



THE CHINESE TAOIST WISDOM OF MAINTAINING GOOD HEALTH

by

Wenzhang Zhou
Professor and Deputy Director
The Development Resource Centre
Haikou, Hainan CHINA

The Twenty-first International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences
Washington, D.C. November 24-30, 1997

© 1997, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

The Chinese Taoist Wisdom of Maintaining Good Health

Dr. Zhou Wenzhang (China)

Of the five major religions —— Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, Christianity and Islamism that are currently practiced in China, Taoism is the native religion while the others are foreign.

Taoism was formed in the late years of the Eastern Han Dynasty (200 A. D.). In this period Buddhism was also introduced into China from ancient India. The existence of Taoism and Buddhism led to a movement away from revering only Confucianism, and the coexistence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. The three belief systems influenced each other, penetrated and assimilated. In this process Confucian culture was the pivot of this triangular relationship. In the subsequent feudal culture which lasted for over a thousand years Confucianism was the leading religion supplemented by Buddhism and Taoism.

As a religion, Taoism is not identical with the concepts of the Taoist school. In ancient China Laozi and Zhuangzi were the representatives of the Taoist school and its classic texts were *Laozi* or *Dao De Jing* (*The Way and Its Power*). Taoism was formed from the interpretation and extension of the ideological contents of “Laozi” and “Zhuangzi”, and by assimilating folk sorcery and ancient Chinese alchemy associated with immortality. The classic Taoist text is the “Taoist Tripitaka”. Taoists basically believe in the Tao and the Pure Trinity derived from Tao —— Yuanshi, Lingbao and Daode (i. e., Laozi). “Tao” is the origin of the material and spiritual worlds, deities emerged before heaven and earth and creator of the things of the universe. In its long process of development Taoism has had great influences on politics, economics, culture, science and technology, customs and habits and peasant movements in ancient China.

Taoism is based on immortality and becoming a spirit and therefore, the religious doctrines of the arts of maintaining good health are the major focus of

its doctrines. Maintaining good health is an important religious act. The Taoist arts for maintaining good health form the main body of Chinese additional arts of nourishing life and contain many aspects of scientific value. Today, those in medical and sports circles and those who wish to remain healthy and to prolong life attach great importance to them.

This article will give a brief account of the Taoist wisdom of maintaining good health.

I.

Although the forms vary, religions have common features —— a disdain for life and a denial of reality. Although they beautify reality to some certain extent, their goal is still to use the results of real – life efforts to support the detachment of soul after death. Therefore, religion deals with the problems of death, calling to the sublimation of soul. Taoism is entirely different. It “stresses man and values life”, which fully displays the spirit of the Chinese emphasis on life, enjoying oneself in this world, a love for life and a willingness to struggle against Nature.

“Stressing man and valuing life” is an important feature of Chinese culture of thought and the philosophical basis of the Taoist arts for maintaining good health. Before the emergence of Taoism, the majority of the philosophers during the pre – Qin period laid an emphasis on man. Confucians believe in a “love for people”, as do the Mohists, although the latter also stress ghosts and spirits. *Laozi*, a classic of Taoist text, says, “Tao is large, heaven is large, earth is large and man is large”, thus placing “man” in a position equal to that of the Tao, heaven and earth. Taoism inherited this precious thought during the Qin and Han dynasties, taking “an emphasis on man and valuing life” as important parts of its doctrine. Taoists believe that man should pay attention to his body and love life. Hence, doing exercises to become immortal has become Taoists’ objectives.

Even before Taoism, people yearned for immortality in China. For instance, “*Zhuangzi*” contains descriptions of immortals and reports that when burnt, immortals did not feel hot, when rivers were frozen, they did not feel

cold and when lightning struck and hurricanes hit, they did not panic. A story in “ ’ Disclosure on Chu ’ in the Strategies of the Warring States ” tells that some people offered an elixir as a tribute to the King of the Chu State. Qinshihuang and Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty sought this elixir. Qinshihuang, China ’ s first emperor, sent four groups of alchemists with boys and girls overseas to search for this elixir during the 12 years of his reign. During the reign of Emperor Wudi of the Han Dynasty, alchemists prepared yellow and white medicines as a means of acquiring the elixir. After the formation of Taoism, it gradually assimilated the alchemies developed previously as its own arts for maintaining good health and conducted further experiments.

The development of the Taoist arts for maintaining good health went through four stages:

The first stage : from the Eastern Han Dynasty to the Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern dynasties. The Taoist belief in maintaining good health developed along with its development of Taoist doctrines and gradually became systematized. A series of propositions, such as “an emphasis on man and valuing life”, “harmony of heaven and man”, “my destiny depends on me”, “dependence of form and spirit” and the “cultivation of numerous arts for maintaining good health” were put forward. A comparatively complete theoretical foundation for the the Taoist arts for maintaining good health was thus developed.

The second stage: from the Sui to the Tang dynasties. The Taoist arts for maintaining good health theoretically assimilated some aspects of Buddhism and medical men, and these arts were further developed and perfected. As a result, new arts for maintaining good health emerged.

The third stage: from the Song Dynasty to the Yuan Dynasty. Apart from the fact that the art of “waidan” (outer elixir) declined, the Taoist arts for maintaining good health continued to develop; in particular, the art of “neidan” (inner elixir) became a mainstream of the arts of nourishing life.

The fourth stage: from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the present. Taoism gradually declined. There were numerous schools of “inner” alchemists, and the Taoist arts for maintaining good health were gradually recognized and practiced in society. During the process of their spread, these arts were combined with Buddhist methods of cultivation and the methods of modern sports.

Thus, the mystical part of the Taoist arts for maintaining good health were diluted; but some of aspects have been recognized in the secular world of science.

II.

There are numerous Taoist methods for maintaining good health, primarily the following nine categories:

1. The Art of "Shouyi"

"Shouyi" refers to making the body and mind enter a state of quietness during cultivation, concentrating one's thoughts on the belief in "one", which is the "Tao". This is the Taoists' highest belief.

2. The Art of "Cunsi"

"Cunsi" means extreme quietness of mind, severing one's perception of surrounding things, forgetting one's own existence and not feeling the existence of the world. After the attainment of extreme quietness, one's thoughts are placed in somewhere outside or inside the body. Some people hold that spirits live in the organs inside the body. Placing one's thoughts in the existence inside the body is called "cunshen" (existence of thoughts). The combination of "cunshen" with the spirit can enable one to ascend the realm of the immortality. Some maintain that in the process of "cunsi" one should see himself with thoughts the internal organs of his body, so that one can obtain an image of his own internal organs. This is inner sight. Such "cunsi" retains a strong sense of mysticism.

3. The Art of "Daoyin"

"Daoyin" means stretching the limbs and guiding the "qi" (breath) and blood. Although "daoyin" involves stretching the limbs; but, it is different from ordinary gymnastics. In stretching the limbs air is taken into the body ("fuqi"), the mouth is closed and one breathes simultaneously inside the body ("biqi"). Hence, the modern science of "qigong" attributes it to a dynamic force of "qigong". There are seven "daoyin" methods:

a. "Kou" (knocking). i. e., percussion of the upper and lower teeth seven times, then concentrating one's thoughts and making one's mind exist

in a static state. With each percussion of the upper and lower teeth the name of a constellation is silently recited.

b. “Tuo” (supporting), i. e., forcefully raising one’s left hand 18 times as if lifting a thing weighting several hundred “jin”; and then repeating this with the right hand.

c. “Zhang” (stretching), i. e., stretching the left hand and simultaneously the left foot standing like drawing a bow 18 times. Repeating this with the right hand and foot.

d. “Mo” (rubbing), i. e., rubbing the hands together to produce heat, and then rubbing the heated hands over ears 36 times; this is called “fashui”, i. e., eliminating wet air from inside the body. The heated hands are then used to rub the eyes 36 times; this is called “fahuo”, i. e., eliminating heat from inside the body. The heated hands are used to lightly rub the face; then the hands spread the body.

e. “Chui” (beating with the fists) with arms akimbo and sitting cross-legged, the left hand is used to beat the shoulders 18 times; the same is repeated with the right hand.

f. “Kai” (wiping) means rubbing the hands to produce heat, and then using the heated hands to rub the kidneys until they feel heated.

g. “Shu” (rinsing) means rinsing the mouth until it is filled with saliva, and then swallowing. This should be repeated 3 times. The hands are then rubbed to produce heat, and then the heated hands rub the acupuncture point in the pubic region many times.

“Daoyin” makes the blood circulate smoothly, getting rid of all diseases and prolonging life. It forms a complete set of actions and postures.

4. The Art of “Tuna”

“Tuna” is a breathing exercise designed to get rid of the stale and take in the fresh. In ancient times “qi” (breath) was considered the basis of life, and it was believed that “qi” from inside the body communicated with the “qi” from heaven and earth. People could prolong their life if they often eliminated stale air from inside the body and took in fresh air from heaven and earth by doing exercises. This exercise mainly involves taking in air from outside, and is called “fuqi”. After taking in air, the mouth is closed and air is guided to

circulate inside the body, and this is called "xingqi".

The essentials of one of the Taoist "fuqi" is as follow: Get up at dawn, rinse the mouth with clear water, lie on one's back on a bed stretching out the hands and feet slowly and sending out air about twenty times. Once all the stale air has been expelled one becomes quiet and concentrated. Breathing with the mouth closed, forget about desire and concentrate the mind on the acupuncture point in the pubic region, swallowing air two or three times. The air which is swallowed is slowly guided by the mind to the pubic region of the body with hearing the sounds sent out in the circulation of air. The second time the mouth is slowly opened to send out air, and then the mouth is closed and the air swallowed. This is repeated twenty or thirty times.

This exercise can be used to get rid of phisiosis and distrcting thoughts and eliminate desires. Repeating this exercise induces a good appetite. Over a long period of practice a "fuqi" method which cures sickness has been developed. This method is strongly directive and effective, and is not difficult to do. It is the essence of the Taosit arts for maintaining good health, and is also a precious inheritance of Chinese medicine.

5. The Art of "Taixi"

"Taixi" refers to the regulation of breathing to such an extent that a goose feather placed under the nose does not stir. It is as if breath is not exhaled by the mouth or nose, but through the navel like a foetus in a mother's womb. The longer such breaths the better.

6. The Art of "Fushi"

"Fushi", i. e., eating a specific food or taking medicine to be immortal. Although there are a large number of prescriptions for "fushi", they generally fall into two categories: The first category is medicines made from grass and trees mainly with plants and bacteria; sometimes animals' horns, blood and meat are put into the medicines. The second category is the medicines made of gold and stones, i. e., using metals, such as lead, mercury, gold and silver or stones, such as, stalacite, mica, and sulphur to make pills in tripods. Pills made of gold and stones are popular among Taoists. Taking medicine made of gold and stones often causes slow poisoning, thus harming the health. After experiments over several hundred years, during the Song Dynasty

people dared not easily take the gold – stone medicine. However, some gold – stone medicines are still used in Chinese medicine. Taoists' herbal medicines are sometimes effective to health protection and are still used as folk medicines.

7. The Art of “Neidan”

Elixirs made of gold and stones and prepared in tripods are called “waidan” (outer elixirs). Taoists invented another method to prolong life, that is, using the body as a tripod. This was designed to guide man's essential “qi” and made it congeal into an elixir inside the body. This is called “neidan” (inner elixir). After the art of “waidan” declined, the art of “neidan” gradually become the main method used by Taoists to maintain good health. From the Song and Yuan dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties the Taoist art of “neidan” gradually expanded to encompass the ancient arts of “shouyi”, “cunsi”, “daoyin”, “tuna”, “taixi” and others. Furthermore, the Nan Sect, Bei Sect, Zhong School, Dong School, Western School and others were formed. Each sect or school had its own skills for maintaining good health.

8. The Art of “Fangzhong”

The Art of “fangzhong” is a theory and method used to guide the sexual life of a husband and wife. Taoism holds that sex is an act in conforming to the natural Tao of “yin” and “yang” in heaven and earth. But, it should not be indulgent or unrestrained; otherwise it harms the health. Taoism puts forward points, principles and techniques for sexual life to ensure that it is healthy, harmonious and happy. Although some of them are unscientific, some aspects are reasonable and correspond to modern medicine.

9. The Art of “Qiju”

Taoism pays much attention to daily life and a diet that help to nourish life. It stresses a restrictive diet and a regular daily life. Methods for maintaining good health should be natural and comply with the climate and environment. For instance, if one eats too much, one should take a walk instead of sleeping, and then remove the coat and sit with waist stretched straight. Both hands should be used alternately to massage the belly ten or twenty times; the hands are then used to massage from the heart down both sides of the chest dozen of times. The air in the belly can thus circulate smoothly, and the food

in the belly will be digested. The thinkers in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States Period composed many expositions on daily life and nourishing life. Taoism comprehensively inherited and systematized these expositions and devised a number of strategies for daily life and maintaining good health.

III.

The Taoist arts for maintaining good health are a treasured inheritance of Taoist culture, and also the main body of Chinese traditional methods for maintaining good health. Joseph Needham, an English noted scholar, spoke highly of Taoism in his *Science and Civilisation in China*, saying that from the beginning, Taoism had the concept of immortality while other countries had no such concept. This concept of immortality had an importance for science which is hard to estimate. It is because of this that the Taoist arts for maintaining good health are a unique and precious inheritance. The Taoist arts for maintaining good health contain many things which are scientific and still applicable today. It is hard to say that how long a healthy man can prolong his life through doing such exercises. However, it has been shown that doing these exercises can stabilize patients with chronic illnesses, relieve their symptom and heal their disease. This proves that the Taoist arts for maintaining good health can get rid of diseases and protect health. Therefore, the Taoist arts for maintaining good health have been well received in medicine and sports circles and by those who want to prolong life.

Certainly, the Taoist arts for maintaining good health contain some dross. For instance, it has been demonstrated by history and modern medicine that elixirs made of minerals are of no or little significance in prolonging life. Some of elixirs are harmful; if man overdoses on an elixir, he will die. Even eating gold also is of no help to man's health. A Taoist prescription says that the materials for a medicine are: three "jin" of swine back sebum, a "dou" of strong, bitter wine and five "liang" of gold. The swine back sebum is put into a utensil and burned. After a definite time required by the prescription, the burning is stopped, and gold is put into the oil and taking it out a hundred times with the wine being put into the mixture accordingly. A man who eats a

“jin” of gold, half a “jin” of gold or five “liang” of gold can prolong his life as long as that of heaven and earth, as long as two thousand years old or one thousand and two hundred years old respectively. Obviously, this is ridiculous. Today, the Taoist arts for maintaining good health should discard the dross, so that they can play a greater role in improving the health of mankind.

Bibliographies

1. Chen Yaoting et al., *The Taoist Arts for Maintaining Good Health*, Fudan University Publishing House, Shanghai. 1995.
2. Nan Huaijin, *Zen and Taoists*, Fudan University Publishing House, Shanghai, 1995.
3. Ding Xinbai and Pan Huaiming, *Dao De Jing and Qigong*, Anhui Science and Technology Publishing House, 1996.
4. Tian Chengyang, *A Dictionary of Taoist Scriptural Knowledge*, Sichuan People's Publishing House, 1995.
5. Tang Yijie, *China's Religions: Their Past and Present*, Beijing University Publishing House, 1992.
6. Lu Daji, *A General Introduction to the Science of Religion*, Chinese Social Sciences Publishing House, 1989.

Zhou Wenzhang
Development Research Center
of Hainan Provincial Government
Haikou, 570204, Hainan Province China
E - mail: