

Fasting and Daoist Cultivation

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Bigu (abstention from grains) is a term used in Daoism for fasting. Fasting is an important practice for entering the Dao. It includes, but is not limited to, abstention from specific foods or grains. The act of reducing or omitting something from one's diet rather than adding to it, reiterates the reductive nature of early Daoist cultivation—the art of embracing emptiness as a means to return. Applied to Daoist dietetics, this renunciation practice is the prerequisite for sublimating the physical body, reversing the path of decay and expelling the Three Worms that hasten death. Such a transformation cultivates an empty space (literally and figuratively) within the adept in which spirit has room to root and dwell. This shift away from grains marks the beginning of the cosmicization of the body, a return to light through the ingestion of *qi* rather than earthly substance.

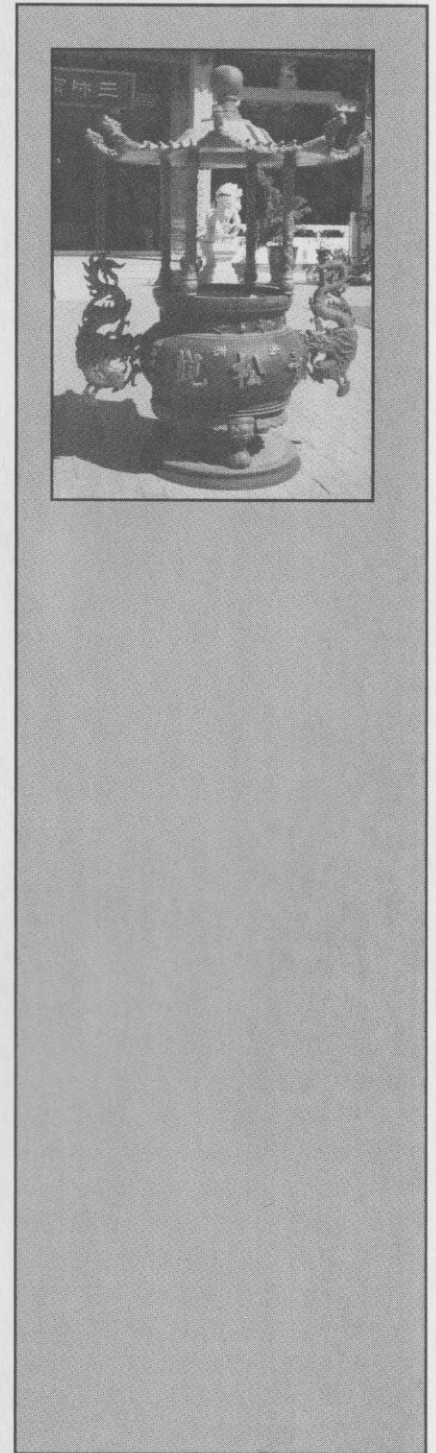
Nourishing Life, Losing the Way

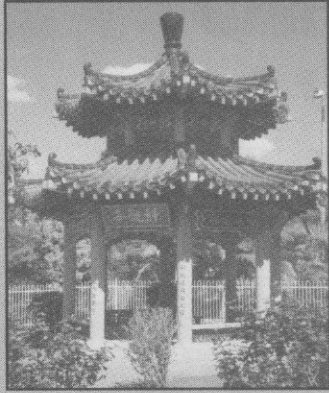
In Chinese medicine human life is dependent upon nourishing postnatal *qi* via breath (heaven/*yang qi*) and food (earth/*yin qi*). Together breath and food meet and mix in the body to help produce and circulate *qi* and blood. *Qi* and blood are the basic vital substances that warm the body, nourish the tissues and irrigate the five yin organs and six yang receptacles, creating the basis for health. Proper movement (exercise) is essential for ensuring the smooth flow of *qi* and blood, as is proper rest for healing and replenishing the *qi* and blood. This basic formula of breath (*yang*), food (*yin*), movement (*yang*), and rest (*yin*) is the prescription for life as we know it. Unfortunately, humans often lose their way. What was once a prescription for health becomes a recipe for disaster when detrimental habits arise. Such is the case when cravings or preference dominate one's dietary choices. This modern-day problem has its parallel in ancient times as well. As far back as the Han Dynasty (206 BC- 220 CE) practitioners and physicians observed the injurious nature of excessive use of any one of the five flavors. The *Huangdi neijing suwen* (Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic: Basic Questions; abbr. *Suwen*) states,

[Considering habits of consumption,] if too much salt is used in food, the pulse hardens, tears make their appearance and the complexion changes. If too much bitter is used in food, the skin becomes withered and the body hair falls out. If too much pungent flavor is used in food, the muscles become knotty and the finger and toe nails wither and decay. If too much sour flavor is used in food, the flesh hardens and wrinkles and the lips become slack. If too much sweet flavor is used in food, the bones ache and the hair on the head falls out. These then are the injuries which can be brought about by the five flavors.

(*Suwen*, ch. 10; Veith, *Yellow Emperor's Classic*, 141)

Upon further examination of this passage from the *Suwen*, one finds that the overconsumption of one flavor leads to a destructive relationship with its "grand-child" orb according to Five Phase theory. Hence, excess salt (water) invades fire, excess bitter (fire) invades metal, excess pungent (metal) invades wood, excess sour (wood) invades earth, and excess sweet (earth) invades water, each resulting in a destructive pattern. Observing this pattern, one understands how illness develops through excess. Further, we see that food, rather than fostering life, can





lead to death and disease. Thereby, the standard formula used to generate life through breath/ food/ movement/ rest causes a destructive cycle when food supercedes breath or when yin energy is in excess of yang.

Not surprisingly, dietary restrictions were an essential part of longevity and immortality lineages. Later Daoists (4th-6th c. CE) determined that certain foods (grains in particular) were responsible for the erosion of human longevity. Originally, humans of antiquity were endowed with a 120-year life-span. However, through the introduction of grains and the establishment of agricultural society, humans traded in their ability to "ride the wind and live off dew" for the comforts of domesticity and a settled life-style that centered around planting, growing, harvesting and eating grains (see Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 27). Such practices had consequences beyond the obvious. Daoists observed that ingesting grains awoke the Three Worms (*sanchong*) who otherwise remained dormant in the body. These Three Deathbringers (*sanshi*) feed off of decaying matter in the intestines, particularly from grains. Once awake, the Three Worm's mission is to further the demise of their host, thereby ensuring a place of occupancy for themselves. Each of the Three Worms dwells in one of the three elixir fields (upper, middle and lower). The manifestation of symptoms helps to determine which worm is predominant. For example, *Peng ju*, the worm in the upper elixir field referred to as "Blue Decrepitude," creates maladies in the upper part of the body such as gum disease, tooth problems, blindness, deafness, etc. *Peng zhi*, the worm in the middle elixir field referred to as "White Hag," provokes problems primarily with digestion and the thorax. *Peng jiao*, the worm in the lower elixir field referred to as "Bloody Corpse," delights in disrupting the lower portion of the body including the bowels, bladder, genitals and reproductive organs. In addition to creating physical symptoms, these worms cause the adept to crave fine foods, be moved by anger and greed, and lust for sexual interludes (Eskildsen, *Asceticism in Early Taoist Religion*, 46). Each of these worms feasts upon the vitality of their respective centers, sapping the adept's energy. Aware of the havoc and destruction that the Three Worms caused, Daoists warned:

The five cereals are the most harmful food, that which prevents the obtaining of immortality... The five cereals are scissors that cut off life, they rot the five internal organs, they shorten life. If a grain enters your mouth, do not hope for eternal life!

(Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, 332-334)

No rest or recovery was in sight for the parasitized host unless they underwent radical changes in their diet and subsequently their heart-mind. The foremost remedy for such a condition was the practice of *bigu*. *Bigu* (abstention from grains) initiates the starvation of the Three Worms. By abstaining from grain, the worms slowly begin to lose strength and form until they finally shrivel up and are expelled from the adept's body. As the worms lose their holding, the adept's true energy resurges, returning the practitioner to the Dao once again. Since dietary changes offered the most direct means to recovery, it became a common practice for Daoists to go through a period of fasting or abstention as an initiatory practice to deeper cultivation. Thus, where breath once nourished life and substance began to extinguish it, the path to return to the Dao lies in reversing this process.

Nourishing the Way, Returning to Life

Transforming habitual patterns that extinguish life ushers one to the gateway of Dao. By abstaining from grains, one begins to free the body from decaying matter, thereby reducing putrefaction in the intestines. The large intestine is the paired yang organ of the lungs. As the intestine is freed from excessive waste, the lungs are supported energetically and breath can circulate easily through the body once again. The following admonishment reiterates the importance of clearing the intestines:

"The five grains are chisels cutting life away...to strive for complete avoidance of death keep your intestines free of excrement!" (Kohn, *Taoist Experience*, 150). Once the intestines become free from undue excrement, the body is no longer burdened by the need to constantly detoxify poisons. As breath begins to replace one's dependency on grain, the body shifts its orientation away from the material, towards the spiritual. Since the focus of the body's energy is no longer restricted to maintaining flesh, fluid and bones, it now has the capacity to nourish subtle energies (vital essence [*jing*], *qi*, and spirit [*shen*]), which in turn help to stabilize and refine the heart-mind.

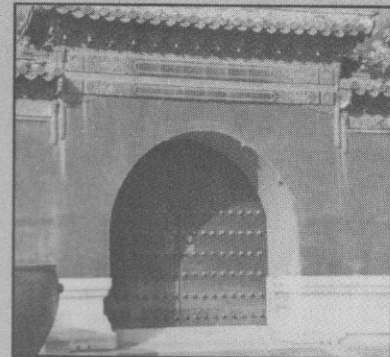
Sima Chengzhen, the twelfth patriarch of Shangqing, lays out the importance of transforming the adept's habits and heart-mind in his treatise *Tianyinzi* (*Book of Master Celestial Seclusion*). He instructs the practitioner to begin this process through fasting. Once one has perfected this initial step, one continues on to the next of the following five gateways as clarified in the passage below.

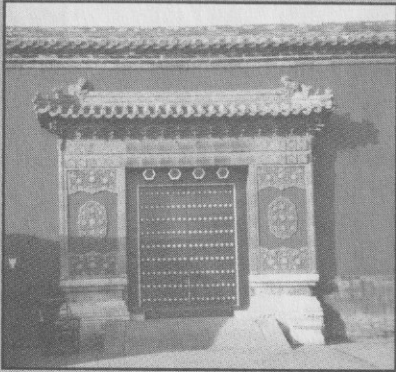
The following five are the progressive gateways to the Tao.
The first is fasting and abstention.
The second is seclusion.
The third is visualization and imagination.
The fourth is sitting in oblivion.
The fifth is spirit liberation...
Practice according to these and perfect step one, only then proceed to step two.
(Kohn, *Taoist Experience*, 82)

In Sima Chengzhen's treatise, fasting and abstention are considered the first step in liberating the spirit. The term fasting in this case includes but is not limited to abstention from grains. It also refers to abstention from sexual activity, the avoidance of meat and alcohol, as well as employing practices that cleanse the body and still the mind. Students are further warned to avoid consuming any food that is not well cooked, anything rotten or stale, as well as strongly flavored dishes. In addition, students are instructed not to sit too long, stand too long, or engage in physically exhaustive labor (Kohn, *Taoist Experience*, 83). Such abstention practices serve to clear out old *qi*, reduce cravings, expel the Three Worms and conserve energy, thus setting the stage for perfecting the four foundational practices.

Once the four foundational practices (trust, withdrawal, wisdom, and absorption) are perfected, spirit pervades and the adept is no longer consumed by personal preference and life-extinguishing habits. Furthermore, as one gains a foothold in abstention practices, the body naturally begins the process of absorbing *qi*, which in turn waters or irrigates the "Five Sprouts." The practice of *fuqi* (*qi* absorption or watering the Five Sprouts) is based on ingesting fresh *qi* from the five directions, which then commingles with breath and saliva producing vital nourishment for the five orbs. As this concoction is "swallowed" into the body, it resuscitates the five spirits that originally dwelled in the orbs and the adept begins to feel light and easy (see Engelhardt, "Qi for Life").

Another text from the Shangqing tradition called the *Huangting waijing jing* (Scripture on the External View of the Yellow Court) explores the process of physical refinement primarily through stilling the heart-mind via inward training. In this third century text, the body is portrayed as a residence for immortals. It proposes that the structure of the body is a microcosm of the cosmos, a territory that can be occupied by either demons or gods. Through disciplined practice and refinement of the heart-mind, the physical structure is transformed into cosmic dwellings.





By practicing this day and night, one will subdue the deadly forces, kill the three worms and expel evil demons. Body and flesh will blossom, the true energy will return. When all evil has lost its power, one will live long and radiate brilliance.

(Kohn, *Taoist Experience*, 184)

Once thoughts and emotions are stilled, spirit stabilizes and light returns.

The Yellow Court is in the head. It encompasses three palaces known as the Hall of Light, the Grotto Chamber and the Cinnabar Field...Practice breathing and gymnastics, close your eyes and turn your vision inward. Calm your mind and concentrate your thoughts.

(Kohn, *Taoist Experience*, 182)

Through fasting one's body, and subsequently one's heart-mind, true energy returns and the Three Worms are expelled. The heavy (yin) forces that initially obstructed the adept's spiritual luminosity disperse when one concentrates spirit inwardly. The body, once fated to become withering flesh and bones restricted to the laws of birth and death (yang and yin), now becomes a grotto for immortal light. Such a process of sublimation is dependent upon one's willingness to reverse the trend of habitual craving and external sensory engagement with the world, thereby concentrating one's energy inward. This radical reorientation of life-energy embraces emptiness, which in turn provides the practitioner with eternal sustenance. ☯

I eat the six energies and drink the nightly dew,
Rinse my mouth with yang itself and swallow morning light.
Guarding the purity of the spirit light within
I absorb essence and energy and drive out all that's coarse...

(Kohn, *Taoist Experience*, 253)

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