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Following is the complete text of an interview with Michael Winn
published recently in *The Empty Vessel*

Internal Alchemy, with Michael Winn

Empty Vessel: Many people are currently familiar with Taoist practices such as taiji quan, qigong and Chinese medicine. But there is a whole other aspect of Taoist cultivation, Taoist spiritual work, which is often referred to as internal alchemy. Perhaps we can begin by talking a little bit about what this internal alchemy really is.

Michael Winn: That is my deepest area of interest, one that I have been investigating for the last eighteen years. That's how I got into Taoist practices. I used to do mostly kundalini yoga and Hindu based meditation. I was introduced to Mantak Chia by a taiji teacher who I was starting to study with. The taiji teacher decided to quit teaching the class after Mantak Chia told her that the fastest way to learn the internal taiji aspects was to first learn to circulate her qi through her microcosmic orbit. So I decided since the taiji class was canceled I would go down to Chinatown and see who this Mantak Chia guy was.

I think most people who practice taiji in this country don't even know they have a microcosmic orbit.

Its true. The microcosmic orbit should really be the foundation rather than the culmination of the practice. So I met Mantak Chia and he started talking about immortality. Now I had always heard about enlightenment , I had never heard anyone talking about immortality. I was pretty skeptical but it did pique my curiosity. I decided to investigate more deeply and continued to do my kundalini practices for many hours a day. I had had some very powerful kundalini experiences and knew that there were such things as the subtle body.

I had already achieved a certain level of consciousness and I thought that all I had to do was continue doing kundalini yoga and eventually I would get to someplace else. But I really didn't know where I was going. I was using the chakra model where you're just trying to get up and out of your crown to somewhere. I kept waiting for the angels to come down and take me the rest of the way or something.

Chia made a comment about my kundalini yoga. He said I was just heating the room. In other words, my qi was coming out of my head, my ears and out my

crown and I was not recycling it. I had noticed that my adrenals were starting to get weaker and I was starting to get colder in the winter. That's when I began to take a harder look at whether I was robbing my physical body in order to pump qi into my subtle body.

Since then I have studied with many people but Chia gave me a solid foundation in internal alchemy. His teacher was a Taoist hermit called White Cloud who had apparently achieved the level of breatharian in the mountains somewhere in northern China. When the Japanese started bombing China he came down from the mountains and came to a village and started eating again with the villagers there. He ended up migrating down to Hong Kong and became a hermit in the hills there.

He had seven alchemical formulas, seven stages of internal alchemy and had transmitted the formulas to Mantak Chia. I began studying these as well as taiji at the same time. I gradually stopped doing kundalini yoga because the Taoist practices were more effortless and more grounded. Once you got them going they just went by themselves. The whole emphasis on effortlessness appealed to me. When I began to practice taiji, Iron Shirt qigong and internal alchemy, I also got much stronger and rooted and that impressed me.

Another term that's used a lot is immortal, which can also be taken a lot of different ways.

I began to investigate the difference between enlightenment and immortality. I concluded that a lot of teachers we're actually teaching enlightenment which I would say is concerned with connecting your mind with the universe in a certain way. But I think immortality is about dissolving the boundaries between your mind and your body and the universe's body-mind. The body is the difficult part to really integrate. To put it simply, it's one thing to open your third eye and have a vision of the universe and its another thing to integrate all three of your dan tiens with the wu ji, which alchemically represents the integration of your jing, qi and shen. A lot of enlightenment practices develop shen only.

Your personal shen ("soul" in Western thinking) can expand and connect to its "great shen" ("spirit" at the cosmic level), but that doesn't mean that you have transformed your negative emotions, completed your desire for sex or children, released your judgments of others, or healed your disease. In fact, that expansion of your shen may even amplify your so-called lower self. Immortality by my definition is the integration of the jing, qi and shen within their matrix in the wu

ji, the Supreme Unknown.

Some of the Hindu practices even deny the body for the shen or spirit and some of the ascetic practices actually mortify the body to free the spirit.

Basically there is no value attached to the body. You can trash the body in order to get liberation or to transcend. That's OK from the traditional Hindu or Buddhist viewpoint. From the Taoist point of view that's not OK. I switched. to the Tao because I realized that my body was not only spiritually important for me, but that most Westerners value their bodies. You can cultivate that body and bring spirit into it rather than get rid of the body so that you can go somewhere else. I think that's why the Chinese put so much emphasis on longevity, because it takes a long time to cultivate and refine the shen, the spirit hidden within the body.

The alchemical formulas that I began studying had three different levels: the Lesser, Greater, and Greatest Enlightenment of Water and Fire (Kan and Li). These practices tap into different fields of polarized yin and yang qi to dissolve jing and build original (yuan) qi and yuan shen. You learn how to gather the lesser elixir and greater elixir, the essence of your consciousness distilled from "cooking" the jing, qi and shen from the microcosm and macrocosm. This builds a yang energy body.

The Lesser Water and Fire is called sexual alchemy, as it couples the inner male and inner female essences within the physical body. This creates a tremendously healing and blissful field of yuan qi that is used to dissolve blockages in all the meridians, core channels, and dan tiens as well as clearing the vital organ, nervous, lymphatic, bone marrow and blood circulatory system. You open your inner eye in each dan tien and learn to manage your family of inner souls. If you receive the transmission of this formula, other formulas often unfold spontaneously.

The Greater Kan and Li is called Sun-Moon alchemy, as it couples the solar and lunar essences to dissolve the boundary between your personal energy body and the energy body of planet Earth. We meditate in the very core of the planet, its central dan tien and doorway to the original shen of the earth being. We connect our personal inner souls to the planetary soul powers of the five directions (north, south, east, west, and center).

The Greatest Kan and Li is called Soul/Heart Alchemy, as it opens up a direct

relationship between your personal Heart shen and the Great Shen of the Sun (or Solar Logos in the West). This practice releases your fear of death and dissolves the karmic, genetic and planetary influences of your personal astrology. We learn to listen to the planetary tones and the central sound current flowing through the Sun.

The Sealing of the Senses (Star Alchemy) relates to the upper dan tien, the pole star and the black hole at the center of this universe. The Congress of Heaven and Earth, and the Union of Man with the Tao, are the final formulas. These last three formulas connect to the three levels of immortality beyond enlightenment. Traditionally, the Chinese are prohibited from teaching these openly, lest they fall into the wrong hands and bring the wrath of heaven.

I feel the age of secrecy is past. The rigorous training filters out the unworthy and half-serious. Part of my work reinterpreting these Taoist methods is to make them accessible for Westerners. Most Chinese have language difficulties in teaching these subtle practices to Westerners. The terminology is confusing and difficult. The terms used by Taoist alchemists are similar to those used in Chinese medicine, but their meanings are often different.

When I started there was really very little available in English. Now there's a lot more available but it doesn't do you any good if you don't have the formulas and a teacher. I don't see a lot of information about just what internal alchemy is yet. I think that we are in the midst of a technology transfer, that inner alchemy will be revived as a popular science of consciousness in the next century.

There are a number of books out now about internal alchemy. They more or less describe internal alchemy but they don't actually teach the process.

That's the problem. Some of the recent books, like Eva Wong's *Guide to Taoism* (Shambhala) offer an excellent overview but no "how-to." When I started, the only book available was Charles Luk's *Taoist Yoga*. It describes practices but the translation is ambiguous, so you cannot actually practice from that book unless you know how to do those internal processes already. Yan Xin, a famous teacher from mainland China, acknowledged to one of my students that the kan and li formulas I teach are authentic. His alchemical practice uses a different inner fire and water method, but is similar in principle.

Do you think it is possible to learn alchemical practices from a book?

I think it is very difficult unless you have some background. I have, of course, written many books on neigong with and for Mantak Chia but we have not published any books on the internal alchemy formulas. We published books on the six healing sounds, the sexual practices, bone marrow breathing, Iron Shirt, taiji, the microcosmic orbit, and others. Those are all just laying the foundation. Only the *Fusion of the Five Elements* begins to explore some of the alchemical processes, with a few techniques downloaded from the kan and li practices.

In internal alchemy you are separating your shen/soul, your qi, and your jing/body essence for the purpose of refining and recombining them back together into a pure spiritual essence. The basic premise is that your consciousness has a substance or essence that can be refined, congealed or crystallized. Alchemy speeds up the natural evolution or unfoldment of your essence.

It is very different from simply expanding your consciousness or transcending the physical plane. It requires a whole multi-dimensional understanding of how your consciousness moves between subtle and physical bodies and into your thoughts, feelings and desires. The local universe is a vast alchemical cauldron that has already separated itself into different densities or dimensions that we call body, mind and spirit. Life is the process by which they refine each other, become each other, until all three aspects are experienced as one.

The yinóyang and five element theory underlies all qigong and Chinese medicine, and is found in internal alchemy as well. But there is an exoteric or outer Tao and an esoteric or inner Tao teaching. The exoteric, popular one is that Tao is learning how to harmonize and balance your qi flow for a long and happy life. But that, unfortunately, still leads to death and a consequent fear of the unknown. But it teaches you to harmonize with the postnatal, or later heaven, realm.

In internal alchemy you're really deciding to accelerate the process of evolution and return to the origin before your death. I believe this is very ancient knowledge that is many thousands of years older than 3,500 year old medical texts or the schools that revived inner alchemy in the third century AD. I think it is older than the *I Ching* or written symbols. Inner alchemy is the very deep memory of how we originally regenerated and rebirthed ourselves. Allusions are made to a older golden period when spirit and matter, yin and yang spirits co-created without struggle or sense of separation.

When we read the Taoist texts, we read about attaining immortality, about refining jing to qi into shen into Tao and of people having miraculous powers. Do you think that these kinds of things still happen for cultivators today?

I can only speak from my own experience. I had an experience back in 1981 that still propels me on the path of inner alchemy. I was in Africa working as a freelance war correspondent. I had an assignment for *Outs i de* magazine to spend a night inside the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid. I had just finished running a mission in Ethiopia smuggling white Jews to meet the black Jews there, when I suddenly got extremely sick. I had heat, nausea, dizziness and diarrhea all at once. I thought I was getting a relapse of hepatitis so I went to the hospital but they said I was fine. I strangely didn't feel sick, but I had all these symptoms. My body was just going wild and was overheated. For three days I sat there and was hallucinating and saw all kinds of astral forms and spiraling visions. I had to keep jumping into the shower I was so hot.

Finally this figure came floating into view. I was quite surprised and didn't know what to think of it. I looked more closely and I saw that it was a very old Chinese man, with a robe and long white wispy beard, standing in meditation. He looked two thousand years old. As he floated into my field of vision, I kept looking at him wondering who he was. All of a sudden from his lower dan tien came a laser beam that shot into my lower dan tien. A surge of energy shot up through my body and exploded out the top of my crown like a big mushroom cloud. It showered down and the heat and symptoms of illness stopped completely. I was just lying there in bliss. Then the guy disappeared.

I wondered who this Chinese guy was. I didn't know about Taoist immortals at the time. I now believe that was a visit from a Taoist immortal who probably induced the fiery condition in me as a kind of purification before I went into the Great Pyramid. Then I had a really intense experience in the Great Pyramid but that's another story.

My point is that beings who have achieved a state of immortality do exist. That's my experience. My speculation is that they are achieved beings that hang out at the boundary between the wu ji, the void, and the realm of cosmic or Great Shen. They can choose to interact with this plane, although they rarely do because the vibrations here are so crude and unpleasant for them. I later had contacts with other beings who likely were immortal.

And you feel that even in this modern age it is possible to attain those levels?

Yes, I feel it is definitely possible. Otherwise I wouldn't be wasting my time practicing alchemy and teaching people. My conclusion is that on a personal level it is the most worthwhile thing you can do, because it is the only thing you can take with you. You can't take your money or your reputation or your kids or your house or anything. You can only take your essence. And if you have not integrated it you can't even take the fragments of your essence with you at death. Until you integrate, you don't even own yourself, you're just a temporary composite of various spirits.

On a collective level, if even one modern human being attains immortality, it will open the door for everyone to follow. I believe it cosmically breaks the bottleneck in the incarnation cycle. There is too much shen trapped within our jing, our physical body substance, and within the earth's body itself.

There are other appearances of immortals in modern times. The Kriya Yoga tradition was started by an immortal they call Babaji, who suddenly manifested to a railroad engineer named Lahiri Mahasay in 1861. Interestingly, the first kriya given by Babaji (and popularized by Yogananda in the West) is the microcosmic orbit. You won't find any references to this orbit meditation in the Vedas, Upanishads, or later Tantric literature. Did Babaji hang out with Taoist immortals in the mid-planes, who urged him to spread the orbit practice in India as the foundation for immortality?

Another question is the relation between reincarnation and immortality.

Taoists view the death process very differently from other paths who believe in reincarnation. From my understanding about Taoism it is not true that everyone reincarnates. If you have not cultivated some essence there isn't any essence there to reincarnate. That instead you are rather more or less recycled back into Tao, or undifferentiated consciousness.

This gets into the whole question of what constitutes a human being. It's one of the most difficult things to understand. The ancient texts speak of the endless flow of qi between heaven and Earth, but I've never seen any reference to reincarnation of the same physical human being. To comprehend the Taoist viewpoint, you must accept the presence of multiple internal body spirits, sometimes called the "inner gods of the vital organs."

The most popular version describes three hun or heavenly souls said to reside in the liver, the seven po or earthly souls that reside in the lungs, the shen in the heart, the zhi or spirit of will in the kidneys/jing, and the mind intent or yi that manifests through the spleen. These are the five main kinds of internal soul groups that the texts identify. They often give conflicting descriptions. This is where you need the alchemical formulas to grasp the best way to manage them. I've spent a lot of time developing a relationship with who they are, which means who I am and how they function in me, or rather as me.

That's also a very different viewpoint. Most people think of a singular soul rather than a collection of souls.

Yes, it's a bit odd to think of yourself as being run by a committee. It took me a while to accept this idea but I now see that it is the ordinary human process. In any given moment you are hearing one of these souls expressing its thoughts or feelings in a voice that you call yourself. If you listen closely, you'll begin to distinguish between one voice that wants to do this and another voice that wants to do that. They may argue with each other. If you have only one soul, per the standard Christian view, how can you have two voices?

Or three or four or five.

Yes. I think one of the main tasks of internal alchemy is to organize or manage our soul team. This is a collection of earth spirits and heaven spirits living under a common human roof. Their job is to get together. They have different agendas, different desires and different wills even. To align them all and to function together into the present moment is the task. This ultimately means we must not only integrate them locally within our person, but also connect them back with the larger Heaven and Earth spirits that birthed them.

Many qigong practitioners learn to manipulate their own or other people's qi, especially martial artists who are focused on defending themselves or healers focused on changing someone else's field. Certainly, this skill in controlling qi is necessary at the beginning and intermediate levels. You slowly begin to absorb the principle that your manipulations of qi must flow in accord with some higher principles of the Tao. If you get too controlling, the qi flow is limited by your ego. This is where teachings of virtue arise.

This raises the question of just who is managing your qi? If you think it is your ego, just what is the ego? If you're not aware of your multiple personal shen,

you may think you're cultivating your qi but it may be only a small group of your internal spirits that you are empowering to control the other spirits. So your qi may feel strong, you may be able to whip your opponent's butt or pump up a patient's kidney, but you will not feel whole or peaceful. The unhappy voices are from the shen that are being suppressed. Eventually your qi practice will tire you because of this unconscious resistance. You will feel stuck, even if your level of qi cultivation appears much higher than that of ordinary people.

Until you find a way to integrate the shen.

Yes. The high level method of internal alchemy is to train your internal spirits to manage the balance of yin and yang qi. When the yin and yang internal spirits are integrated, the yuan shen, or original spirit, begins to live inside you. This is the sprouting of the immortal embryo.

You talk about the group of souls or committee. Do you think that there is such a thing as an oversoul that oversees them all?

Yes, this is ultimately the function of the local shen which resides in the heart/brain. But your personal heart shen is not really an oversoul until it merges with the heart of the Big Shen, the greater or cosmic self. The alchemical formulas guide you to that stage gradually. The personal heart shen controls the flow of qi to the other body spirits, just as the physical heart controls the flow of blood to the vital organs. It is shaped by your astrology, your karma, your elemental makeup. It's what gives you your personal pattern, your personality.

What happens to that at death?

My understanding is that all of these spirits, whether it's the hun, the po, the jing shen, the heart shen or the yi, are all immortal; none of them actually die. That's why they are referred to as your "inner gods." They'll just split off from the body at death and go on their separate ways unless they've fused into a greater identity. So, they don't die. The personality dies because there's nobody there to hold it together.

The po souls will go back to the earth where they will live in the low astral planes of the earth until they "sign a new contract" and co-mingle with some new combination of spirits coming together to form a human. I believe this is why the Taoists do not focus on past lives or reincarnation, because it doesn't make sense to try and track an individual through all of this. You're drawing

from a whole pool of po souls and a whole pool of hun souls from different shens. All that counts is the harmonious merger of these shen in the present moment. This is the rebirth of their original shen and the original qi within physical time/space. This union of spirits from heaven and earth within a human seems to be in deep alignment with the Tao.

So these people who have memories of past livesóthey may be remembering someone else's life.

When you come into earth time you get a new batch of po souls that goes with the new body. So you're getting their memories, their ancestral memories.

So people shouldn't take it too personally when they have memories of past lives, or think of it as being me, Solala, having a past life in China or whatever.

Not only is it not you, Solala, it may just be a fragment of some being that was there and has now joined this team which is now called Solala. Of course time itself is an illusion; past and future are just different dimensions of the present. They are all happening simultaneously, so from the point of view of the cosmic self, your Great Spirit ("da shen"), there are no past lives. There are only other lives happening simultaneously.

To experience yourself as this vast multi-dimensional being, you need to integrate your personal internal spirits into one, and that will naturally and easily reopen communication with your parent, the Great Shen. Your Great Spirit is experiencing and witnessing all the lives simultaneously, as opposed to the personal Heart Shen which is limited to experiencing our local lives or local reality.

If we're all immortal already why go through the great amount of work it takes to complete this process?

But it's not you that's immortal, it's your inner souls. At death your soul parts all disintegrate and *you* may not be there any more. It creates confusion in the universe if you fail to integrate. So basically that's why the shen is bothering to incarnate in the first place, because it's trying to recover its missing fragments. That's why we come in feeling incomplete. It's why we're hungryósexually, emotionally, all kinds of ways. We're trying to find and gather the rest of us and integrate in with the other parts of the shen that have been fragmented and

scattered here from previous incarnations.

You could say human incarnation is a process invented by Great Spirit as a means of recovering and reintegrating the lesser spirits that are still hanging out as matter, as jing shen. Matter itself is nothing other than spirit that has not yet come home or is refusing to reintegrate with the formless aspect of spirit. In the West this is seen as the battle between the forces of Darkness and Light. The Tao, however, does not favor yang over yin, it embraces both and thus reveals its original non-dual nature.

Taoist alchemy is one way of speeding up the flow between jing, qi and shen by accelerating the balanced flow between yin and yang qi at each of those levels. The yuan qi emerges from the wu ji, which has no polarity. But you can't jump straight into wu ji; you'll lack the wisdom and presence to remain. Your lesser or personal shen will pull you back if they don't feel complete. So you start on the personal or body level, then gradually begin working up to the planetary and then stellar levels of yin-yang-yuan interplay until you feel complete on all levels.

There is a popular illusion, promoted by Hindu transcendentalism, that all matter is maya and is going back into spirit. This would end the process of creation. This spiritual notion has led to male dominant, nature exploiting, anti-female cultures. I think that physicality may have started as an exploration by spirit, but is now a stable state. The Tao is not just going to wave a wand and end all the suffering and problems of physicality.

Why? Because spirit loves matter. Shen loves jing. They are addicted to each other. This entire physical universe may be the place where spirit junkies go to get their physical fix. Even if you "transcend" or dissolve your personal jing back into the wu ji, there will be other shen lined up around the block to take your place, waiting to have the thrill of physicality.

Yet I believe something new is evolving, which is a hybrid of spirit and matter, in which a less dense physical body or a light body would be standard. The Taoist quest for physical immortality is holding open the doorway to the practical realization of that new body. I think that this immortal body that is evolving is not just going back to the origin, back to the womb of wu ji which birthed our shen.

The Tao will manifest the desire of the spirit that's in matter to continue having

form on Earth, but to be in a form that is in closer communication with the formless spirit of Heaven. In Taoist terms, the ceaseless lovemaking between the Later Heaven realm and Early Heaven realm is birthing a whole new realm or heaven. This information originally came to me in meditation, but I later heard the idea was also extant in China. The term used for this new heaven was Song Tien. It adds an exciting dimension to daily meditation and my teaching inner alchemy.

But the process is not one of transcending matter. It's really one of infusing matter with spirit and integrating it. Matter means body, on a personal level. I think we've all come here to have a body and I think the Taoists have a wonderful attitude of cultivating not only your spirit but your body. That's why I am a Taoist, because to me that feels most balanced and certainly the most fun.

As you know, a lot of people come to Taoism or to Taoist practices because of health concerns or energy concerns. Then, hopefully they go on to other levels, but not always.

People come to Healing Tao workshops or our summer retreats in Big Indian, New York for two main reasons: One, they want to heal themselves and get recharged. Two, they're interested in exploring their sexuality in relationship to spirituality. And of course once they get into it deeply they find out it's not really about sex or about getting qi. It's really about cultivating your whole being. But the sexual energy and emotional energy are the two biggest sources of confusion for people. So if you can integrate those energies and the spirits that are creating that confusion, that are having those conflicted sexual and emotional desires, then your life gets much easier.

One of the books I wrote fifteen years ago, *Taoist Secrets of Love: Cultivating Male Sexual Energy*, doesn't really get into the refinement aspect of sexual energy. It's merely trying to stop people from depleting themselves with unconscious sex habits.

I teach the higher level of sexual alchemy as part of the Kan and Li or Lesser Water and Fire practice. This method shows you how to get the yin and yang energies in your body to make love. That's really about finding the yin and yang spirits of the body and getting them to have what we call self intercourse. That is what produces original qi. The polarities of the yin and yang within you come together and this produces the yuan qi. By "produces" I mean it just grows more of it to be available for us personally.

It is very important to clarify this because it's very confusing in a lot of the texts. People study yin-yang and five elements theory of qi but there's not a lot taught about yuan qi. I think it's much more useful to think of there being three forces, not just two forces. The yuan qi is an active and present third force at any moment. This third dimension physical reality is mostly polarized into yin and yang energy. The goal of the alchemist is to gradually increase over time the proportion of yuan qi which remains stable and present here in this dimension. That's what allows the original shen to infuse itself into physicality. The yuan qi or original qi is so rt of like a super conductor, a highway or pathway that one can travel on comfortably and is a stable home here on earth.

You mentioned earlier that part of your work has been to present internal alchemy in a way that works for Westerners, without a lot of the ritual and religious trappings from China.

Yes, I've been taking the essence of the ancient Taoists into the twenty-first century. The seven alchemical formulas are already stripped down to core practices. I don't think you need to invoke, as does the Mao Shan sect, the "lu" or name registers of hundreds of deities, or use special mantras and talismans to command them. You can learn that; it's a lineage method. Michael Saso, the Jesuit priest who converted and became a Taoist priest, learned it and told me it works powerfully. But he told me there are only a handful of people left who know it. It is complicated for Westerners; you probably need to learn Chinese. I personally decided my time was better spent practicing nei gong than learning spoken Chinese.

My alchemical tradition works with the polarities of qi in nature and with the natural shen, which manage the natural flow of qi. You can directly tap the energy of the sun, the moon and the stars, volcanoes, water, wind and rain. All of these are natural forces and they are all represented microcosmically within your body. You can resonate those outer forces into your body and do all this work right inside your body without invoking any particular deities other than the natural shen, the spirits that are living inside you and which are connected to the natural spirits that run the body of this universe. Spirits don't occupy any physical space. That's why it is possible to unite an entire universe of spirits "inside" the microcosm of your body.

I have no problem with people having connections to religious deities or special guides or anything. Those often appear and people maintain whatever alliances they want to. The principle is what counts, and the efficacy of one's method.

How do you work the different levels of polarity of water and fire, yin and yang? How do you grasp the essence and open the mysterious gate, the "hidden period" or timeless state, and enter into it?

This is basically what the formulas are teaching. What is the process of reducing the five elements to three forces, of combining water and fire, of birthing and growing the original essence? The metaphor is that of an inner child or golden embryo. But that is essentially just a new consciousness that has a certain substance, that needs to be guarded and protected until it's strong enough to have a life of its own.

It is good for Westerners to investigate and be able to see that these internal processes have been objectified in some sense by thousands of years of study. The shen is the subjective quality of the experience. You can look at qi as the language shen uses to communicate objectively with. Qi sensitivity is a process of learning to speak a universal language that allows you to communicate with trees and animals and plants and planets.

What then would you recommend for people who wish to embark on a serious alchemical path?

Well there are a lot of people who have been studying the microcosmic orbit now. They have gotten the basics down. But you don't just sit there and circulate energy around in a circle and think that you're enlightened. Opening the microcosmic orbit is really kindergarten! It's laying down some pathways so that you can begin the deeper cultivation of moving in to the chong mo, the thrusting or core channels.

So for people who have never done anything, that's a good place to start.

Yes. The next stage is the Fusion of the Five Elements. I think they should also learn the Healing Sounds, to clear the emotional imbalances. One of my favorite meditations is one of the simplest ones, the Inner Smile. That will really link your spirit to the energy channels of the body and to the physical body. You can do that twenty-four hours a day if you include Taoist dream practice.

In the Fusion of the Five Elements you learn how to absorb energy in and start to fuse it into a pearl and open up all the eight extraordinary channels. The microcosmic orbit is just opening up two of them.

This is all part of integrating your committee?

This is creating pathways in which they can operate, so you can communicate with them. In this way you begin to develop a relationship with your personal shen. Then, after you've learned the Fusion of the Five Elements and you learn how to gather these energies together, you can get them to reverse the process of creation. This is really the key to internal alchemy. It's not just about how to get the qi flowing, but how to actually reverse it back on the pathway from which it came. That begins dissolving the density of the physical body on a very deep level.

A lot of people might do meditations where they visualize dissolving but the Taoist practice kind of works from the inside out. You take the yin and yang energies to the very deepest levels of the core channel and begin neutralizing them, which emits a kind of yuan qi. This original qi has a dissolving effect and is, in effect, creating more space between the molecules of your body, more emptiness.

Would you agree this kind of work can take a long time and requires a high level of commitment, but that there are many rewards all along the way?

This path is its own reward. I consider it a great adventure. I've had hundreds, perhaps thousands of wonderful experiences that I once would have rushed to write in my journal. Now these qi effects and shen communications are my ordinary process.

For example, last year I was at the height of a six hour all night sitting meditation. I felt myself crossing the boundary into a new and very deep dimension of myself. At that exact moment, all the wood in the house started cracking and popping. I was in too deep, so my body could not move to investigate. Later my wife found cracks in all the wooden statues in the house, and cracks in the wood stairs. This amazed me. I took it as a message from the wood element, confirming that my expansion into a deeper level of early heaven was being mirrored here in later heaven.

Alchemy has given me a very rich inner life at the same time I'm leading a rich outer life. I love all forms of meditation, and explored many different methods, but for me none of them engage the multiple levels of reality as deeply as Taoist inner alchemy. There's a doubly rich interplay between the qi flow and play of shen in my inner life and my outer life.

One of the main virtues of practicing alchemy I have observed in my students is

their greater serenity and centeredness. They don't feel as controlled by the outer environment. When you cultivate your inner child, your inner consciousness, you're able to experience and witness disturbing things without being pushed as easily into a reactive state. Your personal shen are generally more happy, and it shows up as a kind of personal glow.

Many practitioners become far more telepathic, and much healthier. They heal much more quickly from injury and get ill less often. Paradoxically, one feels more human, more aware of the precarious hold spirit has on its physical body. Because you are constantly changing jing to qi to shen and back again, you never feel limited to a physical body. You never feel stuck in any one state.

Your physical body may feel like it is literally swimming in a great sea of qi. As alchemical practice makes you more sensitive, you become aware that all qi flow is shaped by an infinite field of collective intelligence the ancients called shen. It takes practice to remember continuously that this field of collective shen is who you really are.

Taoist alchemy is one of the oldest forms of deep ecology. It's a practical way to honor the presence of all the intelligences within heaven and earth, and unite them with the beings that live in our own human form. When these three treasures are harmonized, when awareness is fused into a simple pearl essence, a feeling arises that is both serene and joyous. The three dan tiens fuse into a single elixir field. In that moment, the outer universe becomes the inside of your body.

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