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Daoist Immortality

Death and Immortality in Daoism



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*Death and Immortality in Daoism*

A Daoist admonition reads, “Those who know, do not speak. Those who speak, do not know.” Anything written about the subject, therefore, cannot clearly elucidate the Dao or the principles of Daoism, as both are difficult to comprehend. At first glance, it might appear that Daoism is contradictory, as it reflects a union of opposites. Yin and yang, the principles of darkness and light, commingle. They support and give rise to each other, joined by the great Way. The philosophy of Daoism is difficult to discuss and explain on a conceptual level, and therefore, some might think that studying the practices of believers would be easier: that by studying the practices, one can understand the core beliefs more easily. However, the same paradox—the union of opposites—is found in Daoist practices, including the pursuit of immortality. Immortality has always been a goal of Daoists, and there are many tales of immortals in Chinese literature. Immortals did not always live forever, although they did live for incredibly long periods of time. One of the most recently researched biographies of an immortal is that of Li Jing Yuen (1678-1928), who supposedly lived for 250 years (Yang, 1991). He was a practitioner of qigong and a skilled herbalist, and due to his lengthy lifespan, he married 14 times. In 1749, he joined the army of the provincial chief in Gai Xian when he was 71 years old, and he maintained a connection to the army for the rest of his life. Therefore, there is a record of his life. In 1927, General Yang Sen invited Li Jing Yuen to his home in Szechuan Province, where a picture was even taken of him. Li died the next year, and the general began an investigation into his biography. From all of the available sources, General Yang Sen determined that Li’s story was true, and that he had lived for at least 250 years. The information was published in a book entitled *A Factual Account of the 250 Year-Old Good-Luck Man*, which was published by the Chinese and Foreign Literature Storehouse in Taipei, Taiwan. Although this account involves an individual who lived for an incredibly long time (and died in the twentieth century), it is unlike most of the biographies of immortals. There are well-known records of the lives and deeds of famous immortals in the *Liexian Zhuan* (Biographies of the Immortals), and in the *Shenxian Zhuan* (Biographies of Divine Immortals). It is unknown if these accounts have any real historical accuracy, but they are certainly believed by some, and they point toward an ideal: the attainment of immortality. These biographies contain accounts of individuals who lived for hundreds, if not thousands of years. Often, they secluded themselves from society, ingested odd substances, and engaged in the performance of austerities. One immortal named Baishizi supposedly lived for thousands of years. He did not desire to enter heavenly realms, only to prolong his life on earth for as long as possible. In order to accomplish this goal, he ingested many strange substances, among which he considered juice made from gold extremely effective. He saved up money to buy gold, which he ingested.

Besides the extension of his mortal life, he supposedly gained other supernatural powers. For example, it was said that he was able to walk more than 100 miles in a single day. Another famous immortal was called Jiao Xian, and he is known for an incident that occurred in Shanxi Province when he was 170 years old. He lived in a grass hut beside the Yellow River. He rarely spoke and infrequently ate. Many individuals thought that he had a great understanding of the Way, and so they wished to train under him. However, he would not accept a single student, always stating that he did not have the Dao, and therefore could not teach them. One day, while meditating in his hut, a brush fire spread toward his home, and the hut caught fire. People from a nearby village saw that his hut was in flames, and they rushed to put it out. However, by the time they got to the hut it was already engulfed in flames. They were shocked to see that Jiao was still inside the hut, meditating as though there were no fire. They watched and marveled at the site. Eventually, the hut had burned to the ground around him, leaving Jiao unscathed. Once it had been completely destroyed, he opened his eyes and stood up. After this event, many more people wished to study from him, to learn what he knew. However, he would not accept a single student. Thirty years later, when he was 200 years old, he left society completely. He wandered off into the mountains and was never heard from again. Another immortal was called Yujiang. She fled into the mountains when the Qin Dynasty was overthrown, and she came across an old immortal named Gu Chun, who taught her the secret of becoming an immortal herself. He taught her to eat pine needles, a practice that she followed for many years. As time progressed, she felt neither hunger nor cold. Her body became light, as though she could fly. Unfortunately, no one knows what became of her. It is believed that she did attain immortality, and that she still resides in the mountains in one form or another. For more than 200 years, drums and harps were heard emanating from the area where she lived. There were different types of immortals in Chinese lore. There were lower immortals, who lived incredibly long lives in this realm of existence, and there were higher immortals, who quit their bodies and ascended to heavenly realms, where they lived for eons. Most of the immortals engaged in similar, secretive practices, which included the following: they practiced forms of qigong or asceticism, they regulated their diets, cut out the five grains, and ingested odd substances (Jeremiah, 2010). In addition, they all resided on mountains. Mountains feature prominently in stories of immortals, and most of the immortals in China spent years among their peaks training in austerities. The so-called immortals that are currently alive also reside among mountains in various parts of China and other East Asian countries. There is a reason for this. In both Buddhist and Daoist beliefs, mountains have been considered extremely holy places: the dwelling places of ancestral spirits and deities, and the axis between heaven and earth.

In ancient times, the dead were often buried on mountaintops. The mountains, therefore, were liminal places between the living and the dead: a transcendent realm between this world and the next. By training in such locations, ascetics sought to end their earthly existence and begin their lives as immortal, heavenly beings: beings who are on the threshold between this world and the afterlife. The practices of the Chinese immortals themselves further blurred this boundary between life and death. Many of them drank potions of immortality that would supposedly allow them to live forever. However, the potions themselves were poisonous, and they actually caused death. One biography found in the *Shenxian Zhuan* illustrates this: Wei Boyang had dedicated his life to the study of the Dao. He retired to a mountain with three disciples in order to create a potion of eternal life, called the Divine Elixir. Eventually, he created it. However, he decided to test it on a dog first. If the dog rose to heaven, they would take the elixir, but if the dog died, they would not; so they gave the potion to the dog, and it died shortly thereafter. Wei Boyang had trained his entire life to create this potion of immortality, however, so he decided to take it anyway. He too died, and the disciples were puzzled. One of them said, “Our master was not an ordinary person. If he ingested it and died, he must of done so with a purpose” (Pregadio, 2011). This disciple took the potion, and he also died. The other two disciples were confused, as the potion of immortality was actually causing death. They left to make funeral arrangements for the dog, their master, and the other disciple. After they had departed, Boyang came to life again, poured more elixir into the mouths of the disciple and the dog, and they also came back to life. Boyang and his disciple, Yu, headed deep into the mountains, where they lived out the rest of their transcendent existences as immortals. Immortals did not always cause their own deaths by drinking poisonous substances. Sometimes, they starved themselves to death. There are Chinese accounts that state that fasting promoted good health and could reverse or prevent aging. One in-depth set of instructions state that when practitioners first stop eating, they will experience some initial discomfort. However, after 30 days, the sensation of hunger will stop. After 60 days, the practitioner will feel light, as though floating, and he or she will never tire. After 90 days, the ascetic will look healthy, and his or her mind will be purged of delusions. He or she now resides in the sacred realm of immortals. After 300 days without food, the practitioner will be able to perceive spirits. Finally, after 1,000 days, the body will enter a state of “supreme sublimity” (Eskildsen, 1998). It is clear, from thoroughly reading the descriptions in the *Liexian Zhuan* and the *Shenxian Zhuan*, that the Daoists did not intend to prevent the death of the physical body. In fact, they seem to have intentionally caused physical death. This they did in order to become immortal. This paradox can be summed up in this way: they died so that they could live forever.



This motif of everlasting life after death is found in many societies, and (for some reason), it is an important belief. Such practices cause one to consider the true nature of life and death. Although often thought of as two unique phenomena, life and death are actually part of the same continuum. There are no clear-cut divisions between the two, just as there are no clear-cut divisions between night and day. There are transitory states, like dusk and dawn, that allow life to become death. And then, like the retreating and relentlessly returning tide, to (possibly) turn back into life. Daoist practices of immortality cause one to reconsider this interrelationship (between life and death), and to see things anew. This consideration brings to mind a famous Daoist story (Zhuangzi, 1996): A man once dreamed that he was a butterfly, and he fluttered about happily with no thought whatsoever that he was actually a man. Upon awakening, however, he was a man once again. The experience caused him to wonder, was it he who had dreamed that he had become a butterfly, or is the butterfly now dreaming that it is a man?



#### About the Author:

**Ken Jeremiah** has written extensively about Japanese Buddhism and other spiritual phenomena. His articles have appeared in various publications, such as Kansai Time Out, The Journal of Asian Martial Arts, and Southern New England Golfer. His previous books include *Living Buddhas: The Self-Mummified Monks of Yamagata, Japan* (McFarland, 2010), and he has a forthcoming book entitled *Christian Mummification: An Interpretative History of the Preservation of Saints, Martyrs and Others* (McFarland, 2012). Another forthcoming book is entitled *If the Samurai Played Golf: Zen Strategies for a Winning Game*. He is a PGA Golf Professional, and he teaches Spanish, Italian, and Japanese. He has also been training in a Japanese martial art called Aikido for the past 14 years. Ken runs tour groups to Japan, Italy, and other countries yearly.

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