

DAOIST ALCHEMY WITH ART IN MIND

Note: Daoism and Taoism are used interchangeably.

We first hear of what would formally become Daoism in connection with a man, probably a composite, named Lao Tzu, who legend has it lived sometime before 90 BCE. One story tells of when Lao Tzu retired from his duties as an advisor at Court he traveled to Western China, where he was stopped at the entrance to a mountain pass and asked by a guard to write down his philosophy. Thus, he composed the famous *Tao Te Ching*, which remains one of the foundation texts of Daoism, if not of World Literature.

Less known is the *Ts'an T'ung Ch'i*, the *Ancient Dragon and Tiger Classic*, supposedly written, or transcribed, by someone named Immortal Hsü. Unlike the *Tao Te Ching*, which is a book of wisdom, this text either gives instructions on how to make gold from base metals, or how to make compounds that give one eternal youth, depending on for what purpose one reads it.

By 60 BCE, we discover the first record of the ingestion of an alchemical elixir for immortality, and an interest in the properties of various minerals. Called “salvation by ingestion;” ironically, many of these substances, such as cinnabar, a soft red ore that Chinese alchemists called “dragon’s blood,” from which mercury used to be derived, instead of prolonging life proved fatal.

There were also less obtainable substances, found in places that were hardly accessible. Said to contain marvelous qualities, they were pursued by serious aspirants who sought not longevity, but transcendence.

“These exudations all have striking shapes, and most are striking in the same way” they ‘resemble’ or ‘are like’ being or objects of other classes; in other words, they are visually and morphologically anomalous, straddling taxonomic boundaries.”¹



Another school of Daoism is Neidan, or, Internal Alchemy, called The Way of Complete Perfection. Here the body of one’s mind is the vessel, the apparatus in which the Golden Elixir is made by opening various channels using visualization and “embryonic breathing,” or “closed circuit respiration, the way a fetus breathes.”²

“The version of internal alchemy given here rarely makes reference to the equation of parts of the body with furnaces, cauldrons and so forth that is the

feature of many other versions, for here the approach is more nearly what we should call spiritual rather than material.”³

The West is familiar with channels, or meridians, that Daoists call “the dragon’s pulse,” through acupuncture. Joseph Needham, the great historian of Chinese science, called this flow of ch’i energy “the elixir within.”

Aaron Cheak quotes semi-mythical alchemist Maria Prophetissa: ‘if you do not render corporeal substances incorporeal, and incorporeal substances corporeal, and if the two are not made one, nothing will be achieved.’⁴

Neidan also has a direct relationship to internal martial arts such as Tai Chi, and to the healing system of Qigong.

Alchemy is spoken of as being teleological, aimed at producing gold, the Philosophers’ Stone, or a Golden Elixir. I want to suggest that its alchemy’s “additional distillations,” as Jung put it, that’s important. “The Uroboros---the dragon devouring itself tail first---is the basic mandala of alchemy.”

Sinologist Nathan Sivin wrote that

“the aim that runs through most of the roughly one hundred treatises on laboratory alchemy that still exist, the aim that makes them a coherent literature, that conditioned every step in the design of the processes, was to construct a model of the *Tao*, to reproduce in a limited space on a shortened time scale the cyclical energetics of the cosmos.”⁵

It’s in its circulations that alchemy becomes a sacred science, as, like the cosmos, the sacral has no goal but the praxis, or the ritual of itself.

In 1923, C.G. Jung met Richard Wilhelm, a Christian missionary to China who had made a translation of the Daoist alchemical text, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Jung wrote a Commentary to Wilhelm’s translation, to which Thomas Cleary, the distinguished translator of Chinese Zen texts, wrote:

Both German and English editions included an extensive commentary by the distinguished psychologist C.G. Jung, whose work became a major influence in Western psychology, studies of mythology and religion, and New Age Culture in general. Although Jung credited *The Secret of the Golden Flower* with having clarified his own work on the unconscious, he maintained serious reservations about the practice taught in this book. What Jung did not know was that the text he was reading in fact a garbled translation of a truncated version of a corrupted recension of the original work.”⁶

The scholar J.J. Clarke added that Wilhelm’s translation is “practically dysfunctional.”⁷

Be this as it may, Jung’s interest was not in the accuracy of Wilhelm’s translation, but being a creative thinker, he read with a view as to whether a text, any text, helped him to advance, or clarify, *his* project. In this case he realized that the Chinese alchemists

were “talking in symbols,” and thus Jung found the key to incorporating Western alchemical texts into his psychological project.

In our consideration of Daoism and contemporary art, the most important text is another, translated by Richard Wilhelm, with Cary F. Baynes, and to which Jung wrote a Forward. This is the *I Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, whose unknown origins can be traced back to at least 1000 BCE.

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Jung wrote that he had been using the *I Ching* since the 1920s and found in its oracle “meaningful connections with my own thought processes which I could not explain to myself.” “Time and again,” he continued, “I encountered amazing coincidences which seemed to suggest the idea of an acausal parallelism (a synchronicity, as I later called it).”⁸

Harold Coward wrote that, “Jung was convinced that the goal of the *I Ching*, namely a reestablishing of balance between the yang and yin in the Tao, and the goal of his psychotherapy, namely a balancing of the psychic opposites in the experience of the Self, were parallel processes.”⁹

James Miller, a professor of East Asian Traditions, translates Dao as, “the flaring forth of cosmic creativity.”¹⁰ Like the creation of the universe, the making of art remains, in spite of efforts by neuroscientists, a mystery. Central to “cosmic creativity” is chance, which physicists call indeterminacy, and Jung calls synchronicity, or meaningful acausal coincidences that are “the “meaningful coincidence of two or more events where something other than the probability of chance is involved”. ”¹¹

So when we speak of chance here we don’t mean ordinary chance, such as rolling dice or buying a lottery ticket, but something more arcane, complex, and entangled.



An example of this principle in Daoist Art is “crackle” patterned pottery, developed especially during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 CE), in which from rapid cooling, the glaze develops a unique pattern of cracks that look like spider webs, or a dry riverbed.

Here is an entanglement of fire, clay and psyche, a process by which a way of comprehending the world from a post-Jungian standpoint may be opened.

What probably happened is that such pots were first destroyed because the glaze had cracked, and thus was imperfect---until someone realized that the patterns follow the Dao, a natural way of being.

One formula for art with Daoism in mind is meaningful coincidence combined with aesthetic sensibility. This is a different from how art developed in the West, where

before beginning a painting, sketches, or studies were made. Or later, the use of a camera obscura, which projected an image onto a canvas, which was then painted in.

In Europe, it was the Surrealists in the early 20th Century who began applying random operations to their work. And in the 1950s, among the American Abstract Expressionists, was Jackson Pollock, who had undergone Jungian psychotherapy, and was famous for his drip paintings, in which undetermined forms, like uninformed sand paintings, a technique some Jungian analysts use, emerge spontaneously from the artist's psyche,

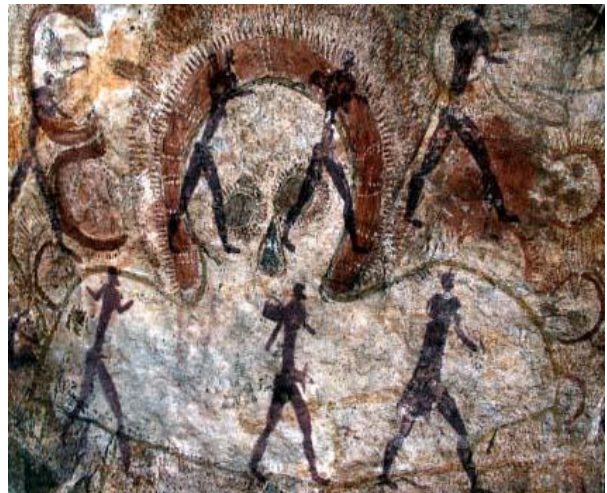
This is reminiscent of the statement by Marie-Louise Von Franz, that the alchemists' "conclusions are spontaneous uncorrected impressions of the unconscious with very little consciousness interference, in contrast to other symbolic material which has always been revised."¹²

Of course it is only after an initial mark is made that further "spontaneous" actions are taken. One mark unconsciously leads to the next. French visual artist Mireille Descombes reverses this process by destroying. "For me," she wrote, "tearing the shapes I have just created, lacerating the sentences I have just written means the destruction of all possible 'aesthetic' tendencies in me, for the destruction of Aesthetics is primarily what I am after."¹³

William Burroughs, among other writers, experimented with tearing up newspapers and making texts by recombining the words. In the mid-1990s, I used an algorithm that scrambled paragraphs, a new one appearing every time I pressed the Enter key; until I saw interesting ideas appear, which I rewrote into grammatical English.

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In dance, Merce Cunningham used the *I Ching* for his choreography. His partner, John Cage, is perhaps the most famous artist for having used the *I Ching* for composing music. Of his collaborations with Cunningham, he said: "It's not starting from an idea. Not starting even from the expression of the same feeling nor an exposition of the same idea, but rather simply being together in the same place and the same time and leaving space around each art..."¹⁴



The most accessible, and published, scholar of East Asian religions in this country during the 1950s was the Zen philosopher D.T. Suzuki, who was a professor at Columbia University in New York. Through Suzuki's popular books Cage became interested in Zen's teaching of silence and emptiness. But his actual practice of using the *I Ching* was not Buddhist but Daoist.

In an interview in which we can see Daoism's influence on his philosophy, Cage replies to the interviewer:

"You say: the real, the world as it is. But it is not, it becomes! It moves, it changes! It doesn't wait for us to change. . . It is more mobile than you can imagine. You are getting closer to this reality when you say it 'presents itself'; that means that it is not there, existing as an object. The world, the real, is not an object. It is a process."¹⁵

Oracles like the *I Ching*, Tarot cards, astrological readings, etc., may be used as techniques for making more open, spontaneous works of art, but do such external consultations transform us, or merely confirm what we want to, or do not want to, believe about ourselves? It seems to me that this is something like the argument as to whether psychedelic drugs, which give one instant access to nonordinary consciousness, are better than taking the disciplined path of meditation; or, perhaps, engaging in science's higher mathematics and collaborative experiments. From physics to metaphysics, there are many ways to question the nature of reality. The best path, I suggest, is the one that leads you toward becoming a more creative and compassionate person. For transformation without compassion, like creativity without insight, is not the Dao.

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Endnotes

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