

The Empty Vessel

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Healthy Dying: A Daoist Challenge

Zhuangzi on Death and Dying

**Meditation and the Use of
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Healthy Dying

A Daoist Challenge

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1. Introduction

Sociographically, we are witness of a proportional rise of the aged population in the developed countries. Here, the life expectancy of most newborns is over one hundred years (Christensen, 2009). Advanced biomedical technologies are certain to keep prolonging the individual lifespan further in significant ways. With very few exceptions¹, nearly all international medical, and ethical standards point towards the obligation of any physician to prolong and to save lives by all means, including reanimation.

World religions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism support these medical ethics. They disapprove of a person's right of deciding herself whether or not (continuation of) medical treatment is wanted, including facing and accepting the consequences thereof.

In the meantime, an ever-growing number of the elderly, frequently without close and nurturing social or family bonds, eventually present chronic, age-related mental as well as physical disorders. More often than not their lives are confined to institutions when they are no more able to take care of themselves and of their most primary needs. Many older persons realize that continuing medical and pharmaceutical interventions may only prolong their suffering. They don't want to become a burden to their families or to society in general. Sometimes they are deeply aware that this kind of life does not feel natural nor rewarding any longer. Life continuation at all costs is not what they wish.

Is a positive correlation of advancing age and declining health an unavoidable law? Is healthy dying a realistic

option at all?

This article has a double focus. First, the ingredients of a healthy life – longevity – will be discussed. Second, the dignity and the freedom of healthy dying will be addressed. Both these issues will be presented in a Daoist context. Though the emphasis is on Daoist philosophy, theme relevant excursions into Buddhism and Confucianism will not be excluded. This paper will start, however, with a – seeming - counterpoint to healthy dying. The Daoist 'Way of the Immortal', with dreams and fantasies.

2. The Way of the Immortal

2.1. Daoist dreams

Within a harmonious, albeit impersonal, Daoist universe of endless spirals of transformation, of growing

and waning, of appearing and disappearing, the concept of death – with a full stop – indeed is problematic. From the Yellow Emperor onwards to early Han as well as to later centuries, Daoist alchemists tried to transgress the limit of death. A twofold dichotomy forms the foundation of their noble endeavors.

First, they discern between the material here-and-now and a transcendental super-reality. To put some ‘flesh-and-bones’ to this concept, these Daoists point to the ‘factual’ dwelling place of the Immortals: the island *P’eng-Lai*. It is here where the mushroom of immortality grows, and where the Immortals use winds and clouds as their vehicles and Divine Sources as their heavenly nourishment.

Second, the personal spirit (*shen*) of a person from birth on, does not leave the body at the moment of dying, but may continue towards immortality, suggesting a Cartesian split of spirit and matter. Then of course, immortality does not come for free. It needs intensive discipline in the practice of self cultivation methods such as deep trance inducing meditation techniques, internal alchemy and *jing gong*, the motionless exercises (Kohn, 2012).

A fantasy to be taken less literally than *P’eng-Lai*, but reflecting another Daoist dream of bliss and ultimate happiness, is the ‘*Country of Utmost North*’ which is lovingly described in the *Lieh-tzu* (Graham, tr., 1960, 102): “...where old and young live as equals, and no one is ruler or subject (...) they live out their lifespan of a hundred years without sickness and early deaths (...) ignorant of decay, old age, sorrow and anguish”.

2.2. Buddhist Beliefs

Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism teach that the body is illusory, that the embodied self is empty (Tophoff, 2013b). Devoid of essence, the self is impermanent. The five aggregates or *skandhas* (body, feelings, perceptions, impulses and emotions, acts of consciousness), which constitute man, are empty in themselves. They form a transient collection during one’s lifetime, only to dissociate, transform and recollect after death. Here, individual karmic dynamics play a fundamental role. It is due to them that a new incarnation is formed in a seemingly endless cycle of birth and death, until – finally – *nirvana*² is reached. Buddhism, Christianity as well as Islam



share a teleological, a future-directed perspective: paradisiacal bliss is not to be realized in one’s lifetime³ – it may be devoutly hoped for, after one’s death, by the true believer.

2.3. Confucian Pragmatism

Pragmatically oriented towards a sober life of virtue, hard work and filial piety, *Kung Zi*⁴ (551-479 B.C.E) does not attach profound meaning to what might happen after death. In fact, there is no afterlife. *Xunzi* (403-221 B.C.E.) formulates succinctly: “Men have their short three score and ten to walk the earth; when they die, they are dead” (in: Kline, 2000, 25.) Elsewhere he says: “Birth is the beginning of man, death his end” (Watson, 1968, 96). *Xunzi* emphatically rejects “all beliefs and practices that seek to put man in contact with the supernatural (...) since the mind of man itself is the source of all moral order, and hence of human perfection...” (Watson, 1968, 71).

3. Longevity

Longevity – the art of a long and healthv life – is a focal theme in Dao-

ist thought, because the human body as such is cultivated: not because of its unique and individual value but because it is part of the greater natural order of the Dao, and as such it merits care and attention. Rather than just being instrumental in obtaining something external, the healthy body may be a source of pleasure and contentment in itself.

This point of view is in sharp contrast to the Buddhist view of the body. In Buddhism, the bodily or incorporated self is deconstructed, in Daoism it is cultivated (Tophoff, 2013). At best the body needs some food to preserve its function as an instrumental means to live through this incarnation; in fact the body is, in the terminology of *Lin-chi*, “just a lump of red flesh” (Sasaki, 1975, 3).

A healthy life is the fruit of lifelong self cultivation. A healthy life, however, is bound to end. Indeed, the *Zhuang Zi* mocks those people who occupy themselves day and night trying to prolong life eternally. The fact is, that “the Sage lives long because he models himself on nature; because he models himself on nature, he has to die” (Welch, 1966,

93). *Zhuang Zi* cautions over-enthusiastic adepts of self cultivation techniques, that “to attain long life, people make themselves ignorant and dull. They spend all their time worrying about not dying” (Kohn, 2014,12). It is not the prolongation of life which is the aim of cultivation of self, but the mindful nourishment of the impermanent body in all its aspects, which makes life healthy, meaningful and enjoyable.

Immortality (Tophoff, 2012 *passim*) in *this* context does not happen in the future, but right here and now. It does not imply the negation of biological processes and does not deny death. Instead it points to a healthy life where we experience each moment in its completeness – in a way ‘as if’ there is no ending. This ‘as if’ quality is fundamental, not only in order to understand immortality, but also to internalize it in daily life. Here, life may be recognized “as a series of new beginnings, (where) each changing state is embraced when it comes” (Kohn, 2014,148) – even death, which is connected to life: “The human life is a coming together of energy. If it comes together there is life. If it scatters there is death” as in the *Zhuangzi* (in: Kohn, 1989, 196). Healthy living is a prerequisite for healthy dying.

3.1. Longevity Practice

Which, then, are those practices designed to meet the challenges of life, including death, as a healthy person? In Daoism, one differentiates between body movement, meditation, breathing exercises, dietary techniques and sexual practices.

Within a healthy organism, the dynamic equilibrium of yin and yang is always maintained in a healthy dialectic of muscle expansion and contraction, of movement and stillness (Tophoff, 2012). Stillness refers to quiet forms of sitting meditation, of standing meditation like *wuji*, the ‘no-poles’ standing state, or the more demanding ‘*santi shi*’, the ‘three body posture’ where the intimate connection of heaven (*yang*), man and earth (*yin*) is expressed and experienced in a dynamic, demanding body posture held over periods of ten minutes or more. In another standing form of meditation, ‘*zhanzhuang*’, the practitioner emanates stillness as the activity of standing is complete. In *Yichuan* (Mind Boxing) stillness and movement are interwoven, and the organism can rediscover



its innate ability of natural movement (Diepersloot, 1999).

More active forms of body movement, which, again, may be characterized as active forms of meditation, and are to be practiced regularly, include disciplines such as *Qi Gung*, where movement, breathing and meditation are integrated. Another health promoting discipline is the ‘Great Ultimate Boxing’ (*taijiquan*). “Moving in the way of Great Ultimate Boxing not only benefits health but prevents stress in contact or conflict with the outside world, because it exemplifies going with the flow instead of resisting it” (Tophoff, 2013a,10).

The beneficial effects of meditation have been widely shown (Kabat-Zinn, 1996). Meditation as an ingredient of healthy living enhances stress resistance and prevents recurrent depressions (Teasdale, 2000). Mindful breathing is emphasized in nearly all forms of meditation. Specific Daoist practices focus on embryonic womb breathing, which refers to a way of breathing in meditation “without causing a feather to tremble” (Waley, 1958, 118), echoing *Lao Zi*’s words: “can you, when concentrat-

ing on your breath, make it soft like that of a little child?” (Waley, 1958, 153). Here, the meditative use of breathing is used as a vehicle to return to the state of the little child, even to the very beginning of life in the embryonic state – as a return to the Source of energy, or, in Buddhist terms, to True Nature.

Dietary practices form part and parcel in illness prevention. In ancient Daoist texts sometimes adventurous sounding drugs and herbs were included, often within a context of alchemy. Recommended were produce such as lotus roots, cold or steamed, raw honey, and special diets for the four seasons. Although vegetarianism is preferred, abstinence from meat should be natural, not forced (Wong, 2011).

In the *Huangdi neiijing suwen*, sex is positively described as an integral part of healthy living. The pragmatic Chinese, influenced both by Daoist and Confucianist thought, “criticized Buddhism with its rule of celibacy, as an *enemy of the Chinese people*” (Kohn, 1992, 125, *my italics*). Daoist bedroom manuals, as described by Schipper (1993, 147), raise the question whether a man of sixty

should keep his semen in and remain alone. The answer is 'no': "A man should not remain without a woman, because if that is the case he becomes nervous and his spirit wears out."

Longevity as a healthy life is constituted by a rigorous management of self, by self cultivation as a personal lifestyle. In this way, inner force and inner autonomy are nourished. It is only from this autonomy that deep and meaningful connections with the outside world become possible. In this way, all longevity practices are instrumental for "remaining alert, master of one's self, upright and lucid – to enter life with a firm step and to leave it with an equally firm step. All this contributes to making us – as much as possible – the artisans of our own destiny" (Schippers, 1993, 214).

4. Healthy Dying

4.1. Impermanence

Healthy living is one of the most significant metaphors for impermanence. Organic life in its essence is a cyclic process of growth and decline, and healthy ageing reflects this metabolic process, visibly and experientially. Here, meditation practices help towards a letting go of attachments to one's incorporated self and to constructively cope with one's naturally and gradually declining capacities. The illusion of permanence (Tophoff, 2013b) may be deeply sensed in meditation, and a way may be entered of a letting go of clinging to the idea of a separate self, which includes clinging to one's body. This realization certainly does not exclude enjoyment in one's functioning within the now. With full mindfulness cherishing the now may extend to eternity, so that a sense of 'immortality' can ensue.

And yet. As the body undergoes changes, the outside world, too, is in transformation. Loved ones die, friends move to different places, one's contributions to society diminish.

Very slowly, the perspective of life's sunset and its dissolution enters awareness. Even the healthy body gradually degenerates and mental functions such as memory and concentration diminish. Healthy lifestyles and medical technologies postpone processes of decline. They are, however, not able to stop them.

Stillness in movement, movement in stillness, introspection and self reflection....there comes a point in mindful and healthy living where the concept of death changes from abstract to real.



Death becomes, so to say, tangible. As if in walking through a forest, one suddenly becomes aware that it is really winter: a stinging cold, a clear, almost frozen sky, and the empty branches of trees. The sense that one's life is nearing its fulfillment. A severe illness may announce itself, the awareness of clearly diminishing mental functions becomes acute, physical handicaps may threaten to deteriorate towards the incapacity to take care of oneself.

4.2. Nature and Protocols

In certain respects, biomedical technology today makes it ever more difficult to die one's proper and natural death. Time and again new options are offered by the medical professions to continue life and to postpone death. In fact, however, advanced technology implicitly offers the autonomous person a choice: either to allow and even to invite death as a natural event within one's lifespan (*not* making use of medical death postponing techniques) – or to undergo medical procedures in order to prolong life.

The three world religions, Chris-

tianism, Islam and Buddhism all share a paternalistic, authoritarian stance in their prescribing the person's behavior vis-à-vis death. They devise solid moral and factual protocols about a person's death and even of what should be done after it. Any intentional interference in the dying process by the individual is strongly rejected. Here, the personal autonomy of the person is fully denied.

4.3. Buddhist Protocols

In Buddhism, for instance, the conscious wish to die and the necessary procedures to make this happen are strongly condemned as a violation of the first Buddhist Precept which entails Right Action. Death means "a good transition to a future life" (Harvey, 2000, 292). Deliberate actions intended to initiate death are a severe karmic burden and a grave obstacle for a 'better' life in a presupposed future, paradisiacal or not. Since the intention is crucial to the assessment of the morality of an act (Harvey, *ibid.*, 294), these actions are not acceptable. They include active euthanasia⁵ (the intentional hastening of death by deliberate action) as well as passive

euthanasia (the intentional causing of death by deliberate omission).

Nakasone (1990, 27) presents still another argument. In his discussion of the Buddhist concept of 'dependent origination' he describes an interdependent world where the individual does not have an exclusive claim on (his) life: "The person might infringe suffering on others by euthanasia", and this, again, is contrary to the first Precept. As mentioned earlier, the Buddhist position is in full agreement with most legal and medical ethical standards worldwide.

4.4. *The Nature of Healthy Dying*

Wu-wei (not doing) is one of the focal concepts of Daoist philosophy. It refers to a mindset of non action in the sense of: not interfering, of going with the flow, of mindfully and intelligently observing and respecting the natural course of events: microscopically as to one's own body, macroscopically in appreciating all cosmic, planetary events. The art of healthy living – and of healthy dying – presupposes a twofold awareness: "Following one's own natural patterns while adapting to the changes" (Kohn, 2014, 16). In the *Zhuang Zi* life is recognized as "embracing each changing state when it comes, and then letting it go in complete presence" (Kohn, *ibid.*, 148).

Daoist philosophy reflects a situational ethics – embedded in an appreciative insight in the movement and the stillness of the Dao. In natural correspondence with the course of life events, the person 'acts' according to what is needed in a specific situation. On the one hand, the person is perceived as an autonomous being able to make his own decisions, on the other man is part of a greater cosmos. Autonomy of the individual person is dialectically paired with mindfulness of this vital context. *Zhuang Zi* formulates: "The true men of old (i.e. the Sage, M.T.) (...) composedly they went and came (...) and did in regard to all things what was suitable, and no one could know how far their action would go" (Legge, tr.19620). Graham (2001, 23) describes these dialectics beautifully in stating that in understanding these dynamics "one's viewpoint shifts from 'I shall no longer exist' to something like 'In losing selfhood I shall remain what at bottom I always was.'" Here, the dynamic Daoist principle is that of returning from motion to stillness, from existence to the void "of which all things emerge" (Graham, tr.1960, 5).



Also *Liezi* (...) shares this position: "Nowhere there is a principle which is right in all circumstances or an action that is wrong in all circumstances (...) The capacity to pick times (...) never be at loss to answer events, belongs to the wise" (in: Graham, tr.1960, 163).

The wise one is the fully autonomous person, is the one who has internalized impermanence and has shed his fictions about a permanent self during years of healthy living. To the Wise, then, "death loses its sting" (Austin, 1998, 448). He is the one who discerns the moment when to act in non action, relying not on an external authority, but on his own inner voice:

"In every man there is a (mariners) compass,
His mind-and-heart is the seat of the ten thousand changes.
Foolishly, I once saw things in reverse:
Leaves and branches thought I outside."⁶

Here, the Ming philosopher *Wang Yanmin* (1472-1529) emphasizes intuiti-

ve knowledge, which is innate. According to Wang, one's innate knowledge already implies action, or: knowledge and action are identical (Tophoff, 2007, 185-186). The inner of man 'knows' – innately – what is needed. Within this innate knowing lies the heart of the action.

The Daoist Immortals may be perceived as metaphors for healthy living in an eternal now. Schippers (1993, 182) expresses it well. Their secret is "that of knowing how to die when one wants to, when one should. (...) they teach us in concrete terms how to live and how to pass from one world to the other, smiling, drunk, dancing to the rhythm of nature".

4.5. *The Way of Healthy Dying*

At a given moment the choice – offered by biotechnology – is made in all tranquil clarity. Artificial life prolongation towards a future of uncertainty, suffering and physical, social and psychological dependency is no longer an option. Still the person is 'healthy', mentally lucid,

connected in family and other social networks, and enjoying a relative psychophysical autonomy. Death, meanwhile, has been transformed into a welcome guest. Wang Zhe, the founder of the early Quanzhen School, is said to have been sound of mind and body when he died. (Eskildsen, 2004) His student Wang Zhijin "suddenly stopped eating and drinking. After seventeen days he casually lay down and peacefully passed away" (Eskildsen, *ibid.*, 146).

Self-starvation is an act of the autonomous person. Here, it is important to discern between suicide on the one hand, and active or passive euthanasia on the other.

Suicide is never the fruit of a deep, long and quiet process of introspection. It does not occur easily in a warm, meaningful social and familial context. On the contrary, suicide frequently is the result of severe mental impairment through grave psychiatric illness, such as unipolar or bipolar depressions. It may also follow sudden attacks of panic. Suicide is a lonely deed, not in connection but in isolation.

In contrast, death in dignity and quietness may be invited through an attitude of no more interfering, of a complete letting go. Death may happen, when the person is surrounded by the intimacy of loved ones, celebrating his life. It may be assisted by an insightful, understanding and caring physician. It may be helped by the intake of professionally prescribed medicine. As such, the death of the beloved may be the metaphor for health.

5. Summary

Different Daoist concepts of 'immortality' are compared to Buddhist beliefs and Confucian pragmatics. Longevity as healthy living is interpreted as nourishment of autonomy and as a prerequisite for healthy dying. Modern biomedical technologies offer the choice between postponing and allowing of death. Contrary to Buddhist paternalistic protocols, Daoist philosophy reflects a situational ethics. When the moment has come, death in dignity may be actively invited, appreciating the transformational flow of the universe of which the dying person is a meaningful part.

1. e.g. in the Netherlands, in Zwitserland.
2. *nirvana* (lit. destruction (i.e. of the ego)).
3. Chan Buddhism teaches that perfect illumination may be reached within one's lifespan.
4. *Kung Zi*, Latin: Confucius.
- 5 eu-thanasia: lit. a good death.
6. (Wang Yangming, in: Ching, 1976, 164)

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