

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The origins of the Taoist religion cannot be traced to a single founder or historical event. The religion emerged during the early centuries of the common era through the convergence of diverse elements of belief and practice. These elements were largely drawn from ancient immortality lore, macrobiotics, alchemy, Taoist philosophy, *yin-yang*/five agents¹ cosmology, state cult, popular religion, and Confucian ethics. Buddhist beliefs and practices also were eagerly incorporated into the mix, particularly from the fourth century onward.

Immortality has always been a cherished goal in the Taoist religion, and many Taoists have practiced asceticism in the hope of gaining everlasting life. One of the most salient features of early Taoist asceticism was the great emphasis on fasting and the amazing variety of techniques devised to suppress hunger. Celibacy, self-imposed poverty, wilderness seclusion, and sleep avoidance also were practiced. Of course, not all early Taoists were ascetics. As has been the case in most other major religions, severe forms of self-discipline and self-denial were carried out primarily by a spiritual elite who made religious self-cultivation their exclusive vocation. This spiritual elite probably represented a distinct minority within the ranks of the faithful.

My working definition of “asceticism” is that proposed by Walter O. Kaelber in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. While admitting that the word has no universally accepted definition, Kaelber states that it may be defined as follows when used in a religious context:

a voluntary, sustained, and at least partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual or profane gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred.²

In most religions, the higher spiritual state and the absorption in the sacred are meant to help guarantee some form of salvation. For early religious Taoists, salvation meant not only a perfection or perpetuation of the spirit but also physical longevity and immortality. Their asceticism almost always purported to improve the

strength and health of the human body. Even though Taoist ascetics sometimes taxed their bodies severely, they believed that their strength and health would eventually be restored if they courageously persevered in their austerities. Ultimately, their austerities were supposed to perfect them both spiritually and physically, finally transforming them into superhuman, divine beings with limitless longevity and extraordinary powers.

Many of the ascetic practices of the Taoists, in their basic forms, predate the emergence of the Taoist religion itself. The practices originated among ancient immortality seekers who perhaps were active as early as the fourth century B.C.E., if not earlier. Unfortunately, the scarcity of sources makes it difficult to adequately discuss the practices as they existed during such an early period. Our study focuses on roughly the first six centuries of the common era, a period for which a detailed examination of asceticism is feasible, due to a relative abundance of sources. A full exploration of the earliest roots of Taoist asceticism must be left for a future study. Nonetheless some points should be touched upon at the outset concerning some of the early precursors of the Taoist religion and the origins of its ascetic current.

The precursors that first come to mind are the Taoist philosophers of the late fourth or early third century B.C.E. whose wisdom is preserved in the *Laozi* (also known as the *Daode jing*) and the *Zhuangzi*. We do not know whether these philosophers pursued lifestyles or training methods of an ascetic nature. In the first place, we know little about who they were, what they did, and who they associated with.³ However, these texts do contain certain teachings that are compatible with an ascetic outlook and lifestyle. Prime examples from the *Laozi* would include the following:

The five colors make man's eyes blind;
 The five notes make his ears deaf;
 The five tastes injure his palate;
 Riding and hunting
 make his mind go wild with excitement;
 Goods hard to come by
 Serve to hinder his progress (Ch. 12)⁴

Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the uncarved block,
 Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible. (Ch. 19)⁵

There is no crime greater than having too many desires;
 There is no disaster greater than not being content;
 There is no misfortune greater than being covetous.
 Hence in being content, one will always have enough. (Ch. 46)⁶

The *Laozi* conveys an apprehensive attitude toward stimuli that arouse the senses and enjoins its readers to decrease their self-centered desires and be content with what they have. Passages such as the aforementioned served as inspiration and justification for later Taoist ascetics. However, as we shall see, Taoist asceticism

sometimes went well beyond what the *Laozi* recommends. Some religious Taoist texts teach one to eschew even the most basic necessities for a normal existence, such as food, rest, and companionship.

One of the most fundamental teachings of the *Zhuangzi* is that one should possess an outlook that “evens things out” (*qiwu*). While the profoundest subtleties of this outlook will not be explored here, it is relevant to point out that the *Zhuangzi* asserts that all things and circumstances that one may confront are of equal quality and desirability.⁷ Based on this outlook, one is to abandon all value judgments, desires, and worries. By doing so, one simply experiences the universe as it is and willingly accords with its flux. Such a person is described as follows:

The utmost man is daemonic. When the wide woodlands blaze they cannot sear him, when the Yellow River and the Han freeze they cannot chill him, when swift thunderbolts smash the mountains and whirlwinds shake the seas they cannot startle him. A man like that yokes the clouds to his chariot, rides the sun and moon and roams beyond the four seas; death and life alter nothing in himself, still less the principles of benefit and harm! (Ch. 2)⁸

A person who “evens things out” would presumably not get wound up in pursuits of pleasure, wealth, and fame. His inner freedom would enable him to be content in any situation, however bleak. However, this does not mean to say that one should purposefully eschew the simple pleasures and bare necessities of life. In saying that the “utmost man” is impervious to fires, freezing, thunderstorms, and death, the *Zhuangzi* describes his inner equanimity and freedom. Later Taoist immortality seekers hoped to gain invulnerability at both the spiritual and physical levels, and sought to do so through self-imposed austerities. In their view, the inner virtue acquired through the austerities would somehow be accompanied by the attainment of physical immortality and supernormal powers. The *Zhuangzi*, however, makes no such promise. It teaches its readers to see death as a circumstance no less desirable than life and to willingly accept it as one of the marvelous workings of nature. Later religious Taoist texts similarly assert that Taoist adepts must overcome their yearning for life and fear of death. However, paradoxically, gaining such a state of mind was somehow supposed to enable them to evade bodily death. But in the view of the *Zhuangzi*, the acceptance of death brings no such tangible reward; it simply liberates people from their anxieties.

Similarly, the *Laozi* contains no clear statements affirming the possibility of physical immortality. In certain places it does present its wisdom as a means for surviving worldly perils and reaching a ripe old age. Certain passages could be interpreted as endorsements of yogic practices of a macrobiotic nature. Still, there is no clear indication that the author(s) believed in physical immortality.

However, immortality beliefs certainly existed by the time the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* were written. By the fourth century B.C.E., people were beginning to

entertain ideas about immortal, superhuman beings who lived in remote, inaccessible mountains or islands. One such being is mentioned in the *Zhuangzi*, within a conversation (probably fictional) recorded between two men named Jian Wu and Lian Shu. Jian Wu tells Lian Shu about the following “wild extravagances” that he had heard from an eccentric named Jie Yu:

In the mountains of far-off Guyi there lives a daemonic man, whose skin and flesh are like ice and snow, who is gentle as a virgin. *He does not eat the five grains but sucks in the wind and drinks the dew* (emphasis added); he rides the vapour of the clouds, yokes flying dragons to his chariot, and roams beyond the four seas. When the daemonic in him concentrates it keeps creatures free from plagues and makes the grain ripen every year. (Ch. 1)⁹

Most important for our purposes is the italicized portion. As we shall see, phrases like this commonly refer to severe fasting methods where the adept shuns solid foods while attempting to nourish himself or herself on air and saliva. During this period, superhuman beings with unusual eating habits may have merely been objects of fantasy and admiration. There still may not have been adepts who aspired to become like them. But if there were such adepts, they may have been practicing some of the fasting techniques that were later pursued by Taoist ascetics.

The deficiency of sources hinders us from knowing much about the asceticism of the earliest immortality seekers. Most of the information on them is found in Sima Qian’s (ca. 145–86 B.C.E.) *Shiji* (Chronicles of the Historian). There we are told about numerous court magicians (*fangshi*) from the kingdoms of Qi and Yan who offered their services to kings and emperors. Heeding their advice, several rulers during the fourth through the second centuries B.C.E. sent out expeditions to search for the legendary island dwellings of immortals.¹⁰ The court magicians also endorsed various cultic observances and macrobiotic techniques as aids toward immortality. It should be noted that Li Shaojun, active during the reign of Han Emperor Wu (Wudi, 140–87 B.C.E.), included what was probably a fasting method (*gudao* or the “method of grains”) among his practices.¹¹ However, even though fasting may have been included among the methods of the court magicians, the word “ascetic” would not seem to aptly characterize these men of worldly ambition. Still, it is not hard to imagine that there would have been some immortality seekers who observed their cults and honed their skills without seeking the patronage of the rich and powerful.

The *Xinyu*, written in 196 B.C.E. by the Confucian politician Lu Jia, contains an interesting criticism of immortality seekers.

[If a man] strains and belabors his body, going deep into the mountains and seeking [to become a] Divine Immortal,¹² [if he] abandons his parents, does away with his blood relatives (lit., “bones and flesh”),

abstains from the five grains, and gives up the *Shi [jing]* and the *Shu [jing]* (i.e., classical learning), [thus] turning his back to what is treasured by Heaven and Earth in his seeking for the Tao of deathlessness; then he can no more communicate with [the people of] the world, or prevent what is not [right from happening].¹³

This passage strongly suggests that immortality seekers had already acquired a reputation for their austerities and unworldly tendencies.

At some point, immortality seeking and Taoist philosophy came to be intimately linked. When and how this occurred is unclear. However, magicians of the kind previously mentioned may have been responsible for this phenomenon, as perhaps were the scholars of the Huang-Lao school (the line of demarcation between these two groups is blurry; they probably overlapped). The Huang-Lao school originated in the Warring States kingdom of Qi—which covered most of present-day Shandong Province—and achieved its peak of influence during the early second century B.C.E. This school venerated two figures as its patrons; Laozi (the putative, most likely legendary author of the *Laozi* book) and the Yellow Emperor (a legendary emperor of remote antiquity). Its adherents interpreted and adapted the teachings of the *Laozi* to develop their own theories on statecraft and self-cultivation. They appear to have also promoted various macrobiotic measures such as alchemy, medicine, sexual yoga, light gymnastics, and dietetics.¹⁴ The findings unearthed in 1973 at the tomb of the Lady of Dai (d. ca. 186 B.C.E.) in Changsha (Hunan Province) attest to the fact that Taoist philosophy and macrobiotics simultaneously held the interest of many members of the early Han aristocracy. Numerous books were found in the tomb, including two copies of the *Laozi* (the earliest manuscripts of the book available), a Huang-Lao text called the *Huangdi sijing* (Four Canons of the Yellow Emperor), diagrams of macrobiotic light gymnastic postures, and a fasting manual entitled *Quegu shiqi pian* (Chapter on Getting Rid of Grains and Eating Air). Most amazingly, the corpse of the Lady of Dai was found preserved with skin and internal organs intact.¹⁵

By the first century of the common era, immortality seekers had come to be known as “Taoists.” This is apparent from evidence in the *Lunheng*, written by Latter Han skeptic Wang Chong (23–100 C.E.). In a chapter entitled “Taoist Untruths” (*daoxu*), Wang Chong endeavors to debunk the immortality beliefs and techniques of his time. In one passage, he writes,

There is a belief that by the doctrine of Laozi one can transcend the world. Through serenity and non-desire one nurtures the essence (*jing*) and cherishes the vital force (*qi*). The longevity of people is based on their spirits. If their spirits are unharmed, they will live long and will not die. After accomplishing his affairs (his duties as royal archivist?), Laozi practiced this. After a hundred years he transcended the world and

became a Perfected Being. (The text follows with Wang Chong's rebuttal of these beliefs.)¹⁶

This passage not only attests to the linkage between Taoist philosophy and immortality seeking, but also reflects how the philosopher Laozi was revered as a great adept who attained immortality through serenity and non-desire.

The Latter Han Dynasty (25–220 C.E.) represents a critical juncture in the development of the Taoist religion. Immortality-seeking Taoists continued to develop their beliefs and techniques. While some of them only considered Laozi to be one of the many adepts who attained immortality, others went further in glorifying him. They deified him as being nothing less than a cosmic super deity, virtually equating him to the all-creating, all-embracing first principle (the Tao) described in the *Laozi*.¹⁷ They interpreted the *Laozi* along the lines of their own beliefs and utilized it to lend authority to their cosmology, macrobiotics, and mysticism.

The earliest known organized Taoist religious movements, the Great Peace School (*taiping dao*) and the Five Pecks of Rice School (*wudoumi dao*),¹⁸ emerged in the latter part of the second century C.E.¹⁹ The Great Peace School had a large following in the east, in portions of present-day Henan, Hebei, Shandong, Jiangsu, and Anhui provinces. The Five Pecks of Rice School—which later came to be known as the Heavenly Masters School (*tianshi dao*)—thrived in the west, in a region covering portions of present-day Sichuan and Shaanxi provinces. The discovery of the *Laozi bianhua jing* (Scripture on the Transformations of Laozi) from the Dunhuang manuscripts has provided evidence that there were other similar movements during this period.²⁰ This text apparently belonged to a popular sect—distinct from the Five Pecks of Rice School—that existed in present-day Sichuan Province at the end of the second century.²¹

The Great Peace and Five Pecks of Rice schools found most of their adherents among the peasantry. These schools emphasized ritual healing and rudimentary ethics based on the fundamental assumption that moral transgressions cause diseases. The Five Pecks of Rice School utilized the *Laozi* as its fundamental scripture, interpreting it along ethical lines to formulate moral precepts. Both groups entertained hopes of realizing a utopian age under an enlightened Taoist regime. To help usher in such a utopia, the Great Peace School took to armed revolt (the Yellow Turban revolt) against the Han dynasty in 184, only to be crushed. The Five Pecks of Rice School, situated at a remote distance from the seat of imperial power, enjoyed autonomous political control of its local area for roughly thirty years, before surrendering to military strongman Cao Cao in 215. Its cooperative stance toward its conquerors allowed it to survive as a religious body. An important, unresolved question is whether or not, and to what extent, the two schools propagated immortality techniques. While they may have included adepts of immortality techniques within their fold, it seems likely that most adepts functioned independently of these schools.

In the ensuing centuries, newer religious Taoist movements integrated immortality beliefs and techniques with the ethics and rituals of the Heavenly Masters School. At the same time, they increasingly imitated Buddhist doctrines and practices. Most influential among these movements were the Shangqing movement of the fourth century and the Lingbao movement of the fifth century. Each of these movements promoted new scriptures that they claimed to be revelations of supreme divine truth. By the fifth century, the Taoist religion and Buddhism had become bitter rivals, competing for the support of emperors and the souls of the people. Naturally, as the Taoist religion underwent this formative process, its asceticism transformed significantly in its form, meaning, and purpose.

Ascetics in various religions have shared the inclination to view spirit (or soul) and matter as being mutually alien and antagonistic entities. Bodily mortification often has been carried out under the assumption that the flesh does little else but hinder one's progress toward salvation. For example, Christian ascetics have tended to view the flesh as the source of sinful impulses that hinder the salvation of the soul.²² The goal of Jain asceticism is to purify and liberate the soul from *samsara* by "burning away" the karmic matter that adheres to it.²³ Manichaeian ascetics considered the soul a particle of light issuing from the true God and aimed to liberate it from the evil prison of flesh.²⁴

However, Taoists sought to immortalize both mind and body, and they did not draw a stark contrast between spirit (or soul) and matter. This crucial fact strongly affected the content and nature of their asceticism.

Henri Maspero, the great Western pioneer in Taoist studies, adeptly argued that Taoist theories on souls dictated that Taoists seek eternal life through bodily immortality. To the Chinese, spirit and matter were different modes of *qi* (energy, ether, material force);²⁵ spirit was a rarefied mode, matter a condensed mode. They thus saw the world as a continuum passing from void to material things. As a result, they had no concept of a soul that played the role of an invisible, spiritual counterpart to the material body. The Chinese view on souls was that every person possessed multiple souls. Although theories about the multiple souls varied in their specifics, a common view maintained that there were two groups of souls; the three *hun* souls and the seven *po* souls. The two groups of souls were believed to separate at death; the *hun* souls were thought to disperse into the skies, and the *po* souls were thought to seep out of the buried corpse into the soil. According to this theory, since the souls separated and dispersed at death, they did not perpetuate the deceased person's personality in an afterlife state that could be properly described as "salvation" or "immortality." Consequently, Maspero argued, the only means by which the Chinese could envision immortality was through the perpetuation of the flesh that kept the multiple souls together in their bodily habitat.²⁶

Yet it is possible that some early Taoist immortality seekers did not actually believe in the immortality of the flesh. To believe in it certainly requires a great leap of faith, since virtually all empirical evidence confronted in real life seems to

contradict it. Some, in keeping with the spirit of the *Zhuangzi*, may have understood “immortality” strictly as being a metaphor for an inner freedom and peace of mind. Some may have believed only in the immortality of an entity more subtle than the flesh. Many Taoist texts of the Song dynasty (960–1279 C.E.) onward set forth as their highest ideal the immortality and heavenly ascension of the “internal elixir” (*neidan*), a divine, internal entity concocted from the pure, subtle forces latent in the body. When it ascends, this entity, which is also known as the “yang spirit” (*yangshen*) or the “body outside of the body” (*shenwai zhi shen*), is said to leave the mortal body behind. Rudiments of such later doctrines may have already existed in the minds of some Taoists during the period covered in this study.²⁷

However, while some Taoists probably understood “immortality” in such metaphorical or abstract ways, the immortality of the flesh is not explicitly rejected in any religious Taoist text of the first six centuries C.E. (as far as I am aware). Most early Taoist ascetics probably believed in the possibility of avoiding death and sought to achieve heavenly ascension in the immortal body.

Taoists also developed doctrines wherein hope was maintained for those who had died. First, there was the belief that some adepts had merely feigned their death by employing supernatural techniques of illusion. Even when death was not “feigned,” it was believed that one could eventually gain the status of a lesser immortal after a lengthy sojourn in the subterranean realm of the dead, or become resurrected into the realm of humans. (It should be noted that in these scenarios the corpse does not decay and dissipate for eternity; it is somehow preserved, transformed, or regenerated).²⁸ However, serious adepts who pursued ascetic practices generally aspired to the highest grades of immortality, which were to be attained only by bypassing death.

Because they believed that the body had to be kept intact for their goal to be realized, Taoist adepts usually avoided practices that they considered harmful to their health. They did not wound the body through self-flagellation. They usually emphasized cleanliness and took care of bodily hygiene. They did not malnourish themselves to the point of disease or death—at least not intentionally. Deviations from these norms were rare and tended to be met with criticism from fellow Taoists.

However, because the goal was to make the body immortal and superhuman, Taoist adepts needed to see tangible proof in the here and now that they were training and transforming it properly. The mental fortitude and physical durability to persevere in increasingly greater austerities were in themselves deemed as such proof, as were the trance experiences induced through painstaking measures. Thus practices such as fasting and sleep avoidance were carried out at an intensity comparable to, if not surpassing, the asceticism of other religions. In this sense, the Taoist mind/body view encouraged and intensified asceticism.

Severe forms of asceticism can thus occur even when the practitioner is not indifferent to the well-being of the body. Actually, this phenomenon is not unique to Taoism. For example, within the Christian ascetic tradition, attitudes toward the

body have been both negative and positive. An interesting comparison can be made between attitudes expressed in accounts concerning two famous Christian ascetics, Ethiopian Moses and Simeon the Stylite. Ethiopian Moses (ca. 320–407 A.D.) was a monk active in Egypt. He was a black man (hence the description “Ethiopian”) of great physical size and strength who, prior to his conversion and monkhood, had been a slave and a robber and had committed every sort of imaginable sin. Throughout his monastic life, he was obsessed with overcoming his predisposition toward sinful acts and thoughts, which were blamed on his physical size and strength.

Still, because he boiled with bodily vigor from his former way of life and was excited by pleasurable fantasies, he wasted his body with countless ascetic exercises. On the one hand, he abstained from meat and ate only a little bread, accomplishing a great deal of work and praying fifty times a day. On the other hand, for six years he prayed the whole night standing, never lying down or closing his eyes in sleep. At other times, he would go to the dwellings of the monks at night and secretly would fill the pitcher of each one with water. This was very hard work, for the place where some drew water was ten stades away, some twenty, some even thirty or more. For a long time he continued to have his former bodily strength, although he made every effort to conquer it with many ascetic exercises and oppressed his body with severe labors.²⁹

Here is an example where austerities were practiced for the precise purpose of weakening the body. Moses’ bodily strength and vigor are described as things that had to be conquered, since they were the cause of his “pleasurable fantasies.” The body is seen as the soul’s adversary in its quest for salvation.

However, in the *Homily on Simeon the Stylite*, by Jacob of Serug (449–521 A.D.), a very different attitude toward the body is conveyed. Simeon (386–459) was a Syrian monk renowned for lengthy fasts and other austerities. He spent his last forty years praying, exposed to the elements atop a small platform on a pillar approximately sixty feet high. Jacob’s homily vividly describes an occasion during Simeon’s stay on the pillar when a gangrenous and putrescent ulcer developed on his foot, causing incredible pain. Jacob’s account attributes the appearance of the ulcer to the work of the Devil, who was attempting to undermine Simeon’s efforts. In spite of the pain, Simeon continued to pray, standing the entire time on his one good foot. The text tells us that while doing so, Simeon sang out the following words:

My foot stands straight and does not bend.³⁰ For its Lord will sustain it that it may stand and support the burden of the two. For lo, it bears the palace of the body like a pillar of the master-builder who fastens and supports it so that it will not be shaken. O Evil One, the hurt that you are causing does not hurt me since it is sweet for me; you will tire yourself out as I am not going to leave my labor.³¹

Eventually, when the condition of the bad foot had worsened to where it had rotted to tendons and bones, Simeon cut it off and said to it, "Go in peace until the resurrection. And do not grieve, for your hope will be kept in the kingdom."

Here the adversary is the Devil. The body is Simeon's ally. Even though Simeon's austerities tax the body severely, their purpose is not to weaken the body. Simeon trusts in God to strengthen and sustain the body so it can overcome the challenges of the Devil. He reassures his amputated foot that it will be reunited with him when his body is resurrected on the day of final judgment. Because of this belief in resurrection, the body is seen as bearing an equal stake with the soul in the battle with the Devil and the attainment of salvation.

Thus in the Christian tradition, asceticism has been accompanied by both negative and positive perceptions of the body. Simeon's concern for his body's sustenance and salvation bears a certain resemblance to the attitude of the Taoists. However, Taoism went a step further by asserting that austerities such as fasting and sleep avoidance, even when carried out to the point of bodily weakening and emaciation, would eventually strengthen the body and imbue it with powers previously unknown. Ultimately, in the best case scenario, the body was supposed to directly gain eternal life without undergoing death and resurrection.

For Taoist ascetics, becoming immortal meant redeeming the body from its mortal state. Also, most hoped to ascend to a heavenly realm beyond the ordinary world. Many believed the world itself was approaching inevitable destruction and was becoming increasingly evil in the process. These beliefs undoubtedly heightened their desire to transcend the world. In this sense, Taoist asceticism may have at times been motivated more by negative sentiments toward the mundane world than by positive aspirations toward higher goals. This pessimistic mood is particularly understandable in light of the widespread social strife that existed throughout the period of the late Han and Six dynasties. The end of the Han dynasty was marked by political intrigue and corruption that engendered widespread hardship and dissatisfaction among the populace. The culminative result was the aforementioned Yellow Turban Revolt of 184 C.E. Political and social stability rarely existed throughout the ensuing centuries. Wars persisted during the Three Kingdoms period (220–280) when the Wei, Shu and Wu kingdoms battled for supremacy. After a brief reunification under the Western Jin dynasty (265–316), the north was conquered by non-Chinese peoples who fought incessantly among themselves. During the fleeting intervals of peace, the political scene was rife with corruption, intrigue, and danger, rendering the benefits of social power and status dubious. For the peasantry and aristocracy alike, it must have often been difficult to be pleased with what the world had to offer.³²

On the other hand, it can be argued that one's outlook toward the world and society is determined more on a personal, psychological level. Under virtually all circumstances, there are always people who by temperament can only perceive the human condition in a negative light. Nonetheless, one must not disregard the

impact the historical context can have in dictating the extent and degree to which an antiworldly mentality can find its expression.

At both the physiological and cosmological levels, Taoist asceticism can be understood as a struggle between the forces of good (*yang*) and evil (*yin*). The good forces, at the physiological level, are the body's pure *qi* and the multitude of internal bodily deities that are activated through austerities. The austerities also serve to subdue the evil forces. The evil forces include the body's impure *qi*, along with its internal demons that try to undermine the adept's progress. At the cosmological level, the adept endeavors to communicate with divine beings (gods and immortals) and gain their support, while resisting the temptations of the mundane world and the demons that dwell in it. The enlightened mind and heightened spirituality of the ascetic are identified with *qi* in its refined, subtle forms that belong to the *yang* principle and possess a divine quality. The ordinary untrained flesh is seen to be full of gross, profane *qi* of the *yin* principle that hinders spiritual progress by obscuring the divine *qi* in the body. The uniqueness of this dualism lies in how the two sides of the duality are not completely alien to each other. Everything, regardless of which side it belongs to, is originally the same thing (*qi*) that has issued from the primordial state of non-being. The distinction between the things of the two sides lies not in their basic nature but in their degree of purity and refinement. This means that the untrained flesh, even though it is gross and impure, has the potential for transformation. Austerities act as the agent for this transformation.

Taoists fasted to purge the body of its impure *qi*. Because they considered all ordinary foods impure, they tried to eat as little as possible. To suppress their hunger they ingested special drug recipes and carried out techniques such as breath holding, air swallowing, saliva swallowing and talisman swallowing. The pure *qi* contained in the air and in their own saliva was thought to nourish the body in the best way possible, activating its latent divine forces in the process. Celibacy was practiced to retain seminal fluid. The vital forces that sustain life were thought to be concentrated in the semen, meaning that ejaculation could lead directly to the shortening of life.

Through their austerities, Taoists hoped to reach a higher spiritual state. By shedding all worldly desires and single-mindedly seeking immortality, they hoped to evoke the sympathy and assistance of gods and immortals. The elimination of sexual desire was considered particularly important in this regard. By employing meditation techniques that usually involved special visualizations, adepts entered trances, thereby hoping to encounter divine beings or gain a foretaste of heavenly realms. These trances also were partially induced and heightened by fasting and sleep avoidance.

Even though Taoist ascetics placed paramount importance upon health, it appears that overzealousness occasionally may have led to bodily harm and even death. The *Zhouyi cantongqi*, an alchemical text ascribed to Wei Boyang of the second century,³³ contains a passage that criticizes the excesses of ascetics.

[Adepts] eat air and make their intestines and stomach growl,
 Exhaling the proper [qi] and inhaling the evil [qi] from the outside.
 They never sleep during the daytime or night time,
 And never rest from morning till evening.
 Their bodies become more and more exhausted by the day.
 With their consciousness obscure, they look like idiots.
 [The blood in] their 100 blood vessels boils like water in a kettle,
 Making them unable to reside in pure clarity.
 They build walls and erect altars and shrines,
 To engage in reverent worship from morning till evening.
 Demonic entities manifest their forms to them in dreams,
 And they become emotionally moved.
 In their hearts and minds they rejoice,
 And say to themselves, 'My life span will definitely be extended!'
 Suddenly they die prematurely,
 And their rotting corpses are exposed. (*Zhouyi cantongqi jie*
 [HY1004/TT628], 1/21b–22a)

It is difficult to determine how often ascetic excesses lead to premature death. Usually, in most such cases, adepts probably fully intended to benefit—not harm—their health. The failure of such adepts could be rationalized by fellow adepts on the grounds that the failed adepts had pursued their methods incorrectly or had lacked inner devotion and moral virtue.

As we shall see, certain “immortality techniques” were tantamount to religious suicide. Theoretically, however, such methods were designed not to destroy the body but to create the illusion of death. The idea, particularly in instances where deadly quantities of poison were ingested, was that the corpse of the adept was merely an illusion fabricated for people to see. While creating this illusion of a corpse, the adept supposedly concealed himself from society to live on elsewhere as an immortal. However, it seems possible that in some cases ascetics may have abused and killed themselves as a result of more negative ideas and feelings. Some of them may have hated their bodies for the impurity of their untrained states. Some may have simply wanted to flee the agonies of worldly existence at all costs.

By the fourth century, and especially the fifth century, Taoists were eagerly incorporating Buddhist doctrines and practices into their religious system. Buddhist doctrines presented the Chinese with new and exciting possibilities for attaining spiritual perfection and transcendence. Taoists adopted the belief in *karma* and reincarnation and came to equate heavenly immortality with the liberation from *samsara*. The doctrine of *karma* accentuated the importance of suppressing and eliminating desires more than ever before. The doctrine of reincarnation caused Taoists to infer the existence of an individual spirit that survives successive bodily deaths. (This directly contradicted the Buddha's doctrine of no soul, or *anatman*.)

Ironically, however, even Chinese Buddhists were initially unable to avoid drawing this inference from the doctrine of reincarnation.)³⁴

As Buddhist influence became greater, there seems to have arisen an increased tendency among Taoists to emphasize spiritual enlightenment and transcendence more than physical longevity and immortality. Furthermore, the newly derived notion of an eternal, transmigrating spirit may have caused some to understand the ultimate salvation solely as the liberation of the spirit. This in turn may have caused some to abandon the ideal of physical immortality altogether. Among such Taoists, there may have arisen a tendency to devalue and abuse the body intentionally, in the hope of expediting the liberation of the spirit.

Apparently due to an awareness of such a problem, the *Yuqing jing* (HY1301/TT1022–102431), an anonymous Taoist scripture of the sixth or seventh century, vehemently criticizes ascetic abuses. The *Yuqing jing* asserts that salvation must be realized within “this body,” and insists that one must seek to perpetuate the life of the body, since the body is “the basis of the Tao.” However, at the same time, the scripture does equate immortality with liberation from *samsara*. It also describes the ultimate salvation as an ascension and a union with a formless Non-Being. In other words, while vehemently asserting the need to keep the body intact, the *Yuqing jing* describes the greatest salvation as being a noncorporeal state. It thus presents us with an apparent contradiction and causes us to wonder what was supposed to happen to the flesh when the adept merged with the formless non-being. However, the idea seems to be that a good Taoist immortalizes the physical body by refining it into a formless state.

Over the centuries, historical writing—particularly that of traditional Confucian scholars, but also that of modern historians—has tended to cast a shadow of doubt upon the integrity of the Taoist religion. Prior to the latter half of this century, the Taoist religion had been a topic of little interest to historians, and mention was rarely made of Taoist religion aside from when it somehow affected political events. The Taoists mentioned in the standard histories have tended to be dubious characters; they include insurrectionists like Zhang Jue³⁵ and Sun En,³⁶ fawning political opportunists like Wang Qinruo³⁷ and Lin Lingsu,³⁸ and quack alchemists like Liu Mi.³⁹ The infamy of such characters has caused many to ignore or lose sight of the fact that most Taoists have practiced their religion in good faith. Historians of religion are now finally beginning to gain a more complete view through the texts of the Taoist Canon. We no longer rely solely on the accounts of those who were indifferent or hostile to the religion. This study focuses on a phenomenon that bears testimony to the earnestness with which Taoists practiced their religion. Taoist ascetics were willing to deny themselves the most basic worldly needs and comforts for the sake of their religious perfection.