

How I Became a Daoist Priest

By Shifu Michael Rinaldini

As I pour myself a second cup of Chinese Pu-erh tea, I ask myself when did it all start, my interests in Daoism? Of course, I know the answer already, as it is never really that far from my mind. I check my cup of tea. No, not dark enough. I like my pu-erh dark and earthy. It was back in 1970 or 1971. I was attending the University of Oklahoma, and one night, I and a few friends were riding our bicycles on campus. Weaving in and out of the hedge-lined sidewalks was like flowing through a maze of pathways. At the time, I was reading a lot of Walden Pond. So, continuing my following the path, making quick decisions: turn right, turn left, go straight. It suddenly dawned on me that life was like this. A lot of interconnected pathways and a lot of choices to make. And, as long as I was aware of my choices, then everything was okay. My overwhelming feeling though, focused on how all these pathways and choices were all relative. Ah, the tea is done. As I continued riding my bike that night a mantra came into my head: Everything is Relative, Everything is Relative ...

But, before I go further, I need to go back to my senior year of high school. I had read a book which was the the real opening for me: *The Razor's Edge*, by W. Somerset Maugham. It turned my life upside down. And, even though the book and subsequent movie versions of it, especially the Bill Murray version, are primarily Buddhist in nature, it didn't matter. I was hooked on the path of searching for the truth of the universe and the truth of my soul. I had turned my back on the materialism of the world, and even though, I was still part of the world, my spirit yearned for the freedom, or should I say, the free and easy wanderings of the Daoist immortals soaring off to distant realms of Celestial Heavens.

These and other experiences I had in the 1970's shaped the direction I was to follow for the rest of my life. And even though I was not consciously aware that I was a Daoist, it became clearer over the next 30 years that my roots in Daoism stemmed from these early experiences.

From the 1970's through the 1990's, I was to continue my searching and explorations through various world religions. "So whatever you do, or even though you do not do anything, enlightenment is there, always." "Buddha nature is our original nature." Reading this inspired me to follow the Buddhist path for many years. And, as a matter of fact, my first significant insight or awakening experience occurred as a direct result of reading it. To sum up my experiences during this time, I spent 6 years in and out of Catholic contemplative monasteries in the 70's, following in the footsteps of the contemporary Catholic monastic, Thomas Merton. Later in Merton's life, he spoke highly of the integration of a Catholic and Buddhist spirituality. I was doing exactly that. In the 80's and 90's, I continued my studies in the Buddhist traditions of Zen, Insight Meditation, and Tibetan Buddhism, including the Dzogchen view. In the mid-1990's because of health reasons, I began a transition towards Traditional Chinese Medicine, including training as an acupuncture therapist, as well as qigong training with various American qigong teachers. In a very short time, I realized that this was the path I had been searching for ever since I first read *The Razor's Edge* in the late 1960's.

By the year 2000, I was firmly established in the Chinese health practices of medical qigong, acupuncture, and tuina, as well as immersed in the study of Daoist classics and Daoist meditation. But it was only my first China trip that allowed me to fully experience the deeper significance of following a Chinese path of healing and spirituality. In May of 2000, I traveled to Beijing to study with Master Wan Sujian (b. 1953). Raised in a family of army medical doctors, he had joined the army at age 17 and duly became a Western-trained physician. During the 1976 earthquake, he performed exemplary service and excelled in various outstanding performance over the following years. Master Wan has received numerous awards for excellence from the Chinese government. He is especially known for his outstanding humanitarian work, including his recent help in fighting the SARS

epidemic, and for aiding the poor, disadvantaged orphans of China.

In 2000, when I first arrived in Beijing, he was still a military physician, but because of his outstanding performance he had been given permission to open a qigong clinic and training center, combined with a residential school of martial and healing practices for young people. This center, the Bagua Xundao Gong Red Cross Medical Exchange Center, located in the western foothills on the outskirts of the city, also opened its gates to train foreigners in qigong, gongfu, qi healing and other Chinese cultural arts. During this first trip, followed by a second sojourn in 2001, I studied and practiced Master Wan's way of qigong (Bagua Xundao Gong Qigong) and learned his method of qi-healing. His Baqua qigong consists of a set of movements, tonifying the three dantians, purifying the channels, strengthening the Jing Qi, or harmonizing the Yin and Yang energies. Most of his exercises are performed standing, but some are done lying down, or in sitting cross-legged postures. A usual practice session lasts about an hour.

His qi-healing is usually undertaken by a group of six to eight practitioners who stand around the seated or lying patient. Using both hands-on massage techniques and a non touching form of external qi transmission, all send or channel universal energy into the patient together. Master Wan believes that this group effort is more powerful than the work of just one healer or doctor. A treatment of this kind is one of the highlights of the center's healing services. In addition, Master Wan also provides training and appreciation of traditional Chinese and Daoist culture. For instance, many of his young students play Chinese instruments and perform them regularly for guests. The center also houses a Daoist temple. Dedicated to Lord Lao, who is represented in a fifteen-foot tall statue, it is the location of regular rituals, during which students play traditional Daoist music. Their opening ceremony for the temple was August 14, 2002, and it is called Tai Shang Lao Jun Hall. Since 2001, the temple has been supervised by a Daoist priest, Ji Zhi Tong, formerly a resident of Beijing's White Cloud Temple and former teacher of its current abbot. Priest Ji teaches Daoist rituals to the students and frequently invites foreign guests to participate in Daoist blessing ceremonies.

Another Daoist activity in Master Wan's center is the Daoist tea ceremony. It involves the formal tasting of various kinds of tea while sitting around a large table in a specially designed chamber. I was fortunate enough to participate in it several times, most memorable being those when a Daoist priestess offered us tea in an ornate but simple ceremony.

I live in a small town, one hour north of San Francisco. I have a day job teaching art, qigong and other things to adults with developmental disabilities. In addition to my family of wife, son and two daughters, my passion is to teach others the Chinese healing arts of qigong, meditation, Qi Healing, Daoist scripture study, and even the Daoist way of drinking tea. One means that I have developed to accomplish this task was the creation of a Qigong Certification Program. My program presents the basics of qigong, including a foundation in key TCM principles, like Five Element Theory and the Meridian system. I also concentrate on a beginner's understanding of Daoism, including Daoist meditation. From my own observations, I've noticed that among the growing numbers of qigong teachers and practitioners, that the influence of Daoism on the development of qigong is little realized. And, the feedback I get from my students is that they are highly appreciative of having been introduced to Daoism.

As this program grows in popularity, more and more people are asking me how can go beyond being a qigong practitioner, and become a Daoist priest. This has led me to the contemplation of what do I need to do to be of service to them? The answer lies in the creation of a training program for Daoist priests. But, before I go into that story, I need to brew a fresh pot of pu-erh tea. I can't tell the story of training priests, until I tell the story of how I became a Daoist priest.

From what I've said earlier, it should be clear I had a deep yearning to fully enter the spiritual-religious life. During the busy years of my training as a qigong practitioner and teacher, I put these aspirations on-hold. But gradually, as I became more proficient in qigong and started immersing myself more fully into the study of Daoism, my old yearnings surfaced again. By this time, I had already been to China twice and developed a strong teacher-student relationship with Master Wan Su Jian. So in the Fall of 2002, I turned to Master Wan for guidance on how I could satisfy my passion to enter the religious life as a Daoist priest, both for my own self-cultivation and to help spread the teachings of Daoism. I turned to Master Wan because on my second visit to see him, I befriended Priest Ji, who I mentioned above. Priest Ji is considered a high priest of the (Longmen) Dragon Gate Daoists at White Cloud Temple. Master Wan was already aware of my background in qigong studies and Daoist practices. He responded by saying how glad he was hearing I want to spread Daoism to others in America. He and Priest Ji would make arrangements for me to receive Daoist Priest Ordination the following year. Nine months later, in August of 2003, I was back in China.

On the very first morning, still in a jet-lag daze, at 9 a.m., I was being ordained as a Daoist priest at the center's Daoist temple. The ceremony began with several assistants dressing me in a new set of Daoist clothes, including a full-length Daoist ceremonial robe, hat, and shoes. Priest Ji and an assistant priestess recited many texts, burned ceremonial paper, walked in special patterns, and bowed a lot. One of the special rituals Priest Ji did was opening the spiritual eye of a statue of Lord Lao, which I carried back to my home temple. He performed a similar ritual on myself, touching the third eye spot on my forehead. The whole ceremony took about two hours.

During the brief time that I was there, I participated in several Daoist ceremonies, which lasted for hours with lots of incense. My main role during these ceremonies was to assist in playing simple musical instruments, namely cymbals. During the next few days, Priest Ji and his assistant priestess spoke to me, through a translator, about the Quanzhen lineage and history. During one of these sessions, he gave me my 22nd generation lineage name of "Li." Chang was added to it, followed by Dao, to make my complete name, Li Chang Dao. In another session, the priestess said to me that to make progress as a Daoist priest, I needed to study and meditate on certain Daoist scriptures. She recommended that I study the Daode jing and Zhuangzi in combination with a collection of other works important to Dragon Gate (Longmen) Daoists. They include the Qingjing jing (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness), and the Yinfu jing (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman). And of course, I should learn as much as possible about the Complete Perfection school, founded by Wang Zhe (1123-1170). She also recommended that I learn the Daoist invocations recited at the White Cloud Temple. Equipped with all these materials, I was ready to return home and begin my new Daoist career.

Shortly after my return, to my great surprise and good fortune, one of the monks I met at White Cloud Temple, Xuan Wen, sent me all the main texts, chants, and invocations for my daily recitation practice in pinyin transliteration. Now I could practice the sounds, but I did not understand their meaning. Then—once again meeting the right person at the right time—I encountered Louis Komjathy, then a Ph.D. candidate at Boston University, whose specialty is the early history of Complete Perfection. Louis had just completed the translation of texts important to Complete Perfection Daoists, which naturally included the ones I had been told to study plus some others I found very inspirational. He had also translated the invocations chanted at White Cloud Temple. I was delighted with this find and continued my practice with great enthusiasm. Much later, Louis viewed the videotape of my ordination ceremony. He confirmed that the ritual was an announcement rite, wherein they announced my new identity as a Daoist and entered my name into the Celestial Registers. The ceremony included other rituals, like my investiture as a heavenly official and the burning of a petition that welcomed me into the religious order.

To this day, I am still discovering the mystery of what it means to be a Daoist priest. I can still see in my mind's eye the intense stare that I received from Priest Ji as he performed the ritual, looking ever so intensely into my

eyes. I strongly feel that this was the true transmission of Dao and qi, being passed on into my body and my world.

Earlier, I mentioned the training program for Daoist priests that I was beginning to work on. This part of my story begins in September of 2006 when I told Master Wan and Priest Ji that more and more American followers of the Dao were coming to me asking if I could ordain them as Daoist priests. I provided an update about my studies and special Daoist practices, notably the Thousand Day Daoist Scripture Recitation Retreat. This means that every day for 1,000 days I recite a selection from scripture collection, which includes the Daode jing, Qingjing jing, Yinfu jing, Neiye, Nei riyong miaoqing, Chongyang shiwu lun, and Zuowang lun.

Reviewing my efforts, they agreed to grant me authorization to ordain others. When Master Wan toured the USA in November, 2006 he visited my qigong center in Sebastopol and presented me with a certificate that grants me the authority to train and ordain others as Daoist priests. Some of the details of the Daoist priest training include the completion of the 1000 Day Daoist Scripture Recitation Retreat, studies in the history of Daoism, emphasizing the story of the Quanzhen-Complete Perfection school. Beyond that, candidates investigate current studies or trends in Daoism, for example, the work of the British Taoist Association whose journal, *The Dragon's Mouth*, contains very enlightening articles on Daoist practices and views on Daoist meditation. Overall, the training program requires extensive experience in self-cultivation: qigong, meditation, retreats, personal self-enquiry, and studies and reflection on the precepts of both the Buddhist and Daoist traditions.

A major area of focus is Daoist meditation. My approach to Daoist meditation is very similar to what I have seen described in *The Dragon's Mouth*. Shi Jing, the head of the BTA, says: "The original practice which is really the core of Daoism, regardless of what tradition, is zuowang, which means to sit and forget. Zuowang is a formless meditation" (2005.1). A key issue is how we approach zuowang practice. Shi Jing notes: "The first step is the view. The view is that our dualistic state of being is a distorted reflection of the non-dual mind" (2005.1).

As for my vision for the future of Daoism and Chinese healing arts in the West, I feel that my own situation is representative of current trends. For example, in 2007, I officially inaugurated the American Dragon Gate Lineage, as the umbrella organization for the activities and services of my Qigong & Daoist Training Center. It is a religious, non-monastic order based on my ordination as a 22nd generation priest, it receives continued support from Master Wan and Priest Ji. Core services include ongoing qigong and meditation classes, qigong clinics, qigong certification trainings, affiliate teachers, and affiliate practice centers, plus the priestly training program. I think Daoism is ready to spread widely in the West. Centers like mine, some much larger and more developed, are being founded and are finding increasing support. Unlike the Longmen monastics in China, these new groups consist of householders (not monastics), with members having families, and membership does not require them to live together as a large, highly structured organization.

The work of training others will take some time to fully develop. At present, I have a small group of priests-in-training. One of them is even tentatively scheduled for ordination in the Fall of 2008. [Update note-as of April,2009 there are three ordained priests of the ADGL, and another ordination ceremony is scheduled for September, 2009.] References to scriptures come from the following texts: *Handbooks For Daoist Practice*, Wandering Cloud Press, 2003. Louis Komjathy\n*Seven Steps To The Tao*, Sima Chengzhen's *Zuowanglun*, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series, 1987. (Out of print). Livia Kohn.\n*Taoist Mystical Philosophy, The Scripture of Western Ascension*, State University of New York Press, 1991. Livia Kohn.