

STUDIES  
IN THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS  
(NUMEN BOOK SERIES)

EDITED BY

H.G. KIPPENBERG · E.T. LAWSON

VOLUME LXXVIII



SELF, SOUL AND BODY  
IN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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BRILL  
LEIDEN · BOSTON · KÖLN  
1998

HEALTH AND SALVATION IN EARLY DAOISM.  
ON THE ANTHROPOLOGY AND COSMOLOGY OF THE  
TAIPING JING

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The theme of Self, Soul, and Body reflects an elementary structure of most religious and religio-philosophical worldviews in the West and in India. The dichotomy of soul and body as two more or less independent aspects of the self, and their respective significance for the cultivation of the "true" self, are central questions in Greek, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Indian thought. Even modern secular philosophers regard the relationship between body and soul as the central metaphysical problem of modern (Western) philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

In the present paper we shall see that the dichotomy of soul and body, which seems self-evident to Western thinkers, is not the only reasonable way to understand the human self. There are other important and historically influential anthropological theories that do not rely on this dualist conception. The best known example probably is Theravada Buddhism, where the existence of a self and a soul is explicitly denied. Less well-known are the anthropological theories of Daoism, which differ significantly from the Buddhist view, but nevertheless represent a model that cannot simply be interpreted as a dualism of soul and body.

Daoism, which is the genuine religious tradition of China, has a history that goes back to the first millennium BC. It will not be possible, therefore, to provide a comprehensive overview of Daoist anthropological thinking, which is as multifaceted as Western anthropology. Instead, I shall confine this presentation to those aspects that exemplify most clearly the *differences* between Daoist and Western concepts of man. Historically, the examples refer to the formative phase of the Daoist religion, i.e., the first half of the first millennium AD. For the sake of convenience I shall concentrate on one scripture, the *Taiping Jing*, which is usually translated as the *Great Peace Scripture*.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Karl Popper, "Bemerkungen eines Realisten über das Leib-Seele-Problem," in *Alles Leben ist Problemlösen. Über Erkenntnis, Geschichte und Politik* (München, 1994), 93-112, esp. 94.

Specialists in the field will feel that the *Great Peace Scripture* might not be the best possible example for the present purpose, which is probably true; but it is the text that I happened to be browsing when I had to prepare this paper. Anyway, it is a convenient starting point for our argument.

*Soul-Body Dualism and the Dichotomy of the Transcendental  
and the Mundane Worlds*

I have called the dichotomy of soul and body a dualist conception. "Dualism," of course, is not to be understood here in a narrow sense, as we know it from the Iranian religious traditions.<sup>2</sup> I rather refer to the fact that in Western religious anthropology, soul and body are regarded as belonging to two ontologically different spheres, which we can call the transcendent and the mundane realms of existence. In religious thinking the transcendent realm is usually regarded as having higher value than the mundane world. Thus, to save the soul is more important than to rescue the body. The uneven evaluation of soul and body is reflected in the dichotomy of salvation (of the soul) and healing (of the body). While a healthy body is certainly a high value in most societies, *religiously* it is regarded as less important than the integrity of the soul, at least in religious traditions where the soul-body dualism is central.

It has been argued that the emergence of a basic tension between the transcendent and mundane worlds was a crucial development that characterized the intellectual transformations of the axial age.<sup>3</sup> Whereas in the so-called pagan civilizations that precede the axial cultures the world was conceived as basically a unity, the realms of humans and gods being "homologous," the new intellectual and religious outlook distinguished sharply between the mundane and the transcendent spheres. Conceptual dichotomies such as those between

<sup>2</sup> For various concepts of dualism see Ugo Bianchi, "Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Dualismus in Griechenland," in *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 1, no. 2 (1993), 3-12.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, "Allgemeine Einleitung: Die Bedingungen für die Entstehung und Institutionalisierung der Kulturen der Achsenzeit," in *Kulturen der Achsenzeit. Ihre Ursprünge und ihre Vielfalt. Teil 1*, hrsg. von Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (Frankfurt am Main, 1987), 10-43, esp. 11ff. id., "Dissent, Heterodoxy and Civilizational Dynamics: some Analytical and Comparative Indications," in *Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Dissent in India*, S.N. Eisenstadt, Reuven Kahane and David Shulman, eds. (Religion and Society 23). (The Hague, 1984), 1-10, esp. 3.

god and creation, soul and body, spirit and matter, the absolute and the dependent, are reflections of this tension. Normative priority is given to the transcendent aspect of being, functioning as the ultimate point of reference. Against this background the mundane world is of only relative value. The perceived tensions between the mundane and the transcendental worlds engender the religious stimulus to restructure human personality and behavior and occasionally also to reconstruct the entire socio-political and economic order as a means to resolve the tensions.<sup>4</sup>

If this interpretation is correct, then the conceptual dichotomy between soul and body is just one aspect of a fundamental structure of the post axial world-view as reflected in anthropological thinking. And the emergence of a tension between the transcendental and the mundane worlds should be considered a significant step in the intellectual history of humankind. It may, therefore, be of some general and theoretical interest that this interpretation does not seem to fit some developments in China, particularly Daoist anthropology and cosmology. Although it is not my intention to deal with this theoretical problem in detail here, I want to stress that the idea of a tension between the transcendent and the mundane does not apply to the Daoist world interpretation. Even if one may be inclined to regard certain Daoist concepts, like the *Dao*, as referring to something transcendent, there is no opposition between the transcendent and the mundane.

As we shall see, the notions of soul and body, when applied to a Daoist context, differ significantly from Western ideas. I must admit that some aspects of the Daoist anthropology are difficult to grasp for someone completely unfamiliar with Chinese thought, although I shall try my best to avoid technical details as far as possible. On the other hand, the fundamental approach of Daoist anthropology bears some similarities to modern scientific anthropology, which should allow Western readers to comprehend it. For we must not forget that modern scientific thinking has abandoned the dichotomy of the transcendent and the mundane or empirical. "Soul" is not a scientific concept, and scientific anthropology today tries to understand humans purely in materialist terms. This is fairly similar to the Daoist view, although the Daoists developed their theories in a distinctly religious context.

<sup>4</sup> Eisenstadt, "Dissent, Heterodoxy and Civilizational Dynamics," 4.

One way to approach the different interpretations of the self in Daoist and Western religious thought is to look more closely at what can be called the *ideal state of the self*. It has been made clear that the Western dichotomy between soul and body gives normative priority to the soul. Religiously speaking it is more important to keep the soul intact than the body. In a certain way the soul is the "true self." Western readers will be surprised, therefore, to learn that in Daoism the cultivation of the body in order to achieve health, long life, and even physical immortality is one of the utmost religious aims. Whereas in Western religions immortality is something relating to the transcendental realm to which the soul belongs, Daoism does not distinguish between the mundane and the transcendental. If there is immortality, it must be immortality in this empirical world. And if there is immortality of the human self, it must be immortality of man as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the cultivation of the self cannot be confined to the cultivation of the "spiritual" aspects of it but has to include cultivation of the body as well. Therefore the concept of "salvation," stressing the ideal state of the soul, is not very meaningful in Daoist contexts. It is more appropriate to regard health as the ideal state of the self, since "health" does not refer to a realm other than the empirical world. Just as in modern terminology, "health" should not be understood as referring to medical problems alone, but rather as a general term signifying the state of affairs as it ought to be. It thus includes not only physical health but also moral health and even social health. In the following I shall introduce some of the religious teachings promulgated to explain the causes of health and diseases in early Daoism, and in this way illustrate some basic tenets of Daoist anthropology and cosmology.

#### *Early Daoism and the Taiping Jing ("Great Peace Scripture")*

When in the year 184 AD the sect leader Zhang Jue started the notorious rebellion of the Yellow Turbans, he could count on a large following that amounted to several hundred thousand people. This is the first occasion in Chinese history where a Daoist sect had developed into a popular mass movement. Although the rebellion was soon put down, Zhang Jue's success in gathering such a huge follow-

<sup>5</sup> For the difference between Daoist and Western concepts of immortality see Henri Maspero, *Le Taoisme* (Paris, 1967), 84.

ing within some ten years makes one wonder how he could attract so many people to his sect. The *History of the Later Han Dynasty*, where the rebellion is recorded, gives an explanation right at the beginning of the story:

Zhang Jue, who called himself Great Saint Teacher, exalted the Huang-Lao teaching (i.e., Daoism). He gathered many disciples and [taught them rituals] of prostration and confessions of sins (lit: "acceptance of faults"), of using charm water and incantations to heal sickness. Since he was very successful in healing the sick the common people believed in him.<sup>6</sup>

The name of Zhang Jue's sect was Taiping Dao, Great Peace Sect. It spread into several provinces, mainly in northeast China. Obviously, the appeal of the Great Peace Sect resulted to a large degree from its successful healing practices. The same is true for another Daoist group, which flourished simultaneously in southwest China. This movement was called Tianshi Dao, Sect of the Heavenly Master, and is the origin of one of the most important Daoist traditions, which later enjoyed imperial patronage and still exists to the present day.

The organization and historical destiny of the early Daoist sects cannot be dealt with here. Suffice it to note that they can properly be regarded as the beginning of Daoism as a communal religion. From the very beginning healing rituals played a central role in the Daoist religion. We know that these healing practices had a distinctly religious coloring since they involved not only incantations of gods but, above all, ritual confessions of sins. These rituals of confession were elaborated upon in the Sect of the Heavenly Master. They included meditation on one's transgressions, prayer, the sending of written memorials to the divinities of heaven, earth, and water, and penitential exercises.<sup>7</sup>

The two popular sects were not the only forms of Daoism in vogue during the second century. At about the same time Daoist teachings exerted considerable influence at the imperial court, particularly among the wives of the emperors. By 165 Laozi, the legendary author of the *Daode Jing*, had been deified and imperial sacrifices were offered to him.<sup>8</sup> It seems that considerations of health, particularly the wish to secure imperial progeny, was one of the motives to adopt

<sup>6</sup> *Hou Han Shu*, j. 71, 3299 (Zhonghua Shuju edition, Beijing, 1965).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Dian lie* cited in the commentary of the *Hou Han Shu*, j. 75, 2436.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Anna K. Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao Tseu dans le Taoïsme des Han* (Paris, 1969) (Publications de l'École Française d'Extrême Orient 71).

Daoist cults at the court. One year later in 166, a certain Xiang Kai mentioned a divine book that had earlier been presented to the emperor. According to later traditions this scripture was the *Taiping Jing*. Xiang Kai claimed that it contained methods that could improve the precarious condition of the state and enlarge the number of the emperor's offspring.<sup>9</sup> In other words, the application of the teachings of the book was recommended as a means to change the current situation of disorder and to save the state and the imperial house.

The *Hou Han Shu* ("History of the Later Han Dynasty"), where this story is recorded, reports that Zhang Jue, the leader of the Great Peace Sect, later made use of this scripture.<sup>10</sup> Because the names of the sect and the scripture were identical, a relationship between the two seems plausible. However, since Zhang Jue's sect turned into a revolutionary movement, while the *Taiping Jing* supported the imperial government, it has been doubted that they were really intimately connected.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding the political differences, however, the scripture and the sect shared a common interest in eliminating baleful influences that disturbed the order of the society and affected the health of men. As we shall see, a healthy society and healthy individuals are just two aspects of the ideal order designated as *Taiping*, "Great Peace."

There has been much dispute among scholars whether the book referred to by Xiang Kai is really the original version of the scripture later known as *Taiping Jing* ("Great Peace Scripture"), as tradition has it.<sup>12</sup> Without doubt the modern edition of the *Taiping Jing*, which has been reconstructed by the scholar Wang Ming from several texts transmitted independently,<sup>13</sup> is not identical with the versions circulating during the Han dynasty. The present text has a long history and is not wholly homogeneous in style and content. These are tech-

<sup>9</sup> *Hou Han Shu*, j. 30 B, 1081.

<sup>10</sup> *Hou Han Shu*, j. 30 B, 1084.

<sup>11</sup> For example Xiong Deji, "Taiping Jing de zuozhe he sixiang ji qi yu Huangjin he Tianshidao de guanxi," in *Lishi yanjiu*, 1962, no. 4, 8-25; 25; K.M. Schipper, "Millenarismes et messianismes dans la Chine ancienne," in *Acts of the XXVth Conference of Chinese Studies* (Roma, 1978), 31-49, esp. 36f.

<sup>12</sup> For critical discussions of the text history, see Xiong Deji, op. cit.; Barbara Kandel, *Taiping Jing: The Origin and Transmission of the "Scripture on General Welfare." The History of an Unofficial Text* (Hamburg 1979); B. J. Mansvelt Beck, "The date of the *Taiping Jing*," in *Toung Pao* 66 (1980), 149-182; Jens Østergaard Petersen, "The Early Traditions Relating to the Han Dynasty Transmission of the *Taiping Jing*," in *Acta Orientalia* 50 (1989), 133-171; 51 (1990), 173-216.

<sup>13</sup> Wang Ming, ed., *Taiping Jing he jiao* (Beijing, 1960) (hereafter: *TPJ*).

nical problems, however, which do not need to prevent us from using the *Taiping Jing* as a starting point for our analysis of early Daoist anthropological views. For there is not the slightest doubt that the ideas propagated in the *Taiping Jing* represent lines of thought popular in Daoist circles during the first half of the first millennium.<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, the *Taiping Jing* is not a very concise book. Its modern edition amounts to some seven hundred pages. They do not contain a systematically elaborated teaching about human nature. We have to collect relevant statements from various chapters and it seems that there are some inconsistencies between them. This may be partly due to the complicated text history, but we cannot exclude the possibility that they represent different forms of symbolic expression referring to the same ideas. While modern Western readers may feel that these different forms of symbolic expression are contradictory, the Daoists regarded them as complementary. After all, the Daoist movement was not intellectually homogeneous; it included scholars as well as peasants. It would have been quite natural to present teachings in different forms, depending on the audience.

Anyway, the *Taiping Jing* contains at least two approaches to the problem of human and social illness and the way to heal them. The one could be characterized as a theistic approach, because human fate is explained as depending on more or less personal deities. The other may be called a naturalistic approach, since the fate of individuals and society is explained with reference to rather abstract natural forces. I shall treat each interpretation separately and then show that they can be reconciled.

### *Healing and Morality*

The theistic approach interprets Heaven and other gods as moral agents supervising human behavior and reacting to it by sending down either blessings or punishments. These teachings about the correlation between health and morality are fully in accord with what

<sup>14</sup> Some aspects of the teaching of the *Taiping Jing* are treated by Xiong Deji, op. cit.; Max Kaltenmark, "The Ideology of the T'ai-p'ing ching," in *Facets of Taoism. Essays in Chinese religion*, Holmes Welch and Anna K. Seidel, eds. (New Haven, London, 1979), 19-52; Zhao Jin, "Dong Han daojiào de jiushi xueshuo yu yixue," in *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu*, no. 1 (1989), 106-118; Jens Østergaard Petersen, "The Anti-Messianism of the *Taiping Jing*," in *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 3 (1990), 1-41.

we know of the ritual practices of the early Daoist sects, particularly the ritual confessions of sins and other healing practices. The central message is that evil deeds generate evil results and good deeds generate good results. Sin causes all kinds of evils, including not only sickness and premature death, but also social unrest, wars, and natural disasters. The present time is depicted as an age where evil prevails, and even righteous people are struck by these calamities. To explain this general misfortune the *Taiping Jing* introduces the teaching of *chengfu* or "inheritance of sins": Usually Heaven punishes the evildoers for their sins with sickness and death but there can be a residue of unpunished transgressions remaining at the time of death. This will then be transmitted to later generations.<sup>15</sup> In this way sins are accumulated over many generations until the anger of Heaven increases to such a degree that calamities and death are sent down without discrimination between good and bad people. This is the cause of general catastrophes that from time to time befall the world.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, the *Great Peace Scripture* describes the situation of the world as a state of deficiency. It is probably not far-fetched if we assume that this description reflects the feeling of many people experiencing the social and political turmoil of the second century. Not only peasants were suffering from misgovernment and calamities. As we can see from the memorial presented by Xiang Kai mentioned above, intellectuals also perceived that the world was not as it should be. The *Taiping Jing* explains that the world has lost its original state of order, and the responsibility for this lies with humankind. Humans are responsible not only for their own fate but for the state of the world. Sins are transmitted from one generation to the other and in this way accumulate and contribute to the general decline of the world. Sickness and premature death are just one aspect of this moral decline of humankind, others being natural disasters and social disorder.

<sup>15</sup> The negative influence of sins is inherited by one's own descendants (*TPJ*, 251f). On the other hand, the effects of the sins and moral behavior of rulers and ministers are not confined to their family but also influence their respective realms of responsibility (*TPJ*, 151).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *TPJ*, 241-245. While the expression *chengfu* does not seem to occur in earlier sources, the idea of an inheritance of good and bad deeds can be traced at least until the middle of the first millennium BC. It is explicitly formulated in the *Zhou Yi*: "Families that have accumulated good deeds will necessarily have blessing left over (for later generations); families that have accumulated evil deeds will necessarily have misfortune left over." (*Zhou Yi*, j. 1, Sibuyao edition, p. 6b/7a).

Now Heaven is distressed because humans do not know that they cause calamities by their own actions. They think that disasters are due to strange cosmological constellations and ignore that they themselves are responsible for their fate. Heaven therefore reveals a scripture to teach men this law. If humans follow this teaching, reflect on their own sins and do good, they can stop the inheritance of sins. They will suffer no more from the transgressions of their ancestors, nor will they transmit sins to the later generations. In this way all calamities will come to an end, Heaven will do away with sickness and death, and the age of Great Peace (*taiping*) will be established.<sup>17</sup>

We note that just as the moral decline of humankind has an effect beyond the life of individual humans, salvation transcends the fate of individuals. If men change their behavior according to the law of Heaven, they will not only improve their own fate but the whole world will be affected, natural disasters will cease, and society will enjoy the ideal state of Great Peace.

It is difficult not to call this promise of Great Peace a promise of "salvation," as I have just done. However, we must note that this idea of salvation is completely this-worldly. What is hoped for is not salvation of the spiritual self or the soul, referring to the transcendent world of a heavenly paradise, but the elimination of disturbing influences to restore the uncorrupted state of the natural order. For this the Daoists used the metaphor of healing—healing of the individual and of society.

It was probably something similar to this teaching that was preached to the followers of the Great Peace Sect and other early Daoist sects, encouraging people to confess their sins and to follow the moral exhortations revealed by Heaven. It is a teaching easy to understand, without any philosophical sophistication. Things are different when we turn to what I have called the naturalistic interpretation of the human fate. We then are confronted with anthropological and cosmological theories that have their roots in the rich soil of the Chinese philosophical tradition. To present this aspect of the teaching to a Western audience is a rather difficult undertaking, since most of the central concepts have no equivalent in Western thought and are virtually untranslatable. On the other hand some of these concepts have at least a superficial similarity to the notions of self, soul, and body.

<sup>17</sup> *TPJ*, 253-255.

### *Human Life and Cosmology*

Chinese, and particularly Daoist, anthropology differs in one crucial point from the idea of man that we know from Western religious traditions. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam man is unique among God's creatures. Man is created in the image of God, and his immortal soul is an essential aspect of this uniqueness. In Chinese thinking man also occupies a central position in the cosmos, but it does not derive from his unique relationship to God. Man may even be said to be more central than God, because he is morally responsible for the order of the world. It is man, above all the ruler or the emperor as the representative of humankind, who through his moral or immoral acts affects the cosmic harmony. Heaven does not send down blessings and misfortune of its own accord but merely reflects the deeds of men. It is like a mirror.<sup>18</sup> We have just met this kind of thinking in the moralist teachings of the *Taiping Jing*.

However, this central position of man does not mean that he is unique in a metaphysical sense. Man is part of the natural cosmos and as such is subject to the same laws and rules that govern all other things. This is one reason why the Western concept of soul, as something exclusively possessed by human beings, cannot be applied to Daoist anthropology without severe distortions. Just as in modern scientific anthropology, for the Daoists human nature is a purely natural phenomenon.

The understanding of natural phenomena, however, is rather different from what we know in Western cosmology. For the fundamental factors of the cosmos are processes, not different substances that form the material of which individual things consist. The basic assumption is that everything existing is in a process of constant transformation. No empirical phenomenon subsists, as the notion of "substance" implies, but rather changes and transforms from one thing into another. One aspect of this "cosmic metabolism" or metamorphosis is the cycle of life and death, of growing and vanishing; another aspect of this flux is the lack of absolute boundaries between different things. When everything constantly undergoes change, nothing is permanently the same, and one thing can appear in different forms. In a certain way every empirical phenomenon is just a

<sup>18</sup> *TPJ*, 18.

visible manifestation of the cosmic process of continuous transformations. This also applies to human beings.<sup>19</sup>

Change or transformation is the law that rules everything. It is only this universal principle of change that does not change. Of course, this principle is not "something"; it is not an empirical phenomenon, but it underlies all empirical phenomena. Although it cannot be described, since it has no attributes, it is real. The early Daoist thinkers felt that this fundamental principle is the condition of all that exists. To talk about it they called it *Dao*.<sup>20</sup>

This is not the place to say much more about this well-known metaphysical notion of Daoism. Suffice it to note here that Daoist cosmology ultimately refers to the *Dao* as the fundamental principle of the cosmos. It is certainly a transcendental notion in that it is the condition of the possibility of everything. And it is transcendent in the sense of "supernatural," since it existed before the world.<sup>21</sup>

We can now turn to the more concrete manifestations of the cosmic processes, which will lead not only to cosmology but also to anthropology. The *locus classicus* of what may be called the Daoist cosmogony is chapter 42 of the famous *Daode Jing*, which I shall present in a slightly paraphrased translation to make it better understandable:

The *Dao* produced the One [which is *qi*, original "matter"].  
 The One produced the Two [complementary forces of *yin* and *yang*].  
 The Two produced the Three [i.e. diversity].  
 And the Three produced the ten thousand things [i.e., all that exists].  
 [Thus:] The ten thousand things contain [the forces] of *yin* and *yang*,  
 and through *qi* ["matter"] they form a harmonious whole.

At first sight this may seem rather obscure, but here we have some basic notions of the Daoist cosmology. To understand the fundamental unity of all empirical phenomena, including man, the concept of *qi* is crucial. Its original meaning is "vapor," but in later cosmological theories it denotes the subtle material essence shared by all things.

<sup>19</sup> This "philosophy of change" has found its most famous literary expression in the book of *Zhuangzi*. For a convenient summary, see Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Princeton, 1952), 221-245.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Daode Jing*, ch. 25.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* It must be noted here that this interpretation of the *Dao*, which is derived from the *Daode Jing*, cannot simply be generalized. Although the *Daode Jing* was regarded as a most authoritative scripture by later Daoists, they elaborated its cosmology. Thus, the understanding of the *Tai ping Jing* is slightly different, and in its cosmogony *qi* seems to be more important than *dao*.

The translation "matter" is somewhat misleading, for this invokes the idea of solidity, which is not necessarily implied in the concept of *qi*. *Qi* may be regarded as the original stuff that, under the influences of the forces of *yin* and *yang*, transforms and takes various shapes, i.e., appears as empirical phenomena. We may quote a passage from *Zhuangzi* to illustrate how human life is part of this cosmic process of transformations. After the death of his wife, the Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (4th century BC) explains:

Amidst the muddle of the waste and dark [i.e., before individual things exist] transformation occurs and there arises *qi* ("vapor," "subtle matter"); *qi* transforms and visible shapes (*xing*) occur [i.e., concrete entities]; [things of] visible shape transform and there is life; and now (referring to the death of his wife) there was again transformation and there is death. This process is comparable to the succession of the four seasons.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, both Laozi and Zhuangzi stress the unity of all natural phenomena. Man, like any other thing, is just a temporary constellation in the ongoing process of transformations. What we may call the material base, the stuff that develops out of the nameless and formless chaos, is *qi* ("subtle matter"<sup>23</sup>). Through transformation it takes various shapes, and man is one of these manifestations. Let me again quote the book of *Zhuangzi*:

Life is a companion of death and death is the beginning of [new] life. [...] The life of man is a condensation of *qi* ("subtle matter"); when [*qi*] condenses there is life, when it disperses there is death. Since death and life are [inseparable] companions, why should I regard [either of them] with sorrow? In this sense all things are a unity.<sup>24</sup>

The basic tenet of this anthropological theory implies that human life is to be understood above all as a natural phenomenon, subject, like other natural phenomena, to similar laws. Consequently, anthropology cannot be separated from cosmology. This naturalistic approach was adopted and developed in the Daoist tradition but it influenced most philosophical schools in ancient China. By the Later Han dynasty (25-220 AD), when the popular Daoists sect flourished and the *Tai ping Jing* was first mentioned, the view that the cosmos is one

<sup>22</sup> *Zhuangzi*, *Zhi le*, j. 18 (*Zhuangzi jishi*, Beijing, 1961), 615.

<sup>23</sup> Since most readers are probably not familiar with Chinese terminology, I occasionally provide a tentative English translation in brackets to make the text more readable.

<sup>24</sup> *Zhuangzi*, *Zhi bei you*, j. 22, 733.

organic whole and man is an integral part of it was widespread, if not generally accepted. Small wonder, therefore, that we find similar ideas in the *Tai ping Jing*.

*Anthropology and Cosmology in the Tai ping Jing*

The *Tai ping Jing* takes up the idea that the whole cosmos is permeated by one single essence called *yuan qi*, "primordial *qi*," ("subtle matter") which is affected by the complementary forces of *yin* and *yang*; i.e., everything is an aggregation of *qi* conditioned by the relative influence of the two forces. Now, there are two extremes, the one, where the influence of *yang* (the "male" force) is at its utmost, and the other, where the influence of *yin* (the "female" force) is at its utmost. They are called "Great *Yang*"<sup>25</sup> and "Great *Yin*."<sup>26</sup> Furthermore there is a third pole, called "Central Harmony" (*Zhonghe*), where the influences of *yang* and *yin* are balanced. The *Tai ping Jing* explains that when the Great *Yang* assumes visible shape (*xing*) it is called "Heaven," the visible shape of the Great *Yin* is called "Earth," and the visible shape of the Central Harmony is man.<sup>27</sup>

We should note that man, although he is basically of the same "stuff" as anything else in nature,<sup>28</sup> holds a central position in this system, indeed *the* central position. He is the "Central Harmony." This explains why the behavior of man is crucial for the order of the whole cosmos. For the whole cosmos communicates through the medium of *qi* that permeates everything. If the equilibrium of the Central Harmony is disturbed, then the equilibrium of the entire cosmos will be affected.<sup>29</sup>

Heaven, earth and man are thus not isolated entities but aggregations of primordial *qi*; they are, as it were, more processes than they are substances. They are part of a general process of mutual interaction and transformation. Also, man is a process of transforming *qi*. In this process the essential functions of human beings occur:

<sup>25</sup> *Taiyang*, in popular usage also signifying the sun.

<sup>26</sup> *Taiyin*, also used as a designation for the moon.

<sup>27</sup> *TPJ*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> *TPJ*, 78.

<sup>29</sup> *TPJ*, 17f.

Men's origin is the *qi* of the chaos.<sup>30</sup> *Qi* produces *jing* ("vital function"), *jing* produces *shen* ("divine function"), *shen* produces *ming* ("brightness," i.e., "intellect"?). The ground is *qi* [affected by the forces] of *yin* and *yang*: *Qi* turns into *jing*, *jing* turns into *shen* and *shen* turns into *ming*.<sup>31</sup>

Here we meet two other important terms of Daoist anthropology, *jing* and *shen*, which I have translated as "vital function" and "divine function." I hesitate to give these translations of terms that cannot be translated. But I am afraid that otherwise this paper would be too esoteric for most readers. In Western parlance we would say that man "consists" of *jing* ("vital function") and *shen* ("divine function"). One could even be inclined to regard them as the soul, or rather two souls.<sup>32</sup>

However, neither *jing* nor *shen* contain the self of a human being, nor are they distinctive to man. This immediately becomes clear when we read that Heaven and Earth also have *jing* and *shen*. *Shen* is the essential function of the Great *Yang* or Heaven, which is to produce. *Jing* is the essential function of the Great *Yin*<sup>33</sup> or Earth, which is to nourish. These two functions must be present for everything to exist.<sup>34</sup> However, to become concrete manifestations there has to be a third function, which is *xing* ("visible shape"). The function of *xing* is explained as "accomplishing," i.e., achieving a physical form, which for man usually is the body.<sup>35</sup>

Thus man is a complete mirror of the universe in that he is the outcome of different functions that are essential for everything. The "material" on which these functions work is *qi*. Now, this cosmic stuff, which permeates everything and by which all things communicate, in its most refined form can be taken as "air." Through breath-

<sup>30</sup> This statement differs somewhat from the cosmological views of the *Daode Jing* and *Zhuangzi* quoted above. It seems that in the *Tai ping Jing* the primordial chaos is thought as consisting of *qi* or *yuan qi* ("primordial matter"), while for Laozi and *Zhuangzi qi* emanates from the primordial unity.

<sup>31</sup> *TPJ*, 739.

<sup>32</sup> In popular religion *jing* and *shen* roughly correspond to *po* and *hun*, which, after the death of a person, exist for a limited time independently. In this function they are often interpreted as two "souls" in Western writings. See, for example, Werner Eichhorn, *Die Religionen Chinas* (Stuttgart, 1973), 79-85.

<sup>33</sup> The present text of the *TPJ* (p. 727, line 1) reads *xing* (shape) instead of *jing* ("vital function"), which is obviously a mistake as is clear from the context. Likewise the first two occurrences of *jing* in line 2 have to be changed into *xing* ("visible shape"). That producing and sustaining (lit. "nourishing") are the essential functions of Heaven and Earth is unambiguously stated in *TPJ*, 220 et passim.

<sup>34</sup> *TPJ*, 699.

<sup>35</sup> *TPJ*, 727.

ing this *qi* enters the human body and circulates. *Qi* is the base on which *jing* ("vital function") and *shen* ("divine function") can act. Like fish need water to live, so *jing* and *shen* need *qi*. Accordingly, *jing* and *shen* disperse when the circulation of *qi* stops, just as fish die when there is no more water.<sup>36</sup>

What may at first sight seem to be a rather whimsical philosophical speculation, had important practical implications for the Daoists. Let me only mention the prominence of breathing exercises intended to secure the unhampered circulation of *qi* within the body and to maintain the functions of *jing* and *shen*. We cannot deal further with these practical aspects of Daoism, however, but have to come back to the anthropological theories and the question of health and salvation.

#### *Health and Salvation*

The attitude of the *Taiping Jing* toward death is ambiguous. On the one hand we find thoughts reminiscent of *Zhuangzi*: All living beings must die and man is no exception. This is the law of nature. Death is the final annihilation of a human being; nothing is left but dust and earth. Furthermore, there is only one life; it never occurs that someone is born again.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, death, and particularly early death, is regarded as a calamity. Again and again the *Taiping Jing* discusses the causes of illness and premature death and how to avoid them. We have seen above that one answer was that Heaven punishes men for their transgression, sending down calamities of all kinds.

The naturalistic anthropology, which has been outlined in the preceding paragraph, takes a seemingly different approach. Illness and death are explained with reference to the elementary functions of *jing* ("vital function"), *shen* ("divine function") and *xing* ("visible shape"). As long as these three elements are kept together, there is an individual human being. For the "self" of man, his individual existence, it is essential that the body and the more subtle forms of *qi* (*jing*

<sup>36</sup> *TPJ*, 727.

<sup>37</sup> *TPJ*, 340f. The explicit denial of rebirth is possibly a reaction to Buddhist ideas. There is a seemingly contradictory statement declaring that the *qi* of the dead resides in the grave and after five generations becomes a man again (p. 182). This means that the *qi* again takes human form. It is not the same person, however, who is reborn. "It never happens that one's own identity (lit. "own name") shows again. It does not rise and live again" (p. 340).

and *shen*) form a unity. If they separate, death occurs. *Jing* and *shen* are completely lost then, and only the visible shape of man, his corpse, remains. Therefore, to "keep the unity" (*shou yi*) of *jing*, *shen*, and body is the key to health and long life. Someone who is able to "keep the unity" will enjoy happiness and transcend ordinary human conditions.<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the body or visible shape according to the *Taiping Jing* is not something accidental to the human self but is indispensable. Indeed the body, belonging exclusively to one individual human being, comes nearest to what may be called the "self" of a person.<sup>39</sup> However, a body without *jing* and *shen* is just a corpse. The body is like a city, while *jing* and *shen* are like the senior officials. The officials control the fate of the people in the city.<sup>40</sup> Although the body is indispensable for the individual, it is in a certain respect subordinated to *jing* and *shen*. If these two leave the body, there is no living personality. "The three cannot exist independently."<sup>41</sup>

There are various methods used to "keep the unity." Since the functioning of *jing* and *shen* depends on the unrestricted circulation of life-giving *qi*, this has to be secured by calming the self (or "the body"), to allow breath to flow freely. To achieve this tranquility, impassioned emotions of anger and joy have to be avoided; in this way a state of equanimity free of sorrow will be reached.<sup>42</sup> However, the cultivation of the self<sup>43</sup> is not confined to the regulation of the bodily functions but requires moral cultivation as well. This means people must know and follow the moral laws that are part of the cosmic order. In the same way that heaven and earth, by which all things are produced and nourished, have their proper functions, man also has his proper functions, which are his social obligations. If men offend these obligations, the balance of the cosmic order is affected:

<sup>38</sup> *TPJ*, 716. "To transcend human conditions" (*du shi*) is a technical term that in later Daoism means "to attain immortality." It may have that meaning here, but I am not sure. Cf. p. 372 where the meaning is also not explicit. On p. 438 the similar expression *du qu* (lit. "transcend and leave") obviously means "to attain immortality."

<sup>39</sup> The Chinese word *shen* ("body")—not to be confused with *shen* ["divine function"], which is a different character) in many instances can be translated as "self." It is still so understood in modern usage. See also below, note 43.

<sup>40</sup> *TPJ*, 699.

<sup>41</sup> *TPJ*, 727.

<sup>42</sup> *TPJ*, 727.

<sup>43</sup> *TPJ*, 245: *yang qi shen* (lit. "nourishing one's self [or body]"). The context shows that in this case *shen* (lit. "body") means "the self" since it deals with moral cultivation rather than cultivation of the physical body.

On the one hand the order of society will decline and social turmoil will prevail. On the other hand heaven and earth will also cease to fulfil their functions properly and the natural order will lose its balance, resulting in disasters, illness, and death. To avoid this, man has to cultivate his self morally and in this way secure health and long life.<sup>44</sup>

We now reach a point where the naturalistic and the theistic interpretations of the cosmos and of human fate approach each other. In the naturalist interpretation the interdependence of all cosmic processes is based on the all-pervading *qi*. Since heaven, earth, and man partake of the same primordial *qi*,<sup>45</sup> moral transgressions of man disturb more than the smooth functioning of his own *qi*. For man as the "Central Harmony" is responsible for the cosmic equilibrium. Therefore the *qi* of the macrocosm will also be disturbed and lose its equilibrium.<sup>46</sup> Thus, there is a close correspondence between man as a microcosm and the processes of the natural macrocosm. Now, the same correspondence can also be conceived as the acting of personalized agents. Heaven then is regarded as a deity (*shen*), and the natural forces as the deities of nature.<sup>47</sup> The disturbance of the *qi* of Heaven and the natural forces is called the wrath of Heaven that sends down the divinities of nature to punish men for their transgressions.

Heaven and all other divinities are thus personalized manifestations of certain functions of *qi*. Actually the Chinese word for "divinity" is *shen*, which is what we have translated above as "divine function." *Shen* together with *jing* ("vital function") is present in everything that exists, and their being united with a human body makes the self of a man. Now, the *jing* and *shen* can appear as deities not only if they function in the forces of nature, but also in human beings. As the *Taiping Jing* states: The divinities (*jing shen*) of nature enter the belly of man and act as his *jing* and *shen*. As divinities of the body they reside in the five inner organs, and can be visualized by the adept in human form.<sup>48</sup> Like officials, they observe the deeds and thoughts of man.<sup>49</sup>

Man then is a microcosm inhabited by deities that correspond to

<sup>44</sup> *TPJ*, 244f.

<sup>45</sup> *TPJ*, 236.

<sup>46</sup> *TPJ*, 372f.

<sup>47</sup> *TPJ*, 221.

<sup>48</sup> *TPJ*, 292.

<sup>49</sup> *TPJ*, 699.

the deities of the macrocosm. This is just another way to understand the fundamental unity of the cosmic processes. We can also say that the divinities, including Heaven, are but aggregations of *qi*. At one time they appear as gods that can be depicted in human form, at another time they appear as the forces of nature. In either case they fulfil certain functions in the whole cosmic process. Correspondingly the life process of man depends on the same functions, which can be interpreted either in a naturalist way as *jing* and *shen*, or in a theistic way as deities residing in the body. Evidently these conceptions do not have much in common with the concept of soul that we know from the Western traditions.

For people who are used to Western modes of thinking, the ontology of the *Taiping Jing* must seem rather diffuse, if not to say abstruse. However, if we accept its presuppositions, it can be understood quite rationally. The key is the idea of transformation. As has been explained above, things are not substances; they have no permanent identity but are processes of the primordial *qi*. The *qi* may appear in different constellations or forms. Thus, there is no logical contradiction if the same function of *qi* simultaneously assumes the form of a deity and the form of a natural force, if in one respect it controls the life of a human being and in another the working of the four seasons. If anything can be transformed into something other, the boundaries between different realms of existence disappear.

This idea is expressed most strikingly when the *Taiping Jing* describes the eight different levels of perfection that men can achieve in applying the laws of the *Dao*.<sup>50</sup> If one proceeds to the highest level, he becomes a "divine man" (*shenren*), who is actually not a human being but a god residing in the Azure Palace of the Great Dipper.<sup>51</sup> There is, as it were, a gradual scale of perfection that reaches from the lowest forms of human existence to the topmost levels of the divine hierarchy. Immortality, therefore, is the result of a transformation through the cultivation of the self according to the laws of the *Dao*. It is not something everyone may reach, but the extreme form of transformation by which the mortal body is substituted by a visible shape not exposed to death.<sup>52</sup> For practical purposes, to exhaust one's natu-

<sup>50</sup> *TPJ*, 221f. A slightly different list of nine grades is described on p. 88. See also pp. 288f.

<sup>51</sup> *TPJ*, 222.

<sup>52</sup> The concept of *shi jie* ("liberation from the corporeal body") is mentioned in the *TPJ* (p. 553), though the passage is somewhat obscure.

ral life-span or to attain one of the grades of longevity is regarded as a more realistic aim.<sup>53</sup>

Where the passage from ordinary man to god in heaven is a gradual scale with many intermediary steps, it is difficult to draw a sharp line between a mundane and a transcendental world. Also the distinction of health and salvation is not one referring to fundamentally different components of the human self, i.e., the body and the soul. For the material and spiritual part of the human self, if we may use this Western terminology, do not belong to ontologically different realms of being, since both emanate from primordial *qi*. In fact, the difference between the spiritual and the material is merely one of appearance and not of substance. We cannot speak, therefore, of a tension between a transcendental and the mundane world;<sup>54</sup> however, there is obviously a tension between the world as it is and as it ought to be. But this can hardly be regarded as a new intellectual breakthrough in China, since the early philosophers like Confucius were already dealing with this problem. The present world is not devaluated because it is ontologically inferior to some transcendental world, but because it has become defective.

If we understand the *Taiping Jing* in this way, salvation is not something happening in another world but is a transformation of the existing world. It is a transformation by which the prevailing illnesses—individual, social and natural—are healed and the order of the cosmos is restored. Salvation is necessary because the world has lost its equilibrium and has fallen into turmoil. This happens because men do not follow the laws of the heavenly *Dao* and so spoil the harmony of the cosmos. Men have lost their proper way,<sup>55</sup> which leads to all the calamities encountered presently and engenders the imminent threat of a final catastrophe, a complete end of the world.<sup>56</sup> To cure this harmful situation, the teachings of the *Taiping Jing* have

<sup>53</sup> Not even one among ten thousand attains immortality, and not one in a thousand reaches the “great longevity” (*TPJ*, 438). The three grades of longevity amount to 120, 80, and 60 years (p. 723).

<sup>54</sup> As the distinction between a transcendental and a mundane world does not really fit the Chinese world conceptions, Eisenstadt’s interpretation of the axial age is not applicable. In China the world of the humans and the world of the gods always remained “homologous” (cf. above, n. 3).

<sup>55</sup> Incidentally, the original meaning of *dao* is “way.”

<sup>56</sup> *TPJ*, 221. The idea of a complete and final destruction of the world is rather unusual in China and not fully in accord with the cosmological theories. However, the *TPJ* clearly states that the great catastrophe would be like a sudden destruction of heaven and earth without a new formation.

been revealed by Heaven to instruct men about the heavenly *Dao* and show them the way to escape from misfortune. The key to salvation lies in man himself. If he follows the heavenly *Dao* and cultivates his self morally, he will be able to “keep the unity” of the vital and divine functions with his body and in this way obtain health and longevity. Moreover, “If man cultivates his inner nature the outer world will respond to it. Internally it will lead to longevity, externally it will bring about the order [of the world]. Without using the strength of one’s muscles, the state of *Taiping* (“Great Peace”) will come spontaneously.”<sup>57</sup> This is the message of the *Taiping Jing*.

<sup>57</sup> *TPJ*, 739.