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Late in his life Jean Gebser looked to Taoism as a living example of integral thought and practice. Perhaps nowhere else is found such a complete and harmonious integration of all major structures of consciousness - archaic, magic, mythic, and mental - into the ideal of a diaphonous re-integration of the practitioner an integral human being, *homo integralis*. In this article we fusion of magic and mythic images of the feminine in an emerging Taoist integral vision.

We would like to thank Taoist teacher and scholar [Michael Winn](#) for recommending this article, and for [Evgueni Tortchinov](#) for allowing us to post it. - Allan Combs

## The Doctrine of the "Mysterious Female" in Taoism

### A Transpersonalist View

by

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The principal purpose of this paper is to suggest the approach of transpersonal psychology for analysis of some important aspects of the Taoist doctrine, that is, the concept of the Tao as a female universal principle and the Taoist attitude "to be like an infant" or even as an "embryo."

To understand these Taoist principles, we must begin from the very beginning-from the central concept of Taoism, that is, Tao (the Way, the True Way). This concept designates the prime ground of the World, the source of all life and the limit of every existence, as well as the rule and measure of beings.

The female, maternal image of Tao is the crucial point to understanding the psychotechnique (or psychopractical) approach of Taoism. It is possible to demonstrate its importance by citing some passages from the *Tao Te ching* (The Canon of the Way and its Power) or the "Lao-tzu," a famous Taoist classic:

1. §6:

The valley spirit never dies-it is called the mysterious female";  
The gate of the mysterious female is called "the root of heaven and earth."  
Gossamer it is,  
seemingly insubstantial, yet never consumed through use.

2. §25:

There was something featureless yet complete, born before heaven and earth;

Silent-amorphous-it stood alone and unchanging.  
 We may regard it as the mother of heaven and earth.  
 Not knowing its name,  
 I style it the "Way."

3. §28:  
 Know masculinity,  
 Maintain femininity,  
 and be a ravine for all under heaven.

4. §61:  
 A large state is like a low-lying estuary, the female of all under heaven.  
 In the congress of all under heaven,  
 the female always conquers the male through her stillness.  
 Because she is still,  
 it is fitting for her to lie low.

E. M. Chen (1974), in her article dedicated to the role of the female principle in Chinese philosophy, notes that some aspects of Lao-tzu's concept of Tao makes it possible to propose that the formation of the teaching about Tao as a philosophical idea was preceded by the cult of some Mother-Goddess which was connected with the genesis of Taoism (Chen, 1974, p.53; Kravtsova, 1994, pp.208-213). She notes that in the description of Tao in the Tao Te ching there are all the meanings which are essential for the Mother-Goddess cult: Tao is like an empty vessel (§4); voidness (§5); mysterious darkness (§1); it is nonborn, but, nevertheless, it is the predecessor of the Heavenly Lord (§4); it is the Mysterious Female which is the gate of Heaven and Earth (§6); mother (§1, 20, 25, 52); female (or hen-§10, 28); female (§61); and Mother of all under heaven (§25, 34). In addition, Tao is often described as water (§8, 78) and as valley (§6, 28, 32, 39, 41). Clearly this valley is the principle of generation which bears all beings in its depth.

The Tao Te ching speaks much about the pre-existential, nonmanifested aspect of Tao which is the philosophical opposition to the manifested phenomenal existence as some potential being (*wu*). In this regard, §1 is rather interesting. It describes this nonmanifested or mysterious (occult) aspect of Tao as the womb of the universal embryo, the womb which generates Heaven and Earth, which is the source of life. Briefly speaking, it is nothing but the Mysterious Mother of the world:

The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures;  
 The named is the mother of the myriad creatures. Therefore,  
 Always be without desire  
 in order to observe its wondrous subtleties; Always have desire  
 so that you may observe its manifestations...  
 Mystery of mysteries,  
 The gate of all wonders!

This passage develops the leading idea of §1 about two aspects or "hypostases" of Tao: about Tao as "mysterious womb" and Tao as mother-nurse of all beings. Here we can recall the words of the

famous commentator and thinker, Wang Pi (3 A.D.), that "Mysterious " (or "Unnamed") Tao nourishes and bears all creatures, and phenomenal named Tao feeds them; the analogous description Wang Pi gives to the character of the interrelations between Tao and Te.

What about the last sentence of the passage? It can be said that the character *miao* (mystery) of the sentence consists of two elements: "woman" and "little." We can suppose that its use here is not arbitrary. It is not too difficult to "ascribe" its etymology (probably it is not a scientific one) as this:

"something, that is little inside a woman," that is, embryo hidden in the womb, like the prototypes of things (see §21) are hidden in the "womb" of Tao. This opinion may be supported by the fact that the images of the womb and embryo are often used by Taoists to describe the "Tao-world" relation. So Tao can be metaphorically defined as the mother of the world, the source of life and being, and the universal female archetype. It is quite essential to understand the Taoist doctrine of immortality as well, because this doctrine considers Tao to be the life-giving principle which gives eternal life to the adept who has obtained unity with it. The Tao Te ching also says (§52):

Having realized the mother,  
you thereby know her children. Knowing her children,  
go back to abide with the mother. To the end of your life,  
you will not be imperiled.

Let's look at the child of the "Mysterious female of all under the heaven."

§55 of the Tao Te ching says:

He who embodies the fullness of integrity is like a ruddy infant.

Wasps, spiders, scorpions, and snakes will not sting or bite him;  
Rapacious birds and fierce beasts will not seize him.

His bones are weak and his sinews soft, yet his grip is tight.  
He knows not the joining of male and female, yet his penis is aroused.  
His essence has reached a peak.

He screams the whole day without becoming hoarse; His harmony has reached perfection.

Harmony implies constancy;  
Constancy requires insight.

Striving to increase one's life is ominous;  
To control the vital breath with one's mind entails force.

Something that grows old while still in its prime is said to be not in accord with the Way;  
Not being in accord with the Way leads to an early demise.

Here, an infant (a baby; the text uses *Ch'ih tzu*, "red," or "ruddy" infant, i.e., a just newborn child) represents the image of the perfect sage of the vital force. An infant in the Tao Te ching is something like an androgyne who does not know the parting of male and female, and who, because of this, is overflowing with vitality. His energetic essence (*ching*) does not flow below; it does not change into semen yet, and so it is perfect. Thus, an infant is like the great Tao itself. Tao is a source of life, and like an infant also can not be tired, because exhaustion is a result of energetic deficiency. An infant enjoys absolute security; nature is not dangerous to it because he or she is at the center of its forces and powers. We should note the following words: Striving to increase one's life is ominous; To control vital breath with one's mind entails force. Here we can find a direct reference to the relation existing between ideas of obtaining immortality and religious psychopractice. Taoism proclaims that a human being is nothing more than an inseparable psychosomatic unity. So people can obtain immortality only when their body-microcosm becomes a self-sufficient whole--a self-containing reservoir of the vital energy from one side, and when it realizes its potential, isomorphism with the world-body of the cosmos from another side. One of the most important means on the way to this exalted state is the so-called "regulation of the vital breath" (or "regulation of the pneumata" - *hsing ch 'i*), that is, a complex of gymnastical and breathing exercises, the aim of which is to obtain mind control over the flowing of the energy streams in the human body. The most important principle of such techniques is often repeated in medieval Taoist writings: "Pneuma (breath, *ch'i*) is led by will-consciousness (*yi*)." This means the presence of some volitional enforcement which leads the streams of the vital energy along the channels of the body (analogous to the meridians of acupuncture) in the desirable direction. The Tao Te ching is just one text which clearly formulates this idea in ancient times. Instead of the "volitional impulse" (*yi*), the Tao Te ching speaks about "mind" or "heart-consciousness" (*Hsin*), but it is the same idea.

It was thought for a long time that the concept relating the Taoist ideas of immortality and different practices was described only in medieval texts, but recent archeological discoveries in Ch'angsha Mawangtui (Hunan province) demonstrate the profound antiquity of both. Thus, the Mawangtui texts describe numerous respiratory exercises for the "regulation of the Pneumata" (*hsing ch 'i*) and postures of the Taoist gymnastics (*tao yin*). Special pictures painted on silk, which were known under the general title, *Tao yin t 'u* (Schemes of Gymnastics), were even dedicated to such practices. So it may be concluded that these practices were well-known in China in the days when the Tao Te ching is now regarded to have been composed.

The Tao Te ching everywhere prefers the softness and weakness of the infant to the strong hardness of adults. Strictly speaking, a newborn child is the concentration or manifestation of the vital energy. This is quite clearly demonstrated in §76:

Human beings are  
soft and supple when alive,  
stiff and straight when dead...

Therefore, it is said:  
The rigid person is a disciple of death;  
The soft, supple, and delicate are lovers of life.

But the theme "infant-sage" cannot be reduced only to the metaphor of the newborn child. Much deeper and more interesting is the image of the nonborn child, which also plays an important role in the teachings of the Tao Te ching. Let us cite a part of §20 of the text:

All the people are glad and joyful  
 as if they are celebrating upon the great sacrifice of oxen, as if they are mounting  
 a tower in spring.  
 O! I am the only who is quiet and silent, like a baby who is not yet a child.  
 O! I am fastened and tied  
 and I have no place to return.  
 All people behave themselves as if they have more than enough  
 and I alone am bereft.  
 O! I have the mind of a fool!  
 O! Muddled and mixed!  
 All people are luminously clear  
 and I am the only one who is dark and condensed.  
 All people are exact and definite  
 and I am the only who is obscured and vague. O! I am wavering like an ocean.  
 O! I am flying in space and I have no place to stop in.  
 All people behave themselves  
 as if they have a purpose  
 and I alone am uncouth and simple.  
 I am quite different from others by honoring the mother-nurse.

This passage is worthy of careful analysis. It appears to me to offer a key to the understanding of the most essential features of Taoism. And the sentence: "O! I am the only who is quiet and silent, like a baby who is not a child yet" (in Chinese: *wo tu p'o hsi ch 'i wei chaoju ying erh chih wei 'wi*) is a key to this passage. So, it is best to begin an analysis of the passage with this phrase.

What is the meaning of the words "a baby who is not a child yet" or "a baby who did not become an infant yet"? I think that the text is speaking about the fetus in the maternal womb. In fact, even those commentators and translators who think that the *hai* (infant, child) here must be changed into its phonetical and practically graphical omonym (the difference between two characters is only one classificatory "mouth" written before the original grapheme) agree with this interpretation. The second character *hai* means baby's cry or baby's smile. But a not-yet-crying baby is a not-yet-born baby.

Therefore, Lao-tzu here compares himself with the nonborn baby. What does he inform us about this baby? This baby-sage is "fastened and tied" by his embryonic "clothes" and umbilical cord, which unites him with the maternal body. This holy fetus has "the mind [or heart-the thinking and conscious organ according to Chinese tradition] of a fool," while at the same time it possesses the highest wisdom. This wisdom seems like nothing but stupidity to ordinary people proud of their common sense. This nonborn baby wavers in the ocean of the womb and "flies" in these maternal waves. The connection with the motherly body and nourishing and feeding the fetus is depicted quite clearly also at the end of the passage where "mother-nurse" (*shi mu*) is mentioned.

If the baby of §20 is a sage, Lao-tzu himself; who then is the mother? The information above makes it

possible to conclude that this mother is the great Tao itself; it is the eternal and unspeakable Way and mysterious ground of every existence; the hidden depth of this Tao is the womb wherein the baby-sage dwells. This image directly correlates with Taoist cosmology and cosmogony. It considers Tao to be something like a cosmic womb which embraces the whole universe. The universe enjoys absolute unity (chaotic unity - *hun yi*) with the maternal body of the Way until its birth, differentiation and divorce from the Way in the course of cosmogenesis. Nevertheless, even in the "born world" some unity with Tao is preserved: it is fed by the power of Tao, which is called *Te* or Power-Virtue. For example: "The Way gives birth to them and integrity [i.e., *Te*] nurtures them" (§51). Thus, the connection between birth in the course of the cosmic evolution world and Tao looks quite like the connection between a mother nourishing her child, and the baby itself. But in the case of humans, there appears a self concept, an independent, self-containing "I," as an unchanging subject of actions. This kind of egoistic self-consciousness harms the original unity, and humans begin to counteract Tao. The predominant attitude of human actions is no longer the law and measure of the cosmic rhythm of Tao, but egocentric preferences, which change spontaneous natural life into purposeful activities based only on bare subjectivity. Taoism sees egocentricity as the cause of all human sufferings, pains, frustrations-from mortality to social collisions.

The only means, not only to become liberated from sufferings but to obtain the highest happiness, is to restore original unity with Tao, to broaden consciousness and to put an end to the egocentric attitude, that is, to return to the state of the nonborn child who does not know a distinct difference between his or her own body and the maternal body, who breathes the maternal breath and eats maternal food. This coming back to the womb of the Mother-Tao is connected with the broadening of the personality to the cosmic scale, when "eternal integrity never deserts you, You will return to the state of infancy" (§28) and "a man is sparing of his body in caring for all under heaven" (§13). This state of the nonborn child is the state of immortality, peace, and unity with all beings and with one's own nature: The return to the root is called "stillness," stillness is called returning to the "fate-vitality," the return to the fate-vitality is called "constancy." One who knows constancy is called "enlightened" (§16).'

Tao explicates itself on all levels of micro- and macrocosm, and because of this, the Taoist texts distinctively describe an isomorphism between cosmogonic process, development of the fetus and birth, and in the reverse sequence, the steps of the Taoist cultivation. So, for the Taoist, the returning to the womb of the Mother-Tao is not simply a metaphor, but a kind of expression of some profound essence of the isomorphous structure of the universe. It is also the reason why practicing Taoists try to imitate the prenatal states in their self-cultivation. One example is the famous technique of "embryonic breathing" (*t'ai hsi*), first depicted in Ko Hung's *Paop'u-tzu* (4 A.D.). It is very still and quiet breathing, minimizing inhalation and exhalation. This kind of breathing control gives the impression that the practitioner does not breathe at all, like a fetus in the maternal womb, obtaining vital energy (*ch'i*) from the blood of the mother.

Prenatal symbolism permeates the whole text of the Tao Te ching. The comparison of Tao with water and the important role played by the symbolism of water in this text in general is well known: For example: "The highest good is like water; Water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures but also struggles to occupy the place loathed by the masses. Therefore, it is near to the Way" (§8). The reason for the importance of the water symbolism lies not only in that, archetypically, water has female nature; it can be proposed, following Lao-tzu, that water is of the same nature as the nature of the

waters of that embryonic ocean in which the baby-sage washes and wavers (§20 of The Canon of the Way and its Power).

In this regard, it is rather important to evaluate the name-pseudonym of the sage, who according to a tradition more than two thousand years old, is considered to be the author of the Tao Te ching, that is, Lao-tzu, Old Sage, and also Old Infant. Let us once again reflect upon this infant with the gray beard.

Up to the first centuries A.D., the teaching was formed about the divinized Lao-tzu (Lord Lao or Lao-jun). But the tendencies to divinization were very old. Thus, in the 21st chapter of the Chuang-tzu, Lao-tzu says that he was wandering in the origin of things. The divinized Lao-tzu was associated with Tao and with original chaos-undifferentiated energetic pneuma (*ch'i*), that is, with the source of the universe itself. (Detailed research into the process of the divinization of Lao-tzu may be found in Seidel, 1969.) The texts of the Han dynasty period (3 B.C.-3 A.D.) describe Lao-tzu as the Body of Tao. All of the texts use synonyms to express the idea of the body in this context: *hsing* (form, pattern), *shen* (body, person, personification), and *ti* (body, substance, incarnation) (Schipper, 1978, pp. 358-361). But further still, identified with the chaos in its mythological personification of *P'an Ku* (cosmic pananthropos, typologically akin to Purusha of the Rig-Veda and Adam Kadmon of the Kabbalah), Lao-tzu became the creator of the world: "Lao-tzu has changed his body. His left eye became the sun, his right eye became the moon, his head changed into the K'unlun mountain, his beard changed into the stars and heavenly space, his bones became dragons, his flesh-beasts, his viscera-snakes" (Maspero, 1950, p. 108; Schipper, 1978, p. 361). In his evolution from the undifferentiated chaos to his cosmic "birth," Lao tzu goes through nine stages, reflected in the myth of his "historical" birth. As K. M. Schipper points out (1978, p.361), this corresponds to the concept of §21 in the Tao Te ching which describes the transformations of the universe from the unqualified "blurred and nebulous" to the Name-Mother of all creatures. The famous commentary of Hoshang-kung (2 B.C.) says:

In relation to myriad beings, Tao is such: it is wandering hither and thither and it has no definite place to be grounded there. Tao dwells in the formless of the "blurred and nebulous," but it is the only principle pattern of all beings. Though 'Lao is nothing but "blurred and nebulous," the One exists in it; the One contains in itself all metamorphoses. Due to the presence of the pneuma-ch'i, it becomes materialized. Though Tao is only formless darkness of mystery, it has spermatogenic energy [*ching*] and though in its essence its divine numinous mind [*shen ming*] is very subtle, it lies in the basis of the yin-yang interaction. If one can say anything about the nature of the spermatogenic pneuma [*ching ch'i*], it must be declared that its mystery is absolutely real; it does not need any decorations, Tao hides glory in itself; Tao contains name in itself—here is sincerity and truth [*hsin*] in the midst of it. (Hoshang-kung, in Tao Te ching, 1989, p.55)

It is timely to recall here the myth about the historical and cosmic birth of Lao-tzu. There are very interesting details in the canonical text *San t'ien nei 'chieh ching* (Canon of the Esoteric Explanation of Three Heavens) written during the Han period. First of all, the text describes the cosmic birth of Lord Lao as a kind of theophany:

Then in the midst of darkness, Cave of Emptiness was born [K'ung tung]. In this Cave of Emptiness, Great Absence was born. Great Absence changed itself into three pneumata: Mysterious, Original and Principal. Being in chaotic mixture,



these pneumata gave birth to Jade Maid of the profound Mystery [*Hsuan miao yu nü*]. After her birth joining pneumata twisted in her body and by their transformations they bore Lao-tar... When he was born he had gray hair. So he was called Old infant [i.e., Lao-tar]. This Lao-tzu is Lord Lao. By his transformation he created from his pneumata Heaven and Earth, people and things. Thus he has created everything by his transformations.

This passage clearly tells us that Lao-tar was his own mother. Another passage tells us about the "historical" birth of Lao-tar:

In the time of King Wu Ting of Yin dynasty, Lao-tar once again entered the womb of Mother Li . . . When he was born, his hair was gray again. Therefore he was again called Old Infant... What about his coming back to the embryonic state in the Mother Li's womb?; it must be understood that he himself has changed his subtle various body into the body of Mother Li, entering thus his own womb. In reality there was no Mother Li. Unwise people now say that Lao-tar entered Mother Li's womb from inside. In reality, it is not so. (Tao tsang, Vol.876; see also Schipper, 1978, p.365)

K. M. Schipper notes that none of the most ancient myths about Lao-tar's birth tell about the father of Lao-tar. Even his family name (*Li*) Lao-tar received from his mother ("*Li*" literally means "plum"). According to some versions, Lao-tar was born because his mother ate the kernel of a plum (Schipper, 1978, p.365).

Thus, in Taoist texts, Tao is conceived of as a female maternal principle personified in the image of the male-female androgyne Lao-tar (Berthier, 1979; Seidel, 1969, p.64). Moreover, texts stress only his female aspect, because Tao bears the universe by itself; its "male" aspect does not participate in this process at all.

In the myths mentioned above, the founder of Taoism is conceived of as universal panantropos, the All-Man, who enjoys everlasting bliss in the maternal womb of Tao with which he is connected so perfectly-like a fetus and its mother constituting one and the same body. It is quite obvious that myths of this kind (myths of a rather early date, as we have seen), underline the importance of the theme of perfection as a prenatal state for Taoism. They also explain in great part why the authorship of such a basic (though not uniquely basic) text of Taoism was ascribed to the person called Old Infant. (I refer here to the traditional view of Lao-tar as the author of the Tao Te ching.) It is also interesting that the Taoists prefer to interpret the name of Lao-tzu as Old Infant or Old Baby but not as Old Sage. It seems to me that understanding the role and meaning of the prenatal symbolism in Taoism would serve as a general key to the right insight into the whole system of Taoist thought.

Here it is also possible to suggest a hypothesis about the relationship existing between prenatal and perinatal themes and their archetypical images from one side, and different kinds of myths about miraculous conception, which are known to practically every civilization, from another side. It can be suggested that the mythologem of miraculous conception is a manifestation of a subconscious wish to enjoy the synergetic unity with the mother which was attainable during the period of prenatal development. This wish is, in addition, accompanied by the elimination of every (and first of all, fatherly) mediation of this unity. In any case, Taoist materials undoubtedly connect the state of immortality and perfection with returning to the state of the sage-infant (compare the biblical phrase

"If you do not change and become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven" [Matt. 18:3], and the idea of the combination of the wisdom of a snake and the simplicity of a pigeon, the topic developed and explained by St. Paul). This sage-infant of Taoism eternally dwells in the universal womb of the Mysterious Female, Tao as Great Mother of the world, and this womb is isomorphic, but certainly not identical to, the maternal womb in which the embryo enjoys happiness before its birth.

Li Erh, Lao-tzu, Eternal Infant of Taoism, the founder of this teaching and the teacher of the kings, age after age appearing on the earth in the name of highest wisdom and highest simplicity (nonpolished wooden block- *p'u*, and raw silk-*su*, are quite common designations of original simplicity as one of the most important values of Taoism. he/she is that paradigmatic figure to which Taoism appeals and calls for identification with.

Taoism proclaims that the human body is a microcosm, an "image and likeness" of the macrocosm, the universe. "A man is but small heaven and earth," is an often mentioned Taoist saying. This teaching, extremely important for the Taoist tradition, is also well-known in other religious and philosophical doctrines, in the East as well as in the West, including Christianity, especially in its Gnostic variety (the Russian theologian Father Pavel Florensky considers it to be absolutely orthodox).

The Taoists also evaluate body as the image of the state; the state according to Chinese philosophical concepts is a part of natural, universal integrity. This doctrine of the similarity of the body and the universe is the true foundation of the Taoist practice of "inner alchemy," the aim of which is to produce the so-called elixir of immortality inside the body of an adept from its energies or pneumata which are a microcosmic analogue of the metals and minerals of the outer world. It is obvious that the processes of the body were thought of as analogous to the processes and changes of the outer laboratory, alchemy, the cauldrons of which represented a specific acting model of the macrocosm as well.

Strictly speaking, treatises on the inner alchemy (*nei tan*) tell us about the creation of a new immortal body of the Taoist which must be created inside the old "corrupted" body. If the process is successfully finished, a new immortal body replaces the old one, being "born" of the mortal body. For our thesis, it is important that the process of the creation of the new sacred body from the pneumata of the profane one is described in the texts in terms of pregnancy, embryonic development, and birth.

The image of the creation of the new perfect body is rather widespread in the religious beliefs of quite different peoples of the world. In Shamanism, for example, it is used in the imitation of death, which is accompanied by contemplation of flesh decay, which is followed by rebirth after the creation from the skeleton (substantial ground of the body) of the new "Shamanic" body. This form of practice is rather common for shamanistic initiations (e.g., Eliade, 1972, pp. 63-64). Such rituals are also known in some Indian yogic sadhanas, especially those of Tantric origin: in the course of this practice, the yogi creates a new indestructible yogic body (*yoga deha*), corresponding with the old one as mature and green fruit, or (in terms of "rasayana," "vehicle of alchemy") as vulgar profane metal and mature alchemical gold (Eliade, 1958, pp. 274-278). The contemplation of a skeleton is also a common practice in classical Buddhism.

But the semantics of this contemplation in Shamanism or Taoism are quite different than in

Buddhism. In the first case, the skeleton is a symbol of some basic or original substance, which coming back to gives new powers to the person and brings him or her to a new level of existence. The adept returns to it in his or her experience of mystical death and rebirth, and then obtains new powers and creates from this substance a new sacred body. The Taoist image of coming back to the maternal womb as an unborn child in the Tao Te ching and its ontological connotation, that is, returning to the womb of the emptiness of Tao and obtaining a new everlasting life, are also of the same kind. From the depth of darkness of the "chaotic and obscure" womb of the Mother-Tao (*huang hu*), the Taoist sage creates the light of enlightenment (*ming*) and new life by passing through the experience of mystical death (reduction to embryonic state in Tao) and rebirth-resurrection. But this rebirth does not lead to the separation from Tao: this Mysterious Female forever remains the mother-nurse of the Taoist baby-sage. In the case of Buddhism, however, such contemplation is directed at recognizing that existence is inherently subject to impermanence, destructibility and mortality, that is, the purpose of this kind of meditation is an interiorization of the understanding of the ubiquity of samsara (world of deaths and rebirths) as suffering and frustration.

For an understanding of the Taoist inner alchemy, two pairs of interrelated concepts are of predominant importance: natural essence (*hsing*) and vitality (*ming*); precelestial or prenatal (*hsian t'ian*) and postcelestial or postnatal (*hou t'ian*). The Taoist texts explain these concepts thus: The teaching about alchemical melting is the teaching of the method of melting of the natural essence and vitality to make them perfect. The law of the natural essence and vitality has two sides: the natural essence given by Heaven, which must be nurtured, and the natural essence of the pneumatic quality, which must be overcome. The vitality which is confirmed in separation must be pacified; bodily vitality must be fed. These are the principal two sides of the teaching of the Way (Tung Te-ning, a Taoist of the 18th century, commentary on the "Chapters of the Insight into the Truth" of Chang Po-tuan, 11 A.D.) . A famous representative of inner alchemy, Wu Ch'ung-hsi (born in 1574), also tells us that precelestial nature is the pneuma received by the fetus at the time of conception, and the postcelestial one is the pneuma or energy received by a fetus due to the breathing of its mother or (after its birth) through its own inhalations. The first pneuma is concentrated in the navel, the second one in the nostrils. The inner alchemy is directed towards the harmonization of the "natural essence" and "vitality," the elimination of any collision between them. When this purpose is realized, an "elixir of immortality" appears inside the body of an adept which, in turn, changes itself into the so-called "immortal embryo" (*hsian t'ai*) growing into the state of the new immortal body of the alchemist. Therefore, the body of the Taoist is a female body, maternal body, and the adept himself or herself appears to be his or her own mother, like Lao-tar of the cosmological myth, who also was, as we have seen, the mother of himself/herself. Certainly, "immortal embryo" is a fruit of the conjugality or hierogamy of two principles, yin and yang, like everything in the world, but this sacred marriage has its place in the body of a Taoist who, like all beings, obtains his/her life in the maternal womb of the Mysterious Female, the great Way (Tao) of the universe. The body of the Taoist is a female body, too; in this body the conjunction of the principles takes its place and the fruit of this union is nothing other than the miraculously transfigured Taoist himself/herself. Thus the body of the Taoist is an analogy to the mystical body of Tao which is of paradigmatic value for the Taoist (Schipper, 1978, p.371).

We can continue to compare "embryological" and "psychotechnical" aspects of Taoism. The Taoists pay much attention to the teachings about the states of development of the fetus. Why? It seems to me that the reason lies in the deep isomorphism between the steps of embryonical growth, the stages of the process of cosmogony, and the phases of the formation of the "immortal embryo" in inner

alchemy": "The fetus obtains his definitive bodily form for ten lunar months and afterwards the baby is born. Like this, the numinous fetus also needs ten lunar months to be born. The spirit obtains its fullness and then goes out" (Wu Ch'ung-hsti, 1965, p.45). In the teaching of the "inner alchemy," therefore, two sides of the Taoist concept of the female take their place: the identity of the body of the adept with the female body, and the correspondence of the latter with Tao as an ontological pattern from one side and the teaching about transubstantiality of the mother-adept and 'her' child from the other side.

Nevertheless, Taoists understood ambivalence of the perinatal patterns. So the maternal womb was seen by them, not only as a source of life and energy, but as the grave as well--the resulting summary of life, built on the expenses of the vital force. It resembles the idea in transpersonal psychology of the ambiguity of the perinatal experience (Grof; 1993): BPM I (Basic Perinatal Matrix) provides an experience of the maternal womb as a blissful and secure place, and BPM 2 and BPM 3 places of suffering and disease. One of the most famous Taoists of the T'ang period, Lu Tung-pin, according to tradition, declared the following: "The gates, through which I came to life are also the gates of death" (Schipper, 1969, p.38). This sentence was repeated in the famous didactic and erotic novel of 16 A.D., Chin, Ping Mei (The Plum Flowers in the Golden Vase) to warn readers against frivolous spending of the life energy, but here, in a sexual context. In any case, the ambivalence of the female principle has never been forgotten in China.

What kind of transpersonal experience is typical for Taoism? To answer this question we can use the classification of Grof (1993). Grof mentions a specific kind of ecstasy he calls "oceanic" or "Apollonic" ecstasy.

According to Grof (1993, p.336), oceanic ecstasy (recall the sea waves in which the unborn baby-sage of the Tao Te Ching swims) may be characterized by bliss, freedom from any stress, loss of any limitations of "ego," and the experience of absolute unity with nature, universal order, and God. This state is concerned with a deep, direct understanding of reality and cognitive acts of universal meaning. It must be noted that the ideal of Taoism is a spontaneous and absolutely natural following of one's own primordial nature (which is rooted in the empty Tao itself) and the nature of all other things, the nature of the universal whole (shun wu, "following things"). This "following the Way" suggests the absence of mentally constructed, reflective, purposive activity--a state devoid of any real ontological status ego-subject of activity (non-doing, wu wei:). We must also note that Taoist texts demonstrate for us a profound and direct vision of reality. Phrases like "returning to the root, coming back to the source" are very typical of Taoist texts. These texts also proclaim the epistemological ideal of Taoism: "One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know".

According to Grof; the conditions of oceanic ecstasy correspond to the experience of symbiotic unity of a baby and its mother during the period of fetal development and of breast feeding. He writes (cited in reverse translation from Russian): "As we could expect, in the state of oceanic ecstasy there is presented the element of water as the cradle of life . . . The experience of the fetal existence, the identification with different aquatic forms of life or the consciousness of the ocean, visions of the starry sky and the feeling of the cosmic mind are exclusively widespread in this context" (Grof; 1993, p.336).

All these characteristics correspond to the description of the Taoist experience. It is also interesting to

note how late Chinese sects with a Taoist background use the theme of the unborn. Here, Female Tao takes the image of *Wu sheng lao mu* (Unborn Old Mother). Unfortunately, sinologists have not noticed the paradoxical nature of the worldview of the sectarians, looking upon themselves as the children of the unborn mother! The paradox of a mother who is herself unborn is as astonishing as a Zen Buddhist koan. Even the very word "unborn" is paradoxical, and we know about the cases of enlightenment of some Zen monks meditating upon the sense of this word. Indeed, the unborn mother of the unborn child is but Great Tao itself.

In Grof's *Beyond the Brain* (1993, p.380 of Russian edition), in fact, there is a picture presenting the image of archetypical Lao-tar-the baby-sage, an infant with gray hair. The picture was made by a participant in a psychedelic session and is concerned with the experience of BPM I. In the picture we can see a baby sitting with crossed legs on a lotus flower. The baby has long gray hair and has an umbilical cord conjoined with the unseen body of its mother. Grof says: "Identification with the fetus in the period of the peaceful prenatal development has, as a rule, divine qualities. The picture demonstrates obtaining, during a high dose LSD-session, an intuitive insight into the connection between the embryonic bliss and the nature of the Buddha" (Grof, 1993, p.380; reverse translation from Russian). Here we once again meet with the exceptionally important question of the correlation between perinatal and transpersonal or "mystical" experience. The question is: Is it possible to reduce the mystical experience of transcendence to prenatal or perinatal experience and to recollections about it? At the present time, we cannot resolve this question conclusively. Therefore, below I shall suggest some hypotheses which remain to be verified in the course of future transpersonal research.

First of all, unlike Grof I do not equate transpersonal (mystical, psychopractical) experience with recollections of a perinatal character; I think it is quite incorrect to reduce experience of the first kind to experience of the second kind. Secondly, it is well known that perinatal recollections of the adult are principally different from the amorphous and rather simple experience of the fetus. The first kind of experience is much richer, broader, and varied. This type of experience is connected, as one can suppose, with much deeper levels of the unconscious representing the archetypical dimension of the mind. Probably these archetypical patterns and gestalts are something like a priori forms of the repetitive experience of the perinatal state--as in Kant's philosophy, time and space are a priori forms of sensual intuition which determine our form of vision of the transcendent to these forms--reality as it is. Briefly speaking, our profound archetypical levels of the unconscious may be the source of patterns forming the experience of the perinatal states by adults. And those archetypical patterns, in turn, are akin to some kinds of mystical vision.

Nevertheless, we can observe a kind of parallelism between the perinatal and mystical experience. In this parallelism, perinatal gestalt correlates with the corresponding transpersonal (mystical) state.

Moreover, in some cases, we can speak of the superimposition or interplay between perinatal and mystical experience. In such cases, perinatal experience may be a sort of key opening to the mind gates to mystical experience.

We can only explain this phenomenon hypothetically by a kind of likeness or analogy existing between some perinatal and mystical states. For example, there is some analogy between the feeling of peace and security of the fetal existence of BPM I and the transpersonal experience of the *unjo mystica*, or the experience of universal unity. Therefore, the attainment of the perinatal state serves to eliminate the barriers of the unconscious, opening its deepest levels which correspond to this unity,

thereby enabling the mind (or self-consciousness) to penetrate there. In other words, a person who achieved the experience of symbiotic union with the mother of BPM I can more simply and easily attain a parallel but higher experience of the universal unity: the first kind of experience gives way to the openness of analogical but highest (or deepest) strata and levels. Probably, the personal or individualistic limitations dividing the psychical worlds of different individuals are already absent on such profound levels of subconscious existence. (I do not use the word "subconscious" here in the psychoanalytical sense; perhaps it would be better to call it "superconscious.")

Therefore, we may cautiously suppose the existence of some kind of isomorphism of basic states of consciousness of different levels, rooted in the holistic and polistructural ("holonomic" in Grof's terminology) nature of reality as such, including its psychical dimension. But the problems of the ontology of consciousness are too subtle to discuss briefly. For now, we can only note the distinctive interplay of perinatal and transpersonal levels of experience in the Taoist tradition.

Taoist tradition, undoubtedly, is a precious part of the spiritual heritage of humankind. Many of the basic ideas and images of Taoism have a profound humanistic sense, deeply rooted in the very structure of our psychical experience. Do we not see the image of the Mysterious Female-Mother of all under heaven in Sophia or Eunoia of the Gnostics, in Shekhina of the Kabbalah, or in Sophia, the soul of the world, the image of the coming all-unity of the Russian philosopher and mystic Vladimir Solovyev?

I have seen everything and everything was only one:  
The only image of the female beauty.  
Limitlessness entered its measure,  
In front of me, inside of me, there is only you.  
-Vladimir Solovyev, "Three Meetings"

## NOTE

1. I have used the English translation of the Tao Te ching by Victor H. Mair (1990). In cases of disagreement with his interpretation of the text, I provide my own translation, which is indicated with the superscript "I." The concluding translation by Solovyev is also my own.

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