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Awakening to the Tao

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Awakening to the Tao

Liu I-ming

Translated from the Chinese
by Thomas Cleary



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Preface

The Tao is the Way, the Way behind all ways, the principle underlying all principles, the fact underlying all facts. Taoism, in its broadest sense, is the search for truth and reality. In a narrower sense, it is the original knowledge tradition of China, but the narrowness of this definition is growing more acute day by day, as Taoism has already in the last couple of centuries extended some of its influence in the West to nearly as diverse an array of areas of human interest as it has in the East.

In English today we have books on Taoism and investment, Taoism and management, Taoism and health, Taoism and medicine, Taoism and sex, Taoism and science, Taoism and psychology, Taoism and art, Taoism and life, Taoism and war, Taoism and education, Taoism and society, Taoism and every sort of illuminism and religion.

This book, *Awakening to the Tao*, is none of these but includes something of all of them, and more—over a hundred methods of attaining reality as a fully conscious human being. According to the Zen masters of ancient times, when you awaken to that unique Way at the crossroads of all ways, you then hold the key to all ways, and can succeed in any of those ways you choose to practice.

Translator's Introduction

Awakening to the Tao is a collection of meditations formulated by Liu I-ming, one of the most adept Taoist writers of early modern times. Written in a simple, explicit style, it uses natural and mythical phenomena as metaphors illustrating the principles and practices of Taoism.

Born around 1737, Liu writes that he first became interested in Taoism during his early teens. According to his own account, he visited all sorts of supposed teachers and studied at random for several years. In his late teens he became gravely ill, and for the first time realized the uselessness of all he had studied.

Liu's illness did not respond to medical treatment, gradually worsening until he had become a complete invalid. At that point, he had the fortune to meet a "Real Human," a genuine Taoist adept, who was able to cure him. Now totally committed to seeking the Tao, Liu left home at the age of nineteen to travel in search of true learning.

About three years after embarking on this pilgrimage, Liu met someone he calls the Old Man of the Valley of the Crypts, whom he thereafter regarded as his teacher. This old man explained to him the fallacies in the aberrant practices of the ever popular pseudo-Taoist cults Liu had naturally encountered, and passed on the essential psychological teaching of true Taoism.

In later years, Liu was to mention this momentous event over and over in taking his stand against deviant practices and approaches to Taoism. There is nothing unique in this, of course, as similar warnings about sidetracks occur time and again in Taoist classics going back over two thousand years. If nothing else, this aspect of Taoist history testifies to the persistence of certain fascinations and the chronic lack of information among cultists.

After opening young Liu's mind to the central point of Taoism, the old man sent him home to finish his social duties and study the Taoist alchemical classics. Neglect of social life in youth and lack of sufficient grounding in the principles of mysticism were two of the major defects that great latter-day Taoists have repeatedly pointed out in aberrant pseudomystics.

Accordingly, Liu I-ming made a thorough investigation of the sacred literature of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. His later writings show a combined knowledge of alchemy and Zen Buddhism

unequaled in his time, but his literary studies did not satisfy him at the time. His own explanation is that he left his teacher too soon. This resulted in twelve years of doubt and uncertainty.

During this unsettled period, Liu spent four years living in Beijing, the northern capital, two years in central China, three years in the far northwest, and four years wandering around. All this, in his own words, was on account of his search for truth. He studied spiritual writings every day, but still could not resolve his uncertainty.

Finally in 1772 Liu met his second teacher, whom he calls the Old Man of the Immortals' Station. Liu describes his experience under the old man's tutelage as like being raised from the bottom of an immeasurably deep pit to the top of an immeasurably high mountain. Freed from doubt forever, Liu now felt as though he "saw the whole world in the palm of his hand and encountered the Tao wherever he was."

After sudden enlightenment comes gradual application, and Liu further reports two profound and encompassing spiritual experiences that took place in 1776 and 1780. Then, "harmonizing enlightenment to assimilate with the world"—again in accord with classic principles—he spent many more years practicing concealment in company, traveling to various places and working at various jobs and professions while continuing his inner refinement.

Even after these experiences, Liu does not seem to have begun writing on Taoism until the 1790s, when he was already nearly sixty. He continued to write until around 1826, a period of nearly thirty years.

During this time he wrote matchless commentaries on Taoist classics such as *The Book of Changes*, *Understanding Reality*, *Triplex Unity*, *The Yin Convergence Classic*, *Four Hundred Words on the Gold Pill*, *Tapping the Lines*, *The Hundred Character Inscription*, *The Rootless Tree*, and *Journey to the West*.¹

Liu also composed numerous essays, poems, and songs of his own, likewise employing the vocabulary of Taoist alchemy in psychological translation and expounding the essence of Taoism with unprecedented clarity. *Awakening to the Tao* is one of Liu's own compositions. Dating from 1816, when he was nearly eighty years old, it encapsulates a lifetime of work and contemplation in over a hundred brilliant opuscles.

NOTE

1. The well-known *Book of Changes* (*I Ching*, or *Yijing*, or *Zhouyi*) is one of the fundamental texts of Taoism, used to illustrate a complete cycle of development.

Understanding Reality (*Wuzhen pian*) and *Triplex Unity* (*Cantongqi*) are the two greatest alchemical texts and are called the

ancestors of alchemical literature by the Complete Reality schools of Taoism.

The Yin Convergence Classic (Yinfujing) is even more ancient than *The Book of Changes*. It is attributed to the Yellow Emperor himself, one of the greatest figures of prehistoric Taoism, who is thought to have lived nearly five thousand years ago. Secular scholars believe it dates back at least to the Shang dynasty, roughly the second millennium B.C.E., on the grounds that there is already commentary on the classic from that period. This text has been interpreted in many ways; some regard it as a text on the art of warfare, while others regard it as a spiritual classic on a par with the Tao Te Ching.

Four Hundred Words on the Gold Pill (Jindan Sibaizi) is a seminal alchemical classic by the same author as *Understanding Reality*.

Tapping the Lines (Qiaoyao ge) and *The Hundred Character Inscription (Baizi bei)* are poems by the great Ancestor Lu, grandfather of the Complete Reality movement.

The Rootless Tree (Wugenshu) is a collection of poems by the fabled Zhang (Chang) Sanfeng, legendary originator of Absolute Boxing, alchemist capable of producing both material and spiritual gold, exposé of charlatans and dummies, and all-around Taoist wizard.

Journey to the West (Xiyouji) is one of the Four Extraordinary Books of the Ming dynasty, four great novels used as media extraordinaire for Taoist teaching in the secular society of post-Mongol times.

The following texts have been translated into English. *The Book of Changes*, with Liu's commentary, is in *The Taoist I Ching* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1986). *Understanding Reality*, with Liu's commentary, is under its original title (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988). *Four Hundred Words on the Gold Pill* is in *The Inner Teachings of Taoism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1987). The others are in a forthcoming anthology.

PART ONE

Contemplations

The Height of Heaven, the Thickness of Earth

The body of heaven is extremely high. Open, round, immeasurable, it is boundlessly vast. Covering everything, containing everything, it produces myriad beings without presuming on its virtue, it bestows blessings on myriad beings without expectation of reward. Whether people are respectful or insincere, supportive or antagonistic, is left up to them. Whether people are good or bad, attractive or repulsive, and whether creatures are violent and stubborn or docile and obedient, they are allowed to be so of themselves, without any contrivance.

The earth is very thick. Lowly, below all else, it bears everything and nurtures all beings. It can bear even the weight of the great mountains, and it can endure even the erosive force of great waters. It tolerates being pierced by plants and trees, and it submits to the tread of birds and beasts. It does not mind being cheapened by pollution.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of emulating heaven and earth. If people can be open-minded and magnanimous, be receptive to all, take pity on the old and the poor, assist those in peril and rescue those in trouble, give of themselves without seeking reward, never bear grudges, look upon others and self impartially, and realize all as one, then people can be companions of heaven.

If people can be flexible and yielding, humble, with self-control, entirely free of agitation, cleared of all volatility, not angered by criticism, ignoring insult, docilely accepting all hardships, illnesses, and natural disasters, utterly without anxiety or resentment when faced with danger or adversity, then people can be companions of earth.

With the nobility of heaven and the humility of earth, one joins in with the attributes of heaven and earth and extends to eternity with them.

The Shining of the Sun and Moon

The way the sun works, it climbs into the sky in the daytime, thus illuminating the outward, then goes behind the earth at night, thus illuminating the inward. The way the moon works, in the first half of its cycle it produces light, thus illuminating the outward, then in the last half of its cycle it withdraws it light, thus nurturing the inward. Sun and moon, illuminating outside and inside, are all one light.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of using illumination. If people can use illumination outwardly, be careful about what they say and do, refrain from any inappropriate conduct, not dwell on anything but the Tao, not be distorted by the power of sensuality, intoxicants,

and material goods, not be seduced by wealth or status, success or fame, not be stained by mundane feelings connected to worldly situations, then they can illuminate the outward as do the sun and moon.

If people can use illumination inwardly, do away with falsehood and maintain truthfulness, leave confusion and return to reality, learn to master emotions, clear up feelings, clean the mind, melt away the human mentality and activate the awareness of Tao, carefully avoiding even the slightest errant thought, then they can illumine the inward as do the sun and moon.

When the inward and the outward are illumined, and all is clear, you are one with the light of sun and moon. When developed to its ultimate state, this is a round luminosity which nothing can deceive, the subtle body of a unified spirit, pervading the whole universe. Then you have the same function as the sun and moon.

Thunder and Wind

Thunder is fierce, intense, and strong; wind is gradual, far-reaching, and soft. When wind and thunder combine, then there is soft gentleness in the midst of hard intensity, and there is hard intensity in the midst of soft gentleness. Hardness and softness complement each other.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of balanced harmonization of hardness and softness. When people practice the Tao to develop character, dealing with events and society, if they are always hard they will be impetuous and aggressive, excessively impatient, so their actions will lack perseverance and their keenness will be blunted. Then again, if people are always soft, they will vacillate, fearful and ineffective, and be too weak to succeed in their tasks. That softness is useless.

If people can be firm in decision and flexible in gradual practice, neither hurrying nor lagging, neither aggressive nor weak, with hardness and softness balancing each other, achieving balance and harmony, then they will benefit wherever they go. If they study the Tao in this way, eventually they will surely understand the Tao. If they practice the Tao in this way, eventually they will surely realize the Tao.

Therefore a classic written by a sage says, “Balance is the mainstay of the world, harmony is the way the world arrives on the Tao. Achieving balance and harmony, heaven and earth are in their places therein, myriad beings grow up therein.” Such is the importance of the Tao of balance and harmony.

The Alternation of the Four Seasons

Spring, summer, autumn, winter—these are the four seasons. In spring things sprout, in summer things grow, in autumn things are harvested, in winter things are stored. Each has its turn, then passes on; when the cycle is completed, it begins again, so that the four seasons are linked together in a continuum.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of mutual causation, of subtraction and addition. Now what I mean by subtraction here is the subtraction of excess in strength and volatility, and what I mean by addition is addition to fill the lack caused by pliability and weakness. Being strong without letting strength go too far, being flexible without becoming ineffective, strength is joined to flexibility and flexibility is applied with strength.

Strength and flexibility matching each other, yin and yang matching each other, it is possible to be high or low, great or small; it is possible to advance or withdraw, to go along or oppose. Adapting uninhibitedly, indirectness and directness working parallel, one then merges with the order of the four seasons. Changing freely, there is a heaven and earth in one's own body, a Creation in one's own mind, yet one is not constrained by heaven, earth, and Creation.

The Moon Borrows the Sun's Light

The moon is originally pure yin, without yang—it only gives off light after borrowing the sun's rays. The waxing and waning of the moonlight depends on the position and proportion of the sunlight.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of borrowing yang to transmute yin. The human body is originally pure yin without yang—it must borrow the yang of other to become yang.

“Other” means everything other than oneself—sky and earth, sun and moon, myriad beings, myriad things. The so-called “yang of other” is the primordial open unified energy, which is the undying human being.

This energy is innate, but as it mixes with acquired conditioning it gradually gets scattered among the sky and earth, sun and moon, myriad beings and things, and is not one's own anymore, belonging to other.

If you know this energy is in other, and gradually steal it back to return it to self, restoring the existence of the nonexistent, regaining what had been lost, that is like the moon shining by borrowing the light of the sun. This is the celestial mechanism of taking over Creation and reversing yin and yang.

Steadying the Furnace and Setting Up the Cauldron

When alchemists cook medicines, first they must steady the furnace and set up the cauldron. The quality of the cauldron is firmness, whereby the medicine is contained; the quality of the furnace is flexibility, whereby the firing is operated. If the cauldron is not strong, the medicine is easily lost; if the furnace is not steady, the fire flies off at random.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of refining body and mind. Firmness of determination in cultivating the Tao is the cauldron. Becoming stronger with perseverance, never turning back even though foiled a hundred times, being imperturbable, unwavering—this is “setting up the cauldron.” Alert observation at all times is the furnace. Working gradually, serenely, unpressured—this is “steadying the furnace.”

When the cauldron and furnace are stabilized properly, you burn away the acquired habits that have become compulsive over the course of personal history, thus bringing to light the original state of completeness, sloughing off all acquired pollutants.

When the slag is gone and the gold is pure, you get rid of the old and take the new. Now you change the furnace and cauldron, and set aside the tongs and bellows, to do advanced work, melting the real gold down into liquid and frost, returning to the state before birth.

So it is that the alchemical classics and writings of the adepts consider steadying the furnace and setting up the cauldron the first priority.

Fire and Water Mirrors

A fire-making mirror is able to take fire from the sun, even at an immense distance. A water-collecting mirror is able to take water from the moon, even at a vast remove. This is because the energies of the fire and water mirrors are the same kind as those of the sun and moon.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of absorbing yin and yang. The yin and yang in the human being are originally combined into one energy; it is because of mixture with temporal conditioning that yin and yang separate. Once yin and yang have separated, the energy of life decreases day by day and the energy of death increases day by day. As the energy of life decreases more and more while the energy of death increases more and more, in the end there is only death.

If you know how to turn the light of awareness around to look within, using the artificial to cultivate the real, then in a moment yin and yang will merge and combine, spontaneously and effortlessly. If you realize this, it is near at hand; if not, it is far away. It is simply a

matter of being willing to do it.

Dung Beetles

Dung beetles roll balls of dung, from which their offspring are born after a time. Balls of dung are originally dead things, with nothing in them, but by the communion of female and male energies joining into one energy that does not disperse, the spirit congeals and the energy coagulates, and is thus able to produce substance and form where there was no substance or form.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of producing being from within nonbeing. People are born with the two energies of heaven and earth, yin and yang, so they have these two energies, yin and yang, within their bodies. If people can bring the yang to the yin, and cause the yin to follow the yang, yin and yang adhere to each other. In the midst of ecstatic trance there is a point of living potential, coming into being from nonbeing, whereby the spiritual embryo can be formed and the spiritual body can be produced.

When this practice reaches its consummation, you break through space and have a body outside your body. Walking on the sun and moon without form, penetrating metal and stone without hindrance, you transcend Creation.

Lead and Quicksilver

In material alchemy, when quicksilver is exposed to fire, it flies off. When lead is put into quicksilver, the quicksilver is stabilized, and they combine to form a mass without volatility.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of controlling yin by means of yang. The human mind is mercurial and unpredictable; it gives rise to emotions about what it experiences, and stirs up confusion after exposure to external influences. This is like quicksilver flying off when exposed to fire.

If the mind of Tao is always present, warding off danger, and one is always aware, then the human mind has no room to arise. This is like quicksilver being stabilized by lead.

If you then go on to work diligently at increasing the positive energy of the mind of Tao while reducing the negative energy of the human mind, increasing and reducing until no more increase or reduction is possible, then the human mind dies and the mind of Tao is stable.

The seed of realization is then in your hands, and with it you can become a sage, an immortal, a buddha. At this point the foundation of essence and life is established. Now if you go on to do advanced work,

you will surely attain profound self-realization.

Planting Wheat and Planting Flax

If you plant wheat, you get wheat; if you plant flax, you get flax. Flax does not produce wheat, wheat does not produce flax—the seeds are different.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of cause and effect in action. If people's thought is good, their actions and deeds are good, so they will surely receive blessings. If people's thought is bad, their actions and deeds are also bad, so they will surely bring on misfortune.

Good and bad thought are the cause of events, receiving blessings and bringing on misfortune are the effect of events. When there is a cause, it will surely have an effect. It cannot be that the fruit of good seed is not good, nor can it be that the fruit of bad seed is not bad. The consequences of good and bad are like shadows following forms, certain and invariable.

It is all a matter of choosing between planting good and planting evil, distinguishing what is good and what is bad. Therefore superior people consider the beginning when they do things; being careful about things in the beginning, they are able to complete them in the end.

Grafting Peaches and Grafting Plums

When a peach tree is old, graft on a young branch and it will again bear peaches. When a plum tree is old, graft on a young branch and it will again bear plums. This is because even when a tree is old it still has energy in its roots.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of grafting when people grow old. People age because they indulge in emotions and passions—a hundred worries affect their minds, myriad affairs weary their bodies. Expend their vitality, exhaust their spirit, they take the false to be real and take misery for happiness.

Their living potential is cut away to the point where it nearly perishes entirely, their nature is disturbed and their life is shaken. Because the root is unstable, they grow old and die. This cannot be attributed to fate, for they bring it on themselves.

If people know enough to regret their errors and change, cut off emotional entanglements, get rid of addictions to intoxicants, sensuality, and possessions, look upon wealth and status as like ephemeral clouds, regard power and profit as like bandits and enemies, then everything will be empty for them, and they will not be attached to anything.

Concentrating the energy like a baby, being abstemious, storing the vitality and nurturing the spirit, getting rid of illusion and returning to reality, fostering the growth of the root at all times, walking every step on the right path, increasing true thought and diminishing false thought, truly sincere within and without, integrated with the design of nature, they can thereby be rejuvenated.

This is like the way of grafting a young branch onto an old tree. An ancient adept said, "Even at the age of seventy or eighty, as long as you still have one breath left in you, restoration is possible." This is true.

A Hair Turning into a Water Snake

If a hair falls into a puddle of water and is exposed to hot sunshine, it takes on the form of a water snake. Why is this? Though a hair is a dead thing, when it is moistened by water and warmed by the sun, the moisture and heat coalesce into an energy with a subtle potential that produces movement. Therefore the hair swims around in the water like a snake.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of stabilizing the root and solidifying life. The yang energy in people is associated with fire, while the yin energy is associated with water. When yin and yang combine, the energies of water and fire balance each other. There is a point of living potential there, which is at first vague but becomes clearly apparent, producing life without cease.

The declining can thereby flourish, the weak can thereby become strong, the lifeless can solidify life, the short-lived can extend their life span. This is the way to deepen the root and make the stem firm, to live on the plane of eternity.

The Crane and the Tortoise

The crane is good at nurturing the spirit, so it lives for a thousand years. The tortoise is good at nurturing energy, so it can survive a century without food.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of prolonging life. If people are able to humbly lower themselves, to be yielding, plain, and sincere, not wasting energy but always nurturing energy, then they will be full of energy. If people can be free from cogitation and rumination, have few desires and little ambition, not belabor their spirit but always maintain their spirit, then their spirit will be complete.

When energy is full and the spirit is complete, the root is stable and the foundation is secure. Thus you can extend your life span, prolonging life without deterioration. The crane and the tortoise can

live long, even though one only keeps its spirit complete and one only keeps its energy complete; how much the more so when both spirit and energy are kept complete—how could you fail to live long?

The Freezing of Water and the Melting of Ice

Water freezes into ice when it is cold, ice melts into water when it is warm. What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of becoming either a sage or an ordinary person.

At first, human nature is basically good. There is originally no distinction between the sage and the ordinary person. It is because of the energy of accumulated habits that there comes to be a difference between sages and ordinary people.

If one practices what is good, one does not lose the divinely bestowed nature, and thus becomes a sage. If one practices what is not good, one loses the divinely bestowed nature, and thus becomes an ordinary person.

If those who are not good know enough to change their ways and turn from error to goodness, get rid of perversity and return to rectitude, and imbue themselves with goodness, then they can restore the divinely bestowed nature, and even though they have been ordinary people they can become sages.

If those who are originally good do not know enough to be careful and prudent, and instead become affected by external influences and become habituated to what is not good, then they lose the divinely bestowed nature, and even though they have been sages they become ordinary people.

Those who are good are like water, those who are not good are like ice. The fact that sages can become ordinary people and ordinary people can become sages is like the fact that water can become ice and ice can become water. Therefore the path of great learning lies in the clarification of the quality of illumination, and in resting in the ultimate good.

The Flourishing of Trees, the Extension of Streams

When roots of a tree are deep, its leaves naturally flourish. When the source of a stream is abundant, its flow naturally extends far. This is the way it is with that which has a basis.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of preserving and maintaining the fundamental. The original vitality, original energy, and original spirit of human beings are the wellspring of essence and life. When the original vitality is undiminished, the body is complete. When the original energy is undamaged, life is secure. When the

original spirit is unobscured, the essence is clear.

When the body is whole, life is secure, and the essence is clear, then myriad things cannot move you, Creation cannot constrain you; your nature and destiny are up to you, not up to Heaven.

This is like leaves flourishing when the roots of the tree are deep, the flow of a stream extending far when its source is abundant. When the basis is established, the Way develops; the living potential is ever present and never ceases.

Most people, however, do not know enough to preserve and maintain the fundamental; instead they act on the outgrowths, imagining falsely that they will thereby attain the Tao. This is like looking for fish in a tree—it will turn out to be in vain after all. Is this not foolish?

The Heart of the Pine, the Joints of Bamboo

The heart of the pine is solid, the joints of bamboo are hard; therefore they do not wither in the cold of winter, but continue to flourish even through snow and frost.

What I realize as I observe this is the Tao of establishing life through cultivation and discipline. If people can avoid what is shameful, be serious, sincere, and impartial, then their hearts will be solid. When the heart is solid, one cannot be corrupted by wealth or status, one cannot be moved by poverty or lowliness, one cannot be suppressed by authority or force.

Dealing with events fearlessly, undisturbed by difficulty, the fortunes or misfortunes one may encounter are up to others, while the creation of life is up to oneself.

If people can cultivate themselves and control their affairs, resting in the proper place, standing firm and unmoving, then they will be regulated and strong. Being regulated and strong, they do not act in any way that is improper, they do not dwell on anything but the Tao, they do not do anything unjust.

Accepting the bitter along with the sweet, able to lead and able to follow, accepting both life and death, always responsive yet always tranquil, not moved by things, firm of heart and strong in discipline, one can thereby handle ease, one can thereby handle danger, one can thereby act, one can thereby rest, one can thereby change adaptively without hindrance, unfixed to any given pattern, uninhibited in any way.

Wood and Charcoal, Clay and Brick

When wood is exposed for a long time it rots, but if it is fired into