

Mysterious Pass or Mysterious Bypass? In Taoism and Spiritual Practice

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Knowing others is intelligence;
knowing yourself is true wisdom.
Mastering others is strength;
mastering yourself is true power.

Tao Te Ching, chapter 33

One of the clearest, most skilled, and learned Taoist teachers I have discovered is Damo Mitchell. Damo often refers to attaining the *Mysterious Pass* as one of the goals of Taoist internal energy practices. (Mitchell, 2018). In simple terms, the *Mysterious Pass* occurs when the *Vitality* of the physical body, the *Qi* of the *Energy* body, and *Consciousness* or what the Buddhists call *Emptiness*, are all open, and flowing simultaneously. When we arrive at the intersection of *Consciousness*, *Energy* and *Vitality* we have attained the *Mysterious Pass*. Stabilizing this state in our body, mind and spirit takes discipline and skillful guidance. Although I have certainly glimpsed this state, I make no claims to have achieved this state with sustained stability!

Because this journey is subtle and complex, practitioners sometimes experience what I call the *Mysterious Bypass*. This can happen to us unwittingly and with the best of intentions. I have noticed four major causes for what I am calling the *Mysterious Bypass*: 1) Doing our practice in an extreme way. 2) Opening up higher levels of subtle capacities before we have established a firm foundation in our belly center (lower Dan Tien) and root in the earth. 3) Using our practice as a way to avoid problems in our lives. And 4), mixing powerful practices from different mystical lineages in a way that creates a confusing input in our development. Although I will be exploring these issues mostly from the perspective of Taoist practice, in my experience as a spiritual seeker for more than 40 years, these errors can occur on any spiritual path. It is important for practitioners to understand them so that their spiritual development can proceed in a safe and organized way.

Every authentic mystical tradition has highly effective alchemical recipes to create the transformation that we seek. Because mystics and spiritual practitioners have been trading secrets for millenia, there are overlaps in their approaches. We might say that every path is a guide to walking a trail up the same mountain but from a different perspective. Sometimes the similarities in the practices offered by different mystical lineages are due to the geographical proximity of the spiritual schools. Sometimes it is because a master studied with several masters from different approaches to a high level, and then created their own integration. Sometimes it is because the different schools are branches of one tree with the same root but

different areas of specialization. Whatever the origin of the lineage, if it is authentic and well developed, the curriculum that is offered usually has an order to it so that the aspirant's progress proceeds in a balanced and organized way, at least in more traditional schools. But in modern times, with so many different teachings and teachers so easily available in the spiritual marketplace, students can easily wander into areas that are problematic. It takes years and much experience to develop our spiritual, psychological and energetic maturity to a place where we can travel any inner landscape that arises with safety, skill and balance.

On the Taoist path, one of the most important understandings is that practitioners must start by creating a solid foundation of health in their physical and energetic bodies. True health from a Taoist point of view is based on the flow of Qi or life force through the meridian system. Physical health and energetic health are always approached together. Deep health is not simply having a 'fit body', which might be very strong but filled with tension and energetic blockages. Deep health is a relaxed body that pulses with an emotional and energetic aliveness that moves from our core out to our skin and then into the field of Qi that surrounds us. It is based in Qi. In deep health, the energy of Qi pulses through every cell and layer of the physical and energetic body in a state of flow. When something goes wrong with our mental or physical health, the Taoists understand that somewhere the pulsation of life force has become disturbed and imbalanced. When these flows are balanced, our nervous systems and minds are relaxed and settled and a deep stillness and sense of ease abides in our being.

Taoist internal energy practices teach us skills to master these energetic flows so we can sustain this sense of stillness and ease in the middle of a busy life. When we rest into the depth of this stillness we have access to the Tao. The Tao is formless, agendaless, nameless and timeless. It is the uncreated center of Being before it comes into the context of Time. It is our "pre-birth" energy and also that which permeates all of creation simultaneously. As such, the Tao is filled with paradoxes. It is simultaneously the Void that sits in the center of the Wheel of Creation and that which holds all Creation together.

We join the spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

Chapter 11, Tao Te Ching

The Tao can't be perceived.
Smaller than an electron,
it contains uncountable galaxies.

Chapter 32, Tao Te Ching

Emptiness, the Tao, or whatever we choose to call this Reality, can only touch Time when it takes form. This is the paradox that Buddhist Heart Sutra speaks of when it states "Emptiness is Form and Form is Emptiness". One of those forms is us. When our physical and

energetic bodies have been worked sufficiently through spiritual practice, timeless, agendaless, *Stillness* naturally makes a home in us. A quality of radical openness soaks into our physical and energetic bodies and we live life from a place of true spontaneity. Our awareness simultaneously holds the depth of emptiness and the unique energetic and physical form of our life with its many conditions and pressures. This is both a return to our natural state and a gateway to our liberation.

Every Being in the universe
is an expression of the Tao.
It springs into existence,
unconscious, perfect, free,
takes on a physical body,
lets' circumstances complete it.
That is why every being
spontaneously honors the Tao.

Tao Te Ching, Chapter 51

Although this is our natural state, because we are born into a fractured world filled with stress and trauma, it takes skill and guidance to attain it. There are many pitfalls and paradoxes along the way.

Thus it is said:
The path into the light seems dark,
the path forward seems to go back,
the direct path seems long,
true power seems weak,
true purity seems tarnished,
true steadfastness seems changeable,
true clarity seems obscure,
the greatest art seems unsophisticated,
the greatest love seems indifferent,
the greatest wisdom seems childish.

Tao Te Ching, Chapter 41

An Example of a Mysterious Bypass

In my twenties, I spent several years studying with a Sufi meditation master. During one of our week-long retreats, he suggested that we eat very lightly or just drink liquids so that we could more easily access the higher, subtle levels of awareness that he was transmitting. During the retreat he taught intensive practices from his tradition using light, magnetism and sound that had a strong effect on our energy bodies. By the end of the retreat, I was in a highly expanded

state of consciousness. My energetic boundaries were so large that I felt as if the whole forest around the retreat center was inside of me. When the wind blew, I felt the wind and my breath as one. My Qi body pulsed with very subtle waves of light and magnetism that extended out in all directions. My mind was so quiet that I could follow my breath as it animated my Qi field with exquisite, ecstatic precision. It was an extraordinary state!

When the retreat was over, I went down to the parking lot to get in my car for the three hour drive back to Boston where I was living. I remember looking at my car, an old beat-up Toyota Tercel, and starting to laugh! How in the world was I supposed to get this huge energy body into that small metal box! It seemed like trying to fit an elephant into a teacup!

Somehow, I got myself into the car and started the drive home. As I was driving, I continued to feel the expanded consciousness that I had gained from the practices that I had been doing. The magnetism around me continued to touch the trees on the sides of the highway and my mind felt as vast as the great blue sky above me. I felt incredibly alive and connected to the energies of nature as it pulsed through me, around me, and as me.

Everything was going great until I started to think about the responsibilities that awaited me at home. I was in graduate school at the time and I had some important deadlines coming up. My wife and I were also under financial stress as we were trying to balance our lives as students and still make enough money to meet our expenses. We were also thinking of starting a family and the immensity of this was both exciting and terrifying.

At first, these worldly concerns seemed like distractions and annoyances. I was focused on maintaining my "high"! It was like looking at the life of someone that lived in a valley from the top of a mountain. What did the life of that person down there have to do with me!?! It was quite a shock when it began to dawn on me that, actually, that was MY LIFE! Suddenly a wave of anxiety hit me as I realized that in my expanded state I had very little interest in that life! The fact was, I was pretty 'popped out' of that life and barely connected to my body! And it takes a body to have a life on planet earth! I was floating, an ocean of energy, connected with the ocean of energy all around me, but without a ship to sail that ocean! I was all energy and very little root. I had opened up the higher levels of my subtle body without a strong foundation. As one of my Taoist teachers later said, this was like going up in a space-ship without any command central on the earth to guide me. Some part of my being started to talk to me urgently. What I heard was "Get back in your body! Now!"

I had barely eaten in almost a week and my first thought was that I needed food. I thought that a hamburger would be just the ticket. Maybe that would ground me. I stopped at a truck stop. It was one of these old truck stops that don't exist anymore, with a bar and lots of overweight truckers sitting in booths smoking cigarettes. As soon as I walked through the door, the density of the vibration in the room hit me like a ton of bricks! It was literally painful to walk into that room with my higher subtle centers wide open! So I walked out. But I still wanted to eat something. So I tried to go in again. Same thing. The room literally pushed me out! So I got back in my car and kept looking. Eventually I found some place that was a little easier on my

expanded subtle senses. But, coming back into my body wasn't so easy. It actually took me several weeks to fully "come down" off of the high of the retreat!

Looking back on that experience with several decades of Taoist practice under my belt, I understand more deeply the dangers of opening the higher frequencies in my energy body without a strong foundation. Even though I had already been practicing Tai Chi for several years, my capacity to keep my attention in my Dan Tien and the energetic strength of my lower Dan Tien was still relatively weak and unstable. I was like a kite flying in the wind without a tether. It didn't help that a part of me really liked being a "high flier". Getting onto these subtle, transcendent currents and riding them was a relief from the stresses of my life and I was using them as an escape. I can see now that my life was not secure enough to hold these energies in a balanced way and that energetically I was undisciplined. I liked the 'high' that spiritual practice gave me too much and was using it as an avoidance of the stresses of my life. I still had tons of work to do to get my career off the ground and my life as a "householder" had barely begun.

When I don't take this experience just personally, I see many "New Age" spiritual practitioners making this mistake. This is an error that can lead to all sorts of difficulties. When we open the higher frequencies of our field before we have established a very solid foundation in our capacity to root and sink our chi, have not sufficiently developed our capacity to settle our attention in our lower belly (lower Dan Tien), and, do not yet have a stable, grounded life path, we open ourselves to imbalance. In my own case, opening up these higher frequencies prematurely, led to anxiety and a hypersensitivity to the denser emotions of the people around me. I am embarrassed to admit that this can still happen to me in situations of stress when my Qi seems to rise on its own into these subtle, higher realms as an avoidance of some important life issue. It is as if my body/mind has learned a trick that only seems to resolve a difficulty in my life but actually resolves nothing. Rather than true progress in my development, in this context, these states are a form of dissociation. Learning how to engage the challenges of my life responsibly, keep my chi field closer to my body and to only expand it when the environment is conducive to this level of subtle sensitivity, and to keep my attention settled in my Dan Tien, has been an important learning curve!

Focus on the Energy Body

In my experience the most important level to stabilize during practice is the energy body. This is also in line with the Taoist Classic, the Yi Jin Jing, or Muscle and Tendon Changing Qi Gong. I believe that this is true on every mystical path, but Taoism has a particularly well developed, complex and sophisticated set of practices to help us progress in this way. In Taoist Internal Energy arts, the path to liberation always begins with transforming the body by mastering the flows of Qi. Over time, the process of cultivating our Qi can also transform the fascia, the ligaments and tendons, the blood, the muscles and even our internal organs. This then becomes a foundation from which we can begin to explore the higher practices of Taoist Alchemy.

This is how I see it at this point in my development. At one end of the spectrum of our possibilities we have *Emptiness*, or *Consciousness Itself* without content, agenda or conditions. At the other we have the physical body. *Emptiness* simply IS. It exists whether we acknowledge it or not. It emerges when we can allow the distractions and noise in our bodies and minds to fully settle, like the mud settling to the bottom of a jar to reveal the clear water. The physical body however, without the energy that animates it, is just a meat suit. Qi, or the energy body is the bridge between the two. It is by working with our energy body that we can both transform and heal the physical body and create a stable abode for emptiness, the Tao, or whatever words we want to use for that ineffable, agendaless, state that holds our lives without conditions or judgements.

In a way, one could say that all three levels are simply different octaves of energy. The densest level of energy is the physical and the most subtle level is formless emptiness. In my opinion, developing our skill at navigating the different layers from the most dense to the most subtle dimension of our beings and dissolving the emotional, mental, ancestral and karmic fixations that we discover, using whatever practices and disciplines we have learned, is the most important part of the spiritual journey.

In my experience, each time one of these fixations dissolves, I rest a little deeper into emptiness and my sense of internal freedom and capacity to enjoy life increases. Because we are all deeply interdependent, I believe that this is an endless process that will continue until all of humanity is free from suffering. Every level that dissolves, reveals an even deeper and more fundamental layer of fixation. The process of dissolving fixations spans all the way from the microcosm of my personal life to the macrocosm of humanity as a whole. This is like a series of Russian nesting dolls. The personal layers are my biology and the constitution of my unique nervous system and the layers of my psyche which were imprinted by my family of origin. The more collective layers are the impressions and assumptions of the culture and socio-economic class that I was born into, to the karma of the country that I live in, spanning all the way to the karmic load of humanity itself. The more I resolve my energetic fixations at a personal level, the more the transpersonal levels reveal themselves. This is the mystical principle that the microcosm reflects the macrocosm and that the macrocosm is contained inside the microcosm. When our personal work is not front and center, there is always work on the collective karma of humanity to do! Each of us is connected to a vast web that unites all of humanity together. As citizens of humanity we have a responsibility to untie the energetic knots that show up for us from the most personal level all the way to the collective karma of the human race. Thomas Hubl, in his beautiful book *Healing Collective Trauma*, (Hubl, 2020) does a great job exploring the ways that energetically we are all interconnected and as such all bear responsibility for unwinding our collective karma.

Another model that I have found useful in working with the energy body is to explore its various layers like the musical notes of a scale. In order to play the “concert” of my life, I need to create harmonies between the notes, practice my scales like a musician, and be continuously curious about my energetic possibilities. All of the practices that I have learned from my

teachers are musical scores for creating deep and subtle harmonies between the musical frequencies of my energies.

There are many examples of energetic skills in Taoism as well as in Yoga, Buddhism, Shamanism, Mystical Christianity, Kabbalah, Sufism and pretty much every authentic spiritual lineage that I am aware of. Although every authentic lineage has highly effective recipes for effecting the transformation that we seek, at a certain point in our practice I think that we have to be careful about doing too much mixing and matching as this can confuse our energetic bodies. Like on our computers, some programs are very compatible with each other and some are not. Personally, I have found that Buddhist Emptiness practices are quite compatible with Taoist Internal energy work. I would encourage you to use your own intuition here and to beware of doing high level practices from different traditions simultaneously, particularly without the guidance of a skilled master or senior teacher.

It would not be possible to fully explore the many important practices that I have learned over the years in this short article. But I would like to highlight three key ones that I think can be a useful foundation for all spiritual practitioners and particularly for people who are interested in Taoist internal energy practice.. These are developing the lower Dan Tien, using the palms (Lao Gong points) to direct the Qi, and sinking the Qi to root and stabilize the energy body in standing meditation. In my experience, if spiritual practitioners can master these three fundamental skills, it will go a long way towards stabilizing their energy body and create a good foundation for more advanced work.

Develop and Stabilize your Awareness of the Lower Dan Tien

The most direct and simplest way to stabilize the lower Dan Tien that I have found, is to work with the breath, using slow, relaxed diaphragmatic breathing. The important point here is not to use force or effort, but rather to invite the breath to settle and to gradually lengthen. If we use effort when we do this, a certain tension gets built into the body/mind. If we relax and settle, little by little, the mind will quiet and the breath will naturally start to deepen. As it deepens, we allow our attention to rest in the breath and invite the possibility that all of the layers of tension in our bellies can soften and dissolve. Over time, this creates a great deal of harmony and relaxation in the nervous system and stillness in the mind. When we get to the point that we can effortlessly follow our breath all the way down into our lower belly and all the way out our nostrils with unbroken attention for 20 or 30 minutes or more, we have developed a good foundation in our awareness of our lower Dan Tien. Once all of this becomes wired into our practice we can begin to extend this awareness into moving practices such as Tai Chi, Qi Gong or Nei Gong. Later, we can also start to use our breath to move our chi through specific meridians, explore practices like “reverse breathing”, and also to awaken different subtle perceptions of both our own energies and the energies of others and the natural environment around us.

Using Lao Gong to Direct the Chi

In Taoist practice the center of the palms is called Lao Gong. To open these points we want to stretch the tendons and ligaments of our hands and wrists. We can do this by massaging our hands and also by stretching our fingers apart and then relaxing them. Many meridians originate in the fingers and hands and by stimulating our hands in this way we also start to influence the flow of Qi in our whole body. Once we feel the centers of our palms start to open we can gently keep the fingers spread to maintain our sensation of energy moving through the palms. Next we can start to direct the Qi in our energy bodies using the palms like magnets. For example, turning our palms downward will direct our chi in our legs and into our root. Turning our palms in towards our belly will help stabilize and develop our lower Dan Tien. Holding our hands in front of our chests either turned in or in a prayer position will increase our awareness of our middle Dan Tien and is very useful when we are cultivating virtuous energy such as compassion, generosity and gratitude. Bringing our hands to our head is useful in calming a distracted mind and cultivating stillness and feelings of inner spaciousness. As we develop our awareness of the energies in our hands we can also explore different mudras (hand positions) that have been used for centuries to help attune our energy bodies to different qualities. (A good text that has examples of many mudras in it is Qi Gong Empowerment by Liang and Wu.)

Sink your Chi and Develop your connection to the Earth through Standing Meditation

The final skill that I want to highlight is “sinking the chi” during standing meditation practice. This is not the same as simply standing with our knees bent in a low posture. It is very possible to do this and still have lots of tension in our legs and very little felt-sense of settling downwards into our connection with the earth. Bending the knees to some extent can be useful, but the more important direction is to relax and allow everything internally to settle downwards towards the ground without collapsing our skeletal structure. We want to feel our soft tissue hanging down from our skeleton and a sense of buoyant spaciousness in our bones. This dropping down of the soft tissues of the body helps our awareness to settle and quiet. This process can be compared to allowing all the mud in a pond to settle down to the bottom revealing crystal clear water. As we allow our energy body to sink downwards our minds also become clearer, more relaxed and better organized. This basic practice of Taoist standing meditation is sometimes called the secret of Qi Gong because it can correct so many imbalances in our Qi flow and physical alignment with one simple method.. There are many good texts and Taoist teachers that teach the basics of standing meditation through on-line programs or in person. Some teachers that I can recommend that have good, easily accessible programs are Damo Mitchell, Bruce Frantzis and Ken Cohen. Mastering standing meditation is a foundational Taoist practice that helps us feel grounded, emotionally present, and available for our lives. After a good standing practice we will feel present, our Qi will be flowing, and we are available for the challenges of our lives..

Conclusion

Attaining the *Mysterious Pass* is an important goal of Taoist practice and perhaps all spiritual practice. On the path to this goal it is easy to get waylaid and arrive at a *Mysterious Bypass*. Four major causes of the *Mysterious Bypass* are 1) Doing our practice in an extreme way that

unduly stresses our nervous system. 2) Opening up higher levels of subtle capacities before we have established a firm foundation in our Dan Tien and root. 3) Using our practices as a way to avoid problems in our lives. And 4) Mixing powerful practices from different mystical lineages in a way that creates confusing input in our energetic development. It is important for practitioners to distinguish the practices, teachings and teachers that move them closer to the *Mysterious Pass* and the ones that lead them into a *Mysterious Bypass*.

Endnotes

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