



“The Elixir of Life” Across History and World Cultures

Exploring Philosophy and Alchemy,
Mythology, Theology and Spirituality,
Mysticism and Esoteric Sciences,
Ancient Medicine, Nutrition and Herbology

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*“If you want to know your true nature,
follow the manifestation back to the source,
the mother,
and when you find the mother,
you will be free from suffering and sorrow.”*

Lao Tze

Contents

I. Introduction

- I.1. Concept and Evolution
- I.2. Names and Forms of the Term

II. Philosophers' Stone

- II.1. Concept and Interpretation
- II.2. Theories of Creation and Cosmogony
- II.3. Cintamani in Buddhism and Hinduism
- II.4. Practical Claims

III. Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus, in Egyptian and Greek Mythology

IV. Ambrosia, Nectar, and Ichor, in Greek Mythology

- IV.1. Ambrosia
- IV.2. Nectar
- IV.3. Ichor

V.1. Amrit, Soma, and Haoma

- V.1. Amrit (or Amrita)
 - V.1.1. The Legend of Amrit
 - V.1.2. Amrita in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism, Sikhism, and Yogic Philosophy
- V.2. Soma
 - V.2.1. The Plant and the Holy Drink
 - V.2.2. The Legend of the Warrior-God Indra
 - V.2.3. Soma in Yogic Philosophy
- V.3. Haoma in Zoroastrianism

VI. Ancient and Traditional Medicine

- VI.1. Ayurvedic Medicine
- VI.2. Siddha Medicine
- VI.3. Traditional Chinese Medicine

VII. Agni, Ojas, and Tejas

- VII.1. Agni – Inner Fire
- VII.2. Ojas – the Vital Nectar of Life
- VII.3. Tejas – the Elixir of Transmutation

VIII. The Absolute Darkness and the Return to Oneness

- VIII.1. Darkness Retreat Traditions – a Path to Enlightenment and Immortality
- VIII.2. “Darkness” and “Blackness” – Alchemic Symbols

IX. Golden Elixir in Daoism

- IX.1. Daoist Alchemy – Phases and Evolution
- IX.2. Neidan and the Golden Elixir

ANNEX: The Golden Elixir Legend through the “7 Precious Gestures” Qigong Form

I. Introduction

I.1. Concept and Evolution

Generically, the **Elixir of (Eternal) Life**, or the **Elixir of Immortality**, was a term used to represent a mythical alchemic potion which would presumably confer immortality, rejuvenation and ageless life to the person consuming it – possibly if ingesting it at a certain time or from a certain cup. The promise of the elixir was “*eternal life*” and/or “*eternal youth*”. In some traditions, the elixir was also believed to have the power to create life. The purpose of the Alchemists over the centuries and across cultures was to seek for the ways and methods of formulating the elixir. Sometimes, in alchemic traditions and literature, the elixir was equated with the “*philosopher's stone*”. In other cultures, a fruit or other type of food or a drink would have the same purpose and would be granted the same powers.

However, as we seek for the deeper meanings and analyze the more profound uses of the concept, we discover different dimensions of the term and different levels of interpretation. This paper will bring a gradual approach to the study, integrating all the dimensions of the concept, and progressing by exploring and understanding all the sides and angles of the elixir “story”.

As an ***ingestible drink or food***, we find variations of the concept of the elixir of eternal life – ranging from the mythical alchemic potion to a large variety of herbs, natural medicines and remedies, fruits, hallucinogenic mushrooms, and other foods and drinks that were generically called “*the food and the drink of the Gods*”. They were used with the promise of health and longevity, immortality, and creating or recovering life.

Some of them were also used as ***entheogenic agents***. An *entheogen* was a psychoactive chemical substance used in a spiritual context for “*generating the divine within*” (in religious, shamanic, spiritual rituals). Entheogens have been used for thousands of years and there are strongly established evidences (modern and anthropological) of their religious significance in a ritualized context. The entheogen could be synthesized from natural sources and may have induced psychological or physiological altered states of consciousness, transcendence and revelation. Entheogens were used to supplement a wide range of practices, such as meditation, yoga, prayer, psychedelic and visionary art, chanting and music, traditional medicine and psychedelic therapy, witchcraft, magic, and psychonautics.

The elixir of immortality is often seen as a ***metaphor for the spirit of God***. In that sense, it is *the expression of the elevation of the spirit*, a superior state of consciousness, and perfect body-mind-spirit integration. The elixir is thus seen as the finest form of perfection, the culmination of enlightenment, and heavenly bliss. At this stage in the study, we explore the dimension of spiritual knowledge, “religion of knowledge”, mystical enlightenment, or “insight”.

We largely speak about the broader philosophy and archetypal human mythology related to ***the life and the transformation of an ascending person***, centered around the concept of the “*elixir of immortality*”, the “*golden elixir*” that was thought to confer “*immortality*” to the seekers of spiritual realms and self-realisation. The “elixir” is depicted as the goal, the target, and the prize, pursued through persistent practice and cultivation of the right attitudes, the expression of the highest form of “cultivation”. The “*golden elixir of immortality*” is both *the intent and the gift*. But one cannot purchase it, one has to earn it. One has to deserve it, and acquire it, and the process requires undergoing the steps and stages of proving the appropriate qualities, attitudes, persistence, determination, endurance, and the patience of the one who is ready for it; overall, those qualities of the initiate who has attained the level of transformation that grants one the privilege and the grace of receiving the elixir.

The ***Gods*** – often appearing in these legends of the elixir across cultures – are seen, in this view, as *archetypal representations* of exceptional historical figures, “*deified evolved beings*” that have been – upon the success of their quests – ***wed as gods or demi-gods***. “Ambrosia”, for example, was sometimes defined as a reward for the ones that had succeeded to complete the Gods’ quests and were thereby wed as Gods themselves and accepted on Olympus.

Sometimes the Gods are regarded as ***the embodiment of particular qualities and wisdoms*** of ascending beings, or even as ***forces of nature and specific energies*** of the Earth and the Cosmos that could be developed or assimilated by the seekers of spirituality and enlightened beings, through persistent work, mind-body energy cultivation, spiritual practice and commitment to righteous attitudes in life. In Daoist and Buddhist stories we find the ascending beings undergoing the quests in order to be accepted at the Temple, where they would further prove readiness and being worthy to be initiated and to eventually receive the “*elixir of life*”, the “*pill of immortality*”.

I find it interesting and of crucial importance to explore with profound attention the range of mythological and spiritual archetypes and figures of divinity in order to understand their ***similar profiles and the common treats of the “divine” archetypes*** that could be linked to the self-realisation and/or the ingestion of the “Elixir of Life” – throughout world’s historical dramas, cultures, and philosophies.

In most traditions, and typically at later stages in history, we then discover the “*pill of immortality*” as being the symbolic representation of the “***Inner Elixir***” – ***the most highly refined essence of self, our “true nature”***, expressing the profound truth of eternal being. We discover the “*elixir of eternal life*” as being directly related to the ***profound inner transformation of the initiate***, gradually occurring as the ascending person undergoes the process and the quest for finding and acquiring the elixir of immortality. Eventually, one discovers one already has it; *it is inner*, it is subtle, it is the most resilient self, that which is the most real, pure and perfect, *the self infused with the aspects of one’s nature that are indestructible*.

The concept of the "Golden Elixir" and the archetypal human mythology of the ascending person can be found in the Daoist, Buddhist, Vedic, Greek, Latin mythologies – to only mention a few – which all started with the "elixir" being seen as an ingestible potion thought to confer "immortality" and the access to "transcendence" and to the "higher soul", but further it was **"turned inside" toward the inner plane** and linked to the process of inner evolution – e.g., the Waidan (Daoist External Alchemy) transitioned to Neidan (Daoist Internal Alchemy) and the "elixir" became the "inner elixir" sought to be created, or developed, or simply re-discovered (in the version of Liu Yiming, which stated that we already had it in ourselves).

The Elixir now becomes **"the goal" inner essence to be generated through the inner alchemical practice**. That's where practice comes in place – combining the spiritual teachings with physiological practices, nutrition, healthy life-style and righteous life attitudes. It further addresses concepts that can be found with similar connotations across cultures – such as the *Yin and Yang*, the *Elements* (the simplest essential parts and principles of which anything can consist), and the *"World's Soul"* in direct relation to the *individual souls* and the human body.

Last but not the least, we find pointers toward the alchemic tantric practices of **sexual energy transmutation** (e.g. in Vedic and Daoist traditions), put in the frame of *"Reversing the Sense of Cosmogony"*. Transmutation (and sublimation) are presented as a way of refining the raw vital life force (or essence) and transforming it into superior forms of spiritual energy – that would further develop the spirit and lead it into the Emptiness. The concept of the elixir of eternal life comes closely related with these practices of alchemic transmutation, revealing the ultimate essence of our being, the *"true nature"* and *"eternal self"*.

I.2. Names and Forms of the Term

The word "elixir" was not used until the 7th century A.D. and derives from the Arabic name for miracle substances, "al iksir". There are hundreds of known names for the "elixir", found in various cultures and at various times in history, in the extensive sense comprising: the *Philosopher's Stone* (legendary alchemical symbol), *Cintamani* (the equivalent of the Philosopher's Stone in Buddhism and Hinduism), *Amrit Ras* (or Amrita, the Indian name for "immortality juice"), *Maha Ras* ("the great juice"), *Soma Ras* ("juice of Soma"), *Haoma* (the version of Soma in Zoroastrianism), *Hum* (the Middle Persian form of Soma and Haoma), *Aab-i-Hayat* (Persian name for "water of life"), *Aab-Haiwan*, *Dancing Water*, *Chasma-i-Kausar* ("Fountain of Bounty," which Muslims believe to be located in Paradise), *Mansarover* (Pool of Nectar, or "mind lake" - the holy lake at the foot of Mt. Kailash in Tibet, close to the source of the Ganges), *Ambrosia* (the "favourite food or drink" of the gods or demigods in ancient Greek mythology, *Nectar* (similar to Ambrosia, the Latinized version of néktar, and

etymologically meaning “overcoming death”), the *Wine of Dionysus*, etc. Other legends refer to the myths of Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus, both of whom in various tales are said to have drunk “*the white drops*” (liquid gold) and thus achieved immortality, as mentioned in one of the Nag Hammadi texts.

In Christianity, the term “*Water of Life*” is used in the context of living water, specific references appearing in the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John. Jesus's reference to the “*Water of Life*” or the “Fountain of Life”, refers to the Holy Spirit: “*But whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.*” (John 4:14); the term is also used when water is poured during Baptismal prayers, praying for the Holy Spirit (“*Give it the power to become water of life*”).

II. Philosophers' Stone

II.1. Concept and Interpretation

The **Philosophers' Stone** (or stone of the philosophers) is a legendary *alchemical substance* that was thought to have *mystical properties and magical powers*. In literature, it was generally granted the power to heal diseases and to increase longevity for anybody who would ingest a piece of it. It was also conferred the alchemical property of transmuting base metals (e.g., lead) into gold or silver, which was at the core of the alchemy ambitions for centuries and the most pursued goal. The gamut of work and writings that were developed in the effort to discover the philosophers' stone formed the Magnum Opus or the “Great Work”.

The theoretical roots and the first mention of the philosophers' stone in writing comes from early Greek Alchemy and philosophy (Cheirometa by Zosimos of Panopolis, c. 300 AD), in Greek language (translations into Syriac or Arabic are known), but legendary claims that send us back to Adam who is believed to have acquired the knowledge of the stone directly from God. This knowledge was presumably transmitted through biblical patriarchs who, according to the legend, owed their longevity to the stone. There are also comparisons made between the legend of the philosophers' stone and the biblical history of the Temple of Solomon.

There are many speculations regarding the stone's composition and source, especially due to the many names and properties that were attributed to it. Some authors in Alchemy also suggest that the description is metaphorical and that, also it is called a stone, it doesn't necessarily look like a stone. There are a range of possible suggestions for its nature and composition, such as metals, plants, rocks, chemical compounds, and bodily products (e.g., hair, urine, eggs). A mythical key element of which the philosopher's stone was believed to be composed was called “carmot”.

Another view on Alchemy was brought by the esoteric hermetic alchemists who rejected the idea of work on substances. ***They turned their search for the philosophers' stone inward.*** However, *esoteric* and *exoteric* approaches are sometimes mixed. Although material substances are involved in the alchemical practice, some authors are not concerned with this aspect and they make use of the “exoteric alchemy” terminology only for expressing their mystical theories and goals of theological and philosophical nature. There are still new interpretations being developed regarding the chemical theory, the spagyric methods (herbal medicine, alternative medicine, holistic medicine), and the esoteric alchemic schools of thought.

Seen as an “***elixir of life***”, the stone was considered useful for rejuvenation and for overcoming death. As a spiritual alchemy symbol, in mystical terminology, it symbolizes ***the finest perfection, enlightenment, and heavenly bliss.***

There is a metaphoric reference about the ***spiritual accomplishment of Gnosis*** (“knowledge”, in Greek) that was made by a realized Hindu sage using an analogy with the philosophers' stone. In Christian, Islamic and Jewish mysticism, Gnosis represents the “religion of knowledge” (meaning spiritual knowledge), “insight” or mystical enlightenment – the man’s liberation from the limitations of the worldly life that was possible to achieve by developing insight into the spiritual connection of the soul (or spirit) with the heavenly place of freedom.

Another reference was left by Sir Thomas Browne (English physician and philosopher) in his spiritual testament called “Religio Medici” (1643), in which he addressed the religious interpretation of the quest for the Philosopher's Stone: “*The smattering I have of the Philosophers stone, (which is something more then the perfect exaltation of gold) hath taught me a great deal of Divinity.*”

II.2. Theories of Creation and Cosmogony

At a later stage, the alchemists explained their alchemic process by making analogies with the *Creation stories*, *classical elements*, and *anima mundi* (e.g., Plato's Timaeus).

- **Classical Elements** (in various versions) reflect the simplest essential parts (and principles) of which anything can consist, and laid a foundation for the analysis in Hinduism and Buddhism. In this context, we talk about the *Four Elements* (earth, water, air, fire); the alchemists sometimes included also the “quintessence”, which is a *Fifth Element* called *aether* (in ancient Greece) and *akasha* (in India) – “*that which was beyond the material world*”. Plato talked about “prima material” (first matter), which originally was associated with chaos, but the alchemists used the concept to describe the first (starting) ingredient in the process of the philosopher's stone – which brought it to a high level of importance

in alchemy over the centuries. Plato considered the four elements as being derived from this first matter, as a common source. Later, we find references to the first matter in relation to the stone's creation: *"the first matter of the stone is the very same with the first matter of all things"* (Thomas Vaughan, 17th century).

- **Anima Mundi** is a Greek and Latin concept and originated from Plato's work, being a key concept in most Neoplatonic systems. Anima Mundi refers to the *"World Soul"*, defined as the direct connection between all living things on the planet; in relation to the human world, it brings a similarity with the way the soul connects with the human body. In Plato's text *Timaeus*, the world is described as a living being, a single living entity with soul and intelligence, and including all individual living entities – which are all related to each other. In Eastern philosophy systems, this connection is found as Brahman-Atman (in Hinduism), the Buddha-Nature (in Mahayana Buddhism), and similar concepts in the School of Yin-Yang, Taoism, and Neo-Confucianism.

II.3. Cintamani (or Chintamani Stone) in Buddhism and Hinduism

In both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, Chintamani represents a "wish-fulfilling jewel" and it was considered similar to the philosopher's stone concept in the Western Alchemy.

- **In Buddhism**, Chintamani may appear held by the Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteshvara and Ksitigarbha, or carried on the back of the "wind horse" (Lung ta, depicted on the Tibetan prayer flags), or as a luminous pearl in the possession of different forms of the Buddha. Chintamani was granted the power to enable one to see the Holy Retinue of Amitabha upon one's deathbed. It is believed, in the Buddhist tradition, that one attains the Wisdom of Buddhas, becomes able to understand the truth of the Buddhas, and turns afflictions into Bodhi, upon reciting the Dharani of Chintamani.
- **In Hinduism**, Chintamani is introduced in connection with the gods Vishnu and Ganesha. Chintamani appears either as a fabulous jewel carried by Nāga king (a deity or entity present in the Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism traditions that takes the form of a great snake, sometimes known as the king cobra), or on the forehead of the Makara (a sea-creature in Hindu mythology). We also find a story about the philosopher's stone in the Yoga Vasistha spiritual text of the Hindu tradition (10th century AD). Later, Saint Jnaneshwar (1275–1296), made references to the philosophers' stone as having the power to explicitly transmute base metal into gold. On the other hand, the Indian sage Thirumoolar (7th century), when explaining the path to "immortal divinity", he stated that Shiva (the name of God) represented an alchemical vehicle that had the power to turn the human body into "immortal gold".

II.4. Practical Claims

- **Discovering the philosopher's stone:** There is a legend stating that Albertus Magnus (scientist, philosopher, 13th-century) claimed to have discovered the philosopher's stone, but the claim was not confirmed in his writings; he only recorded to have witnessed the creation of gold by "transmutation". The legend also states that Magnus passed the stone before his death to his pupil, Thomas Aquinas (circa 1280). Another practical claim comes from the Swiss alchemist Paracelsus (16th-century) who believed in the existence of an undiscovered element called *alkahest* from which all the other elements were derived (*earth, fire, water, air*) and which was, according to his belief, the true philosopher's stone.
- **Scientific claims:** In modern times, science experiments proved that gold could actually be obtained by living organisms from chemical reactions using compounds with gold atoms. An experiment was designed to verify if the natural process of digestion of certain living organisms could transform compounds with gold atoms into metallic gold, and it was found that the process was possible by feeding the bacterium *Cupriavidus metallidurans* with gold chloride I, which led to defecating nuggets of gold without apparently harming the organisms.

III. Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus, in Egyptian and Greek Mythology

We find legends of the "*Elixir of Life*" in one of the ***Nag Hammadi texts*** – part of the Gnostic texts collection discovered near Nag Hammadi (Upper Egyptian town) in 1945. The text refers to the myths of Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus, who were believed to have achieved immortality by drinking "*the white drops*" (*liquid gold*).

Hermes Trismegistus received his name from the term "*Trismegistus*" which stands for "*thrice great*": he was a *messenger of god (or prophet)*, a *king*, and a *source of wisdom*. As a character of mythology, he was a syncretic combination of two gods: ***Hermes (Greek god)*** and ***Thoth (Egyptian god)***. The two gods had some common characteristics that were cherished as wisdom values in their cultures – they were both gods of writing, and magic. Bringing the qualities together, Hermes Trismegistus embodied the combination of the Greek god of interpretive communication and the Egyptian god of wisdom (patron of astrology and alchemy). They were also said to be psychopomps - deities having the responsibility to guide (escort) newly deceased souls from Earth to the afterlife. In a different interpretation of the myth, Hermes Trismegistus (or Thoth) was presented by some Greek scholars as a ***hypothetical historical figure*** whose wisdom and achievements in science and medicine brought him the deification after his death. Therefore, we again see the profile of a god-like wisdom and enlightenment figure related to the discovery of the "*Elixir of Life*".

Thoth was an important Egyptian god, mainly depicted as a man with an ibis head (or sometimes a baboon), both sacred animals. In the Egyptian pantheon, he was the god of wisdom, of magic, and of time keeping (the measurement and regulation of events and time). Thoth had the role of the sun god Ra's secretary and counselor, and it was considered that the words he spoke always fulfilled the wishes of Ra.

The feminine counterpart of Thoth was Seshat, and his wife was Maat (truth/order) who (together with Thoth) stood next to Ra as he voyaged across the sky at night:

- **Seshat** (*"she who scrivenes"*, *"she who is the scribe"*) was the goddess of wisdom, knowledge, and writing in the ancient Egyptian mythology, being credited with inventing writing. Seshat was depicted as a scribe and record keeper. Another title for Seshat was "Mistress of the House of Books", her priests being in charge with overseeing the library where important wisdom scrolls and spells were kept. She was also identified with a wide range of professional skills, and therefore she was considered the goddess of architecture, astronomy, astrology, building, mathematics, and surveying. In later texts Seshat was linked to Safekh-Aubi.
- **Maat** represented the concept of truth, balance, order, law, morality, and justice in the ancient Egypt. Making proper use of Maat, Thoth was considered the master of both physical and moral (divine) law. As a goddess, Maat was thought to be the deity who set order from chaos in the universe at the time of creation, and who regulated the stars, the seasons, and the actions of both the mortals and the gods.

Thoth was regarded as the One, self-begotten, and self-produced in the ancient Egypt. He played vital and prominent roles as a god in many Egyptian myths. Thoth was in charge with the arbitration of godly disputes and he had overseen the three epic battles between order and chaos, good and evil. He also had the role of maintaining the universe, the development of science, the system of writing, and the judgment of the dead. He was thought to master the arts of magic, having the power to resurrect.

Hermes was the Greek god that Thoth was related to, based on the similarities between their attributes and functions. His name *"Three times great"* was translated to Trismegistos in Greek, which led to the combined name Hermes Trismegistus. Being considered by the Egyptians as the creator of all works of science, religion, philosophy, and magic, he was further declared by the Greeks the inventor of astronomy, astrology, the science of numbers, mathematics, geometry, land surveying, medicine, botany, theology, civilized government, the alphabet, reading, writing, and oratory, and finally granted as the author of every work of every branch of knowledge, human and divine.

IV. Ambrosia, Nectar, and Ichor, in Greek Mythology

IV.1. Ambrosia

Within the Indo-European areas, the “*elixir of immortality*” was a concept with common etymology in both Greek and Sanskrit. There is a link between the Greek (*ambrosia*) and the Sanskrit (*amṛta*), both terms representing a drink or a food that gods consumed to achieve immortality.

Ambrosia was seen as the **food or drink of the gods (or demigods)** in ancient Greek mythology. Sometimes it was mentioned as a ceremonially *anointment* used to confer divine or holy attributes by smearing or rubbing a priest or monarch's body with oil. Ambrosia was attributed the quality of **conferring immortality** to anybody who consumed it. In the Homeric tradition it is also considered some divine exhalation of the Earth. According to the legends, Ambrosia is believed to have been brought by doves and given to the gods in Olympus, and it was sometimes depicted as distributed by a nymph (in ancient art).

In some stories, Ambrosia is also defined as a reward for the ones that have succeeded to complete the quests set by the gods, and are thereby wed as gods themselves and accepted on Olympus.

The term “Ambrosia” is directly related to the term “Nectar” and sometimes the terms are not distinguished. They are both regarded as gods' “forms of sustenance” their immortality depended upon, one of them being usually the drink and the other the food of the gods. In mythology, the consumption of Ambrosia was exclusively destined to divine beings, and those who consumed Ambrosia were believed to have no blood in their veins, but “Ichor”.

Later, Ambrosia appeared in literature as a generic “delightful liquid”, and the term was used in nutrition, medicine, botany, and herbology. Modern ethnomycology linked Ambrosia with a hallucinogenic mushroom (“*it was the food of the gods, their ambrosia, and nectar was the pressed sap of its juices*” - Danny Staples, *The World of Classical Myth*).

There was also a connection made with the healing and cleansing powers of **honey and propolis**, products of honey having been used in various forms of medicine for a long time as anti-septic and remedy, therefore Ambrosia was sometimes believed to be a sort of “Honey” with extended power of *conferring immortality*; goddesses were often represented with bee faces. Interestingly enough, the fermented honey (mead) was the **entheogen agent** that preceded wine in the Aegean world, being used as a psychoactive substance for “*generating the divine within*” in ritualized contexts.

IV.2. Nectar

The term “Nectar” has a similar etymology to “Ambrosia”. Nectar is derived from the Latin *nectar*, the Latinized version of Greek *néktar*, and it represents “*the favored drink of the gods*”. It is believed to be a compound of the Proto-Indo-European language roots **nek-*, “death”, and *-*tar*, “overcoming”, i.e., therefore “*overcoming death*”. Today it is used as a botanical term to describe “sweet liquid in flowers”; this meaning was first recorded in the Medieval 1609.

IV.3. Ichor

Ichor is the “*ethereal golden fluid*” in Greek mythology, representing *the blood of the gods and demi-gods* (or immortal beings) - the liquid (described as golden in color) that was said to flow instead of blood in the veins of the gods, often believed to retain the qualities of Ambrosia and Nectar, the gods’ food and drink of immortality.

However, Ichor was considered lethally toxic to mortals, being an exclusive attribute of the ones who had attained immortality. Ichor was mentioned in many writings of the ancient Greek literature, the term occurring in the Homeric Hymns, in Plato’s literature, and Hippocrates’s texts.

V.1. Amrit, Soma, and Haoma

V.1. Amrit (or Amrita)

Hindu scriptures mention the “*Elixir of Life*”, or “*Nectar of Immortality*”, described by the Sanskrit term *Amrita* (or *Amrit*, in Sikh tradition). It was believed that even a small quantity of Amrit would bring immortality upon the person consuming it. It is first found in Rigveda. *Amrita* is also mentioned as a synonym with *Soma*, described as the “*gods’ drink of immortality*”.

Historically, it is believed that the Alchemy of immortality and medicine were brought to China from India (or possibly the other way). There are strong connections and similarities between the two traditions. The Vedas (Hindu sacred scriptures and the oldest Indian writings) reveal similar concepts and theories related to Alchemy as the ones recorded in ancient China. For example, both traditions talk about **metals** – especially gold and mercury – and the core idea is *the process of transmuting base metals to gold*.

However, **gold-making** was not a goal of the highest importance in any of the two Alchemy traditions. The main purpose of Alchemy was **medicine**. Also, the Hindus

were not so concerned with the “*elixir of immortality*”, considering that India had other sources and paths to immortality. The Hindus used their elixirs as “*mineral remedies*” for curing diseases and longevity.

V.1.1. The Legend of Amrit

Amrit was seen as a holy drink that could confer unusual strength and immortality to the ones consuming it. The Hindu legend says that, at the beginning of time, soon after the world creation, the gods (Indra, the god of sky, Vayu, the god of wind, and Agni, the god of fire) feared the evil demons that had gained strength, and considered them a threat. The gods received advice from the three primary gods (Vishnu, the preserver, Brahma, the creator, and Shiva, the destroyer) to obtain Amrit – but the Amrit could be obtained only by churning the ocean (samudra manthan). This was achieved using a mountain as a churning pole, placed on the shell of the turtle that Vishnu turned himself into to help. A long mighty serpent was also used (Vasuki, king of Nagloka) in the churning process. The gods and the demons combined their efforts for achieving this difficult task by pulling from each side of the serpent coiled around the mountain – the demons agreeing to do such job in return for a portion of Amrit. However, when Amrit was brought up from the depths of the ocean, the gods received the drink but they tricked the demons who did not receive any portion of the elixir.

V.1.2. Amrita in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism, Sikhism, and Yogic Philosophy

In the Chinese Buddhism tradition, Amrita was a form of “*blessed*” water, food, or other consumable objects – which was often produced through the merits of chanting mantras.

Mostly interesting, in the Yogic wisdom and practice, Amrita is considered to be a ***fluid that potentially could drop from the pituitary gland into the throat in deep states of meditation***. The claim of some yogic texts is that immortality could be achieved by producing and swallowing one single drop of this inner fluid.

V.2. Soma

V.2.1. The Plant and the Holy Drink

In the early **Indo-Iranian** cultures, and subsequently among the **Vedic** and greater **Persian** traditions, *Soma* was a *Vedic ritual drink* that was often mentioned in the Rigveda as an “*elixir of life*”. The effects of Soma were believed to be both ***energizing*** and ***enlightening*** – ranging from achieving control over senses, to becoming invulnerable to “internal” or “external” enemies, and developing the physical strength or light of gods. It was sometimes called “***moksha medicine***” and it was considered the key to enlightenment (“*moksha*” is the Sanskrit term that signifies “*freedom from*”).

samsāra” – freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth; the meanings also point to liberation, release, emancipation, self-realization and self-knowledge). “*Soma Ras*” literally means the “*juice of Soma*”. However, the word “*Ras*” received a later meaning related to arts and spirituality: “*sacred mood, which is experienced by listening to good poetry or music*”.

The version of *Soma* in **Zoroastrianism** is called *Haoma* (see Chapter V.4.), and the **middle-Persian** version is called *Hōm*. Both *Soma* and *Haoma* were granted consciousness-awakening qualities and were both believed to help increasing alertness and awareness.

There has been much speculation as to the original Proto-Indo-Iranian ***Sauma plant***. In the **Vedas**, the holy drink and the plant were considered the same entity. Although *Soma* was recorded as a ***psychoactive drug*** often used by the Vedic poets as a mean for receiving their visions, the plant is not known at present. The only indication found was the mention that the plant could be found in the mountains – especially Mount Mūjavant. The plant was described as being of yellow or tawny (*hari*) color and having long stalks. It is believed that the juice was obtained by extracting the juice from the stalks of the plant. The priests would prepare the holy drink by pounding the plants with stones, then the juice was filtered and mixed with other ingredients. The legend says that the juice thus prepared would “bring the gods”, and it was said to “roar”.

In both **Vedic** and **Zoroastrian** cultures, there was a ***religious and mythological unity*** formed by the *plant*, the name of the *drink*, and its personification as a *divinity*. Rigveda stated that ***drinking Soma produced immortality***.

Other sources mention the *ritual of Somayajna* – that has been continually held till the present days in South India, using a plant’s substitute. The *Somalatha* (Sanskrit word meaning “Soma creeper”) is found in the Himalayan region and collected in small quantities. It is the basis for preparing *Soma rasam* or *Soma juice*. Another long-time usage is found in *Ayurveda and Siddha medicine* (see Chapter VI), the herb recorded in this case being *Sarcostemma acidum*.

V.2.2. The Legend of the Warrior-God Indra

Rig Veda makes references to Soma in relation to “*the visionary seeing of Light*”. In mythology, *Soma* is associated with *Light* and the warrior-god ***Indra*** – considered the “***Lord of Light***”. The gods ***Indra*** and ***Agni*** (leading gods of the Rigveda) are described as consuming *Soma*.

In the Vedas, the god Indra also received the name Śakra (meaning “*the mighty-one*”), being the leader of the gods (*Devas*) and demi-gods; he was also considered the *lord of the Heaven* (*Svargaloka*, in Hinduism). Indra symbolizes *courage and strength*, being the god of rain and thunderstorms. In the Vedic myths, Indra heroically defeated Vṛtrá, the snake (or dragon) that had blocked the flow of the rivers, and thus brought

the rivers' water back to Earth. In the confrontation, Intra used a weapon called Vajra, in Sanskrit language meaning both "diamond" (the symbol of indestructibility) and a "thunderbolt" (symbolizing irresistible force). *"Of the Vedas I am the Sama Veda; of the demigods I am Indra, the king of heaven; of the senses I am the mind; and in living beings I am the living force [consciousness]."* (Lord Indra, Bhagavad Gita).

Indra masters the **elements** – Agni (fire), Varuna (water), Surya (sun), he leads the gods of the Heaven (**Deva**), and, as the warrior-god, permanently fighting the war against the demon-like opponents of the gods (*asuras*). Indra is also one of the "Guardians of the directions", representing the East.

Indra is the favourite 'national' god of the Vedic Indians, for his worshipers representing *"the purifier"*. *"In Indra are set fast all forms of golden hue."* (The Hymns of the Atharvaveda).

Indra appears also in **Buddhism, Jainism, and Daoism** – in China, Korea, Japan, Bali, pictured as the *"Lord of the Devas"*, *"Ruler of the Heaven"*, or as a *Bodhisattva* (one who has generated bodhicitta, motivated by great compassion, with the spontaneous wish to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings). The gods Indra and Brahma are venerated as protectors of the historical Buddha.

V.2.3. Soma in Yogic Philosophy

The concept of *Soma* evolved and it was later given the meaning of **"the moon"**. In Hinduism, the god Soma also evolved to become a *"lunar deity"*. The time for collecting and pressing the *"juice of Soma"*, the divine drink, was the time of Full Moon. Also, the moon was symbolically seen as the cup used by the gods to drink Soma. By combining its meanings together, Soma was further identified with the *"moon god" Chandra*. Therefore, the time of "waxing moon" had the symbolic meaning of Soma recreating himself, and becoming ready to be drunk again.

In **Hatha Yoga Pradipika** we find an affirmation about *Soma* as being the *"fluid of eternal life"*. The yogic scriptures state that *death could be conquered in 15 days* by the one who continually drinks the *inner Soma*, by the practice of **khecari-mudra**.

In Yoga tradition, Soma was described as the **regenerative energy of the Darkness**. Soma was associated with the *energy of the Moon*. In that view, it is seen as an essential vital energy that charges the human being during the night, and it is *"burned by the inner sun"* – thus providing the energy necessary to be manifested in the daily activities during wakefulness. The day is the symbol of the personal domain, and of all dualities, discursive knowledge of multiplicity, *dispersant energy*, while the night is the symbol of eternity, regeneration, contemplation, surrender, dissolution and centeredness. (See also Chapter VIII for a discussion on *"Absolute Darkness and the Return to Oneness"*.)

V.3. Haoma, in Zoroastrianism

Avestan Haoma (the version of *Soma* in Zoroastrianism), occurred from the Avesta and it is the name (in Avestan language) of a plant and its divinity, both of which play a role in Zoroastrian doctrine and in later Persian culture and mythology. *Hōm* is the Middle Persian version of the name, and the name in Modern Persian, Pashto and other surviving Iranian languages.

Being related to the Vedic *Soma*, the sacred *Haoma* originated in the Indo-Iranian religion. As etymology, both terms (the Sanskrit *soma* and the Avestan *haoma*) are derived from the proto-Indo-Iranian term “*sauma*”.

There is a connection made with the **plant Haoma** which was believed to be the main ingredient for making a ritual drink – *parahaoma* – which (according to the Greek Sokrates), had some attributes and virtues: namely, “*the Golden-Green One*”, “*righteous*”, “*furthering righteousness*”, and “*of good wisdom*”. Haoma grants “*speed and strength to warriors, excellent and righteous sons to those giving birth, spiritual power and knowledge to those who apply themselves to the study of the nasks*”.

The **rituals of Haoma** were celebrated even in modern times in a conservative village near Yazd, at least until the 1960-1970s. However, there are warnings of misuse in Avesta – a difference being underlined between the real *Divine Haoma* and the modern *drug-like Haoma* (including Opium).

VI. Ancient and Traditional Medicine

Ayurvedic Medicine, **Siddha Medicine**, and **Traditional Chinese Medicine** are forms of alternative medicine, and form the basis for **Systems Medicine**.

Definition, Systems Medicine: “inter-disciplinary field of study that looks at the dynamic systems of the human body as part of an integrated whole, incorporating biochemical, physiological, and environment interactions that sustain life.” (Evolving from Reductionism to Holism: Is There a Future for Systems Medicine?, Journal of the American Medical Association, 2009)

VI.1. Ayurvedic Medicine

Ayurvedic Medicine (or Ayurveda) (in direct translation, “*life-knowledge*”) is a system of **Hindu** traditional medicine that was born from the **Vedic** tradition on the Indian subcontinent, although both **Hinduism** and **Buddhism** have influenced many of the Ayurveda's developing theories. Ayurvedic Medicine takes a *holistic approach* in diagnosis and therapy, regarding the individual patient as an integrated unit – from

physical, mental and personality perspectives – considering that each of these aspects may influence the others. Ayurveda states that one of the causes of diseases is the lack of healthy channels that transport fluids in the body, therefore part of the Ayurvedic treatment is designed to ensure the *proper functions of the channels*. Special importance is also given to the *lethal points* in the body (*marman marma*).

One of the main characteristics of Ayurveda is that bodily substances are associated with the **five classical elements**: *earth, water, fire, air, ether*. Also, another classic theory of Ayurveda is that health is based on the balance of the three **Doshas** (*the elemental substances – Vata, Pitta, Kapha*), and disease is caused by their imbalance. According to Samkhya philosophy and the Bhagavad Gita, **Prakrti** (*or Nature*) is the *original matter/nature of intelligence* at the basis of the existence and functioning of the Universe, and by correspondence the *nature of one's body*, and it is composed of the three modes of operation (or tendencies) called **Gunas**: *sattva (creation), rajas (preservation), tamas (destruction)*.

Relating to the human physiology, according to the ancient Vedic science of Ayurveda, the balance or imbalance of the three Doshas defines the Prakriti (the nature of one's body – *sattvic, rajasic, or tamasic*). **“Balance” is therefore the key concept in Ayurveda Medicine and it involves moderation of food intake, sleep, and sexual intercourse.** There is also a focus on exercise, yoga, and meditation, and Sattvic nutrition is recommended for maintaining health.

VI.2. Siddha Medicine

Siddha Medicine is considered the oldest medical system known to mankind, having originated in Southern India (more than 10,000 years ago). It means *“medicine that is perfect”* and the basic concepts are almost similar to Ayurveda. The purpose of the treatments is to alleviate the disease by revitalizing and rejuvenating dysfunctional organs.

Siddha Medicine uses the concepts of *Varmam* as part of a **holistic therapy** tackling the *body, mind and spirit*, and the underlying links between the body, vital life-force and mind. **Varmam** are *vital points in the body* acting as *“energy transformers or batteries”*. *Varmam* represent centres for boosting the **Uyir Sakthi** (*vital life-force*) to circulate through the **nadi system** (*energy channels*) of the body. The key to health in this system is to **maintain the balance of the three Doshas** (*Vaadham, Pitham, and Kabam*).

People who founded this ancient medical system were called **Siddhars** (*or “Siddhargal”*) and they are considered the leading “scientists” of the beginnings of medicine. Siddhars were also **spiritual initiates** who had received (or developed) the *“eight supernatural powers” – the ashta siddhis*. The Siddha medical practitioners were

trained in traditional ways by gurus (teachers); in case the teacher was also a martial arts teacher, he was called an *ashan*.

The Siddhars were thought to have gained supernatural powers and attained enlightenment (the supreme wisdom), as well as immortality, by persistent dedicated practice of intense yogic methods, years of periodic fasting and deep meditation.

It is historically considered that this spiritually-attained supreme knowledge of the Siddhars gave them the divine inspiration and wisdom to write the scriptures on life, on all its aspects – from arts to medicine and science, from the “truth of life” to miraculous curing of diseases. The Siddha Medicine is the origin of part of the present days Indian medical science.

VI.3. Traditional Chinese Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine is a widely used form of complementary / alternative medicine, and has been developed in China over more than 2,000 years. It includes a large range of practices – such as *herbal medicine, acupuncture, massage (Tui na), exercise (qigong), and dietary therapy.*

Traditional Chinese Medicine is based on the definition of a series of functional entities which regulate digestion, breathing, aging etc. In the view of Chinese medicine, *health* is defined by the ***harmonious interaction*** of these entities with the outside world, while *disease* is seen as a disharmony occurring in this interaction. Diagnosis is usually based on symptoms linked to patterns of an identified disharmony.

Chinese medicine uses energy-related concepts, mainly the ***chi (qi), meridians, acupuncture points***, and the three ***dantians*** (energy centers or locations in the body where an alchemical process can be produced). *“The body's vital energy (chi or qi) circulates through channels, called meridians, that have branches connected to bodily organs and functions.”* (Stephen Barrett, *“Be Wary of Acupuncture, Qigong, and ‘Chinese Medicine’”*)

Many theories of Chinese medicine have the roots in ***cosmological notions*** – such as ***yin-yang*** and the ***five elements***. Historically, there have been seen correspondences between the body and the universe and these notions received significant influence on the Chinese medicine model of the body, being also applied in diagnosis and therapy.

There is also a correspondence with ***Numerology*** (*“There are 365 days in the year, while humans have 365 joints [or acu-points]... There are 12 channel rivers across the land, while humans have 12 channel”, A Study of Daoist Acupuncture & Moxibustion*).

The **Five Elements**, or **Five Phases** theory (*Wu Xing*), is based on the concept of the *five elemental qualities* – represented by *wood, fire, earth, metal, water* – and the theory that they represent the basic constituents of all phenomena of the universe and nature. There are *lines of correspondence* between the Five Elements, and the relationships between them are governed by strict rules – in terms of sequence, acting on each other, counteraction etc.

Yin and Yang are ancient Chinese concepts with cosmological roots, expressing “*two complementary aspects that every phenomenon in the universe can be divided into*”.

By correspondence, the **yin-yang** concept is applied also in relation to the **human body**. It is considered that yang governs the upper body and the back, and yin governs the lower part of the body; the yin and yang character is further linked to the body functions and disease symptoms, being considered the factor determining characteristic symptoms or combinations of symptoms (by its lack or overabundance).

In Traditional Chinese Medicine, **health is characterized by the balance between yin and yang**.

VII. Agni, Ojas, and Tejas

VII.1. Agni – Inner Fire

Agni is one of the most important principles in Ayurvedic Medicine and it represents the “**digestive fire**”. Etymologically, “*agni*” is the root of the English word “*ignite*”. Agni regulates the absorption of the nutrients in the body and the burning off the waste products. According to the ancient science of Ayurveda, a strong Agni can ensure good health, while a weak Agni and the accumulation of *ama* can gradually lead to the deterioration of the body and disease.

In a larger sense, Agni defines the capacity to process all life aspects – from food to sensory impressions, memories, etc. Therefore, just like the inability to digest food, the inability to metabolize emotions (e.g., anger, sadness, guilt) and to manage experiences generates toxic residues, sometimes even more than physical digestion.

VII.2. Ojas – the Vital Nectar of Life

In Ayurveda Medicine, *Ojas* (in Sanskrit, “*vigor*”) represents the “*essential energy of the body*”, the “*fluid of life*”. Ojas is the finest result of digestion, metabolism, absorption and assimilation, the pure and subtle substance extracted from the completely digested food. When sufficient, it ensures immunity to the body and, when deficient, it results in

fatigue, weakness, and disease; it is crucial therefore to eliminate the *ama* stored in the body and produce enough *Ojas*. The creation and circulation of *Ojas* can be ensured by a good diet based on pure foods — “sattvic” nutrition, according to Ayurveda, can easily be digested by the body in order to extract the necessary essential *Ojas*.

Ojas is seen as a complex **biochemical substance**, based on the activity of the enzymes (Agnis), is collected from the body’s seven tissues — *plasma, blood, muscle, adipose tissue (fat), bone, bone marrow, and reproductive tissue (semen and ovum)*.

According to Ayurveda, *Ojas*’ primary location is the heart. From there, it is believed to circulate through the entire body, omnipresent in the human being, sustaining the physical self, nourishing all body tissues, while also connecting the mind to the body and consciousness, thus bringing mind clarity and balancing emotions. Overall, *Ojas* is seen as the “**vital nectar of life**”, that regulates the nature and the quality of the *physical, mental and emotional life*. When enough *Ojas* is produced by the body, it sustains our entire physiology and our life and we feel blissful. *Ojas* is thought to be responsible for longevity, perfect health, immunity, intelligence, creativity, memory, purity of thoughts, positive emotions, love, and joy.

Abundant *Ojas* is also thought to generate “**higher states of consciousness**” and, when the inner consciousness of an individual awakens spontaneously, *Ojas* increases.

VII.3. Tejas – the Elixir of Transmutation

In the Hindu tradition, we basically talk about the attitude or practice of **Brahmacharya**. *Brahmacharya* means “**Path to Brahman**” (seen as Absolute Reality, eternal, supreme God), which means to follow *the path toward Self-realization* – translated as mode of behavior, “virtuous” way of life, the lifestyle adopted to enable one to attain the ultimate reality. It is addressed and defined in various ways, in different contexts, such as: being constantly aware of the universe, immersed in divinity, divine conduct, continence, celibate when single, faithfulness when married.

Translated as “**continence**”, *Brahmacharya* has the initial meaning of “*the avoidance of non-productive expenditures of energy*”, meaning to expend our energy on activities that are conducive to the attainment of Self-realization. That includes avoiding extremes in eating, sleeping, staying awake, working, playing, or anything else you do in life. It also includes vigilance in thinking (every thought is an outflow of energy, some thoughts being beneficial and rewarding, while other thoughts just draining one’s resources). In relation to diet, *Brahmacharya* is defined as the observance of conscious non-excess, self-awareness and vigilance containing one’s sensual desires for food and taste.

When related to sexuality, “continence” means non-waste of essence and sexual energy – either in celibacy, or in conscious relationships allowing spiritual advancement.

In the Vedic Hindu, as well as pre-Vedic traditions, the spiritual aspirant is directed to emulate the transcendent absolute reality and obtain self-mastery of sexual energy in deed, mind, and speech. It means to convert that sexual energy in a positive creative way. According to the Hindu scriptures, the practice of Brahmacharya promotes mental and spiritual purity, and aids tremendously in attaining spiritual realization.

Some traditions associate Brahmacharya with “**celibacy**”. It is the most common usage of the term and it denotes the practice of celibacy (abstinence from sexual intercourse, by eight types of sexual contact) adopted by those following a spiritual path. At more subtle levels, it is greater physical and mental sexual discipline, toward the ultimate experience of complete absence of sexual desire and sexual thoughts despite any surrounding stimuli, keeping the aim for the perfect divine happiness.

Brahmacharya in this sense is adopted by monks and sadhus (renunciates), often taking a lifelong vow of celibacy – *Akhanda Brahmacharya* (unbroken Brahmacharya) – that allows them to become centered on, and surrender to Guru and God in the path of Self-realization. Among the Buddhist, Hindu, Jain and many other **monastic traditions**, Brahmacharya refers to the practice of **self-imposed celibacy**, involving monastic vows of *sexual abstinence* that are generally considered a prerequisite for their spiritual practice. Celibacy may also be adopted outside the monastic communities by the aspiring people who chose to pursue the path of complete abstinence.

Swami Vivekananda attributed his success, magnificent personality and phenomenal mental powers to his perfect lifelong observance of Brahmacharya. According to Vivekananda, complete continence gives great intellectual and spiritual power, tremendous energy and gigantic will power. Transforming sexual energy into spiritual energy: the stronger this force, the more can be done with it. Controlled desire leads to the highest results. *“If one is a slave to his passions and desires, one cannot feel the pure joy of real freedom.”*

Sexual continence may also be practiced by **laymen** – as an aid on the path toward Self-realization – perfectly well achievable in a couple that cultivates conscious loving.

The higher-level meaning of Brahmacharya as Sexual Continence is addressed by the spirituality seekers that adopt the practical and vigilant “non-waste of sexual energy” attitude, including the grounded practice of tantric (alchemic) methods for *sexual energy transmutation and sublimation into superior mind and spiritual energy* – the source for enlightenment and the elevation of the spirit. That attitude can be adopted both with celibacy, or as integrated in one’s active sexual life. Addressing the householders, Brahmacharya refers not only to moderation and faithfulness in sexuality, but also to the quality of the sex act that must not be just for satisfying the flesh (unconscious habit), but an expression of the love within, and therefore the energy is not lost and the spiritual gain is not wasted in such a loving union.

According to ***Patanjali's Yoga Sutras***, the end-result or fruit of Brahmacharya practiced to perfection is “*unbounded energy*” or “*vitality*”. When we work with preserving and transmuting Sexual energy, we are dealing with very powerful and refined energies and their conservation brings tremendous spiritual growth and benefits. Opposite, their wasting can slow down or impede our spiritual growth, and their overuse can even harm us and the others. The yogi (practitioner of yoga) who is firmly grounded in this virtue gains great vitality. The practice of Brahmacharya in this sense can be adopted not only by monks taking celibacy vows, but also by dedicated spirituality seekers who are capable to integrate Sexual Continence in their active sexual life, within conscious relationships and households, and their entire mindful life-style. Many yogic techniques, such as some forms of meditation, advanced pranayama, kriya techniques (Uddiyana Bandha and Nauli Kriya), specific asanas (e.g. Shirsasana, Sarvangasana, Halasana), and alchemic tantric methods such as the Oli Mudras contribute to achieving Brahmacharya – in both meanings of celibacy (overcoming and consciously educating desires), as well as achieving strict control and transmutation of sexual energy within a couple life and conscious loving relationship.

Also, this discipline transcends gender and cultivates the greater power of sexual essence ***channeling it upwards*** to enhance meditative capacity, rather than dispersing it outwards. For men, it refers more specifically to refraining from voluntary loss of semen, to preserving and sublimating male sexual energy rather than losing it through ejaculation. While being more often related to men, it is also an advanced spiritual discipline powerfully practiced by conscious women who wish to follow a strong and grounded spiritual path towards Self-realization. A *Brahmachari* is a male and *Brahmacharini* is a female.

Sexual Continence refers to conserving, not repressing sexual energy. When we intelligently conserve sexual energy, it is naturally transmuted to the more refined form of energy: ***Ojas***, which is a powerful healing energy, as well as strengthening the nervous system. ***Ojas*** increases stamina and the lucidity of the entire thinking process, enhancing concentration and supporting deep long meditation practice. Further, by advancing the practice and refining even ***Ojas***, it becomes ***Tejas***: splendor, brilliance. ***Tejas*** is a subtle form of *prana* that brings that serene radiance and compelling glint in the eyes of the ones that are spiritually realized. And that is valid for both men and women.

According to ***Patanjali's Yoga Sutras***, ***Tejas*** distinguishes the teachings of great spiritual masters from ordinary teachers. “*Spiritual teaching is different from any other form of instruction in that it is not the mere imparting of ideas or even methods of analysis but the transmission of this most subtle and precious vital energy from teacher to student. It is this process that awakens the forgotten truth of the Self in the student.*” (*Inside the Yoga Sutras, translation by Reverend Jaganath Carrera*)

VIII. The Absolute Darkness and the Return to Oneness

VIII.1. Darkness Retreat Traditions - a Path to Enlightenment and Immortality

In the **Dzogchen lineages of Tibetan Buddhism** tradition, the retreat in a room where it is complete darkness is called Dark Retreat. It is done by advanced practitioners, the period varying from a few hours to decades. A 49-day Dark Retreat is typically recommended by some Tibetan monks, but this duration requires stability in the natural state. Generally, beginning Dark Retreats are recommended for no longer than 7 days.

In India, Darkness Retreats are called **Kaya Kalpa** – which literally means “**ageless body**” (*kaya* - in common usage “body”; *kalpa* - “ageless” or “immortal”). It requires complete seclusion in darkness, meditation, and typically the application of various herbs as medicines. As an **Ayurvedic treatment**, it was used for rejuvenating the body, slowing the aging process, maintaining physical health and vitality, and delaying the physical death (until one achieves spiritual liberation from the effects of karma). However, **kaya** literally means “**permanent**”. Referring to Kaya Kalpa in the book “*Guru Vachaka Kovai, The Light of Supreme Truth*”, **Ramana Maharshi** commented that “*Only Self-Consciousness, which is found to be the Ultimate Truth, is permanent. The real, unique Self-Knowledge, which is distilled and obtained when the repeatedly rising ego merges into its Source is the true Kalpa*”.

The Darkness Retreat should be seen as a symbolic descend in the **Absolute Darkness of the Transcendental Spirit**. The concept of “Initiation” itself actually means returning to the essential origins (etymologically, it comes from the Latin word “*initiare*” which means *beginning, origin*).

Rejuvenation of the physical body occurs naturally during a darkness retreat, and there are major effects in the brain chemistry. Referring to the **Taoist approach**, **Mantak Chia** (in the book “*Darkness Technology*”) states that “*darkness actualizes successively higher states of divine consciousness, correlating with the synthesis and accumulation of psychedelic chemicals in the brain*” - e.g., melatonin, pinoline, and the “spirit molecules” (DMT and 5-MeO-DMT) - these chemicals contributing to quieting the body, mind and the sympathetic nervous system in preparation to reaching the subtle realities of higher consciousness, the occurring of visions and dream-states in our conscious awareness, and “*facilitating transcendental experiences of universal love and compassion*”.

Historical sources show that holy men of the **Ancient Egypt** and **Mayan** culture might have practiced Dark Retreats, traditionally spending 10 days in the center of their pyramids, isolated from light and sound. In **Christianity**, the catacombs and the underground network of tunnels of the first Christians in Rome are thought to have been used for Dark Retreats. Same were the caves of the Essenes (near the Dead Sea) in **Israel**. In the **Taoist** tradition, Inner Alchemy Chambers were perfect places for Dark Retreats – e.g., the cave, the Immortal Mountain, the Wu San.

VIII.2. “Darkness” and “Blackness” – Alchemic Symbols

In **Hindu, Chinese, and Japanese traditions**, we find **black** as being the color of “material prima”, primordial formlessness, Chaos at the beginning of time, universal substance (Prakriti), the color of the North and the color of death.

In Hindu, the pair “**black and white**” is a symbol of the *integration of manifestation and non-manifestation*. In India and China, as well as in the Book of Genesis, we find the first work of Creation being described and interpreted as the separation of light and darkness. Therefore, the resolution of this duality could be seen as the “return to the beginning of things” and the *recreation of the primordial unity*. “*Follow me beyond the two principles [of light and darkness] into Oneness*” (Chuang Tzu).

Rene Guenon, in “*Initiation et realisation spirituelle*”, talks about the concept of the “**Midnight Sun**” – “*if the culmination of the visible sun takes place at noon, that of the Spiritual Sun could be considered symbolically as taking place at Midnight. Because of this, the initiates in the ‘great mysteries’ of antiquity contemplated the Sun at Midnight*”. The night therefore represents the fundamental state of non-manifestation; the darkness (or black color) is a symbol of the unmanifest.

Alchemical work begins with **Nigredo** – **blackness**. This is the essence of spiritual alchemy, not just the first stage. Without the journey into Darkness, the individual would remain only at the superficial level of social existence and rational thinking. When descending into its original nature, the individual appears to suffer a great loss – by being forced to abandon the old moral and social values; the darkness is also associated with the disappearance of the rational mind. But at this level, the individual will open toward and reach the Harmony of the Whole. Sometimes, the darkness of desperation, of anguish, of fear of death, can lead to the instantaneous awakening of pure awareness, of the non-conceptual bliss – a quantum leap between the “bottom” and the “top” of existence.

In “*Psychology and Alchemy*”, **Carl Jung** (himself an enthusiastic alchemy student) described **Nigredo** as the moment of maximum despair that is the prerequisite to personal development – the moment when one turns toward the search for self-knowledge. The confrontation with the inner reality can be painful, but once the individual reaches the depth of the darkness, the light is born – **Albedo**, **whiteness**. According to Jung, this is the phase when insight into shadow is realized, inflated ego is removed from the psyche, and unnecessary conceptualizations are discarded – the alchemic phase of washing away the impurities. **Rubedo** – the phase of spiritual freedom – would then represent the “Self” archetype, the final phase when a person discovers his/her true nature – the Self manifested in its “wholeness”.

According to **Vijnana Bhairava Tantra**, by contemplating for long over the darkness, the Yogi will attain the nature of Bhairava. According to **Abhinavagupta**, the Night

means the surrender and the dissolution of all cognizable objects in the Supreme Conscious Subject. When the eyes can't focus on any object of perception, the awareness comes back to itself, to the center – it becomes the awareness of the awareness. The pure awareness can be described as an omnipresent Light or as an Absolute Darkness, and the peace that results is revealed as the ultimate reality. The subject who contemplates the darkness and the object of contemplation (darkness) become one and are absorbed into the Oneness of contemplation.

The *void* is the expression of the *dissolution of the subject-object duality*, and the **Transcendental Self** will be revealed. It is continuum, free of change, free of transformation. The pure existential condition of “I am” can be described as a non-state. The concept of **Absolute Darkness** refers to the same non-state condition. The **inner absolute darkness** is a *void* described as both an abundance of Light and Darkness.

The subconscious is therefore unloaded, in a similar way as the active and passive impressions – the psychological residue (*samskaras*) – are unloaded in the form of dreams during the night. The Pure Darkness has the potential to absorb many of our obscure subconscious tendencies, fears coming from the lack of awareness – just as the black holes in the universe absorb enormous quantities of matter. The “*transcendent darkness*” can absorb our “*psychological darkness*” (our psychological residues) and bring the quietness of the subconscious tendencies.

Osho talks about the **Darkness** and he points out the need to *surrender* to it. He makes a difference between the “*negative darkness*” and “*real darkness*”. In Osho's view, the “*negative darkness*” describes the “dark part of our being” (fears associated with our subconscious world), while the “*real darkness*” is transcendental in nature, and can bring a deep transformation of our subconscious world – *nirodha parinama*.

“And the moment of darkness, the real darkness, which is there, enters in your eyes, it will give you a very deep soothing feeling. When real darkness enters in you, you will be filled by it. And this entering of darkness will empty you of all negative darkness. This is a very deep phenomenon. The darkness that you have within is a negative thing; it is against the light. It is not the absence of light; it is against the light. It is not the darkness that Shiva is speaking of as the form of all forms – the real darkness that's there.”

“If you can love darkness you will become unafraid of death. If you can enter into darkness – and you can enter only when there is no fear – you will achieve total relaxation”.

“If you can become one with darkness, you are dissolved, it is a surrender. [...] You cannot die now. You have become deathless. Darkness is deathless. Light is born and dies; darkness simply is. It is deathless.”

(Osho, The book of Secrets)

IX. Golden Elixir in Daoism

IX.1. Daoist Alchemy – Phases and Evolution

Chinese Alchemy is part of the body-spirit cultivation tradition in Daoism, which, based on the understanding of the body and through cosmological principles and analogies, leads the practitioner into alignment with the cosmos and *the return to the Dao*. Alchemy generally targeted the purification of the spirit and the body for the purpose of obtaining longevity or immortality.

The history of **Daoist Alchemy** goes back more than 2000 years. It has two main branches (or stages) – namely, the **Waidan** (*External Alchemy* - lit., "*external elixir*"), and the **Neidan** (*Internal Alchemy* - lit., "*internal elixir*"). The foundational principles are partially shared, but the practices are greatly different. Neidan is the later stage and the historical sources show that it was probably developed from the 8th century CE.

Waidan, the first stage of the Daoist Alchemy, was focused on the compounding of various concoctions (considered alchemical medicines) by mixing, heating and transforming natural ingredients in a crucible, and the resulted **elixirs** were consumed for different purposes. Waidan also involved the performance of **rituals**, which were linked with every stage of the practice, from the teachings (and texts) transmission to the ingestion of the elixir. *Cosmological associations* were made for the natural substances used in the compound, such as minerals and metals, as well as for the instruments and operations involved in the practice.

During the Waidan (Daoist External Alchemy) stage, the goal of many emperors in ancient China was to find that "**elixir of eternal life**", and the common belief was that the ingestion of certain substances (e.g., jade, cinnabar or hematite) would confer **longevity** and/or **immortality** to the person ingesting it. The role of the Alchemist was, at that level, to obtain the elixir and guarantee the longevity benefits to the emperor. There was also considerable emphasis put on gold (non-tarnishing precious metal) and variations of "drinkable gold" were used in China by the end of 3rd century BC. However, many of the substances used in elixirs were toxic and provoked the death of several emperors, instead of offering longevity and immortality - e.g., Jiajing Emperor (Ming Dynasty) died because of consuming mercury present in a lethal dosage in the "Elixir of Life"; several other Chinese emperors likely died due to elixir poisoning.

Gradually, the interest in the ingestible "Elixir of Life" decreased in China, and the Waidan (External Alchemy) evolved toward and **transitioned to the Neidan** (Internal Alchemy). Another reason for the declined of the Waidan practice and the use of the elixir potions was the rise of Buddhism in China, which brought its own "alternate routes" to "immortality". That transition represented the "**interiorization of alchemy**", the idea of the "Elixir of Life" being turned inward.

The main Daoist text that reflected the shift from Waidan to Neidan is the *Cantong qi* (*The Seal of the Unity the Three*): “Innerly nourish yourself, serene and quiescent in Empty Non-Being. Going back to the fundament conceal your light, and innerly illuminate your body.”

IX.2. Neidan and the Golden Elixir

Neidan (lit., “internal elixir”) is called “**The Way of the Golden Elixir**” (*jindan zhi dao*) and the practice is designed to develop the “elixir” within the human being, the alchemist using *the ingredients of the human body and the cosmos* in the process. Neidan integrates the spiritual teachings on the Dao (the Absolute, and the origin of the manifested world) with descriptions of physiological practices. The correct practice of inner alchemy is meant to lead to the creation of an “immortal body” or “immortal self”, by returning to a self-generated “inner embryo”. Etimologically, the “**Golden Elixir**” term (*Jindan*) is formed of two words: *Jin* (“gold”) - the state of constancy beyond change that characterizes the cosmos; and *Dan* (“elixir” or “essence”) - the true nature of an entity, its most significant essence, reality, quality, or property.

The theory brought up by *Liu Yiming* (1734-1821) was that we already had the elixir in ourselves and we only needed to discover it:

“Human beings receive this Golden Elixir from Heaven... Golden Elixir is another name for one's fundamental nature... There is no other Golden Elixir outside one's fundamental nature. All human beings have this Golden Elixir complete in themselves: it is entirely realized in everybody. It is neither more in a sage, nor less in an ordinary person. It is the seed of the Immortals and the Buddhas, the root of the worthies and the sages.” (*Liu Yiming, Commentary to Wuzhen pian - Awakening to Reality*)

Historically, the transition from Waidan to Neidan included the Daoist tradition of meditation on the “inner gods” – that approached the human being as hosting a *pantheon of “inner gods”* performing various roles – such as, ensuring the communication with the “corresponding gods” in the celestial pantheon, administering the human body, controlling the functions of the body and ensuring their balance. In the later stages, earlier practices and elements of the Daoist meditation traditions, including meditation on the “inner gods”, were adapted and incorporated into new practices designed to serve the new purposes (especially the development of the *internal elixir*), and resulted in the *disappearance of the “inner gods” themselves*.

Neidan methods are based on the principles of **Traditional Chinese Medicine** (See Chapter VI.3). Daoist Alchemy addresses the **Yin and Yang**, the **Five Elements** (*five agents - wu xing*), and the cultivation of the “**Three Treasures**” – precious substances already present in the body: **Jing, Qi, Shen**. *Jing* is the “life essence”, it governs the developmental growth processes in the body and it can be increased through healthy

nutrition and lifestyle. *Qi is the "vital energy"*, it results from the interaction of yin and yang, and a healthy body constantly circulates it. *Shen is the "spirit"*, and it is the energy used in mental, spiritual and creative functions. The "three treasures" are also associated with the **three dantians**. The set of practices used in Neidan include *meditation and visualization*, as well as *breathing exercises* (for preserving the Jing), and *body exercises* (for improving the Qi flow in the body).

The Daoist meditation is used as a tool in the process of reaching the state of *Non-Being (or original state of the Being)*, the **"true nature"**, the **"immortal self"** which is eternal and indestructible. The end-goal of the practice is the **"return to emptiness" (xu)**, that state in which no distinctions exists between the absolute and the relative. This process must be fully understood by the practitioner at the level of the relation between the Dao and the world.

Transitioning to Neidan, the Daoist Alchemy has undergone a **"shift from ritual to cosmology"**. The fundamental areas of interest now are Metaphysics, Cosmogony, and Cosmology:

- **Metaphysics** address the non-duality of the Dao and the Cosmos.
- **Cosmogony** explains the birth of the cosmos from the Dao, on one hand, and the frame of practices that serve reversing the process ("reversing cosmogony").
- **Cosmology** describes the cosmos as the operation of the Absolute in the relative. A major focus is placed on the analogy between the macrocosmos and the microcosmos, the **"Correlative Cosmology"** addressing the correlations between the cosmos and the human being.

"Essence, Breath, and Spirit affect one another. When they follow the course, they form the human being; when they invert the course, they generate the Elixir."
(Chen Zhixu, *Jindan dayao - Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir*)

In the book *"The Way of the Golden Elixir"* of Fabrizio Pregadio, we find a thorough explanation of the process. Once we understand the meaning of "following the course", we can follow the process of "inverting the course" (see diagram):

- **"Following the course" (shun)** is the descend of the dimensions: "One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things." **"Inverting the course" (ni)** is the reproduction of that process in a reverse sequence, the process of gradual reintegration of each of the dimensions into the one that precedes it in the ontological hierarchy, starting with the lowest stage and ending with the highest stage: "The ten thousand things hold the Three, the Three return to the Two, the Two return to the One."
- When we **"Follow the course"**, *"emptiness transmutes itself into Spirit, Spirit transmutes itself into Breath, Breath transmutes itself into Essence, Essence transmutes itself into form, and form becomes the human being."* When we

“Invert the course”, the process follows the stages in reverse order: *“refining Essence to transmute it into Breath”, “refining Breath to transmute it into Spirit”, and “refining Spirit to return to Emptiness”*, the practice ending with the adept returning to Emptiness, to the Dao.



On the left, the “downward” stages of cosmogony. On the right, the corresponding “upward” stages of the Neidan practice.

The ancient book *“The Secret of the Golden Flower”* gives a brief conclusion: *“In the book of the Secret Correspondences, it is said: Release is in the eye. In the Simple Questions of the Yellow Ruler, it is said: The seed-blossom of the human body must be concentrated upward in the empty space. That refers to it. Immortality is contained in this sentence and also the overcoming of the world is contained in it. That is the common goal of all religions.”*

The Daoist Neidan texts set a frame for the practice needed to *reproduce the cosmogonic process in a reverse gradual sequence*, tracing back the stages of the generative process of the cosmos, in order to recover the One Breath. **“Inversion” (*ni* or *diandao*)** is key to Neidan. “Inverting the course” culminates with reversion to the state of *Non-Being* or *Emptiness* and the final stage is the state in which no boundaries or distinctions occur between the absolute and the relative. The Alchemist’s task is therefore to retrace the process backwards, and the final purpose of Neidan is to transcend the cosmic domain and return to Emptiness.

Then the **Golden Elixir** is achieved. In Neidan, the Elixir is equivalent to the **original state of being**, the **“eternal self”**, and the goal is to attain or recover it.

ANNEX

The Golden Elixir Legend Through the 7 Precious Gestures Qigong Form

The Legend of the “Golden Elixir of Eternal Life”

In Daoist terms, or speaking largely from many other spiritual traditions and mythology systems, we look at this legend as being part of the broader philosophy and archetypal human mythology related to the life and the transformation of an ascending person, centered around the concept of the “*elixir of immortality*”, the “*golden elixir*” - the “secret pill” that was thought to confer “immortality” to the seekers of spirituality and self-realisation. In most traditions, we then discover the “*pill of immortality*” as being the symbolic representation of the “*inner elixir*” - the most highly refined essence of self, our “true nature”, expressing the profound truth of eternal being. We discover the “*elixir of eternal life*” as being directly related to the profound inner transformation of the initiate, gradually occurring as the ascending person undergoes the process and the quest for finding and acquiring the elixir of immortality.

We’ll further look at this archetypal story and the old verbally-transmitted teaching and practice coming from the **Daoist** wisdom. In the legend, we find the “*elixir*” depicted as *the goal, the target, and the prize*, manifested through persistent practice and cultivation of the right attitudes, the expression of the highest form of “cultivation”. The “Golden Elixir of Immortality” is both *the intent and the gift*. But one cannot purchase it, one has to earn it. One has to deserve it and acquire it, and the process requires undergoing the steps and stages of proving the appropriate qualities, attitudes, persistence, determination, endurance, and the patience of one who is ready for it; those qualities of the initiate who has attained the level of transformation that grants one the privilege and the grace of receiving the “Elixir of Immortality”. Then, one discovers one already has it; it is inner, it is subtle, it is the most resilient self, that which is the most real, pure and perfect, *the self infused with the aspects of one’s nature that are indestructible*.

The process, in life and in the legend, requires undergoing the **steps of preparation** and the **steps of initiation**. We’ll tell the story and we’ll build up the practice around it, learning the “**7 Precious Gestures**” Qigong form. We’ll explore the “**4 Precious Warm-ups**” as steps of preparation and the “**3 Very Precious Gestures**” as steps of initiation.

We start by following the seeker, the humble hero in the legend, as he reaches the temple. He ***“Rings the Temple gong”***. Ringing the gong of the temple is the symbol of expressing the interest and desire to be received at the temple, to serve and to study, to work and to prove readiness, to be initiated, and to eventually receive the elixir - the “pill of immortality”. The seeker is hopeful, he is full of expectations, full of optimism and impatience. But he has to learn patience. He has to transcend restlessness and learn to shift his relationship with time, to neutralise the influence of time and experience timelessness.

He is asked to wait in front of the temple, while preparing and gradually becoming ready to be received at the temple. The aspirant is committed, determined to wait and to prove his qualities. He undergoes a time of practice, a time of patience and purification, a time of awareness and conscious exploration.

He gathers energy, cultivates vitality, bringing together the Qi from the ***Earth and the Heaven*** and the biosphere in between, merging the Yin and the Yang within the human system. ***He purifies the space in and around him***, circulating the Qi and eliminating stagnation, allowing the fresh life force to revitalise his body. The monks at the temple watch him, observe him, with calm and neutrality. At times, they offer him tea. The wind is cold, the rain falls. But the seeker still has to wait. He has to prove patience and maybe he is not ready to be received. He has to learn to experience timeliness. The aspirant takes the time to think about his life, to meditate and understand the stages and complex life transformations that brought him there. He needs to go beyond the world and leave impermanence behind.

In most of cases, as worldly people, we start the process of transformation by living and undergoing those stages in life that bring us to the point of being ready and wishing to engage on the path toward self-discovery and, ultimately, toward self-realisation and the revelation of our eternal self. The process of simply “living” may be paved with sorrow, it may be paved with joy, it may bring loss and failure, it may bring success and rewards, it may bring hardship, delusion, attachments, frustration, illusory targets to follow, hopes and expectations, obstacles and setbacks that may be real or imaginary. And we get trapped into the endless game of mind distortions and emotional turmoil. That is the life we live and that is all part of the growing pattern we undergo. But we will always have the option of choosing to escape the pattern of accumulation and conditioning, of reaching the stage of mind transformation that allows us to make the shift toward a gateway of timelessness, freedom and liberation.

This is the stage of worldly existence. We live a life and learn. And we mostly learn about letting go. We spend years gathering things, building patterns, accumulating concepts that appear to be of most importance to us. One after the other, we invest our time and energy, and our care and emotions into what we gather and build. We spend years creating, feeding and growing those things of worldly nature - may it be nurturing an idea, working on a project, setting and achieving goals, or gathering and accumulating material things. Or it may be about giving life and bringing up a child, or

carrying for somebody we love. And we put all our love and care into this. But eventually we will have to learn to let go. Eventually we will have to detach and release. It is all about **“living a life”** and learning to **“let go”**.

There are those things in our lives that we take such careful care of, and then we are forced, or we are allowed, to release. It is about gathering something precious, carrying for it, polishing it, growing it, keeping it in good shape, and then be willing to let it go. Mostly, we don't want to let go. People feel like they just can't do it, they have feelings attached and associated with them, they have mind fixations that hold them there. But they are always seeking for something liberating, they need the release-type feeling and they are permanently longing for it.

Then, life brings us to the edge of letting go. We get into an environment where someone recognises and acknowledges the relevance of surrendering, the liberating power of acceptance, release, forgiveness. Or we simply discover it ourselves. And we think: “What was I doing ?” The answer is there - the release, the liberation, the salvation is right in front of us, we only need to look at it and become aware of it. Then, one learns to surrender, and let go. Maybe even for no compensation. That brings release and freedom, peace and acceptance. **And we are finally ready to follow our path to self-realisation.**

This is the stage when we can reach the **“Calm at the Center”**. We discover the attitude and we establish it in ourselves - in our mind, body, and spirit. Stillness, quietness, silence. We watch the world with detachment, with Witness Consciousness. You may watch the world, the **“10 thousand things”**, the 10 thousand considerations and details, spinning by, swirling around, but at the centre, where you are, it is quiet, stillness, silence. You may still reach out and grasp something precious, a “one thing” from the “10 thousand things”, not necessarily an item, but a concept, or maybe an idea, or anything. You may bring it to yourself. And yet, at the centre, it is quiet. Watch the world spinning, then feel that quiet stillness at the centre, where you are. This practice and attitude is a wonderful revelation of the quiet **Stillness at the Centre** in the middle of the mad crazy tumultuous world, beyond that clear space that you created around yourself. You enjoy the peace and serenity while resting in this process.

The aspiring seeker is still waiting: **“Waiting at the Temple Gate”**. But now, one is ready to understand, to feel and experience the transcendence of impermanence. One can experience timelessness through the detached observation of the present, by disassociating from the time-based complexity of life. One can neutralise the influence of time, one is ready to open and access the portal to the eternal, the vibrant present where the most precious aspects of the self can be experienced and manifested. The seeker **offers** all the precious things he has accumulated. He bows deeply in a prayer-like gesture, showing **gratitude and appreciation** to nature, to the Earth and the Heaven, for all the different things he has grasped.

At this point, the ***Temple Gates open and he is allowed in***. He is received, accepted, recognised. The aspiring hero now receives the initiations, he becomes part of the temple community, participates in practices and rituals. But he is still waiting for the Golden Elixir. Another process of growing, learning and understanding follows, and he finally receives the prize, the gift, the reward - “the elixir of eternal life”, the “pill of immortality”. ***Swallowing the Golden Elixir***.

The seeker can now understand ***the nature of immortality***, the *time transcendence* - not as an intent of living forever, but merrily as a way to experiencing peace and eternal *equanimity*, the capacity to **rightly** be immortal, to express the profound truth of *eternal being*. The initiate looks up into the Heaven, penetrating to infinity, and meditates on his conditioned self transformed, on his “Eternal Nature” revealed.

The realized one now contemplates that part of self that doesn’t need to die, that part of self that is pure and perfect, that doesn’t need to return to the Source to find the “higher essence”. One is already there, one is in Emptiness, one is in Dao.

7 Precious Gestures - Qigong Form

Four Precious Warm-ups:

1. Ringing the Temple Gong (*classic Tai Chi type of warm-up*)
2. Dispel and Absorb (*“push and pull”*)
3. Gather and Release (*“living a life”*)
4. Heaven and Earth (*“gather from sky and earth”*)

Three Very Precious Gestures:

5. Calm at the Center
6. Waiting at the Temple Gate
7. Swallowing the Golden Elixir

Qigong Form Description

1. Ringing the Temple Gong (turning at the waist):

- Twist your torso from side to side; rotate your waist all the way, and as you turn look behind you (if that is available to you);
- Torso leads; let the arms and hands follow, relaxed arms, let the head and neck follow, no tension;
- Allow your hands to slap up against your body, against your kidneys at the back, against the liver and the spleen in the front; tapping and massaging the body with your fists, **as you “ring the gong” of the temple**; keep a deep relaxed breath;
- Turning the spine, exercise the connective tissues around the spine;
- Activate the waist / belt meridian, energising the entire abdominal area, bringing the upper body and lower body in balance, maintaining the connection and coordination;
- Feel the vibrations throughout the body, the warming, flowing sensation; feel the “Qi sensation”, the sign of Self-Healing.

2. Dispel and Absorb (“push and pull”, Qi circulation):

- Shift your weight to one side, turn and step out to the other side;
- Raise your hands and inhale;
- Exhale and press forward, pushing the Qi with your hands;
- Come back, inhale and pull the Qi in with your hands;
- Deep, slow, relaxed breath; the movement may be faster or slower;
- Become aware of the Qi circulation: gathering, breathing in; releasing, breathing out;
- We are eliminating blockages and obstacles in the flow of Qi, we are eliminating Qi stagnation;
- We are clearing the space around us, bringing in clean fresh Qi, new vital energy;
- Fresh Qi comes in through the breath, and also comes in through the thousands of acupuncture points, spread all over the body;
- The deep relaxation is enhancing the function of the nervous system, and all of the functions in the body that are related to moving out of the sympathetic level of activity towards a more parasympathetic level of activity; become aware of the relaxation response;
- The deep relaxation expands the blood vessels and helps circulating the oxygen and nutrition;
- The movement demands oxygen from the blood and creates a higher perfusion of oxygen into the tissues;
- The breath is pumping the lymphatic system, boosting up the immunity system, removing toxins and circulating the immune cells.

Several Variations:

- **Making a large circle with the hands** (*both ways, reversing*):

- when your hands come back, let them go down and around towards your knee; as you rock forward, let them go forward, past the knee, and up;
- your hands start making a circle;
- complete the circle and repeat, breathing in as you bring your hands up and around toward you, and breathing out as you let them float down and around past the knee;
- when your hands come back, reverse and go the other way, making the circle in the opposite direction; exhale as you press your hands forward and down, inhale as you come back and bring your hands up by the front of your body.

- **Water wheel:**

- with the hands in front of your chest, make the gesture of picking and holding the water wheel with your hands; imagine lifting the water out of the wheel with your movement;
- make the circle forward and down holding with your hands, as you turn a water wheel; complete the circle breathing in and out and repeat.

- **Rowing the boat:**

- make a circle with your hands as you hold the rows of the boat, and push and pull them through the water; imagine lifting the rows out of the water and putting them back in the water, while rowing the boat;
- repeat, breathing in and out while you complete the circle with your hands.

- **Sharpening the blades of the sword** (*kungfu type of gesture*):

- turn your hands flat, facing down; your hands are like the blades of a sword;
- push forward the outer edges of your palms, like you sharpen the upper side of a sword blade; turn your hands over, facing up, and come back sharpening the lower side of the blade;
- repeat, exhaling as you rock forward and push forward, sharpening one side of the blade, and inhaling as you rock back, pulling the arms back and sharpening the other side of the blade.

- Step back and come back to the centre;
- The hands are at the chest level; press the palms down, pressing on Qi;
- Repeat on the other side;
- Shift your weight and step out, turning your torso to the other side;
- Repeat the “push and pull” sequence, including all the variations practiced;
- Step back to the center to finish;
- Exhale, press your hands down alongside the front of the body, pressing the Qi, and prepare for the next gesture.

3. Gather and Release (“Living a life”):

- Continue from the previous gesture with no break;
- Shift your weight to the other side, turning your torso;
- Rock forward slightly, sink down, bend your knee, bring your palms down to the side and gather;
- Gather with your hands, lift your arms as you turn toward the centre, holding your hands with palms facing up ***like you hold and carry something precious; carry carefully to the centre;***
- Raise up as you are going (hands are raising, torso is raising, you’re coming above your knees, slightly straightening your legs);
- When you get to the centre, you are 50-50% weight on the legs, knees slightly bent, your hands are right in front of the Lower Dantian;
- Keep going toward the other side; carry with your palms to the other side, raising your arms higher;
- When you reach the other side, open your palms wide, release and let go; ***imagine you let go of something precious;***
- Sink onto the knee on that side, bring your hands down and gather; lift your arms, as you turn toward the centre, holding your hands with palms facing up ***like you hold and carry something precious;*** carry to the centre then to the other side, raising your arms higher; ***release and let go;***
- Repeat on both sides several times, breathing in and out mindfully in synchronicity with the movements: sink down, gather, carry carefully to the centre, raise up, then carry to the other side, release and let go;
- Allow your breath to be deep, slow, and relaxed;
- Come back to the centre and close with the hands in front of the Heart.

4. Heaven and Earth (“Gather from sky and earth”):

- Continue from the previous gesture with no break;
- Inhale at the centre, open your arms wide at chest level; exhale, hold from the waist, reach your arms down and around;
- Inhale, gather Qi from Mother Earth, all the richness and the beauty of the earth, minerals and plants, life force, energy and vitality; lift your torso, bring your hands up, exhale and press the Qi into your chest, energizing the body;
- Open your arms wide, at chest level, reach your arms up and around;
- Inhale, gather Qi from Father Heaven, all the richness and the beauty of the sky, stars and galaxies, life force, energy and vitality; exhale, press your hands down, from the top of your head along the front of the body, bringing the Qi in and showering your body; energizing the body, marrow washing;
- Reaching down, we gather from Yin; reaching up, we gather from Yang;
- Yang rises, Yin falls; to bring them together, to merge them, to bring them into balance, we carry Yin up, and we carry Yang down, mixing them together in

- ourselves, in the alchemical vessels for merging Yin and Yang;
- The Yin of the Earth, the Yang of the Heaven, coming together within the human system, and merging to become Life Force, vitality, healing resources;
 - Deep, slow, relaxed breath; allow yourself to listen to the sound of water, allow your thoughts to be simple and free.

5. Calm at the Center:

- Continue from the previous gesture with no break;
- Make fists, turn fists facing up, and pull the arms back by the sides of the body, elbows bent; hold;
- Find the attitude: ***“Calm at the Center”***
- Breath in at the centre;
- Breath out, turn to one side, let the front arm extend, open the palm wide;
- Big long deep long breath in, as you turn back to centre, move your arm along, watching your palm as you turn, continue turning to the other side, watching your palm as you move, ***like you watch the “10 thousand things” go spinning by;***
- Big long deep long breath out, as you come back to the centre, watching your palm as you turn;
- As you keep your eyes on the tips of your fingers, notice that the world is swirling around, beyond your fingers; the world of “10 thousand things”;
- At the centre, inhale, lift your arm, reach out and ***grasp something so precious, a “one thing”***; exhale, make fist holding on the “one thing” you grasped, turn fist facing up, and bring the arm back to the side of the body, elbow bent, ***bringing the “one thing” to the centre***; grasping Qi with your hand and bringing it in towards yourself, pulling the Qi in;
- Repeat on the other side; in consideration of all the “10 thousand things”, grasp “one thing” and bring it to the centre;
- At the centre, where you are, it is quiet inside, there is silence, stillness;
- Deep, slow, relaxed breath;
- Absorbing vital force from water, stone, air, sun; deriving benefit and peace from resting in this process.

6. Waiting at the Temple Gate:

- Continue from the previous gesture with no break;
- Open your hands, breath out, sink down, extend your arms forward ***like you are offering something precious***;
- Bring your arms around, palms turning down, continue moving arms backwards in the same direction, palms reach up at the back, then come back through by the torso and bring the palms to the centre;
- Extend your arms forward, offering something precious again;

- Make prayer hands and bring them to the chest; ***show gratitude and recognition of the different nature things you have grasped***;
- Make a large bow, reaching down toward the Earth, exhale; ***prayer-like motion***;
- Lift up your torso, reaching up with arms extended toward the sky and the Heaven, holding prayer hands, big deep slow breath in;
- Hold your breath, compress the Qi bringing the prayer hands down to the chest; sink slightly, big horse stance, and hold;
- Press the Qi, the vital force and energy into the organs through your torso, healing the organs; lengthen, lift your head, drop your chin;
- Repeat: exhale, bring your arms around, turn palms down; inhale, hands come through; exhale, offer something precious; inhale, prayer hands; exhale, bow with prayer hands, coming all the way down; swing the arms; inhale lifting up (big long breath in), reach up, prayer hands above your head, hold breath; sink down, compress the Qi, press energy and vitality into all the organs; horse stance, hold;
- ***Waiting at the Temple Gate***.

7. Swallowing the Golden Elixir (“the pill of immortality”):

- Continue from the previous gesture with no break;
- Big deep slow relaxed exhalation;
- Open your hands, let them make a circle down and around, exhale;
- Inhale, coming up, lifting the palms along the chest toward your head, gathering Qi;
- As you come up, gather saliva in your mouth, creating the “pill”, the “elixir” - ***“the pill of immortality”***
- Turn your palms to face your face, as they pass your face, then turn them out;
- When you get to the throat level, ***swallow the pill, the Elixir***;
- Continue to raise your hands up above your head, ***make a Mudra with your fingers***;
- Open your chest, open your heart, press up, ***look up into the Heaven, stare at the sky penetrating to infinity***, and hold your breath;
- ***Meditate and consider your “Immortality” or “Eternal Nature”***;
- Exhale, relax and bring your arms down to close;
- Coming to a close: inhale, nice deep slow relaxed breath, shift your weight to one side, step in, raise up, bring your arms up above your head, then guide your hands softly down showering your body;
- Rest standing; place your hands on top of your lower Dantian; absorb resources from nature and dissolve in Qi;
- Close, arms drifting softly by your body.

Illustrated Qigong Form

Four Precious Warm-ups:

1. Ringing the Temple Gong (*classic Tai Chi type of warm-up*)



2. Dispel and Absorb (*"push and pull"*)



3. Gather and Release (*“living a life”*)





4. Heaven and Earth (*"gather from sky and earth"*)





Three Very Precious Gestures:

5. Calm at the Center





6. Waiting at the Temple Gate





7. Swallowing the Golden Elixir



Closing





“Golden Elixir is another name for one's fundamental nature... There is no other Golden Elixir outside one's fundamental nature. All human beings have this Golden Elixir complete in themselves: it is entirely realized in everybody. It is neither more in a sage, nor less in an ordinary person. It is the seed of the Immortals and the Buddhas, the root of the worthies and the sages.”

Liu Yiming (1734-1821)

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