

Taoism, Chinese Medicine and The New Alchemy. A conversation with Daniel Reid

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Daniel Reid, author of [The Complete Book of Chinese Health and Healing](#) and [A Handbook of Chinese Healing Herbs](#), among others, lives in Thailand with his wife Snow, with very occasional forays to the US. We've caught him recently on a trip to San Francisco where he was catching up with American culture. A very erudite and off-the-cuff Taoist, Daniel is the product of years of personal study in Taiwan as well as Thailand. His close personal relationship with his teachers has enabled him to glean much knowledge in Chinese medicine, chi gung, and Taoist philosophy in general. His writing skills have enabled him to live the life of a cloud dwelling Taoist, while his down to earth sense of humor enables him to keep at least one foot on the ground at all times.



Daniel and Snow at home in Thailand

Daniel appears in darker text below, the interview questions are in a lighter shade of grey, labelled "TEV" (The Empty Vessel)

TEV: Is your background primarily in Chinese medicine?

Daniel Reid: Not really. I went to Taiwan in 1973, after getting a Master's degree in Chinese language. I was originally in the restaurant business. I got into Chinese medicine because of a sports injury. Somebody introduced me to a doctor, Huang Po-wen, and I was so impressed by what he did! I had a really serious racquetball injury that would usually kept me out for a couple of weeks. He fixed me up in one day. So I kind of apprenticed myself to Dr. Huang and he taught me a lot of his family secrets and things like that. I did that for about a year and wrote some things about it, which is how I got my first book going, *Chinese Herbal Medicine*. A few years later I met a guy called Han who got me into Taoist meditation.

TEV: So you got your knowledge directly from a practitioner rather than by going to school.

Daniel Reid: Right. I never went to medical school. I was really just interested in learning for myself and for fodder for my writing. I practiced on friends and had a lot of hands on experience.

TEV: It's nice that you were able to apprentice yourself like that, rather than get it all through book learning.

Daniel Reid: All the reading I did was research for my books. I don't really like to learn from books, I like to learn from teachers. I had teachers who had taught me the basics and the theory and the standard terminology, which I think is one of the big obstacles for Westerners.

In the Chinese system, especially in a place like Taiwan, which is very traditional, it can take years to learn anything. The kind of test your mettle. You have to hang around there. I stayed for sixteen years and some of the things I didn't get until I had been with these people for ten years. Then they started to hand me things. You had to really pay attention. It might come after a cup of tea in the evening, during a meal, you never know when they're going to drop it. You have to be really awake. Because if you ask them to repeat something, they'll say "What, did I say something?"

My teachers were all very good and were direct lineage people. I was really lucky to meet those people. I was able to get the spirit of Tao from them.

TEV: We get a lot of calls from people who want to know if there's a Taoist community they can join, or some kind of group or something. I have to tell them that there really isn't a whole lot out there. Traditionally Taoists are non-joiners, people who may have a great mystic, poetic, spiritual feeling, but they aren't interested in joining some group and following a bunch of rules and regulations and all that.

Daniel Reid: I get a lot of that too. What I tell people is to find a teacher, an individual. If there's no one in your area, go somewhere where there's a Chinese community, like LA or New York or San Francisco. Go to Chinatown, hang around the restaurants, talk to the waiters. They could be a master. Quite often you find these guys in laundries, and actually they're high level *tai ji* masters. Or hang around in the early mornings in the parks. Look around, see the old guy out there doing something, ask him what he's doing. Or ask him if he knows anybody. Eventually you will find a teacher.

TEV: Though you may get rebuffed a few times first.

Daniel Reid: You will be rebuffed. But eventually, if you seek, you will find. That vibration, that energy, that intent - it will hook up, like the internet. You put in the right code, and of all the millions of signals you will get the one you want.

It's like me meeting my first teacher. I had no intentions. I mean, I thought I would like to meet some interesting Taoists but I never thought I would. Then I got hurt in a racketball game and by default I met my first teacher.

TEV: Is most of the Taoism in Taiwan of a religious sort?

Daniel Reid: Yes. There's a revival of that. The big temples are going up, with trance work and channeling. That's become very popular, or people going in to get lottery numbers.

TEV: At the temple?

Daniel Reid: Oh yes. My meditation teacher, Master Han, has a favorite way to open up the psychic channels in some of his students. He had this one girl who was about seventeen who was really quick, she could see all kinds of things and commune with deities and all that. She stopped coming to class and no one could find her. After about a year one of the students bumped into her and it turned out

that her parents, once they realized what Han had done to her (opening her channels), took her to a temple and set her up there giving numbers and things. When Master Han found out about it he became very furious and told her she had to come back to him and she did. Then he closed it back up again and she lost her power. He said, "That's it, I'm not going to teach you again until you purify your heart and not use it for that kind of thing."

There are individual Taoist masters practising there (Taiwan) in the hills and the mountains, but they don't teach. There are these Taoist organizations there that are kind of semi-religious Taoists, though they don't have a temple. They go through a certain lineage. It's all very up and straight. Most of the people who participate in it are business men and women who have a tendency towards Taoism and are trying to get on the right side of the track, but they're not really into high level practice.

TEV: It seems that there's not many people practicing with the old Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu style in the East.

Daniel Reid: I don't think there are any more Chinese who understand the *Tao Te Ching* than Westerners. We read it in translation and if you have a little idea about Taoist philosophy and practice, then you can get something from that. But to most people, it's a mystery. It's true of the Chinese people also. Just because you're Oriental doesn't mean you're any more enlightened. Today it's even worse, they're so into the modern high tech world and fast foods. They have even less inclination than Westerners to study such things.

TEV: Have you been over to the mainland much?

Daniel Reid: I've been there about six times.

TEV: Is there whole lot of difference from Taiwan?

Daniel Reid: Yes, there's a tremendous difference on the level of development, economic and all that. There's a whole lot of difference in spirit. On the mainland, they've really been ground down. Now all they want is money, as far as I can see. Even the Chi Gung masters, they go to Thailand by the droves. These guys go to Thailand and charge a fortune. Some of them are total charlatans. There was one guy who was wired up with batteries and he would have people extend their palms and he would put his index finger near them and there would be a jump of electricity. Then he would say, "There, did you feel my *chi*?"

So even on the mainland it's gotten to some of them. On the other hand, like in Bill Porter's book, "Road to Heaven", he talks about these guys up in the mountains who didn't even know there was a communist revolution! But they're not really accessible to people.

I would say that you would have a better chance of meeting a good teacher in Taiwan than on the mainland. They're not worried about getting involved with foreigners so much.

TEV: One thing that was nice when I was in China a few years ago was that people were talking about the spiritual aspects of chi gung. In the not too distant past, it was only thought of as a health practice.

Daniel Reid: That's true. It works on all three levels: body, energy and spirit. You have the better vitality and energy parts and eventually you have the spiritual insights that come up if you do your practice.

Some people get really scared. In Taiwan, there's this thing called "playing with fire and encountering demons." I know Chinese people in Taiwan who would not even consider sitting down to meditate even once. They've been told that if you do these Taoist practices, something will happen to you, you will open yourself up and demons will come and get you. In fact, sometimes things like that do happen. Perhaps they already were possessed in their karmic destiny and the practice has brought it out. When you start meditating and doing the Taoist practices after a while you start opening your channels. You do get effects sometimes, like a shaking of the body, or you might fall down on the ground. Then, if your channels are open, on the perception level you become more bright and all that, you begin seeing things or you get a quick flashback of something. The whole teaching is that you just don't pay attention to that. They don't encourage it, you just go through it, and it passes. But that first stage, when you start encountering these things, it's a big bugaboo for most Chinese. They're afraid they will be lost. They won't go to work the next day, maybe they'll drop out and go to the mountains and not be part of the society anymore.

But if a Chinese person breaks away from the whole Confucian, society bond and dives into it, they become the best practitioners. Why? because they are going way beyond anything we would ever consider doing. For instance, when I decided to become a Taoist, I didn't have to break with my family or society. I didn't have to worry about fifteen generations of ancestors frowning on me because I don't have children. It's easy for us to take that step, which in Chinese is called *chu jia*, which really means "to leave home" or "leaving the family." Once a Chinese can do that, then they're free and they go fast and become these really incredible guys who have broken the tradition of social obligations.

TEV: In your books you mix in what I would consider Western things like fasting and colon cleansing, things that I've never seen in Chinese medicine.

Daniel Reid: You have to really dig to find it, but it *is* there. I wouldn't write those sorts of things otherwise. It's been lost. For instance, in the old books they say things like "to cure the body one must first clean the bowels." Of course, they didn't have colonic irrigation then, but they did have a particular kind of herb which went in and dissolved the lining of the colon and they would then use a lot of water and clean it out. Even in Western medicine, that sort of thing has been lost. It's not popular anymore, people don't want to go through all of that. Those things are there but I find that's it easier to use things that people are familiar with here. I think those herbs they used could be dangerous.

TEV: In your book "The Complete Book of Chinese Health & Healing" you have a section called The New Alchemy, where you talk about amino acids and things like that.

Daniel Reid: Yes, that's a pet subject of mine. The Chinese were always great alchemists and, of course, the herbal tradition has a whole class of drugs which are no longer talked about, having to do with some pretty serious stuff, people trying to get esoteric powers. But really, in the new alchemy, we use certain amino acids, in combination with certain vitamins and minerals, which then convert to another neurochemical in order to make your memory better or to make you more stable in meditation and all that. It's a similar tradition and I'm just trying to draw a comparison with the idea

that in traditional China, you used food and herbs in order to create certain effects in your body to get certain abilities. We have that now in a modern and much safer way. We're not using cinnabar and all that. The things we can use are perfectly safe. If you use them and use the right combination of cofactors, you can get remarkable results. It's still unknown in America, but in Europe they're miles ahead of us on all this. They're called nootropic, which means to affect the mind. They're not herbs, they're chemicals, but they're perfectly safe.

TEV: In this country, more and more people are turning to alternative methods of healing. How is it where you live in Thailand?

Daniel Reid: The Western doctors in places like Taiwan and Thailand and Japan are even more rabid against alternative methods than the doctors in the US because they're converts. They're new to this high-tech medicine, they've spent all this money and time on getting educated so they don't want to hear anything about herbs! However, the tradition is pre-existent there. There has always been the local herbalist, there has always been the local acupuncturist, there has always been the so-called Chinese doctor. Even if you're in Japan or Korea. They have been allowed to practice, they're licensed. They can open a clinic, they can tell their patients "Yes, I can cure your cancer with herbs" and it's not illegal to do that. The overwhelming shift however is towards the Western medicine because that is what the society wants.

TEV: Because it's new and modern and the wealthy people like that.

Daniel Reid: Yes, and it's so quick. The herbal guy says, "You will be alright in six months. Take this three times a day and that four times a day and eat this and do that." Then the Western doctor says "Here, I'll give you a shot, if it hurts again come back and I'll give you another shot." They keep putting off the real problem by treating the symptoms and eventually the patient has got cancer.

TEV: We just got a book about a hospital in China where they don't even use herbs or acupuncture, only chi gung.

Daniel Reid: Well that's great because chi gung supersedes the physical level. That's the way it works in Taoist alchemy. You can cure totally with chi gung if you have the right therapist and the patient cooperates.