

Feng Xingzhao

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Feng Xingzhao

An Interview by Shi Zhi

The Dragon's Mouth is very happy to be able to introduce it's readers to Feng Xingzhao, a Daoist master of the Dragon Gate tradition. To write something about ones master is not as easy as it seems, because it is the presence of his being that affects you and it is not easy to put that into words so I will tell you some things about him that might help.

He is a quiet unobtrusive man who smiles and laughs easily and I detect a slight sense of embarrassment when people address him as master, to the extent that when a Westerner asked him 'How do you become a Daoist master?' he just shrugged his shoulders and said 'I don't know, that's just what people call me.'

His decision to accept us as priests has broken new ground in China and is a large responsibility for him and yet he carries it lightly. He even left his home to visit us in England which was amazing considering that he hardly leaves the mountains at all now. He prefers to spend most of his time at small temples and with village folk rather than at grand ceremonies, although I did once attend a conference on Daoism with him at Louguantai Temple. There were many Daoist masters and priests gathered there and when it was time at the end to take the traditional formal group photograph, true to form he stood right at the back.

He also has a charming sense of humour – he was once asked what the main difference between Buddhism and Daoism was and he thought for a moment, then, as though struck by some profound realisation he said 'The clothes!' He also has a wonderful chanting voice and quite often can be seen playing with children.

One of the things I remember about Leigutai, the temple where I was ordained is at the end of the day how everyone would gravitate to outside the temple gate and find a spot and watch the sun go down behind the mountains and that sense of quiet stillness that enveloped everyone in a natural meditation, master Feng carries with him all the time.

Shi Jing



DRAGON'S MOUTH: How did you become a Daoist priest?

FENG XINGZHAO: I grew up on a farm where I lived with my parents and an older brother and sister. When I was in the fifth year of junior school, I fell ill and it became difficult for me to attend lessons. I was about 14 or 15 years old then and my health continued to get worse but I was still determined to stay on until the sixth year and take my final exam. This would make me eligible for senior school so I was very glad when I passed the exam. Unfortunately my health was deteriorating and I had to stay at home, though I was unable to help my parents with the house chores or the farming. At the time my parents went to a local temple at least four times a year to pay their respects. The temple was called Leigutai and it had been built in the seventeenth century. Since my health had not improved under their care they decided to take me to see a Daoist priest in that temple called Yang Faxiang. At the time he was nearly sixty years old and he had been living

at Leigutai for many years. He asked the immortal Zhenwu Zhuzi about my health problem on behalf of my parents. They wanted to know whether it was better for them to leave me in the temple and under the care of the immortal since I had become a burden to the family. The immortal answered that it was my destiny to stay and work in the temple and that if I continued to live at home then my health would not get any better. So I went to live there and without a doubt, after a short period of time my health had improved and my family's life had also got better.

DM: What was your life like living at the temple?

My master had a principle that during the first three years of his student's training they had to sweep the floor, open the doors and gates, change the water on the altar on a daily basis and collect firewood from the woods nearby. This was done in order to find out their loyalty and at the end of the three year period he would test you and if he reckoned that you had qualified then he would accept you as his disciple. On the other hand, if you couldn't go along with the hardship during that time then you would be asked to leave the temple.

DM: So after the three year period, once you had been accepted as his disciple, what practices did he give you?

When I became his disciple he gave me the priest's robe and taught me how to chant and pray. He also told me the rules, regulations and procedures that I needed to know to live in a temple. Once I had this basic knowledge he started to teach me the knowledge of Daoism. He told me the first thing to do was not to smoke, drink alcohol, eat stimulating foods or to have red meat because red meat is too strong, and once I did that I actually got a bit better and my master taught me how to sit.

Sitting meditation should not be forced, you just sit there naturally and relax the whole body and try not to think about anything. If you are thinking about something that is not called meditation. To develop a natural and easy attitude is the essential ingredient of meditation. The techniques and methods that you use are not so important, and eventually methods

drop away. When I learned sitting meditation I learned to do the Eight Brocades first and then do the meditation afterwards. The seated version of the eight strands stimulates the flow of qi in the meridians. It also develops awareness of the senses like the eyes, ears, nose, mouth and breath, and turns them inwards so that nothing can disturb you, or distract you from the inner process.

Yang Faxiang



DM: When is the best time to meditate?

When you do meditation you've got to do it every day. If you do it for one week and then you don't do it for three days, then you won't develop the foundation that you need. Meditation is something that you cannot force, it has to come naturally in your own time. The lifestyle of a person has got a very close relationship with meditation, so you have to adjust your practice accordingly. It is best to meditate at night between 11pm and 1am but if you can't do this then you have to choose another time that is suitable for you. One time you shouldn't do it is if there is heavy rain, or thunder and lightning. You can do it when you've finished all your work and when everybody is asleep, in a quiet room, so that there is nobody to disturb you. You can also do it in the morning just so long as you are not thinking about getting to work. If you get up quickly after you've finished your practice and go out in the town straight away then that's no good. When you have finished you should just wander around and not worry about things for a while. You've got to adjust your lifestyle to suit your personal needs. You can take a very simple example, looking at the grass growing in the ground. In winter the grass dies but the root is still there and in spring it starts to sprout again. So when you cultivate you have to look at you yourself and, like the grass, adjust according to the atmosphere and situation. Keep your life simple then worries won't be such a big problem.

Meditation also has a very close relationship with praying, chanting, and bowing, so when you cultivate you have to cultivate these as well. Human beings involved in this world are carrying a lot of bad things with them so when you pray you have to have the heart to ask the immortals to help you with all these and this will help you in your meditation. If you are actually aware of things that you have done then you should also try to correct them.

DM: Could these be things from previous lives?

Your previous life has got a strong impact on your current life so if you've done a lot of bad things in your previous life then they come with you when you are reborn. You actually carry it with you, so in this



Leigutai

life it is important to be aware of what you are doing. If you can get rid of all these bad things in this life then it will help you in the next life.

There was once an emperor called Liang Wu. In his previous life he had been very poor and spent his days collecting firewood., his entire life he had only been a woodcutter. One day as he was working in the woods he came across a shrine which was in very bad condition as it had not been maintained for many years. Inside the shrine was a stone statue of an immortal, although the shrine was so rotten that you could hardly see there was a statue there at all. At the end of the day the woodcutter decided that he would spend the money he had earned to buy a hat to put on the stone statue. Then people would be able to see clearly that there was a statue there devoted to an immortal. He bought the hat and on his way home, he placed it on top of the statue. After he had left the shrine, he came to a river and there he had another idea. He collected some large stones and placed them across the river all the way towards the shrine so that people could use them as stepping stones. He was hoping people would cross the river without getting their feet wet and once on the other side they would notice the shrine of

the immortal. It was believed that at the time one of the heavenly soldiers was patrolling the area and saw what the woodcutter had done. He immediately wrote a report to the Jade Emperor, who is the supreme ruler of heaven, and told him all about the poor woodcutter, praising him for the things he had done. In his report he told how the woodcutter had built a bridge of nine stones and that he had also had bought a hat for the stone statue. The Jade Emperor was surprised and glad to find that there was such a kind person on earth and decided that as a reward he would make him an emperor in his next life. Without a doubt the woodcutter enjoyed his next life as the emperor Liang Wu.

DM: Does this mean that it is not possible to change your destiny in this present lifetime?

Not really. In this story, the woodcutter's life did not change because he did not know how to do self cultivation. Therefore he spent his life as a woodcutter and nothing changed until his next incarnation where the Jade Emperor had arranged for him to be born into the royal family. So if you know how to cultivate yourself then things can change for you in this lifetime.

DM: Does the Quanzhen path believe in karma?

In China there are the three teachings of Daoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. The Quanzhen sect of Daoism adopted some beliefs from Buddhism, like karma, and emphasizes the close relationship between the three teachings.

DM: What is the hardest part of the training you have come across in the early days when you first became a priest?

I hardly came across any. At the time there were six priests living at the temple and I had my master Yang Faxiang and an abbot called Chen Xingling to take care of most things. I was quite happy until the cultural revolution came when I had to go home to my family and work in the farm. I would say that that was harder because I preferred to be in the temple and I had been forced to leave. Even though I was not allowed to stay in the temple, I made time to go back to Leigutai to pay respect to my master, especially during the Chinese New Year and public holidays. I treated those trips as my holidays.

DM: How long did you leave the temple for?

I had to stay at home for 17 years and it was not until 1980 that I was allowed to go back to Leigutai. In 1985 I left there to go and live at the Eight Immortals Temple in Xi'an. This is a very important temple in our tradition as it is the place where Han Zhongli first met Lü Dongbin and there has been a temple there since the Song dynasty (960 – 1279). I also went to the White Cloud Temple in Beijing for three years of intensive study after which I was officially recognised as a master. Then in 1990 someone from Leigutai came to the Eight Immortals Temple to ask me to go back to Leigutai as my master was getting older and needed someone to take over from him. I thought about my old master, who perhaps needed a break after all these years and so that winter I returned to Leigutai.

In September 1995 I met you [the six Westerners who were ordained as priests] and then the following April my master Yang Faxiang died at the age of ninety two. Shortly after this I came to visit you in

England and then returned to China in July 1996 and spent another four months at Leigutai. I decided to come down from the mountain then as I wanted to find a place that I could develop where it would be convenient for all of you to visit. I thought it would be much easier for us to contact each other either by post or by phone if I was not up in a mountain so that winter I went to Hanzhong, which is a large town a few hundred kilometers west of Leigutai. I soon found a good place to develop as a temple, a flat piece of ground in open country with one seven bedroom building on it. So I bought the site and started to liaise with the local government and community to obtain the approval I needed to turn the place into a Daoist temple with accommodation. Unfortunately the local government, who did not know much about me, had affected my application. I didn't really know anyone in that area and I was considered an outsider by the people in Hanzhong. I was asked to write a report about my ideas on the development of the site and when the local government reviewed my report they said they would have to discuss it in one of their meetings.

While I was waiting to hear from them, Zhang Buzhang, an ex-minister for the local government in Ziyang came to see me in Hanzhong. He wanted me to go back to my home town, Ziyang, and find a place to develop there. I considered this and thought to myself that it was a good idea as there is a historic immortal cave near the town which is devoted to the immortal Zhang Ziyang. Zhang Buzhang told me that there was some land near the cave that could be used to build a temple. I am still a local of Ziyang and if I can develop and bring benefits to my own people and follow the wishes of the immortal Zhang Ziyang then I should be delighted to do so. Therefore I went to stay with Zhang Buzhang in December 1997 and the day after I arrived, I crossed the Han river to see the immortal cave and the land nearby which Zhang Buzhang had mentioned. Unfortunately the land had been used for testing explosives at one stage and I felt that it was not really an ideal site for a temple. I met a few older ladies there and asked them whether there was any more land or buildings around. They told me there was an old warehouse just up the valley which might be suitable so I went there to find out.



Ziyang Zhenren Gong – nestled in a small mountain valley running into the the Han river

That night I talked to Zhang Buzhang about the place which I had found and said that I preferred it to the other site. Zhang accepted my idea and after eleven days of negotiations he had made all the arrangements to buy the old warehouse and the surrounding land. All I needed was 50,000 yuan and I could move into the place and start tidying up. Luckily one of Zhang Buzhang's relatives works in

a bank and he organized a loan for the money and I was able to move in.

I started the work here in January 1998 and I had plenty of help from the local people who came to rewire the building and work on the basic structure to make it liveable in. The old storeroom was turned into a shrine for the immortal Zhang Ziyang and on

the 18th day of the 12th moon (Chinese calendar), a group of us had a ceremony to move the photo of Zhang Ziyang from the shrine above the cave and bring it to this temple. On the day lots of people came to help and there were fireworks and chanting, and music played on the gong and other traditional Chinese instruments. On the 28th day of the 12th moon we seated the Zhang Ziyang immortal where he is now and since that time the local residents and other visitors have been coming to the temple to pay their respects. The temple is called 'Zhang Ziyang Zhenren Gong Xianren Dong' which means 'Zhang Ziyang True Person Temple Immortal Person Cave'.

DM: Could you talk about the immortal Zhang Ziyang?

Before he became a priest, Zhang Ziyang was a government official. One day when he was working in the study in his house, his maid came in with his dinner, a bowl of rice and two dishes. He did not have his dinner straight away because he was too busy working but when he finally finished his work and wanted to eat he found that his dinner had disappeared. He was very angry and thought that his maid must have eaten his dinner and although she denied it he would not believe her. This was too much for the maid, she could not accept the blame for something that she hadn't done and decided to commit suicide. A few days after her death Zhang was working in his study when he found maggots and bits of his dinner from a few nights ago appearing on his desk. When he looked up he saw his dinner was on the ceiling facing downwards! He then realized that his maid had not stolen his meal and with regret he realized that he had caused an unnecessary death. He burnt all of his paperwork and resigned from his position to become a Daoist priest and pursue the Dao. He was afraid that if he continued his life as an official then he might make more mistakes and ruin someone else's life. He became a priest in Zongdao Guan, a nearby temple, then he moved into the immortal cave where he cultivated himself and obtained immortality. The town, the cave, the river, the stream and the pond are all named after him. Zhang Ziyang was a real person and there are other stories about him. His statue shows him carrying a fly whisk, the traditional

symbol of one who can fly at will. After he had become an immortal it was believed that he once turned himself into a human and spoke to a scholar at the nearby meeting immortal bridge. It is also said that Zhang Ziyang's cave was a tunnel which connects all the way to Sichuan.

DM: What are your hopes for this temple?

So far the development has come along quite smoothly. Some places can't even get the permission to be used as a temple. I would like to refurbish this place and turn it into a big temple. There is also the future of the temple in Hanzhong which I'd like to renovate. In the future all of you could come back here and treat these two temples like your home. We will certainly try our best to sort out the legal procedures. The thing we need to do now is to raise another 70,000 yuan towards the refurbishment of the current Zhang Ziyang shrine. Once we have achieved that then, we then will think about the next stage.



Ziyang Zhenren Gong