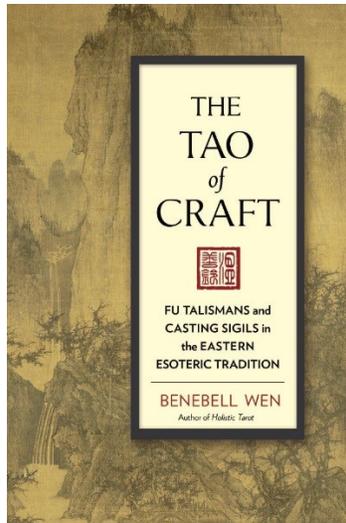


Excerpt From

# THE TAO OF CRAFT



FU TALISMANS and  
CASTING SIGILS in  
the EASTERN  
ESOTERIC TRADITION

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BENBELL WEN

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North Atlantic Books  
Berkeley, California

## CHAPTER 6

# THE TOOLS OF CRAFT

### Accumulating Good Deeds

I have added this section because in my personal practice, I have found it to be pertinent. While my views on morality should not have any bearing on your approach to craft, I have included this section for its historic relevance. Historically, many lineages, such as the Zhen Da Tao lineage<sup>i</sup> and Quan Zhen,<sup>ii</sup> espoused moral accounting or moral cultivation as inextricable from the cultivation toward immortality. Immortality seems ambitious, but I will address my interpretation shortly. The rise in publication of morality books (善書, shàn shū), authored by practitioners of esoteric Taoism in the 1100s AD, also merged occult practice with doctrines of benevolence.<sup>iii</sup>

Circa AD 316 to 317, the alchemist Ge Hong wrote the *Bao Pu Zi*, one of the classic Taoist texts on esoteric Taoist practices.<sup>iv</sup> The text offers Ge Hong's instruction on achieving immortality. To become an "Earthly Immortal," a practitioner needs to accumulate 300 good deeds. To become a "Heavenly Immortal," the practitioner needs to accumulate 1,200 good deeds.<sup>v</sup> The practitioner's highest aspiration toward achieving immortality is to accumulate 1,199 good deeds. Ge Hong's instructions form the bedrock of how many Taoist magical lineages cultivate their practice.<sup>vi</sup>

First, what constitutes a good deed? According to Ge Hong, to achieve transcendence, a practitioner must extend love to all life, "even those that creep and crawl, so that nothing breathing may come to harm."<sup>vii</sup> The concept of good deeds is also informed by the Taoist philosophy of wu wei, the principle of nonaction. In chapter 2 (論仙), "On Immortality," of the Inner Chapters (內篇), the text reads: 仙法欲靜寂無為 (Xiān Fǎ Yù Jìng Jì Wú Wéi).<sup>viii</sup> It is no easy task to translate that line, so forgive me if I err. As a practitioner, I interpret it, including some of the unspoken subtext of those characters, to mean, "The means or craft of achieving immortality is in forbearance, in the quietude and stillness of wu wei, to be voiceless and drifting."<sup>ix</sup>

Therefore, I construe good deeds to be elucidated through the principle of wu wei (無為). A good deed is to be truly selfless, to demonstrate sincere altruism. A good deed cannot have any

selfishness attached to it. Any deed, even one that benefits others, attached to self interest in any way whatsoever does not count as a good deed for the purpose of cultivating immortality.

Inherently, a good deed is a form of restraint, of sacrifice. When every last shred of yourself desires action in the name of self-preservation or self-interest, you then restrain yourself from action. To be voiceless is a most difficult request, as what many of us tend to desire most is to be heard. To be drifting suggests yielding to oppositional forces. Again, it is a difficult task. It runs against our fight-or-flight instinct. Drifting is neither fight nor flight. It is transcending beyond the fight-or-flight inclination.

Accumulating these good deeds is a form of cultivation that is difficult, and by its definition, more than just helping an elderly woman across the street or giving a dollar to a beggar, because subconsciously, there are still selfish interests attached to such acts. After all, doing so makes you feel good about yourself. Certainly continue your habit of helping elderly women across the street and giving alms to the poor; such habits are the initial phases of developing a path toward good deeds. But the good deeds that Ge Hong refers to are much more profound than that.

As for immortality, I interpret the concept in more practical terms. In every aspect of a practitioner's craft, he or she is extinguishing a piece of him- or herself, the practitioner's Vital Force or personal Qi. Our personal Qi is limited. The more energy we practitioners extinguish during craft, the less of our personal Qi is left.

That is metaphysical mortality. Immortality, then, is achieving never-ending Vital Force, to transcend limitations of personal Qi. The objective of immortality sought by inner cultivation could in theory be interpreted as an objective to achieve never-ending Vital Force for a practitioner to work with. Thus, a practitioner's power and abilities increase as he or she accrues good deeds, and so part of a practitioner's cultivation of craft is also the accumulation of good deeds.

The word 仙 (xiān), in addition to “immortality,” also means “transcendence.” Transcendence is to surpass present limitations, to be able to rise above or go beyond space and time. Transcendence is thus the ability of a practitioner to be more than just Man and be aligned with Heaven or the Tao, as in point 1 of the *Classics of the Esoteric Talisman*, summarized in chapter 3, or to deftly take from Heaven or Earth, as noted in point 4.

The means for achieving 仙, or transcendence, according to Ge Hong, is through good deeds, which—again referring to his texts—I interpret as deeds that apply the principle of wu wei. That, then, is the “secret” to transcendence, to 仙 or immortality: accumulating 1,199 good deeds.

The practitioner seeks transcendence—what the metaphor of immortality truly means—so that the practitioner may transcend space-time. To transcend space-time is to enable the practitioner's self to travel fluidly through time—past, present, and future—and fluidly through space—above, below, the four compass directions, and the five relative directions.<sup>x</sup> These are the abilities that empower a practitioner with effective craft.

Note that the foregoing is not the traditional or historic interpretation of immortality by Taoists. The traditional or historic interpretation is literal immortality, where one literally lives

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forever.<sup>xi</sup> Only I have opted to reinterpret the concept and, based only on very limited anecdotal evidence, experienced the merits of such an interpretation. I do see the accumulation of good deeds as one way to cultivate the Vital Force a practitioner needs to craft powerful Fu sigils, though herein lies the rub: if you accumulate good deeds with the self-interested purpose of extending metaphysical mortality, of attaining power for craft, that deed is no longer “good,” and does not serve the purpose you seek to achieve.

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- i. See chapter 2 and Pas, *Historical Dictionary*, 30.
  - ii. See chapter 2 and Shek, “Daoism and Orthodoxy,” 149. The Quan Zhen lineage focuses on inner cultivation, incorporating the practice of qi gong, and sets aside many of the practices more commonly found in esoteric Taoism, such as summoning and invocations, astrology, or spell casting. Lin, *Qigong*, 18.
  - iii. See generally Shek, “Daoism and Orthodoxy,” 149.
  - iv. As noted in chapter 3, the esoteric Taoist practices that I refer to—alchemy, Fu talisman crafting, demonology, and so on—are found in the Inner Chapters of the text.
  - v. See the translation of the quoted section from the *Bao Pu Zi* in Shek, “Daoism and Orthodoxy,” 161.
  - vi. The *San Huang Wen*, or *Writ of the Three Sovereigns*, written around AD 437, over a century after Ge Hong’s *Bao Pu Zi*, addresses the concept of purification as the inner cultivation needed to achieve immortality. It is instructive on the concept of good deeds as discussed in this section. According to the *Writ of the Three Sovereigns*, acts such as self-defense, or killing to save one’s own life, stealing in an attempt to provide for oneself, falsely advertising one’s own abilities, no matter the intent, or indulging in materialism will bar a practitioner from achieving immortality. See Steavu-Balint, “Three Sovereigns Tradition,” 102–3.
  - vii. Steed, “To Extend Love,” 32, citing James R. Ware, *Alchemy, Medicine and Religion in the China of AD 320: The Nei Pien of Ko Hung* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1981), 43.
  - viii. 中國哲學書電子化計劃 [The Chinese Texts Project], 抱朴子 [*Bao Pu Zi, Book of the Master of Simplicity*], chap. 2, 論仙, in 內篇 [Inner Chapters], n.d., <http://ctext.org/baopuzi/lun-xian/zh>.
  - ix. This translation and interpretation is a synthesis of my father’s viewpoint and mine. He and I had disagreed on exactly how to interpret it. Because he is a scholar and possesses one of the most intelligent minds I have ever come across in my life, his interpretation should be given more weight. He does not read an implication of craft when reading the word 法 (Fǎ), whereas I did, in 魔法 (Mó Fǎ), or witchcraft, and 法術 (Fǎ Shù), spell-crafting. He also interpreted wu wei to include purposelessness, whereas I did not. My compromise was to use the term *drifting* instead of *purposelessness*. “Drifting” suggests not taking an action against the current or tides.
  - x. See generally Wu, *Chinese Shamanic Cosmic Orbit Qigong*.
  - xi. Taoists hold that, through cultivation, a practitioner can achieve immortality, or “become gods and return to heaven, escaping the cycle of death and rebirth.” DeBernardi, *Way That Lives*, 84.