Q&A with Jonathan Blank
co-author of
*Secrets of Dragon Gate*

The exercises in the book have been used by Dragon Gate masters for centuries. How have they been passed down?

The secret teachings of Dragon Gate Taoism have been passed down through the centuries in a direct oral lineage from teacher to student. This is the traditional way that most eastern knowledge has been taught. Historically, most teachings have been considered "secret" and have only been entrusted to students after a long period during which their character and dedication has been tested. The stories popularized in many kung fu movies of a teacher who puts his student through a near torturous training regimen before opening up and teaching the "secrets" of their system is drawn from real life.

Students today - especially in the west - do not have the same levels of patience. So teachers have adapted their methods to fit the times, and now it is common for students to receive teachings very quickly on subjects that previously might have required years of preliminaries. In addition, there is now so much information available in books and on the Internet that today's modern students of esoteric traditions have amazing access that students from an earlier time could only dream of.

Why haven’t Western readers heard more about Dragon Gate? How has it remained so mysterious?

One of the main reasons that Dragon Gate Taoism has remained so mysterious is that it has a tradition of passing on its core secrets to only one individual - the master who inherited the lineage from his teacher. This has naturally limited access to the information. Additionally, unlike other Taoist schools, Dragon Gate never became a "religious" form of Taoism, choosing to focus instead on exercises to promote health, vitality, wealth, and higher states of consciousness. The absence of a religious organization’s infrastructure has naturally limited its spread.
How did you discover the Dragon Gate School?
I started studying Taoism from a legendary Tai Chi master named Franklin Kwong at Columbia University in New York. Since then I have sought out different teachers both here and in Asia to learn more about this fascinating philosophy and transformational mind/body system of knowledge. In the mid 1990s, I was introduced to an instructor who was teaching a style of Dragon Gate Taoism from mainland China. I learned many interesting exercises and practices, though I found that particular system to be too ascetic for my tastes. But I was clearly destined to continue on the Dragon Gate path, because shortly thereafter I met Dr. Liu who was a lineage holder in the Taiwanese branch of Dragon Gate Taoism and whose laid back approach and open-minded teachings much more closely fit with my personal preferences as well as my understanding of what Taoism is really all about.

How can these practices help readers, as you put it, “create a magical Taoist reality – even if you live in a bustling modern day metropolis”?
A magical reality is one that is marked by conscious creatorhood, or a strong sense that you are in some way an author of the story of your life. There are a few basic principles underlying the creation of a magical reality. These include health, awareness, breath control and the ability to enter into non-ordinary states of consciousness by focused direction. We need good health to follow a metaphysical path. Awareness is key to fostering an understanding of how we are responsible for manifesting our experience of reality. Breath control is the gateway skill to spiritual development which leads to energy development and the ability to enter into non-ordinary states of reality. And once you can do that, you can exist in a magical reality.

Dragon Gate Taoism offers very simple techniques that promote all these skills and abilities so anyone can do them and experience the benefits with a minimal commitment of time and energy.

What does “spiritual alchemy” mean? How will readers know when they’ve achieved it?
Alchemy is the process of transmutation, or converting an energy. Typically this is used to refer to a process of changing from a less desirable to a more desirable state. This is why the metaphor of turning lead into gold is typically used. In terms of spiritual alchemy this can be thought of as turning sickness into health, poverty into wealth, anger into joy, and hate into love.

Every person has to come up with their own ideas of what type of alchemy, or positive change, they want to bring into their lives and how they define success for themselves. The Taoist view is that one never completely achieves any goal, so pursuing a Taoist alchemical path is about the journey and not the destination. That’s why it’s important to make the journey worthwhile and, in my experience, Dragon Gate practices can really help with that.

In addition to mental wellbeing, the book focuses on physical health. Which practices have the most impact on health?
According to fundamental Taoist principles, deep breathing exercises and standing meditation practices have the fastest and strongest impact on overall health. Even practicing these for just a few minutes a day can be very beneficial if done regularly. Practicing for 5-15 minutes 5-7 days a week is far superior to doing 1 hour of practice once a week.
How can readers strengthen their connection to their partner with Dragon Gate’s sexual yoga practices?

Taoist alchemical principles are based on the idea that the universe and people are linked—that the microcosm of humankind is reflected in the macrocosm of the universe. Because of this, the concepts of yin and yang are as applicable to people as they are to the world around us. So from the Taoist perspective, sex between a man and a woman is an earthly manifestation of the universal principles of yin and yang.

Sex holds a tremendous amount of power in our culture. It hooks into many important human feelings such as pleasure, power, self-worth, etc. Ideally, it can be a very deep expression of love between two people and turning this key part of life into a spiritual practice strongly enhances the connection between partners.

What are the five elements of life and how can they be applied to our lives?

Taoism has a number of key concepts that are used as metaphors to help in understanding the nature of reality. These include the binary yin/yang symbol, the eight trigrams of the Ba Gua and the 64 hexagrams of the Yi Jing. Another key model is the five element system—wood, fire, earth, metal, and water—which represents a way of describing essential patterns in every aspect of life in this time and space (in Taoism, everything is relative to the time and space in which you find yourself).

According to Dragon Gate philosophy, the five elements are the creative and controlling energies of our planet. These elements are in a constant state of flux, and their interdependence and interactions explain the complex connection between humanity and the natural world. Every aspect of our bodies, our lives, and the world around us can be categorized into one of these five perpetually flowing and interacting elements. For instance, each element is associated with a specific organ within our body (liver, spleen, stomach, lungs, and heart), a direction in the world around us (east, west, north, south, and center) and a color (green, red, yellow, white, and blue). The five elements are largely defined by the relationships among the elements and the key to using them is knowing how to maintain the correct balance. So once you have a basic understanding of the different elements, you can enhance different aspects of your life by energizing a weak element or offsetting the power of a strong one.

SECRETs OF DRAGON GATE:

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