

The Wisdom Of The Three Sages



***Ancient Wisdom For The
Modern World***

Neil Kingham

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Introducing The Three Sages

In a culture obsessed with the new, the latest, the updated, and the modern, it's easy to overlook or under-value the old.

But as the saying goes, "there's gold in the old." And this is especially true in the fields of health, well-being, spirituality and self-development. And the ancient wisdom of China is as relevant now, in the West, than it ever was back in the day, half way across the world.

As a practitioner and teacher of Chinese medicine and the Chinese self-cultivation arts for over 20 years, I can honestly say that the best advice I've ever had has been from teachers who have been dead for thousands of years!

Here, I'd like to introduce you to three of them, and share some of their nuggets of advice, along with some of my own comments on how to practically apply what you learn.

This simple, practical advice has changed my life on many levels... and I hope that it will help you, too.

So, in no particular order, let me introduce you to some of my most influential teachers - the Three Sages: Ge Hong, Sun Si Miao, and Lao Tzu.



Ge Hong

In everything pertaining to the nourishing of life, one must look widely, learn much, and know how to select. There should be no reliance any one particular speciality.

This short quote, from Ge Hong's *Baopu Zi* (The Master Who Embraces Simplicity) contains a great deal of wisdom, which is easily overlooked. If you follow its simple advice, you can easily avoid the number 1 health trap that I see a lot of people falling in to.

Ge Hong was an eclectic philosopher and scholar who strove to uncover the secrets of good health, long life and immortality. He drew from a wide range of sources, especially Taoist and Confucianist, and his classic

work the *Baopu Zi* lays out his philosophy of the importance of wide and broad study and practice.

Like Sun Si Miao, who we'll look later, he was concerned with the arts of 'nourishing life', and believed this pursuit to be the greatest and noblest goal of human life. One of his main insights is summarised in the quote above – let's look at it in more detail.

The need to 'learn much' is obvious. Ge was a prolific scholar, had read the classic books of the age, and also travelled widely to study with the best teachers and masters. He believed quite simply that if he wanted to 'nourish his life', he had to first learn the techniques and methods for doing so.

However, it is vital to 'look widely' when learning. In other words, specialisation has its limitations, and there is great value in looking at a wide range of different approaches, ideas and theories. Hence, in the pursuit of a long and healthy life, 'there should be no reliance any one particular speciality.'

Another quote from the *Baopu Zi* elaborates on this idea:

Moreover, the danger is that those who devote themselves to one of these practices trust only their discipline of choice. Those who know the arts of the Mysterious Woman and the Pure Woman [ie Taoist sexual techniques] say that one can transcend the world only through the arts of the bedchamber. Those who are expert in breathing say that one can extend the number of years only through circulation of breath.

Those who know the methods for bending and stretching [their body] say that one can avoid aging only through daoyin [Qi gong]. Those who know the methods

based on herbs and plants say that one can surpass any limit only through medicines and pills.

When the study of the Tao [ie study of life and longevity] does not bear fruit, it is because of biases like these.

In my opinion, this is still all too common. Teachers, writers and gurus focus on one technique or tool to the exclusion of all others, promoting it as the singular answer to 'what ails you'. If you follow this path, no wonder that your practice may not 'bear fruit', no matter how dedicated you are.

Finally, the essential last piece of the jigsaw is that having looked widely, and learned much, you then need to know 'how to select' – in other words, to sift through the different ideas and the techniques, and choose the one most suitable to you at that particular time, based on your own personal circumstances.

I often liken this whole process to having a well stocked tool-box, and the wisdom to choose the correct tool for the job in hand. If you don't have many tools, you're less likely to have the one you need at the right time, and without the ability to select the right tool from the box, you're relying on pot-luck whether or not you get the right one!

An Equal Opportunities Philosopher!

Ge believed that a healthy long life, and possibly even immortality, were achievable for anyone, regardless of background, education or place in society (In fact, he believed that wealth and position are actually harmful because they would make it harder for you to attaining moral and physical serenity!) - This quote illustrates the point nicely:

Now, if the transcendent humans use medicines and substances to nourish their bodies and techniques and calculations to extend their allotment, they make it such that illness does not grow within nor anxiety enter from without. Even though they are long lived and do not die, their old bodies do not change. If you have their way, this will not be taken as difficult.

Here we again see the value of using different approaches to achieving optimum health and well-being, using medicines and substances (herbal preparations) as well as other 'techniques', which would have included t'ai chi, meditations and living in harmony with the seasons.

One also needs to use 'calculations' - in other words, to give careful thought to exactly which medicines, substances and techniques should be used. This is another way of saying, as we saw at the beginning, that you need to know 'how to select' among the various health promoting options available to you.

Ge describes this as the way of the 'transcendent humans' but also reassures the reader that this is achievable for anyone, if you just follow the same steps it isn't hard: 'If you have their way, this will not be taken as difficult'.

Another simpler quote gives us the same idea:

Now, the Duke of Zhou was the highest sage, but every day he read a hundred chapters.

The implication here is clear – that the Duke is just a normal person like the rest of us, and he became a 'high sage' by his reading and learning. In other words, if he could do it, you can too.

How To Use Ge Hong's Wisdom

1. It doesn't happen on its own – if you want to improve your health and well-being, and increase your lifespan, it's well within the reach of each and every one of us. Step one is to commit to learning what's required.

I'm reminded of a time that I saw the Dalai Lama speak, and he talked of holy books not as dry dusty things to be revered, but as practical day-to-day textbooks to be regularly studied and consulted. His message was really the same as Ge Hong's - that you need to put in some time, study and practice.

2. There's no 'magic bullet' – It's natural that you'll be drawn to particular practices or theories, but don't get caught up in just one way of looking at things. To make an exaggerated point – it doesn't matter how much yoga you do, if you're living on junk food! Every area of your life needs to be looked at, with a range of different tools, techniques and methods.

3. Use a framework – You need a way of choosing which areas of your life to focus on. This is essential to avoid overwhelm, particularly after you've 'looked widely' and 'learned much'!

The good news is that you normally don't need to make huge, radical lifestyle changes - small adjustments can yield big results, just as long as you choose the right small changes in the first place. This is why I created my Radiant Health Evolution program, which contains exactly such a framework for understanding and choosing the best tools or interventions at any given time.

(You can find out more about the program at the end of this article)



Sun Si Miao

Sun Si Miao, born in the 6th Century, was one of the most influential early Chinese doctors, and is often referred to as the 'King of Medicine'. As a sickly child, Sun quickly became interested in health practices that he could use to benefit his own well-being, and leaves a legacy of important work in this area.

Heavily influenced by Taoism, he believed in following the way of nature, and working in harmony with natural forces. He was very much a man of the people, and refused at least three official positions in the imperial court, preferring to treat ordinary people in rural settings.

He studied and taught a wide range of health-promotion and self-development exercises which fall under the category of 'Yang Sheng' (literally 'nourishing life') which include tai chi and qi gong, correct diet and

food energetics, meditation, self-acupressure and self-massage.

Although he wrote widely on the practice of Chinese medicine, Sun taught that the best course of action was to act to prevent illness rather than treat it, saying "to be skilled at nurturing one's nature is to treat disease before it arises." He encouraged doctors of the time to follow this tenet, and to teach patients the Yang Sheng self-cultivation arts in order to stay well so that treatment never became necessary. How different this is to the modern practice of medicine!

In all of his work, Sun emphasised the importance of balance and moderation. For instance, he valued movement of all kinds, noting that

Running water does not grow stale, the pivot of the door does not get bug infested. The reason for this is that they move

but also warning that

The way of nourishing life is to constantly strive for minor exertion but never become greatly fatigued and force what you cannot endure.

This is a simple but important aspect of the balance of the Taoist theory of Yin and Yang in everyday life. Although there are a few 'couch potatoes' (too much Yin) most of us in the modern world find ourselves out of balance in the opposite direction – too much activity, business and stress (Yang), and not enough rest, calm and down-time.

As Sun noted, this is a recipe for declining health, as we don't recharge our energy (Qi), and find ourselves 'running on empty'. In my clinic, I frequently see people in this position, with chronic low energy levels and weakened

immunity, leading to a whole host of health conditions. This is where meditation, t'ai chi, qi gong, yoga and other rejuvenating practices really make a difference.

The Importance Of Food

In his famous book of Chinese medicine, the 'Prescriptions Worth A Thousand Gold', Sun talks about the central, pivotal role of diet and nutrition on all aspect of good health.

Food is able to expel evil [pathogenic influences] and stabilise the viscera and bowels, and to please the spirit and clear the will, thereby protecting Blood and Qi.

If you are able to use food to balance out chronic disorder, release emotions, and chase away disease, you can call yourself an outstanding craftsman. This is the special method of lengthening years and 'eating for old age' and the utmost art of nurturing life"

Although it's obvious to all of us that your diet is an important part of being healthy, the detailed explanation of different foods and their effects on the body – sometimes called 'food energetics' – goes deeply into the essence of different kinds of foods, and provides a way of matching the diet to the individual to treat and prevent all manner of illness. As the quote above illustrates, this goes beyond just physical, and also includes the mental and emotional.

In fact, in Chinese medicine, the digestion is often seen as the centre of the whole of human life. All of your Qi and Blood come from the food you eat, and the quality and quantity of these vital substances determines and governs all aspects of your day to day life and development, from the efficient functioning of the organs, immunity, thought processes,

emotions, and even spirituality.

For this reason, the quality of the food eaten, how well it matches your own constitution and individual requirements, and the strength of the digestive system, are all key components to maintaining (or regaining) good health. Hence, understanding diet and nutrition really is 'the utmost art of nurturing life'.

How To Use Sun Si Miao's Wisdom

1. Think prevention rather than cure. By all means, if you're ill or unwell, get yourself sorted out, but above all, do everything you can to identify the things that have the potential to cause problems in the future, and deal with them NOW.

2. Use food as medicine. Food is much more than just something you need to keep you alive, it's also a powerful medicine, and has a very important role to play in keeping you healthy and happy. Assess your diet honestly, and see what could be improved. Small, gradual changes will all add up, and are easier to stick to than radical new diet plans.

The Chinese approach to food and nutrition ('food energetics') has a lot to offer in this area, and is worth your attention.

3. Balanced Yin with Yang. Downtime is important. Nobody can run on full steam forever, and the harder you push yourself the more dramatic the crash will be when it comes.

Give yourself at least a little quiet rest time everyday. If this doesn't come easy, then you'll need to practice. Simple meditation, deep breathing or relaxation techniques will help. If you don't know where to start, look for classes or teachers in your local area. T'ai chi, qi gong and yoga are all useful.



Lao Tzu

Lao Tzu is the legendary founding Father of the philosophy of Taoism, and author of its 'bible', the *Tao Te Ching*. The story goes that Lao Tzu made the decision to leave China, saddened and disillusioned that his fellow men weren't willing to follow the ways of nature. At the Western border of China a guard begged him to record his teachings before he left. He then composed the 5,000 character *Tao Te Ching*.

Another particularly odd myth about Lao Tzu is that he was conceived when his mother saw a falling star, after which he supposedly remained in her womb for 62 years, eventually being born while she was leaning against a plum tree, emerging as a grown man with a full grey beard (I feel sorry for his mother!)

The name Lao Tzu is actually not a name at all, but an honorary title, literally meaning 'old master'. Whether Lao Tzu ever lived, and if so, whether he wrote the *Tao Te Ching*, is a subject of great debate. If he did live, it was

sometime around the 4th - 6th centuries BCE, and it's quite likely that the book is a compilation of different authors, assembled in his name.

Whatever its true origin, this small but powerful book is a manual for living a stress-free life by following the Tao or the way of nature.

The Tao pours out everything into life. It is a cornucopia that never runs dry. It is the deep source of everything.

And the person who can leave behind the distractions of life and follow the natural way is called a sage

The sage has no attachment to anything, and he therefore does what is right without speaking, by simply being in the Tao.

Acceptance

Lao Tzu tells us that to be a Sage, and tap into the infinite well of creation which is the Tao, is actually very simple, and one of the key messages is all about the futility of endless striving for riches and prestige.

Instead, the Sage quietly accepts his or her situation, whatever it is.

Those on the way of the Tao, like water, need to accept where they find themselves. And that may often be where water goes, to the lowest places, and that is right.

In this way, we are able to maintain our own inner truth, and stay connected to the Tao. Constantly going after 'more stuff' or 'more power' cuts us off from the source:

Wanting what's precious, you do what distorts your being.

Quiet, Still and Empty

Once you begin to remove the distractions and slow down, you begin to connect to the Tao. Lao Tzu portrays this as a great stillness.

Like a lake, the heart must be calm and quiet, having great depth beneath it.

There's too much talking, it's really better to stay quiet. There are too many laws, when all you have to do is to hold on to the centre.

And yet, this stillness is not the same as a completely passive inactive state. It's calm and quiet, but also fully alive.

This is one of the great Taoist paradoxes, summed up in the philosophy of *wu-wei* or non-doing:

The Tao goes on forever - wu-wei - doing nothing, and yet everything gets done.

How? It does it by being, and by being everything it does.

When the Sage embraces the Tao, becomes still and quiet, and is able to see beyond the normal distractions of life, that's when the power of *wu-wei* manifests.

Then, minimal action yields big results. There's no more struggling against the tide. You're in the right place, doing the right thing at the right time, and events seem to unfold perfectly by themselves.

Vive La Difference

The final theme I'd like to mention from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* is that of being different.

In a number of different passages he contrasts

himself with the average person, saying, for instance

What do people want? Money and things. And yet I find I have nothing, and I don't care. I am as unambitious as any fool.

And the people, the people are so busy! But I have nothing to bother about. I am a bumpkin, a lout.

I am different, I am strange. I live for the Mother [Tao]

This quote, and others like it, show that even then, this way of living was seen as strange and maybe even stupid. And if that was true then, how much more so now!

But Lao Tzu reassures us that this is to be expected, and is even a sign that you're on the right track:

And when the inferior student gets wind of it [the Tao], he laughs at it like an idiot! And if he didn't, then it wouldn't be the Tao!

This, I have found one of the most useful ideas in my own years of research and practice of Taoist self-healing arts and Chinese medicine.

All around us chronic disease is getting worse. As a people we're more stressed, and less happy. The 'average person' is not in a good place. And as the saying goes, if you do what everyone else does, you'll get what everyone else gets.

So maybe being an 'unambitious fool' and following the Tao isn't as silly as it may look to some...

How To Use Lao Tzu's Wisdom

1. Balance Striving And Accepting. There's a fine line here, between the Yin and the Yang. There's nothing wrong with wanting to improve your lot, and to better yourself. This is what the Sages did, and still do.

But look at what things you're really striving for. Where are you putting your effort? And is it worth it?

And at the same time as developing and working on yourself and wanting to be better, you can also accept yourself and your situation exactly as it is right now

When you find a way to marry these two apparently opposing ideas, it goes a long way to bringing peace and stillness into your life, even as you move gently forwards.

2. Embrace Downtime (Again!) - Just as Sun Si Miao speaks of the importance of balancing Yang activity with Yin rest, Lao Tzu tells us the importance of stillness, quiet and peace. Anything you can do to bring these qualities into your life will help.

3. Be The Renegade! - Just because 'everyone else' does something doesn't mean you have to. Allow yourself to expand your thinking and live your life the way you really want to.

If you want good health, happiness, peace and long life, then there are established, time tested ways of getting there. But they're not the paths that the majority follow.

It's OK to be a 'renegade'!

Final Thoughts, Next Steps

None of the wisdom quoted here is less than 1500 years old. It has stood the test of time, and proven its value. Pick just one or two of the ideas you've learned, put them into practice, and you'll quickly begin to notice the benefits. Don't wait - do it today. You'll thank yourself for it.

And these ideas represents just the tip of the iceberg - if you have found any of this short piece helpful, there's plenty more theory, strategy and practical day-to-day tools that you can use in your own Yang Sheng (nourishing life) journey.

I've made it my mission to spread these teachings, which have transformed my own life beyond measure, to as big an audience as I can, and I'd be happy to share them with you.

You can lots get more information at my blog:

<http://www.neilkingham.com/blog>

(where you can also sign up for my free newsletter, if you haven't already done so)

And when you're ready to take the next steps to transform and evolve your own life, I invite you to join me on my flagship online training, Radiant Health Evolution:

<http://www.neilkingham.com/evolution>

To your Radiant Health,

Neil

