

THE PAIN OF LONGING

Introduction

The British philosopher Thomas Hobbes famously put forward the idea that desire is the fundamental motivation of all human endeavor. His mechanistic view of mankind driven by the passions has a negative corollary. Selfish desire often causes humans to become obsessed and embittered which eventually leads to misery. In Buddhism, desire is traditionally regarded in this negative light and craving thought to be the cause of all suffering that one experiences in human existence. The eradication of craving therefore leads to ultimate tranquility. Instead of a life filled with desire of sensory pleasures, Buddhism encourages letting go of all the temptations and passions that flow in the river of life.

Daoism, on the other hand, maintains as does tantric Buddhism, that physical desire is necessary for health and can serve as an enhancement of the spirit. For the Daoists, lovemaking can increase either the *yin* essence of women or the *yang* essence of men causing increased health, longevity and in rare cases even immortality.

While Western thought considers emptiness as a negative or undesirable condition, in Buddhism and Daoism this is a realized achievement. Accepting that emptiness is inherent in existence opens a path to the permanent cessation of suffering and liberates the self for personal growth.

This series of poems depict human desire for man or woman, for reputation and achievement, as well as the misery and pain that comes with longing.

《感镜》

白居易

美人与我别，留镜在匣中。
自从花颜去，秋水无芙蓉。
经年不开匣，红埃覆青铜。
今朝一拂拭，自照憔悴容。
照罢重惆怅，背有双盘龙。

THE MIRROR

Bái Juyí (772-846)

A flame had been extinguished
an exquisite beauty
strayed from me forever

Never again would I see
her perfect lotus blossom face
in this unpolished mirror
she abandoned in an ancient case

Years later brushing away the dust
a sudden shock stabbed my heart

In the reflection I witnessed
a disappointed poet who had
grown old bitter and wrinkled

I turned the bronze mirror over
remorsefully looking at two
dragons eternally intertwined

“The Mirror” emphasizes the matriarchal power of the mother in the Tang family structure. On the subject of marriage she alone had the final word. In this case, Bai Juyi’s mother refused to permit the poet to marry a neighbor’s daughter Xiangling, a girl four years younger than he. At that time the poet was nineteen and she was fifteen. The poet never overcame this bitter disappointment, though he married another woman when he was 37. Throughout his life, he celebrated his beloved ideal woman by writing numerous poems about Xiangling.

For many years Bai Juyi treasured a keepsake from Xiangling, a bronze mirror enclosed in a case which he never opened for fear of bringing back painful memories. On the occasion described in this poem, curiosity overcame his hesitancy. He brushed the dust away. Fondling the mirror, he discovered on the back an image of two intertwined dragons. Dragons in Chinese mythology have positive connotations. The dragons in this poem are a poignant symbol of happiness for a married couple, which Bai Juyi and Xiangling were never permitted to enjoy. Many years later, when Xiangling was forty, they met by accident and recognized each other. Both broke down in a flood of tears. She was still single.

Though the poem starts with “a flame had been extinguished,” the poet’s desire for Xiangling never ceased. His craving for this ideal woman transformed him as he aged into “a disappointed poet who had grown old bitter and wrinkled.”

《久别离》

李白

别来几春未还家，玉窗五见樱桃花。

况有锦字书，开缄使人嗟。

至此肠断彼心绝。

云鬟绿鬓罢梳结，愁如回飙乱白雪。

去年寄书报阳台，今年寄书重相催。

东风兮东风，为我吹行云使西来。

待来竟不来，落花寂寂委青苔。

HOW LONG AND PAINFUL YOUR DEPARTURE

Lǐ Bái (701-762)

Ah sir how long since you departed

embarked on wanderings

I count more than five springs

From where I sit

I watch the cherry blossoms open

sweet remembrances of our days together

You write letters to me in red characters

drifting like spoiled petals

across the sheet I hold trembling

I cannot staunch my tears
nor can I stop the deep rooted sighs
that leave me shuddering

My heart is scattered broken
knowing your heart has drifted
and sailed away on another journey

I am negligent of all affairs careless
of combing my cloud-like locks of
hair that once so pleased you

As deepening sorrows mount like
snow banks swirling and twisting
a whirlwind brings havoc to my emotions

Last year I dispatched a letter
explaining my grief
and again I sent another
imploing you to answer me

O that the east wind would scatter the
threatening clouds from the west
bringing me even the slightest hope of
you holding me in your arms

I am waiting for my man who will return
watching the flowers quietly and gradually
fall on green moss

Another spring and all hope gone