

Im a Mortal Episode 7: Livia Kohn – Daoism and Immortality

Transcript

Speakers: Bruce Newbold (Guest), Sufal Deb (Host), Marvin Yan (Host)

[MUSIC – Im a Mortal Theme]

Livia Kohn 0:27

My name is Livia Kohn, Professor of East Asian Studies and Religion at Boston University. I've been retired for about 15 years, and I now run a publishing company called Three Pines Press. I also run organized tours, hiking tours to Japan, because in the course of my studies, which focused on Daoism, I spent 10 years in Kyoto, Japan, and I love to go back. I have a website called Livia Tours Japan. I also run the International Conference on Daoist studies for which we have a website and a Facebook page called Daoist Conference.

Marvin Yan 1:06

Thank you so much for being here.

Livia Kohn 1:07

Well, thank you for having me. This is a fascinating topic, and I'm very excited to talk about it.

Sufal Deb 1:12

Great, let's start off. Our podcast is called Im a Mortal, a little bit of a pun on the buzzword immortal. We like to ask all of our guests, what does the word immortal or immortality mean to you?

Livia Kohn 1:23

Oh, well, thank you for this very important question. I should start by saying that the whole question of immortality has been the milestone and key pillar of my career in Daoist studies. When I first started to get introduced to Daoism, I was at the University of California, Berkeley in the 70s. I had classes in Daoism and also in Chinese culture and language. Many people were telling me just how sophisticated the Chinese were, how complicated their language is and how high level their intelligence was. Then at the same time, I was reading books on Daoism, and I said, "All these Daoists, they want to become immortal. How dumb is that? There's something wrong here. I mean, they either highly intelligent or they're totally dumb." The solution I came up with is that we do not understand what they mean by immortality, because the intelligence of the Chinese cannot be doubted. I spent my entire career studying immortality, and for many different aspects. Immortality to me is one of four different phenomena relating to life. Our human life, our life time on this earth, we distinguish the lifespan, which is the biological limit that the species has, which is 120 years, and the life expectancy, which is the kind of life that as you're born in a certain culture in a certain year, you can expect to have.

Now from there, we have the phenomenon of longevity, which is an extension of somewhat—not too big, but somewhat extension of your life expectancy. If your life expectancy in this culture is, say, 75 years, and you're healthy, and vigorous—so longevity is not just length, it also means remaining vigorous, which is very important. Then you get to 80 or 85, then you're reaching longevity. Now, more recently, and also in traditional Daoism, we have the phenomenon of something called prolongevity. Prolongevity is an extension of this life expectancy and longevity going even beyond the lifespan. People who reach 120, 130, 150 are attaining prolongevity, and that's also a goal we have in the Daoist tradition. That's something that's becoming very relevant today, as more and more people get not only older and become—get over to be over 100, but get really old. Then there's immortality, which is a completely different kettle of fish, really, because then you're not dying at all. Even in prolongevity after 100 or 200, or in some cases several hundred years, you're still moving on and being transformed and you're dying. But in immortality, you do not die.

Sufal Deb 4:20

Out of all of these options, all these forms of longevity and even immortality itself, do you personally think you would want any of them? Or is it more, "I prefer the life I have so far"?

Livia Kohn 4:30

I like the life I have and I like longevity, especially with this increased vigor. I'd see in our kind of society, a lot of problems with prolongevity, partly because there's only going to be a select few people and this is a problem. People that are getting very old, it's like all your friends die and you're on your own and you're alone. Then you also have societal and cultural changes, and even if you're aging very slowly, if you're still aging, you miss the way things were. I'd like longevity, maybe up to 90 or so, but I'm really not too much of a fan. On the other hand, immortality in the Daoist tradition, which is what we'll be talking about some more, involves the attainment of a mystical—a quasi-mystical state, where you start to float along with the currents of the universe. Yes, your physical body at some point falls away, but you're attaining a spiritual kind of survival, a spiritual level of immortality, and that is something I'm also quite in favor of.

Marvin Yan 5:47

Before we jump more into what Daoists think of immortality, you've highlighted a brief point here. Do you mind just telling our listeners about what Daoism is and what Daoists believe in?

Livia Kohn 5:57

Yes, Daoism is the indigenous higher religion of China. It began about 500 BC, with a philosopher who was known as Lao Tzu and a classical text known as the "Book of Dao and Virtue" or "Tao Te Ching". It divides into three different categories or different types of practices and understanding. The first is the philosophical, where you think of Dao as the power that underlies the universe, the core energy of life, something that is at the

origin of everything, but it also pervades everything. So, Dao is like the flow of things, the natural flow of things, and we human beings, are part of this flow but we also have the power to get away from it. The idea of harmony of going with the flow is very important in the philosophy. The philosophical tradition has continued to the present day. There are still many translations and interpretations of the ancient texts. There are other philosophical writings that have been produced over the centuries. We have a very vibrant, philosophical, intellectual kind of tradition, we call it Literati Daoism or the intellectual dimension of it. Then we have an organized religion, which started around 200 ADs, in the wake of the philosophy, where the philosopher Lao Tzu is transformed into a representative of Dao. He becomes a deity that represents Dao. We have creation myths, where Dao becomes this God. We have all kinds of other deities. We have several layers of heaven. We have a priesthood ritual. Everything we associate with organized religion. In this group, in this organized religious setting, we have many different schools, where individual seekers go into altered states of consciousness and connect to some deities and receive information from the heavens and then start their own groups. Today, we have two major schools in the organized religious dimension of Daoism.

The Orthodox Unity, or Celestial Masters, which is the continuation of the original first Daoist group from the second century, and their headquarters is in southern China. They're very strong in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and they're increasingly stronger in the mainland. They're a lay group, so the priests are married. They're very much into community rituals, purifications, weddings, funerals. Many life events are being celebrated, like opening a business and things like this. They do Feng Shui for houses. It's a very community-oriented religion that comes with a lot of rituals and an organized hereditary essentially priesthood.

The other group is called Complete Perfection. Their headquarters is in Beijing. It's a monastic organization where people leave the household, become monks or nuns, and practice personal internal cultivation. Mostly internal alchemy and energy transformation. Their goal is the transcendence of this life and immortality. Immortality is very central to the monastic school. They also perform some rituals they're involved in. Several of the city God temples in mainland China are being run by Complete Perfection clerics, but their main thrust is monastic and towards immortality.

Then the third group of Daoists are what I call longevity or health practitioners. The Chinese technical term is *Yangsheng*, which means nourishing life. Those are the people who practice *Tai Chi*, *Qigong* and internal cultivation meditation. We don't belong to a particular sect. We usually are familiar with the philosophical readings and are inspired by philosophy, but they're not really all that intellectual about it. Those are people who are really into the kind of practices that we'll be talking about some more.

Sufal Deb 10:14

Just before we move on, when you say not intellectual about it, what exactly do you mean?

Livia Kohn 10:19

Well, I mean that they're really not sitting down and writing commentaries. They're not sitting down and having intellectual discussions. They're not sitting down and writing poetry. The verbal part of things is that they read the books, they maybe go to a talk, and they get inspired. But the way they express it is in practice, as opposed to more talk.

Sufal Deb 10:40

Okay, great. Thank you for clarifying that.

Marvin Yan 10:42

Okay, on the same note—because I was doing a little bit reading of Daoism, and one of the chapters you wrote in the book we have here and a little bit on your own work. Daoism, as you mentioned, seems very practical. For example, some Christian friends I have heavily emphasized they need to go to church every Sunday, right? But Daoism seems more like what you do less than what you might believe in, for some people. Is there a reason why this is?

Livia Kohn 11:05

It's a feature that's common to all Asian religions. Hinduism is the same way. Daoism is the same way. Shinto is the same way. It's a general tendency that religion is what you do, as opposed to what you believe. The odd one out is really the Western tradition. Even in Western religions like ancient Rome, ancient Greece, a lot of the mystery cults, even in early Christianity, it's what you do that counts. Judaism is what your daily life is, whether you keep a kosher kitchen, your community engagement. It's what you do that defines who you are, what your calendar is, and how you organize your life. That is what classifies religion. The emphasis on belief is a Western saying that's, to my understanding, from a perspective of world religions. It's really the odd one out. The definition of religion really is what you do.

Sufal Deb 12:05

Jumping over a little bit to the Asian countries, how has Daoism influenced developments in Chinese society as a whole?

Livia Kohn 12:12

It's been there. It's a way of relating to nature, it's a way of—it's a "counter-culture" in many ways. The tendency, even in very ancient China, is for the people in power to be very pushy, to take away from the poor, to start wars, and to be aggressive. Daoists have always been the counter-balancing point there and say, "Hey, take a step back, relax, you can do the same thing but do it a little more slowly. Why do you have to have progress at all? Why do you have to have a bigger country? You're already wealthy." It's a—it's always been this sort of balancing factor in the emphasis on moving along with things, of looking at—Feng Shui would be an example where you're really consciously working to integrate

with nature, and to have a look at the whole context and fit into things, smooth things out. It's a balancing point towards more power hungry and aggressive tendencies.

Marvin Yan 13:22

Just before we jump into more of the longevity based questions, could you clarify what Feng Shui is because I feel like people will just think it's moving furniture around and they'll have some sort of misconception. Do you mind explaining it?

Livia Kohn 13:32

Okay, Feng Shui, the term means wind and water. Originally, it goes back to burial sites. It goes back to the belief that the souls and spirits of the dead have an impact on the fate of the living and if the dead are not buried correctly, they're not happy or not content and then they start haunting people. How it started out was that you had to put the burial or the site of the tomb in a specific direction, have specific measurements for it, have the right time of interment, and so on and so forth. Then, people expanded that idea towards the houses of the living and they found that if you orient your house in a certain way, in a certain direction, like facing South, you get the sunlight and your spirits are up and you feel better. If you have a little hillside behind you, then that gives you are feeling of protection. If there are certain kinds of trees around, it gives you shade and it gives you smooth energy. If you have a little river in front, some lake or a little water, then it gives you that feeling of being connected to the water and it also gives you nourishment. So, gradually they started to find ways to place houses into the environment that would not disrupt the environment.

The other Part of Feng Shui is the understanding that every organism is like a human body, the earth is a living organism. It's not just dead rocks. They talk about the hills looking like a tiger or a dragon. You don't want your house right on the nose of the dragon, because the dragon might get annoyed and there might be an earthquake or it might have a landslide. You don't want it on the tail of the tiger. You're looking at hills as having their own power, in other words. The other concept in this is that, like human bodies have blood vessels and arteries, the earth also has arteries. You don't want to interrupt the flow of energy through the earth. You want to place your house in such a way that it fits in. Then, once you have your house then you ask what's in the compound, you may have more than one building. You arrange your buildings in a particular way that creates harmony, so that your kitchen is not right next to your toilet. You have certain basic things. Then, once you have furniture, you place it in such a way that gives you maximum satisfaction and well-being. The idea is that the *Chi*, the vital energy, flows through the space in the most possible harmonious—most harmonious manner.

Sufal Deb 16:32

Before we jump into longevity, again, I just wanted to ask, before we live longer, we have to understand what is death? How does Daoism view death? Is it an end, a transition, a state?

Livia Kohn 16:43

Yes, well, death is something that I have to go a little further afield because modern science has recognized—I have a book which just came out, it's called *Taming Time*. It talks about—one of the chapters is about biological time, or a bio-temporality, which is the time as it flows in the human body. In that chapter, I talk about how, in the early stages of the universe, and also on the quantum level of existence that is still there, there is no such thing as death. There's only transforming, transmutation of energies. Then, even when you get to the stars and the big, galactic entities, you don't have death, either. You have cessation. They end. At some point the fuel runs out and they go supernova, explode or just dissolve, but there's no death. Then, even on the human plane, like plants, they keep on changing. They don't—we talk of them as dying, but they really don't. Death, people have found, is directly linked, in terms of evolution, to sexual reproduction. The idea of having entities or beings of two sexes coming together and reproducing is a very handy one in terms of evolution, because you have two gene pools and they come together. Those genes mix and if there's a certain gene that hasn't been functioning well enough, it can be gotten rid of really quickly. Mutations are easy in sexual reproduction. The downside of sexual reproduction is that the organism that develops then has this built-in aging pattern and eventually there's death.

This is very highly relevant to the Daoist situation because that's how Daoists see immortality or longevity. They see the life expectancy we have as a function of sexual energy. They call this *Jing*, which we translate as vital essence. Vital essence is something that we receive at birth genetically through the parents, but it's coming from heaven and earth. Everybody has a certain amount of gene or primordial/original parent given, heaven given vital essence. Then, as we live, we interact with our environment and we interact on the basis of *Chi*. *Chi* vital energy comes into our bodies through air, food, drink, and also social and sexual interaction. Each time we interact, that *Chi* that we take in mingles with the *Jing*, with the essence we already have. Then, it gets expanded as we live. Over a natural life cycle—and that's been described first in the *Chinese Medical Classic, the Internal Classic of Internal Medicine of the Yellow Emperor, The Huangdi Neijing*. In this text, it talks about how, for females it's a seven year cycle and for males it's an eight year cycle. In the first five, seven or eight years, the gene gradually starts to awaken. Then it gets more—it starts to really arouse in what we would call puberty, it reaches its high point in the 20s and maybe early 30s, and then it starts to decline. So, by the 60s and 70s, it's used up and once the *Jing* is gone, you die. So *Jing* is like, which is sexual energy. Vital essence is like the core. That's how Daoists explain longevity. It's a function of *Jing*.

Marvin Yan 20:47

As a follow up—just because I was reading about some of the Abrahamic religions, and they emphasize the body as very important in terms of reincarnation or resurrection, where it's not just the soul or mind as a concept, it's the whole person and their body. In terms of *Jing*, is that connected to the person's body or is it connected to more of their identity or soul? How important is the body in terms of Daoism?

Livia Kohn 21:10

It's essential. *Jing* is physical. *Jing* is your body. Your mind comes into it as a function. It's everything as *Chi* or energy. Your body is a slightly more condensed, grosser, thicker, slightly slower vibrating kind of *Chi* and your mind and spirit are faster, subtler, more rapidly moving forms of *Chi*, but they're closely interconnected. There's a unity there.

Marvin Yan 21:41

Okay, we talked about terms of the practicality of Daoism before and a lot of it seems like it would promote a longer life. I was wondering if people who practice Daoism, do they truly seek as long a life as possible or even immortality, or is it just that the way of life in terms of Daoism, longer life comes as a consequence, because of that?

Livia Kohn 22:02

It's a mutual relationship, it varies. One of the big characteristics of Daoism is that it's highly individualized. A very typical pattern is that somebody is living their life happily and then some kind of ailment comes in. Whether it's because of an accident, or whether it's because of some other event, some inherited thing, or whether it's because of their lifestyle, whatever it is, and there is this big ailment that comes in. They try this medicine and that medicine, some other medicine, and it doesn't work. Then, they come in contact with some person who practices *Qigong* and lo and behold, very small steps, but things change. Then it's like, "Oh okay, what's going on here?" and they start to learn about *Chi*, and then they restore their health. Once they get to that point, it's like, "Hey, I'm enjoying these practices, they're very good for me, I have a lifestyle that's sustainable, why not keep going." Your level of health is at this level, and you've dipped down and gotten sick. You worked your way back up to your original health level, but then why stop there, so you keep going and so you attain longevity. Some people from the word go, they're healthy already. They've heard about it, they read literature, and they say, "Ooh, this is fascinating stuff. Let me try it." They don't have the sickness, they just are getting interested and then they start to practice. Some people grow up in a Daoist community, and they're regularly doing *Qigong*, because that's just what they do and then longevity is a consequence of that. They're already Daoists, so there's no one size fits all.

Sufal Deb 23:55

What exactly are some of the longevity techniques that Daoists follow or practice, you just mentioned, *Qigong*.

Livia Kohn 24:01

We classify the techniques in a number of different ways. There's the healing techniques. For people who have a compromised health situation, you do use essentially methods of Chinese medicine, there's acupuncture, there's herbs. It's usually dietary prescriptions, there's gentle exercises and then some kind of basic meditation. Then, sexual control is a big deal too. Then, you move into the more—they already have attained health and again, you do the same thing. You have breathing practices where you consciously

breathe deeply was from your belly. There's gentle movements, and some are standing practices. Most *Qigong* is in the standing position. But you can also have lying down practices, seated practices, there's meditations where you internally move the *Chi* through the different organs or you visualize your organs in different colors to put different energies. You can talk to your organs and say, "Hello heart, how are you today? You know, are you happy?" It's like, "Yes!"

There's dietary methods. The thing is that the methods are always very similar, but the emphasis shifts and the modality shifts. For example, if you're looking at diet, ordinary Chinese people eat a lot of rice. Everything is cooked. They eat meat, usually chicken, pork and beef. If you're in a health situation where you need to improve your health, then people may tell you, depending on what exactly your condition is, why you should eat more sour foods, or you should eat less oily foods, or you should eat—but you're essentially still eating a normal diet. But once you get to the longevity level, you start to be a little more selective and you go easier on the grain. There's a practice called *Qigong*, which means avoiding grain, so you go easier on the grain and you go heavier on the vegetables and you eat lighter overall. You may go easier on the meat.

If you're a Daoist and you join the Daoist community, you become vegetarian. Daoists also avoid what they call the five pungent vegetables. They are five vegetables that are all members of the allium family. They include garlic, ginger, and three different kinds of onions, like regular onions, shallots, and scallions. Those, of course, are mainstays in Chinese regular diet. Here, you're actually breaking away from your mainstream society. The main reason they're given for this is that all these onions, garlic and ginger are very warming. They're increase young quality energy, which is rising, aggressive, pushy, going out there, which is good if you're—in your daily life, you're a laborer and you need to work hard. But if you're sitting in a monastery and all you do is do breathing exercises and sit in meditation, you don't really need that much young energy. On the contrary, it would be counterproductive because you'd be wanting to run around and do stuff. So, you have that level and then once you get to immortality, people switch over into periods of fasting, where they systematically reduce their food intake. They switch from vegetables to vegetable broth. They use a lot of herbal supplements. Daoists, in particular, are very fond of the pine tree. Then things like ginger, which they eat in the regular diet and take out in the monastic diet, comes back in but as an herbal supplement, as a very specific supplement for keeping the organs active.

Then, they get to the point where they just can live on *Chi*. Where they just inhale like a breatharian, that some of the people talk about, you're using breath and air and just some water to survive. Some people do this kind of practice, like every year for like a month, going a semi retreat, because as you're going into this, your body gets weaker, and it adjusts. But once you get to the point where you don't need food anymore, the body starts to get active and quite strong. But there's a transition period. Coming out of it also you have to be very careful, you can't eat too much, too fast, too soon. That's an example for diet where you use diet on the different levels and you're still using similar

stuff like ginger or other vegetables, but you're using them differently depending on your level.

Marvin Yan 29:00

On the topic of ingesting and non-ingesting, we were doing some reading and we came across—I didn't think we'd come across it. We came across alchemy and Daoism, which was very strange because alchemy—I was reading they took some concoctions which they knew contained, maybe I think mercury, which we know ends your life. How does that relate to the concept of immortality and longevity?

Livia Kohn 29:21

Yes, there's a couple of different things. There's physiological or operative or outer alchemy, and then there's internal energy-based alchemy. We have two different types. The one you're just talking about is external or operative chemical alchemy, which started as a way of actually trying to become immortal. The idea was—it's a fairly primitive idea, but the idea was that because gold as a metal does not decay and does not change, if you ingest—and they still do this, they have like little gold flakes, which you can buy. It looks like a salt shaker, but it's gold flakes and you put a little gold flakes on your rice. That's a Han dynasty thing, around 200 BC they came up with this, that if you start to ingest some of these metals, then you can transform your internal system and become more like this metal, which of course, it doesn't really work, but that was the idea. Mercury comes into it in the same way and they did actually—to preserve corpses, they put mercury in the arteries as a way of preservation.

Then, alchemists came up with this substance called cinnabar. Cinnabar is a mineral, it's a sand, and it's sort of a reddish color. It's found on the banks of rivers, and you take the mineral and make it—powder it into a sand, and you put it in a pot, you heat it up, and it divides into Mercury Sulfide. It transforms into Mercury Sulfide. But if you keep on heating it, it reconstitutes itself and it becomes cinnabar again. This whole idea of this substance that has one form, and it transforms into something else and then it reconstitutes was like this model of reconstituting your body, your identity, and yourself in a new way. In other words, immortality here is not the continuation of longevity, but a complete break. It's like you want to be something completely different. You're transforming yourself into something entirely alien, essentially. You're taking these substances and yes, your physical body dies, but some spiritual entity continues in an immortal form. Then this whole complex gets linked with the many deities that I talked about earlier, how Daoists have these many heavens, and you have these gods in these heavens. The belief was that you had a hierarchy of deities in those various heavens. Like every hierarchy, there's job openings every so often and so people would be invited by the celestial administration to join their ranks. The practitioners would go into ecstatic states, like a shamanic journey, and they would travel with their soul and meet all these other worldly entities.

There's all kinds of psychedelics and drugs involved in that too, which are also body and mind altering. There's that whole part. Then eventually, somebody would receive a summons, an order from the celestials to take the elixir and get yourself up here. It's like a way—I don't know if you'll remember this. It was many years ago, there was a sect in California called Heaven's Gate. They all had cut off their hair, they looked unisex and then they said, "Oh, we're now moving on, we have connections to this otherworldly entity, to this galaxy out there." Then they all drank Kool Aid or whatever it is they did, some chemical. The whole group committed, essentially, ritual suicide with the understanding that they'd be transported to this other galaxy. I remember how everybody was totally outraged. We're like, "Well... Daoists... Yeah, that's what Daoists do, I mean, that's one way of doing it." It wasn't all that alien to us. But that's the kind of thinking where alchemy fits into the immortality spectrum.

Sufal Deb 33:58

Obviously, Daoism has been around for a very long time, over the years, all the way to the 21st century today. Are there any major changes? How has longevity techniques changed over the years?

Livia Kohn 34:08

There have been a few changes, a lot of the practices are still very similar. I mean, obviously, you now have—your whole diet situation has changed since you can transport food longer distances. You have imported foods from other places. You have—but they did—even then they had pill forms and powder forms and tinctures, so that hasn't changed a whole lot. The technology has had some input, but not all that much. I mean, Daoists still try to travel to all kinds of different mountains and they do a lot of walking, as opposed to taking airplanes or buses, so that's pretty much stable. The internal practices are pretty much the same. We don't have an actual operative alchemy like the kind we're talking about where people mix up arsenic and mercury. We don't actually have that anymore. That was phased out about 1000 years ago and if people are still doing it, it's underground.

Sexual techniques, which involve retaining—getting aroused, but then moving the arousal energies into the body rather than allowing it to exit the body. Those are still around, but again, semi-underground. There's not... if anything, the political climate forces people to do this in secret. That's a big change. In terms of the actual practices, what we do have is the *Qigong* forms and the forms of *Tai Chi*. *Tai Chi*, *Tai Chi ch'üan*, is a martial art that developed in the late—in the early 17th century at the time of the Manchu Conquest. That has recently been really integrated into the Daoist curriculum. That's a relatively new development. Every mountain and every monastery has their own form of *Tai Chi*. There are a lot of new forms that are showing up like the different kinds of *Qigong*. But I don't see that big of a difference, because there may have been other kinds of physical practices that they did, but nobody ever wrote them down so we don't know about them. Tradition has been pretty stable, really modulating itself depending on the political climate and the cultural center.

Marvin Yan 36:53

Going into the future—because we spoke to some scientists, and they each had their own prediction of when life extension technology would come about—the question that everybody is anticipating is, would Daoists be accepting of life extension technologies? Would it impact their practices in any way or would they reject it?

Livia Kohn 37:12

What exactly are we talking about? Growth hormones, or I mean ...

Marvin Yan 37:19

Say, the seven hallmarks of aging could be cured, or they weren't a thing anymore by 2050, where death by biological age no longer existed. Would Daoists—would they want to engage in that sort of technology or therapy?

Livia Kohn 37:34

I'm sure there would be some Daoists that would and some Daoists that wouldn't. Like any other group, I know quite a few Daoists who have—the example I can give you is the whole internet technology. I have—one of my people who I work with is a *Tai Chi* master. I publish books with Three Pines Press, and he likes every book that I produce, he's very interested in everything. He always gets the emails, so he gets this far. But then he insists on ordering the book and sending me a cheque. Then the other day, we had some issue and the cheque didn't arrive, so someone said, "Can't you use some other means?" He says "No, like all Daoists, I'm technologically incapacitated, and I can't do this. The only way is hard copies. I can't handle it." It's like, "What do you mean, like all Daoists?" There are other Daoists who are top level on the cyber world and would do all kinds of things online, who are very active, and have embraced the internet. For me, one of the arts of the immortals is to be in two places at once. I love that, because the internet allows you to do that. Here I am in the Pacific Northwest and I'm also doing a talk with people on the East Coast, and it's like, "Yay!" So, I'm sure that some Daoists will say, "Yes, this is a very good idea. Let's work with this." Some Daoists will say, "Oh, my God, no way!"

Another example, if I may continue along this line for another moment, is the modern developments of Daoism. We now have a bunch of Daoists in this—in America, who have trained with various *Qigong* and Daoist masters in China and do their own thing. We have several temples that are being built, many by Americans, some by Chinese who have moved here. In my own scholarly community, there's a whole segment of scholars who just radically ignore these people and who say, "No! These are not Daoists. In order to be Daoist, you have to have this lineage or that lineage and this certification, that certification or this ritual or that ritual. No, this is not Daoism." It's like, excuse me? How is it not Daoism? It's just the religion changes, people move to other places. They pick up new methods. I mean, you can show historically how in the Song and Yuan dynasties, they did the same thing. People moved to new places, and they created new methods,

and some developed followers. Lo and behold, you had a whole new sect or a whole new school. But again, some say, "Oh, no, no, this is not Daoism." Some say "Yes, you know, this is the new development, this is perfectly fine." You have—different people will work differently.

Sufal Deb 40:47

Absolutely, it's a little bit of gatekeeping that people have to get over.

Livia Kohn 40:52

Yes, exactly.

Sufal Deb 40:54

This is our final question before we wrap up with our outro. Do you think there are any ramifications of radical life extension? If we were to extend life by, say, 500-600 years?

Livia Kohn 41:03

Oh, yeah, I mean, that's a huge social issue. I mean, already prolongevity—prolongevity is already happening. I don't have—there's a volume, I think it's called prolongevity. I have an article on how Daoists would relate to this and how Daoist practices fit into that. You already have issues that people have multiple families. They have families in their 20s, families in their 40s, families in their 60s, and they had another one in their 80s. You get this whole complexity, the whole social security—whole idea of retirement is like, "Excuse me, I'm 65 but I don't feel like 65. I feel like I'm 40, and I've got another 50 years to go." So you have another career, you have multiple careers. The whole idea that you go to college and you enter your work life by your mid 20s, that's going to be obsolete. I mean, why not go to college for 50 years, and then have 50 years and another 50 years. Everything is shifting if people live longer. We're not even looking at 500 years, which totally boggles the imagination, at least for me. But if you're looking at say 120, 130 years, everything shifts. You'd have children—I have friends who are in their 80s, and their great grandchildren are starting to go to college. You're looking at what used to be two or three generations maximum, now you're looking at five or six. The other part of this is as technology moves on, there's less manual labor that needs to be done and less work. So, you need to figure out how to keep people not only financially supported, which then all of a sudden the government starts to pay money to people to live, but also how to keep them entertained. They need to do stuff and people don't just want to watch TV, they do want to be creative and productive. There's many, many shifts that are already starting to help. That is a big change coming. Yeah.

Marvin Yan 43:11

Whether it be Daoism, immortality, or even how to send you a cheque or whether to e-transfer you. What's one thing you really want people to take away from today?

Livia Kohn 43:19

Well, I'd like them to take away that Daoism plays an important role in this discussion, that it has a lot to offer in terms of not only whole conceptualization of immortality, but also that the actual concrete practices that many Daoist practices are very accessible. They can be used on all the different levels. If you're already healthy, you can become healthier. If you have any physical ailments, you can use the methods to get better and it will help with life extension. There's a spirituality there that's very relevant. Daoism is a very flexible religion, so if you're more philosophically inclined, you have all that. If you're more physically inclined, you have all those practices. There is a plethora—a lot of organizational groups too, that you could join. It's a very vibrant, viable, and also cheerful religion. Daoists are very life-affirming. There's none of this, "my big guilt", like in Catholicism, and there's none of this "Oh everything is suffering," like the basis of Buddhism. It's like, "Yay, we're alive and we're having fun!" So, very positive, which is one of the things that attracted me to it.

Marvin Yan 44:34

Right, join the party.

Livia Kohn 44:35

Join the party. It's a fun religion, and so, one of the main characters that are widely venerated today in Daoism are the Eight Immortals, and they're a group of seven guys and a woman and they're just having fun. I mean, they go out and party and they have magical powers, they have jokes, they play tricks and they're funny. It's an enjoyable, life-affirming religion. That's what I would like them to take away. If they want to learn more about it, we have many books on Daoism on our publishing company, which is called Three Pines Press, you can go to threepinespress.com. My latest book is called *Taming Time*, and it talks about many different ways of looking at time, both comparative and in the Daoist tradition. And if you ever want to go hiking in Japan, contact me and that would be great.

Sufal Deb 45:33

I feel like you already answered my question, I was going to ask you where people can find more about you. There you go. For all of you guys listening, all links or things we described will be in the description below. Once again, thank you, Livia, for coming on to our podcast, *Im a Mortal*, your source for all things immortal. We really appreciate you taking the time to come and speak with us.

Livia Kohn 45:49

Well, thank you so much for having me. It was a great pleasure to join you.

[MUSIC – *Im a Mortal* Theme]