Health-preserving Thought of "Huai Nan-zi"

Guozhe Yang  
School of Marxism  
Wuhan University of Science and Technology  
Wuhan, China

Abstract—With the continuous improvement of living standard today, people pay more and more attention to health preserving, and Taoist health keeping is our most well-known health-keeping thought. As a great masterpiece of Huang-lao Taoism, the book "Huai Nan-zi" is compiled by the the king of Huainan in Western Han Dynasty Liu An and his companions. It deserves to be called an encyclopedia-like treatise, which implies abundant health preserving thought. It holds that body, spirit, and energy are the three major elements of human life, together constituting the human life, and the three are indispensable. Therefore, this article discusses the health keeping thoughts contained in "Huai Nan-zi" from three aspects: body preserving, spirit preserving and energy preserving.

Keywords—Huai Nan-zi; health preserving; body preserving; spirit preserving; energy preserving

I. INTRODUCTION

Both in ancient times or modern times, people value their lives. In ancient times, Taoism treasures the life mostly and Taoism also regards immortality as the ultimate pursuit. As a Taoist works, "Huai Nan-zi" contains a large amount of content about health preserving. On the structure of life, "Huai Nan-zi" puts forward the idea of "Body is the house of the life, energy is dominator, and spirit is full of the whole body. If one of them is absent, the person will fall ill due to the loss of balance.1 This idea means three major elements of life are the body, spirit and energy, and each of them has their own status and role, so losing either of them will cause damage of the three. Therefore, health preserving must start from these three aspects, and none of them can be neglected. We should take full account of body, spirit and energy, and make target to each of them. This is the idea mentioned in "Huai Nan-zi original Tao training" that "Therefore, sages will preserve their energy, weak their spirit and exercise their bodies".

II. BODY PRESERVING

What is the body? For people, body is people's shape and body, including human's skeletal muscle, internal organs, skin and tendons and so on. In Huai Nan-zi, the body is "the house of live"2 as well as the carriers of the existence of life. Human life cannot exist without body, and body is the basis of the existence of life. Therefore, health preserving should pay attention to body that is the basis for health preserving. "Huai Nan-zi" believes that preserving the body require us to "keep the body comfortable".3 In "Huai Nan-zi", the interpretation of "comfortable" is the "there is nothing with the body"4, which means that one can often avoid being interrupted by other things so as to achieve peaceful, calm and discard all desires and worries from one's mind, instead of being tired of external objects. Overwork will result in "the body will be damaged if one doesn't rest after overwork"5. Although "Huai Nan-zi" holds that "the body" should be peaceful and calm without overwork. At the same time, however, it also believes that "preserving the body" should combine movement and quiescence to play the role of moderate sports in preserving the body.

"Huai Nan-zi" mentions "Breath can help people spit filthy gas and inhale fresh air, like a bear hanging, a bird stretching the neck, a duck floating, an ape jumping, an owl looking around, a tiger looking back. The people who do such actions just want to maintain their body, but the real person does not have to worry about these techniques."6 It suggest people to breath to exhale dirty gas and inhale fresh gas, like a bear hanging, a bird stretching, a duck floating, an apes jumping, an owl watching around and a tiger looking back. These are all done by the the people who preserve the body. The methods mentioned in "Huai Nan-zi" are actually the most important way of Taoist to preserve health by exercising one limb. It develops the two kinds of guiding action mentioned in "Zhuangzi deliberate": "breath help people spit the filthy gas in chest to absorb the fresh air, like a black bear climbing quotes and a bird flying wings, which is good for longevity; the people who do like this are people good at health preserving. This is what the long-life people like Peng Zu pursues." (Bears hanging and birds stretching) to the above mentioned six animals. So what is the guide? Guide is the guidance of breath (respiratory exercise). Leadship refers to the guidance of body (body exercise). This is similar to the hygienic gymnastics we do now, which is a basic method of preserving the body.

It is not enough to preserve the body only by exercising the body. Food is the paramount necessity of the people, so the food is the main guarantee that maintains the normal life activities of the human body as well as an indispensable part

1 Huai Nan-zi original Tao training
2 Huai Nan-zi original Tao training
3 Huai Nan-zi interpretation training
4 Huai Nan-zi interpretation training
5 Huai Nan-zi Spiritual Training
6 Huai Nan-zi Spiritual Training
of human life. Therefore, the diet is essential for human health as well as for health preserving. Regular diet, ensuring food safety, and supplying the nutrition needed by the body through food can play a role of health preserving. Conversely, if the diet is not regular, the food used is not hygienic, and some of the basic nutrition needed by the body cannot be met, it will harm human health. Therefore, on the aspect of “preserving health”, there are a lot of ideas in Huai Nan-zi about how should people eat food and adjust diet, which has reached the goal of health preserving. "Huai Nan-zi Spiritual Training" warn people that "Eating all kinds of delicious together will make the taste out of order." It warns people that the disease comes from the mouth, so we should pay attention to diet. In addition, we must also note that we should not eat too much or less, and pay attention to proper diet. Eating too much will aggravate the gastrointestinal burden of the people. In the long run, it will lead to the occurrence of obesity and some diseases. "Huai Nan-zi Tai Zai Xun" says that "eating too fat and too much but still desiring to eat is harmful to health preserving." "Huai Nan-zi" thinks the human body is a small world, and our small world must be compatible with the big natural world. Therefore, people's daily life should comply with the law of yin and yang changes in the world. "Huai Nan-zi time training" gives people a detailed account of production and living arrangements and issues requiring attention in the twelve months of the year, such as "in the second month of autumn...... people should all come indoor since cold air comes together so that people can't bear " In September, the second month of autumn, the cold air invades. People should conform to the natural changes in the world, and come indoors to avoid the cold. Another example is “in the second month of winter ...in this month, the day is shortest and yin and yang fight with each other. Man should fast and must hide his residence to make the body peaceful. One must abandon voice and sex and forbid the desire to calm the body and settle the mood." 8 In the second month of winter, November in lunar calendar, daytime is short while night is long. Yin qi and yang qi confront each other. Since this solar term, Yang qi begin to rise. At this time, yin qi is in a period of great prosperity, while yang qi just starts to grow. People should control their desire and calm down their bodies to stabilize their own spirit, and maintain yin essence so as to gradually increase yin in the body. Just because we conform to the changing laws of the yin and yang in the world and have a regular daily life, we can reduce the risk of illness or injuries caused by not adapting to the external environment so that we can achieve good health and reach the goal of longevity.

For people, no matter how people pay attention to diet, exercise and regulate daily life, they will inevitably get sick. Therefore, for the health preserving people, preventing disease and treating disease as early as possible is particularly important. Therefore, people often underestimate trivial matters and neglect them so much that they regret it after catastrophe. People begin to worry after disaster comes, which is like to seek good medicine after being in critical condition. Even if there are such doctors Bian Que and Yu Xuan, it is also difficult to cure the illness. 9Therefore, for those small problems, whether it is a trouble or a disease, we should pay attention to it even if it is small. We need to take preventive measures; otherwise it cannot be saved if it becomes disaster. If we get such a serious illness even superb doctors like Bian Que and Yu Fu cannot save us. Therefore, we must take preventive measures as the mainstay of health preserving. Prevention is greater than cure, but we must promptly treat if the disease is prevented effectively.

III. SPIRIT PRESERVING

"Spirit" is a very important ancient philosophical category in Chinese culture. At the same time, it also plays an important role in health preserving science. Taoism school attaches great importance to it and advocates preserving spirit. Zhuangzi thinks that "people live because of the gathering of spirit. If spirit scatters, people will die." 10 In the opinion of the Taoist school, "spirit" is a crucial link in the process of Tao creating everything. Taoism believes that "Tao" is the ultimate root of all things in the world, but "Taoism" cannot directly produce everything in

---

8 Huai Nan-zi time training
9 Huai Nan-zi the world training
10 outer chapters of Zhuangzi northern travel
the universe. It must be realized through the key medium of "Qi".

Huai Nan Zi pointed out that "Tao" is the natural law and the origin of the universe as well as the ultimate source of all things in the universe, while "spirit" is the direct root of all things. The generation of all things is due to the constant change of "spirit." "Huai Nan-zi" interprets "spirit" producing everything like this: "积阳之热气为火，火气之精者为日；积阴之寒气为水，水气之精者为月；日月之淫气为风，地受日月星辰，地受水潦尘埃。" Not only the sun, the moon and the weather in the universe are caused by "spirit", but people are also created by essence of water is the moon; the quintessence of the sun and the moon are stars, the sky contains the sun, the moon and stars, while the ground accept water and dust. "天之清气，怒者为风；地之含气，和者为雨。" The key of energy preserving is "internal preservation" of the body and the spirit are born by the spirit, so it is said that "spirit" is the essence of man. Therefore, although preserving body is very important for health preserving, the lack of spirit preserving cannot achieve true health preserving. We cannot indulge in sensual pleasures, but should pay attention to self-cultivation.

The specific method of preserving spirit is mentioned in the "time training" that people's diet and daily life must be consistent with the law of spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

IV. PRESERVING ENERGY

The theory of preserving energy of "Huai Nan-zi" inherits the theory of preserving energy of Taoism in pre-Qin period and develops its own unique theory. According to Huainanzi, the body, spirit and energy are a unified whole. It advocates that the three should be preserved together, but emphasize that "energy is the master of life", which means energy is the master of life and dominate the life activity of human beings. It believes that "taking energy as domination, the body will get benefit while taking body as domination, the energy will be harmed". Thus we can see that "Huai Nan-zi" considers that man is dominated by energy, so health preserving should be based on energy preserving.

The key of energy preserving is "internal preservation" of the spirit rather than "foreign exceeding". So how can we achieve "internal preservation"? The most important thing is "quiet", which means to keep silence and nothingness. This is the nature of Tao. Doing nothing is the fundamental approach of preserving spirit. According to the description of "Huai Nan-zi", to do nothingness can proceed from the following aspects:

A. To Control the Desires

The so-called abstinence is controlling desires. "Huai Nan-zi" inherits the spirit of Taoism, thinking that waht lead to mental disillusionment of people is the desire. The desire has been created to make people distracted so that people cannot rest their mind and cannot be idle. And the generation of desire is not only from its own reasons but also due to the external factors, so people must control these desires if they want to be quiet.
However, the "abstinence" mentioned in "Huai Nan-zi" refers to controlling the excessive desires, namely controlling "appetite". "五色乱目, 使目不明; 五声乱耳, 使耳不聪; 五味乱口, 使口爽伤; 趣舍滑心, 使行飞扬。" mentioned in "Huainanzi" proves that preserving energy by abstinence is justified and necessary. Spiritual Training". It shows that preserving energy by abstinence surely have to go downhill." mentioned in "Huainanzi". On the contrary, if the spirit collapses or fails, the body will become unhealthy. The body is composed of essence, energy, spirit and mind. If it can be maintained, the heart and preserving energy. That is "energy preserving health. No matter where you are, you have to maintain a good mood, to prevent health preserving. Thus, to preserve energy, people should not let sadness, likes and dislikes be accumulated; too much likes and dislikes will bring about disaster. Therefore, it is said that joy and anger, sadness, likes and dislikes are not conducive to health preserving. Thus, to preserve energy, people should not let changes of external objects to lead to emotional fluctuations. No matter where you are, you have to maintain a good mood, in order to achieve "quiet" and reach the purpose of maintaining the heart and preserving energy. That is "energy is composed of essence, energy, spirit and mind. If it can be stabilized and strengthened, the body will become healthier. On the contrary, if the spirit collapses or fails, the body will surely have to go downhill." mentioned in "Huainanzi Spiritual Training". It proves that preserving energy by "quietness" mentioned above is justified and necessary.

V. CONCLUSION

Health preserving thought of "Huai Nan-zi" inherits and develops the Taoism health preserving thought, which plays an important role in the development of Taoism. "Huai Nan-zi" discusses its health preserving thought and has its own unique health preserving ideas. The health preserving idea of Huai Nan-zi holds that the three aspects of "body", "spirit" and "energy" should not be considered at the same time instead of being neglected. As mentioned above, body is the house of the life, energy is the dominator, and spirit is full of the whole body.. The three will be injured if one is out of position, the "body" is the basis because there is no life if there is no body, let alone health preserving; "spirit" is a transition because it is in the "body" and provides life with pillar; "energy" is the root, because "energy" makes human life meaningful. The three are an entirety, so we need to combine the three to achieve the purpose of health preserving. And "Huai Nan-zi" reminds people that we need not put too much emphasis on health when preserving health, which means we should not preserve health for health preserving.

The health preserving thought in Huai Nan-zi, especially the idea of preserving energy has given descendants a good revelation. Now with the improvement of living standards and medical standards, we can do better in body preserving and spirit preserving. However, the serious materialization, excessive pursuit of fame and fortune, faster pace of life in our society lead us to lack energy preserving. Therefore, we should be "quiet" down to preserve our energy. Only in this way can we achieve the purpose of keeping in good health, and our body will become healthier. Although some of the theories in Huai Nan-zi may not be suitable for current society and some of them are not correct from the perspective of current level of scientific development, on the whole, as we deepen the study to the health preserving thought of "Huainanzi", the more and more value it contains will be discovered and will play a positive role in our life and health.

REFERENCES