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Foundations Of Daoist Practice

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Daoists who wish to gather medicines and escape the chaos of the world become recluses. Of these, there is no one who does not enter the mountains. If you don't know the correct methods, you will meet with calamity and injury…Many of those who sought longevity in the end died trying.—Ge Hong, Master Embracing Simplicity (287-347)

Daoist cultivation involves a commitment to self-refinement and transformation, to consistent and prolonged practice. It involves vigilance. Daoist cultivation inspires us to overcome our conditioning and habituation. As Daoists, we endeavor to realize our innate connection with the Dao, the way in which we are and can become *embodiments* of the Dao. In this respect, it is important not to mistake *wuwei* ("nonaction") and *ziran* ("suchness") as the reproduction of habituation or as a justification for atrophy. One's innate nature is one's specific endowment from the Dao, and the fulfillment of Daoist training will manifest differently in different individuals. This may be compared to an ecosystem, in which the overall health of the system is expressed in and dependent on diversity.

From a Daoist perspective, the Dao is understood as Source of all that is, unnamable mystery, all-pervading numinosity, and cosmological process. As Daoists, our most important orientation or ultimate concern is living in attunement with the Dao, that which is identified as sacred within the Daoist tradition. Daoist cultivation is an all-pervasive existential approach, wherein life is our practice and practice is our life. Daoist cultivation also locates us in a soteriological system, a religious system that aims at realization, participation, and/or liberation variously defined. The models of Daoist attainment, established, modified and confirmed throughout some 2,000 years of history, are many and varied. They address various dimensions of human existence: embodiment, psychology, diet, meditation, ethics, medicine, ritual, and so forth. In our own training, we are interested in how Daoist principles and practices may inform the search for authentic humanity and clarify our potential to become realized beings. Daoist cultivation develops a sense of aliveness. Here there is no way around a simple fact: there are levels of consciousness and degrees of actualization. This is a way to map our own experience and internal condition, rather than a way to judge or compare ourselves to others. For those who know this insight as their own or hear their own voice speaking through these words, only one choice remains: to engage in self-cultivation and commit to self-transformation. In short, we seek to be Daoists, those who embody the Dao, through our being and presence.

Daoist cultivation may be mapped and applied under what we refer to as the "Nine Foundations" (*jiugen*):

Cosmology and theology
Astro-geomancy
Practice principles and guidelines
Health and longevity practices
Dietetics
Meditation
Ethics
Scripture study
Ritual

These parameters of practice locate us in a Daoist religious worldview and training system as well as in a distinctively Daoist cosmos. The Nine Foundations require dedicated and sustained application. They are listed in a certain order, but that order depends on one's perspective. In Daoist training, there is a constant oscillation and interrelationship among self, community, world and cosmos. One may begin by identifying these networks of relational influences, by locating oneself within particular fields and places,

or by exploring the inner landscape of the Daoist body. From our perspective, Daoist practices absent of Daoist principles and extracted from a Daoist religious context may be beneficial, but they are beneficial in a different way than if undertaken within that context, within Daoist communities and Daoist places. We say this out of a concern for and experience of the possibility of a Daoist religious way of life, a life rooted in depth and integrity (or integration).

The discussion that follows is meant to be an outline and an overview, not a comprehensive training manual. It is intended to direct and inspire deeper and more authentic Daoist practice, for ourselves, our community, and members of the Daoist tradition. Without personal commitment and responsibility, there can be no authentic community; the vitality and well-being of the Daoist body as a religious community rests on each Daoist's personal practice. The same is true of our own being. What is most important is reverence for the Dao, understanding and respect for the religious tradition which is Daoism, and commitment to a Daoist way of life. This involves dedicated and prolonged practice, and observation of our own internal conditions is essential. Honesty rectifies delusion, deception and disorientation.

COSMOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

The foundational Daoist understanding of cosmogony (emergence of the cosmos) and cosmology (underlying principles and patterns of the cosmos) centers on "correlative cosmology" or "systematic correspondences," on a worldview based on yin-yang interaction and the Five Phases (*wuxing*). Here it should be noted that yinyang and wuxing are not Daoist per se; rather, they are part of what could be labeled "traditional Chinese cosmology," which was incorporated into the worldview of certain Daoist movements and classical Chinese medicine. Etymologically speaking, yin depicts a hill covered by shadows, while yang depicts a hill covered by sunlight. At the root-meaning level, yin and yang are ways of speaking about the same place at different times/moments of the day. Yin and yang are not "polar opposites" or antagonistic substances; they are, in fact, complementary cosmological principles, aspects, or forces. By extension, there are various associations: yin/female/earth/dark/heavy/turbidity/rest and yang/male/heavens/light/light/clarity/activity. What must be emphasized is that these are relative associations, not absolute characteristics. There are also varying degrees of yin and yang in every phenomenon, in each moment or experience, and in every being. The same is true of the Five Phases, which include Wood (lesser yang), Fire (greater yang), Earth, Metal (lesser yin), and Water (greater yin). These five relate to both actual substances as well as related phenomena and energetic qualities of the phases. They form a dynamic and process-oriented system, with each phase having various associations and patterns of interaction. (The associations are readily found in almost any textbook of Chinese medicine.) What this foundational cosmology means is that each human being has a particular constitution and set of patterns, which are influenced by seasons, emotions, foods, and so forth. Knowledge of the Five Phases allows aspiring Daoist adepts to remedy deficiencies and alleviate excesses, to help to establish homeostasis. This account also provides insights into basic Daoist "theology" (discourse on the sacred), which centers on emanation (differentiation without diminishment), immanence (presence in the world), and cosmological processes. In terms of the origins of the manifest universe, or the present cosmic epoch, the Dao represents primordial undifferentiation or pure potentiality. In a pre-manifest "state," the Dao is an incomprehensible and unrepresentable before. Here the Dao is understood as Source of all that is. Through a spontaneous, unintentional, and impersonal process of unfolding, the differentiation eventually leads to the emergence of materiality as well as more individualized beings and forces, including the Three Powers (*sancai*) of heaven, earth and human beings. Here the manifest universe is understood as an emanation of the Dao and the Dao is seen as immanent in the universe. From such an emanationist, immanence, and process-oriented cosmology, one may understand how Daoist theism (veneration of gods) is one way in which the Dao becomes manifest in the cosmos. Deities are simply differently differentiated aspects of the Dao, and worshipping deities is not, in and of itself, different than having reverence for the unnamable mystery which is the Dao. Such cosmology also reveals a continuum among gods, immortals, and physically-embodied beings, which may be charted on a spectrum from the most rarified (yang) to the most material (yin). As a mature religious tradition, Daoism is polytheistic, with different gods occupying a central position in different lineages, communities, temples, and individual lives. There are also differences of opinion among Daoists concerning what these "gods" represent. For instance, some Daoists believe that the Sanqing (Three Purities) are actual, personal gods to whom one can be pray, while others see them as representing the three primordial cosmic ethers.

Some classical discussions of Daoist cosmology appear in chapter 42 of the fourth-century BCE *Daode jing* (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), the fourth-century BCE chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master

Zhuang), and chapter 1 and 3 of the second-century BCE *Huainanzi* (Book of the Huainan Masters).

The Foundation of Cosmology locates us in a specific cosmos, a cosmos structured according to yin-yang and Five Phase patterns of interaction as well as containing multiple sacred realms populated by a variety of deities, immortals and Perfected. It also inspires us to contemplate and reflect upon larger issues of meaning and the place of the sacred in our lives. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we become attuned with the larger cosmological structure and sacred dimensions.

ASTRO-GEOMANCY

Astro-geomancy includes geomancy (study of landforms), astronomy (study of the stars and planets), and, occasionally, astrology (stellar divination). Geomancy is the study of earth. It is fundamentally about a sense of place. From a Daoist perspective, geomancy is a way of living in harmony with one's given region and locale. Geomancy relates to both natural and humanly-constructed environments. Fengshui, the Chinese term here approximated as "geomancy," literally means "wind" and "water." On the most basic level, Chinese geomancy is concerned with the ways in which wind and water flow through landscapes. By extension, geomancy is concerned with the smooth flow of qi through places and structures, with qi having similar movement patterns as wind and water. As Daoists, we care about places, recognizing the important influence that places exert on our lives. Each region, landscape, and living-space has specific qualities and effects. Through Daoist cultivation, one becomes more attentive and sensitive to such influences. One begins to become more energetically aware and attuned with place. Similarly, astronomical patterns affect our lives. The oscillations of sun, moon, and planets exert an influence on our being. How could the phases of the moon shift oceanic tides but fail to influence our internal states and energetic cycles? From a Daoist perspective, different seasonal and astronomical moments have specific qualities and require attentiveness. The lunar cycles, specifically the new and full moon, and the solar cycles, specifically the "twenty-four nodes," occupy a central place in Daoist training. Among the latter, the Eight Nodes, the beginning of the four seasons, solstices, and equinoxes, are especially influential. This dimension of Daoist cultivation also relates to calendrics, or the use of the calendar in our practice. Following traditional Chinese usage, the calendar is based on lunar and agricultural cycles. There are also important festival days in Daoism. The final dimension of "astro-geomancy" is astrology, and there is ambiguity

Daoist meditating on the stars of the Dipper

in the Daoist tradition about the relevance of astrology within the context of serious Daoist training. There can be no doubt that each of us was born on a specific day at a specific time and that, from a Daoist qi-based perspective, such astronomical influences have contributed to our constitutions and continue to influence our lives. However, the use of that information to "divine" future occurrences or to isolate and solidify our "personalities" is problematic in a universe (internal and external) characterized by unending transformation and flux. This Daoist view is expressed in the story of Huzi's (Gourd Master) encounter with the medium Ji Xian, as contained in chapter seven of the *Zhuangzi*. Ji Xian attempts to persuade Huzi's disciple, Liezi, that he has psychic abilities. However, Huzi shows him various states of manifestation in the transformative process, culminating in his appearance as "being not yet emerged from the ancestral." In the end, Ji Xian flees in terror, and Liezi goes into seclusion to engage in self-cultivation. Divination and prognostication are easily manipulated for duplicitous purposes. As a necessary qualification, one would do well to remember the Daoist alchemists' insight: "My fate is within me, not in the heavens" (*wo ming zai wo, buzai tian*).

A classical discussion of Daoist-related astronomy appears in chapter 3 of the second-century BCE *Huainanzi* (Book of the Huainan Masters).

The Foundation of Astro-geomancy locates us in a specific place, which is at least partially determined

by ecological relationships, seasonal changes, and astronomical shifts. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we become attuned with shifting energetic cycles and the transformative process which is the cosmos.

PRACTICE PRINCIPLES AND GUIDELINES

Daoist practice principles and guidelines, or the underlying worldview that informs our cultivation, derive from the direct personal experience of earlier Daoist adepts and religious communities, from various Daoist scriptures, and from our own practice. Every Daoist lives by and expresses specific principles, whether conscious or not. Daoist practice principles and guidelines inform and deepen our training. Without them, it is possible to practice "Daoist techniques" in a non-Daoist way. In short, Daoist practice principles and guidelines express the values, concerns, goals and ideals of Daoist training. Some important Daoist values include flexibility and yielding, patience, gentleness, clarity and stillness, concern for life and stewardship, openness, simplicity, minimalism, cosmological alignment and attunement, effortless activity, introspection, non-contention, serenity, quiet attentiveness, energetic aliveness, unrestricted circulation, carefree joy, numinous pervasion, and so forth. As expressed in chapter 52 of the *Daode jing*,

Block the passages;
Close the doorways;
Blunt the sharpness;
Loosen the tangles;
Harmonize the brightness;
Unite with the dust.

As Daoists, we base our lives in experiential understanding, recognizing the interpenetration of practice, experience and insight. We focus on internal conditions over external phenomena, while simultaneously recognizing the interdependence of "internal" and "external." This involves refining what is base or harmful into its subtle and beneficial counterpart. Daoist cultivation also involves conservation, specifically with respect to the internal Three Treasures of vital essence, qi and spirit. By loosening our attachments and entanglements, we become less dissipated and strengthen our energetic integrity. We still excess emotional and intellectual activities and overcome desire-based modes of existence. One way of thinking about this centers on expelling the Three Poisons, traditionally identified as ignorance, greed and anger, but with the modern associations of acquisitiveness, power, and reputation ("fame"). By abandoning egoistic patterns of interaction, we also transcend enculturation and habituation. We return to our inherent virtue. At times, this requires us to atone for previous misdeeds, whether through direct apology and reparation or by purifying our consciousness. In this context, complete psychosomatic well-being is both the culmination and the expression of our training. We endeavor to realize our innate natures and become pure yang beings; this involves self-refinement and manifesting a transformative presence to others. The world is a reflection of our own internal condition, and relationships are formed through patterns of resonance.

Classical discussions of Daoist practice principles and guidelines may be found in almost any scripture. Important insights appear in the fourth-century "Neiye" (Inward Training) chapter of the *Guanzi* (Book of Master Guan), fourth-century BCE *Daode jing* (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), fourth-century BCE Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang), sixth-century CE *Laojun jinglü* (Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao), eighth-century *Qingjing jing* (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness), and twelfth-century *Chongyang shiwu lun* (Fifteen Discourse of Chongyang).

The Foundation of Practice Principles provides us with guidelines that form the basis of Daoist cultivation. Daoist practice principles give us the correct orientation for practicing specific Daoist techniques. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we gain insights into what it means to follow a Daoist way of life and realize this in/as/through our own being.

HEALTH AND LONGEVITY PRACTICES

Health and longevity practices are methods that restore or maintain our foundational vitality and ensure that we live out our allotted lives. We could also refer to this dimension of Daoist training as "physical practice," as long as we remember that there is no activity from a Daoist perspective that is not psychosomatic. Traditionally speaking, health and longevity practices fall under various categories, including *yangsheng* ("nourishing life") and *daoyin* (lit., "guiding and stretching"; gymnastics), with the latter sometimes problematically referred to as "Daoist yoga." Health is foundational for more advanced training, and longevity is often a sign of accomplishment. Although Daoists tend to identify a connection between realization and energetic presence, there are always exceptions: one's fate may involve illness and/or a relatively brief lifespan.

For instance, the *Zhuangzi* records the lives of various individuals with "physical deformities," "cognitive disabilities," and those who "died prematurely." One may also become attached to one's "health" and "beauty" to such an extent that they hinder one's practice. In the context of Daoist self-cultivation, health is understood as psychosomatic integrity and wellness, specifically as the proper circulation of qi throughout the orb (organ)-meridian system. In contrast, disease is defined as stagnation, obstruction, or chronic deficiency. Health and longevity practices are employed in different ways within the Daoist tradition. Sometimes they are remedial (curative/corrective), while at other times they are methods for health maintenance and energetic refinement. However, health and longevity practices are almost invariably seen as preliminary and foundational, rather than as the culmination of Daoist training. Modern Qigong (Qi Exercises) and Taiji quan (Yin-yang Boxing) are two such practices. Although rooted in earlier health, longevity and martial arts practices, both Daoist and non-Daoist, Qigong and Taiji quan are neither originally nor inherently Daoist. There are also many types of Qigong, including Buddhist, Daoist, martial, medical, and so forth. Some Qigong forms traditionally utilized by Daoists include Baduan jin (Eight Sectioned Brocade), Huashan (Mount Hua) forms, Wuqin xi (Five Animal Frolics), as well as specifically alchemical forms. When utilizing health and longevity techniques, it is important to find a system that is effective and to focus on one's internal condition; one should avoid comparing oneself to others and be satisfied with knowing no more than a few routines well. Regarding the latter, discernment is key, as there is a danger in "collecting techniques" simply for the sake of knowing more. Depth of practice and experience is primary.

Classical discussions of Daoist-related yangsheng and daoyin practices appear in the second-century BCE chapter 15 of *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang), the second-century BCE *Daoyin tu* (Diagram of Daoyin), fourth-century CE *Daoyin jing* (Scripture on Daoyin), and the sixteenth-century *Chifeng sui* (Marrow of the Crimson Phoenix).

The Foundation of Health and Longevity Practices provides us with methods that augment vitality and psychosomatic well-being. Such techniques strengthen our degree of embodiment and movement awareness; Daoist systems also stimulate the orb-meridian system, ensure the smooth flow of qi throughout the body, and activate the Daoist subtle body. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we become physically stronger, more energetically alive, and pervaded by the numinous currents of the Dao.

DIETETICS

What we consume and ingest, whether food, air, water, or energetic influences, affects our being. As Daoists, we seek to understand, attend to, and modify such influences. In most natural environments (in a meditation enclosure in the Sierra Nevadas, for example), these influences are inherently pure and beneficial. The air that one breathes, the water that one drinks, and the influence of place support energetic aliveness. However, in many humanly fabricated environments (in a coal-producing town in Pennsylvania, for example), these influences are toxic and harmful. The air that one breathes, the water that one drinks, and the influence of place weakens health and well-being. Daoist dietetics is thus far more complex than "food consumption." In addition to the ingestion of food, Daoist dietetics includes herbology and minerology, fasting regimens, ingestion of seasonal and locality influences, and absorption of astral effulgences. Daoists seek to ingest purer influences, to move from materiality to subtlety. Still, Daoist dietary practice begins with food and nutrition. One becomes aware of and attentive to the effects that various consumption patterns have on oneself and others, both human and non-human. On the most basic level, one must gain a deeper understanding of one's constitution and tendencies as well as the qualities of various "foods." This centers, first and foremost, on yin-yang qualities and characteristics, with yin substances tending to be cooling and moistening and yang substances tending to be warming and drying. The next level of dietetics centers on the so-called five flavors, associated with the Five Phases and five orbs. The five flavors are sour (Wood/liver), bitter (Fire/heart), sweet (Earth/spleen), spicy (Metal/lungs), and salty (Water/kidneys). The five flavors thus have specific influences as well as associated cravings and injuries. Following a traditional Chinese diet, Daoist dietetics tends to make grains and vegetables primary, supplemented with smaller amounts of meat. Quanzhen Daoists are vegetarian and avoid intoxicants. Daoist dietetics also center on specific guidelines: Honor the ancestors (human and non-human, terrestrial and celestial) before eating. Eat pure and fresh foods. Avoid putrefying and rotten foods. Eat food containing the various flavors. Eat a nourishing meal during the time of the stomach (7am-9am) to initiate digestive rhythm. Eat a diet consisting primarily of vegetables, fruits, grains, and beans. Take at least 100 steps after finishing a meal. Enjoy the food and company that surrounds one. Diet often needs to be modified based on specific concerns, including season, age, and health issues. Dietetics also involves awareness concerning sources and consequences. A diet rooted in ecological commitments, social ethics, and compassion recognizes the effects that one's choices

Anqi Sheng gathering herbs

have on both known and unknown lives and realities. Moreover, the consequences of dietary choices are more than "ecological" and "ethical." There is an energetic and constitutional aspect as well: What one ingests literally becomes and expresses one's being and nature.

Classical discussions of Daoist-related dietetics appears in the fourth-century BCE "Neiye" (Inward Training) chapter of the *Guanzi* (Book of Master Guan) and the Han-dynasty *Huangdi neijing suwen* (Yellow Thearch's Inner Classic: Basic Questions).

The Foundation of Dietetics enables us to develop awareness concerning the way in which what we consume and ingest affects our constitutions and tendencies. It reveals our dependency and effect on other beings and communities, both human and non-human. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we nourish our core vitality, locate ourselves in a larger network of relational influences, and enliven our practice. We also invite gratitude into our lives.

MEDITATION

Daoist meditation may refer to any or all of the traditional four postures, namely, walking, sitting, standing or lying down. Daoist seated meditation consists of a wide variety of methods and practices, including inner observation, visualization, concentration, alchemy, and so forth. Here it should be mentioned that different meditation techniques have different goals. From our perspectives, quiet standing and seated meditation are the most important foundations of Daoist cultivation. Ordinary mind cannot rectify ordinary mind; habituated nature cannot rectify habituated nature. Only a purified heart-mind and numinous consciousness reveal and express our original nature. Meditation assists us in purifying the heart-mind and awakening our innate capacity for realization. Quiet standing involves standing with the feet shoulder-width apart with arms hanging at the sides. One's eyes are slightly open or closed. The crown-point and sacrum, and the crown-point and soles of the feet relax away from each other. There are other postural principles, but the most important point is to keep the muscles and sinews relaxed and the joints open. One brings one's awareness to Baihui (Hundred Meetings; crown-point), Huiyin (Meeting of Yin; perineum), Yongquan (Bubbling Well; center of soles of feet), and Laogong (Labor Palace; center of palms). Then calm emotional and intellectual activity, allowing the heart-mind to become empty and still until Emptiness and Stillness are attained. It is best to stand for at least fifteen to thirty minutes in the early morning, ideally in a nourishing natural environment. General prohibitions include not practicing outside in extreme cold and heavy wind, rain or snow. For seated meditation, a foundational Daoist practice centers on clarity, stillness, and emptiness. In a quiet, naturally well-lit room, one sits in a comfortable position either on a cushion or in a chair, and begins to draw the senses inward, to withdraw from the world of sensory phenomena and habitual reactivity. The spine is erect, and the crown of the head and coccyx relax away from each other. Breathing is natural, allowing respiration to find its own rhythm. The hands are either placed palms down on the knees or joined in front of the navel in a Daoist *mudra* position. With the tip of the tongue touching the upper palate, focus on emptying and stilling. The ears listen to the center of the head. With the eyelids hanging and the eyes slightly open, the gaze rests on the tip of the nose. Then the gaze extends down the front centerline of the body to rest on the lower elixir field (lower abdomen). Allow emotional and intellectual activity to become stilled and to dissipate naturally. Over time, stillness deepens and clarity increases. In Daoism, this practice is often referred to as "entering stillness" (*rujing*), "quiet sitting" (*jingzuo*), "sitting-in-forgetfulness" (*zuowang*), "guarding the One" (*shouyi*), and "fasting the heart-mind" (*xinzhai*). Daoist seated meditation

may be solitary or communal, though secluded individual practice is preferred among contemporary Daoists. It is usually concluded with self-massage, which includes tapping the teeth, rubbing the face, beating the Celestial Drum (occiput), and so forth. It is best not to meditate immediately after eating. For those beginning Daoist meditation, daily practice in the morning and in the evening, lasting from twenty to forty minutes is recommended. Of these various parameters, commitment to daily practice is most important.

Classical discussions of Daoist meditation appear in the fourth-century BCE "Neiye" (Inward Training) chapter of the *Guanzi* (Book of Master Guan), fourth-century BCE *Daode jing* (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), fourth-century BCE Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang), seventh-century CE *Zuowang lun* (Discourse on Sitting-in-Forgetfulness), and eighth-century CE *Neiguan jing* (Scripture on Inner Observation).

The Foundation of Meditation, especially as established in quiet sitting or emptiness meditation, reveals our innate nature as a manifestation of the Dao. It increases clarity and stillness of consciousness, neutralizes karmic influences, and activates our inherent insight and wisdom. Simultaneously, sitting in postural alignment expresses cosmological attunement and initiates qi circulation. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we find the resolution of the fundamental questions of existence and participate in the Dao's transformative process and sacred reality.

ETHICS

On the most basic level, Daoist ethics incorporate the foundational Daoist view that human beings are innately good. Free from societal conditioning, familial obligations, and personal habituation, humans will naturally return to their innate connection with the Dao. From a classical perspective, "morality" (concern for and discussion of "virtues" and "moral obligations") indicates that humans have become disoriented, have lost their original alignment. After humans lose concern for virtue and ethics, legalism, with its laws based on artificial restrictions and punishments, comes to dominate human society. Thus, the Daoist account of human de-evolution involves a movement from personal integration and cosmological participation to morality and then to legalistic concerns, with the last two stages leading to greater disorientation and misalignment. Still, recognizing the challenges of living in various social situations, Daoists composed and compiled ethical systems, in which precepts or ethical guidelines

Daoist meditation from the Shunni sanguan tu

formed the centerpiece. Daoist conduct guidelines or precepts developed within the Daoist tradition as it became more complex in its communal organization. The most basic Daoist precepts were adopted from Buddhism and include the Five Precepts of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual misconduct, not lying, and not taking intoxicants. As Quanzhen Daoists, we also reflect on, apply and seek to embody the Ten Precepts of Initial Perfection, as contained in the *Chuzhen jie* (Precepts of Initial Perfection). Daoist conduct guidelines provide an opportunity for ethical reflection and clarification. Moreover, they help to ensure personal integrity and communal harmony through the cultivation of respect, consideration, graciousness, and energetic attentiveness. In contrast to most other religious traditions, Daoist practice activates the subtle body, including an energetic sensitivity that manifests as a natural "moral" compass. Here ethics transcends mental categories and projected "oughts." Our ethical refinement and engagement become transformational influences on friends, family, community and world. As Daoists, we live through deep responsibility (the ability to respond).

There is an enormous amount of Daoist texts that contain discussions of Daoist ethics, precepts and conduct guidelines. Some important classical sources include the sixth-century CE *Laojun jinglü* (Scriptural Statutes of Lord Lao) and seventeenth-century *Chuzhen jie* (Precepts of Initial Perfection).

The Foundation of Ethics focuses our attention on the Daoist concern for virtue and ethical involvement in the world. It helps us to understand how a Daoist relates to other beings and responds to different

circumstances. It strengthens our sense of responsibility. This may manifest as "hidden virtue," as communal participation, as charitable activities, or as socio-political engagement. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we incorporate Daoist ethical guidelines into our body and express our commitment to beneficial relational influences. We recognize the interconnection among self, community, region, world, and cosmos.

SCRIPTURE STUDY

Daoist scriptures, or sacred texts, represent one of the external Three Treasures, which include the Dao, the scriptures, and the masters/teachers. This is an adaptation of the Three Refuges of Buddhism, namely, the Buddha, Dharma (teachings), and Sangha (community). From a Daoist perspective, scriptures are understood to be "sacred" or emanations of the Dao. The character for "scripture" (*jing*) contains two elements: the *si* ("silk") radical on the left, and the *jing* ("well") phonetic on the right. A further etymological reading of this character might suggest that the jing phonetic is also a meaning-carrier. Under this reading, "scriptures" are threads and watercourses that form and re-form networks of connection. They connect the Daoist practitioner to both the unnamable mystery which is the Dao and the Daoist tradition, the community of adepts that preceded one, as a historical and energetic continuum. If we then consider how to read Daoist texts *as practitioners*, we engage the given text as directly relevant to our immediate situation. That is, Daoist texts provide principles and practice guidelines, as well as specific practices, for cultivating the Dao. However, creative and critical engagement also requires the recollection of the interrelationship among knowledge, insight, practice, and experience. These texts create the context for dialogue and discussion. From a praxis-based perspective, these texts are here to clarify our practice and to transform our life. For those committed to Daoist cultivation, Daoist texts are practice manuals. They contain detailed principles, guidelines, practices, goals, and ideals for a Daoist way of life. Scripture study provides opportunities for contemplation and reflection, for clarification of Daoist practice. While almost any Daoist scripture could be directly relevant for self-cultivation, different Daoist communities identify different texts as most important. In the case of Quanzhen Daoism, the *Daode jing* (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang), *Yinfu jing* (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman), and *Qingjing jing* (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness) occupy such a position.

Here it should be mentioned that deeper scripture study also requires an understanding of the historical contours of the Daoist tradition. Simply reading Daoist texts without discernment or a sense of historical context may easily lead to confusion. For example, the *Dazhong songzhang* (Great Petition for Sepulchral Plaints; a.k.a. "Tomb Affairs"), translated in Stephen Bokenkamp's *Early Daoist Scriptures* (1997), is a Celestial Master text that diverges significantly from the fundamental Daoist worldview. If one uses such a text as a foundation for contemporary Daoist practice, without understanding the demonology contained therein, including the soteriological dangers and political purposes of its ontological categories, one will invariably become disoriented, attached to dubious views, and in the end fail to make progress on the Daoist path.

Explicit classical discussions of scripture study are relatively rare, as the Daoist commitment to scripture study is most often expressed in commentaries. One clear account appears in the twelfth-century *Chongyang shiwu lun* (Fifteen Discourses by Chongyang).

The Foundation of Scripture Study familiarizes us with the voices and insights of earlier Daoist adepts and religious communities. It enables us to explore the textual landscapes of Daoist scripture, landscapes that reveal the Dao made manifest in linguistic patterns. However, this dimension of Daoist training proves challenging for many Western Daoists, as they are usually unable to read the original Chinese versions and are thus dependent on translators. Fortunately, reliable translations of Daoist scriptures are increasing with each passing year. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we connect with one of the deep wellsprings of the tradition and gain a necessary orienteering point.

RITUAL

Daoist ritual expresses our relationship to the sacred, to the Dao as primordial Source and manifested in multi-tiered sacred realms and numinous beings. The most complex Daoist rituals, the *zhai*-purification and *jiao*-offering rites, require Daoist priests who have received years of training to be ritual experts. The most important ritual activity in contemporary Quanzhen monastic communities centers on the liturgy (*gongke*). This is contained in the *Xuanmen risong zaowan gongke jing* (Liturgical Scriptures of the Mysterious Gate for Daily Morning and Evening Recitation). This may also be considered a form of Daoist prayer. The text consists of a morning and evening section, and is chanted everyday in observant

Daoist monasteries during daybreak and dusk. A modified schedule involves chanting on the new and full moon, seasonal nodes, and major festival days. The *Xuanmen gongke* has yet to be transcribed and translated for Western liturgical services, though we are in the process of completing such a project. In the West, Daoist ritual activity most often involves communal activity before a formal Daoist altar or individual ritual activity before a personal altar. The standard, central Quanzhen altar faces south and houses the Sanqing (Three Purities), namely, Yuanshi tianzun (Celestial Worthy of Original Beginning; center), Lingbao tianzun (Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure; on the left of Yuanshi tianzun), and Daode tianzun (Celestial Worthy of the Dao and Inner Power; on the right of Yuanshi tianzun). For personal altars, one may select the deity based on one's personal concerns and affinities. Quanzhen altars usually consist of two central candles or oil lamps, incense burner, offerings of flowers and/or fruit, a wooden fish drum, and a prayer bell. A prostration mat is placed in front of the altar with space in front and behind. In terms of ritual protocol, on the most basic level, to open the altar the officiant purifies herself and lights the candles. Then take three sticks of incense and light them. Next, move to the back of the prostration mat, and bow three times with the incense. Then return to the front of the altar and place the incense sticks in the incense burner with the left hand: center, to the right, then to the left. Next, return to the prostration mat and make three full prostrations, touching the head to the ground three times for each prostration. This makes a total of nine aspects of the bowing. The altar attendant rings the prayer bowl at the completion of each prostration, making a total of three strikes. If there is no attendant, the officiant may ring the prayer bell herself after completing all of the prostrations. One may then chant the liturgy or a Daoist scripture, offer specific prayers (requests, petitions, invocations, expressions of gratitude, expressions of reverence, and so forth), and/or practice seated meditation. Daoist ritual in turn consists of both an external performance and an internal attentiveness. Prostrations are a form of *yangsheng* (nourishing life) practice, and the liturgy contains sections focusing on self-purification, merit-making and salvific activity, as well as cosmological alignment. The Daoist emphasis on microcosmic/macrocosmic relationship also informs our understanding of daily practice as a form of ritual activity. One of the simplest but more profound forms of Daoist ritual activity is bowing to our fellow adepts. We bow to them as expressions of the Dao, as members of our religious community, and as glimpses into our own possibilities.

Explicit and interpretative classical discussions of Daoist ritual are also relatively rare, as it involves formal and direct training. Daoist ritual activity is expressed in ritual itself, and documented in manuals related to the correct performance of specific rituals.

The Foundation of Ritual enables us to develop a relationship with the sacred and have a context to express our reverence and gratitude. It locates us within the Dao's cyclical patterns, re-members our tradition, celebrates community, and highlights our participation in the Daoist body. By attending to this dimension of Daoist cultivation, we realign ourselves with the larger matrix of cosmos, world, region, and community.

ESTABLISHING A FOUNDATION

The Nine Foundations provide parameters for a Daoist way of life and establish a context in which authentic and integrated Daoist training may take place. They emphasize the importance of consistent and sustained practice. Through in-depth inquiry and sustained application, we may attain higher levels of self-cultivation, refinement and transformation. This involves attentiveness to cosmology, astro-geomancy, practice principles and guidelines, health and longevity practices, dietetics, meditation, ethics, scripture study, and ritual. The Nine Foundations orient us towards the Dao as sacred Source, unnamable mystery, numinous presence, and transformative process. They facilitate our process of realization and enable us to become embodiments of the Dao. Whether one follows the path of a renunciant, recluse, monastic, priest, or householder, these guidelines offer assistance in mapping the contours of Daoist practice. They are equally applicable in the context of individual or communal training. The Nine Foundations also clarify each person's affinities and vocation. In this way, they inform whatever our work may be, and have the potential to reveal each and every situation as an opportunity for Daoist practice. In advancing on the path of Daoist cultivation, authentic Daoist teachers and our fellow adepts have essential contributions to make. Such individuals are characterized by their reverence for the Dao and commitment to a Daoist way of life, by their commitment to mutual respect and mutual flourishing. This is what it means to be "Companions of the Way" (*daoyou*).

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