

# Reading Daoist Texts as Practice Manuals

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For all their rumblings and grumblings contrawise, Daoists have a profound fascination with language, both its limitations and its possibilities, and communication, both linguistic and nonlinguistic. Daoists recognize the paradox in the following: "Laozi (Lao-tzu) said, 'One who speaks does not know; one who knows does not speak.' Why then did he write five thousand characters?"

Because for all its potential to confuse, mislead, and fail us, language is important. Language and communication matter. Language also has the capacity to clarify, reorient, and enliven us. Thus, we find the character *xin*, usually translated as "trustworthy" or "honest." This character consists of *ren*, "human being," and *yan*, "language." It is a person standing by words (1). It is the person whose speaking expresses his or her being and whose being embodies his or her speaking.

On one level, one's speaking reveals one's corporeal and energetic condition. On another, one's body becomes one's communication. Language, especially a language such as Chinese with its pictographic and ideogrammatic capacity for more-complete expression, also may be forged and arranged into written patterns, traces and tracks of something that has disappeared into the unseen and the unseeable. In this way, Daoists have used language to compose texts. These texts are one way in which the Dao becomes manifest in the human world. These texts become a record of the experiences and insights of previous Daoist adepts; they become opportunities to commune with the community of practitioners, the "tradition," that came before one.

## Daoist Views on Language and Communication

From the beginning, Daoists have attempted to establish and maintain a connection with the sacred, the unnamable mystery and cosmological process referred to as *dao* (2). The earliest inner cultivation lineages, (3) documented in texts such as the "Neiye" (Inward Training) chapter of the *Guanzi* (*Kuan-tzu*; Book of Master Guan), *Laozi* (*Lao-tzu*; Book of Venerable Masters; a.k.a. *Daode jing*), and *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang-tzu*; Book of Master Zhuang), emphasized the unmanifest and the

undifferentiated. The reader of these texts could easily become attached to the Dao as the name of some "ultimate reality." However, various passages emphasize that to which Dao refers as "nameless" (*wuming*) and "mysterious" (*xuan*).

When speaking about the Dao, and the Daoist adept by extension, the text uses a whole vocabulary of negation and obscurity: "wondrous" (*miao*), "subtle" (*wei*), "chaotic" (*hun*), "obscure" (*mei*), "vague" (*huang*), and "indistinct" (*hu*). The Dao also receives other cognate designations: "source" (*yuan*), "root" (*gen*), "mother" (*mu*), "beginning" (*shu*), and "ancestor" (*zong*). The inability to adequately express "what" or "how" the Dao is (if it is at all) becomes clear in such passages as the following from chapter 25 of the *Daodejing* (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power): "I do not know its name, and so I call it 'Dao.' Forced to name it, I call it 'great.'" Echoing this passage, the anonymous ninth century *Qingjing jing* (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness; DZ 620) has the following: "The great Dao is without name. It raises and nourishes the ten thousand beings. I do not know its name; forced to name it, I call it 'Dao'" (1a).

Because humans communicate primarily through language, and because one wishes to verbally express one's experience, one uses names (*ming*). However, in the context of classical Daoism, the name that expresses the subtle presence / absence at the center of Daoist practice is only a vague approximation. As chapter one of the *Zhuangzi* explains, "Names are the guest of reality" (*ming zhe shi zhi bin ye*). In this context, speaking, like thinking and discriminating more generally, is seen as a limitation and as a form of dissipation. Like language, speaking may remove the adept from a place of mystical communion and cosmological integration.

Closely associated with a fundamental distrust of language, the classical Daoist tradition also recognized the possibility of more-subtle communication. If an adept cultivated and realized a condition of calm serenity, he or she could commune and merge with the Dao as unnamable mystery and original source. The heart of such a worldview emphasized an understanding / experience of some hidden or subtle aspect of reality; as is well known, this subtle, all-enlivening and all-per-

vading “substance” is *qi*, “subtle breath” or “energy.” Within a *qi*-based worldview, everything may be understood in terms of a spectrum, from the most substantial (rocks, for example) to the most rarified (gods, for example). Thus, in chapter 42 of the *Daode jing*, we find the following: “The Dao generated the One; the One generated the two; the two generated the three; and the three generated the ten thousand beings. The ten thousand beings carry yin and embrace yang; and it is the empty *qi* (*chongqi*) that harmonizes these.” Similarly, chapter 4 of the *Zhuangzi* explains, “Make your will one. Don’t listen with your ears; listen with your heart-mind (*xin* / *hsin*). No, don’t listen with your heart-mind, listen with your *qi*. Listening stops with the ears, the heart-mind stops with recognition, but *qi* is empty and waits on all things. The Dao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai* / *hsin-chai*)” (4).

In the context of the early Tianshi (Celestial Masters) movement, the most well-known and influential form of early Daoism, other possibilities of subtle communication emerged. According to traditional accounts, in 142 CE Zhang Daoling (Chang Tao-ling) received a revelation from Laojun (Lao-chun; Lord Lao), the “deified” form of Laozi and personification of the Dao, on Mount Heming (Crane Cry). During Lord Lao’s revelation, Zhang was appointed as terrestrial representative, the “Celestial Master,” and given healing powers as a sign of his empowerment. This founding revelation, this subtle communication from the heavens, was referred to as the “covenant of orthodox unity” (*zhengyi mengwei*), a name still used by contemporary Zhengyi (Cheng-i; Orthodox Unity) Daoists as expressing their connection to the early Celestial Masters tradition. Here one may also note that the “emanationist cosmogony / cosmology” of classical Daoism also reveals how and why the Daoist belief in deities, spirits, and immortals or transcedents (*xian*) does not contradict the view of the Dao as unnamable mystery and original source. “Theologically speaking,” if the Dao is both immanent and transcendent, neither immanent nor transcendent, then there is no necessary distinction between “nature” and “gods.” 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 that is the Dao. Lord Lao in turn became the inspiration for an enormous textual corpus contained in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) Daoist

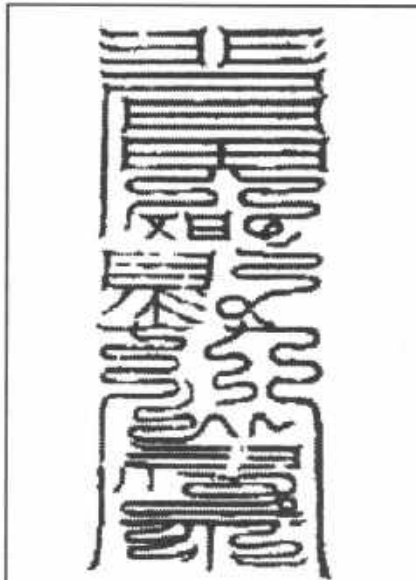
Canon (see Kohn 1998); one of the most famous and influential among these texts is the *Qingjing jing*, of which the full title is *Taishang laojun shuo chang qingjing miaojing* (Wondrous Scripture on Constant Clarity and Stillness, as Revealed by the Great High Lord Lao) (5).

Divine communication and inspiration as well as the Daoist texts documenting and expressing them were not understood simply as a “god” or “subtle being” making itself known. Rather, there was an interaction between a subtle realm and the Daoist practitioner as agent of transformation and as transformed receptacle.

This interaction may be understood, and was expressed, in terms of talismans (*fu*). In the Daoist tradition, talismans are divine symbols that have two corresponding parts. Originally one, the two parts must be connected in order to reestablish one’s original connection with the Dao and in order to gain more-efficacious spiritual abilities in the world. Some of the earliest talismans are found in Ge Hong’s (Ko Hung; 287–347) *Baopuzi* (Pao-pu-tzu; Book of Master Embracing Simplicity; DZ 1185), associated with the Taiqing (T’ai-ch’ing; Great Clarity) laboratory alchemy (*waidan*) tradition, and in the fourth century CE Lingbao *wufu xu* (Explanation of the Five Lingbao Talismans; DZ 388), associated with the early Lingbao (Ling-pao; Numinous Treasure) tradition. In chapter 17 of the *Book of Master Embracing Simplicity*, we find the five “Talismans of Lord Lao for Entering the Mountains,” which were used to protect and guide the Daoist adept when traveling in the mountains.

“Generally speaking, as for individuals practicing the Dao (*weidao*) or preparing medicines, as well as those fleeing political disorders or living as hermits, there is no one who does not enter the mountains (*rushan*). Many, however, meet with harm or even death because they do not know the methods for entering the mountains. Thus, we have the saying, “At the base of great Hua[shan], bleached bones lie scattered.” Everyone knows that a person may have specialized knowledge about one thing but that he cannot know everything about all things. Some people intent on seeking life drove themselves to death” (DZ 1185, 17.1a).

In this context, talismans ensured protection and correct orientation. Some of these talismans were used to determine whether or not a wild animal was, in fact, a malevolent mountain spirit in disguise, while others were placed on the traveler’s legs so that he could travel enormous distances without becoming tired. This passage should, of course, also be read metaphorically; the aspiring adept must be careful to find a trustworthy



One of the “Talismans of Lord Lao for Entering the Mountains”.

Source: *Baopuzi neipian*,  
DZ 1185, 28:242

teacher and a well-established training regimen when entering the Dao (rudao), which is also “entering the mountains.”

The “Five Lingbao Talismans,” which find their inspiration in the five “Talismans of Lord Lao for Entering the Mountains” from the Book of Master Embracing Simplicity, were associated with the five directions and believed to maintain cosmic harmony. The Five Lingbao Talismans were symbolic representations of cosmic ethers, the primordial energies at the beginning of cosmos. In the Lingbao tradition, influenced by Indian views of Sanskrit as divine in nature, language—specifically magical language—became seen as powerful and efficacious. Language, with its capacity to connect with and manifest the numinous, could ensure the continuation of personal, communal, regional, and cosmological harmony.

Daoists have also used talismans as a way of mapping an internal orientation and commitment. The most well-known and influential text expressing this view is the anonymous sixth century CE *Yinfu jing* (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman; DZ 31), which became central in the early Quanzhen (Complete Perfection) tradition. Here the “hidden talisman” of the title invokes the reality that each individual has an innate connection with the Dao. This resembles a talisman in two separate pieces, which when rejoined reveal original unity. “When heaven and humanity join and manifest, / The ten thousand transformations have a stable base” (1a). This is the “pivot” (ji) and the “extraordinary vessel” (qiqi) mentioned in the *Yinfu jing*. In this respect, the phrase *yinfu* also reminds one of the title of chapter 5 of the *Zhuangzi*—“Dechong fu” (Talisman of Inner Power Complete).

Daoists thus have an ambiguous and ambivalent relationship with language and communication. On one level, language may distract and disorient. It may condition one to care more about the name “magnolia” or “wren” than encounter the aliveness and wonder beyond such names. Similarly, speaking may dissipate one’s vitality and disrupt ecological and cosmological integration. On another level, language, especially language connected with and expressing the numinous, has the capacity to (re)awaken one to the subtle aspects of being. What cannot be denied is that communication is central to Daoist cultivation. This communication occurs in a number of ways: by listening to the innate harmony and self-rectifying qualities of the human body-self; by being attentive to the subtle influences of community and region; by expanding consciousness to include and become permeated with the cosmos in its multilayered numinosity. Thus, the earliest name for Daoist adepts was *shengren* (“sage”). The character *sheng* (“sacred”) contains the radicals for “ear” (er) and “mouth” (kou). The sage is the “receptive one,” the one who listens to the sonorous patterns of the cosmos and its varied subtle layers. This capac-

ity for listening also leads to an additional ability: one’s speaking expresses such a divine connection, and such expression then resonates with others.

## Daoist Texts as Scriptures and Daoist Ways of Reading

Familiarity with the historical precedents that have been established by the earlier Chinese tradition allows practitioners to reflect on and determine the extent to which what they are doing is “Daoist.” Considering Daoist practice in particular, various “models” emerge through the careful consideration of the entire breadth of the tradition (see Komjathy and Kohn forthcoming; also Kohn 2001). These include but are not limited to the following: ritualistic, cosmological, quietistic, hermeneutical, ascetic, therapeutic, alchemical, shamanic, and mystical. Most often, a variety of these models are contained and combined in any given training regimen or lifeway, and these approaches can be individual or communal.

Moreover, often such combinations, on deeper consideration, can be in conflict with each other. From my observations of Daoism in America, most people are practicing or interested in a “self-cultivation” approach (see Komjathy 2003a; 2003b; forthcoming; see also Siegler 2003; forthcoming), although the notion of a separate “self” does not last very long in the course of Daoist training. Self cultivation involves a wide range of concerns and motivations: from personal health and healing through self realization to mystical unification. That is, various self-cultivation models are embraced, advocated, and taught in America, especially therapeutic, quietistic, alchemical, and mystical.

There can be little doubt that “scripture study” and appropriate exegesis (hermeneutics) has occupied a central place in the Daoist tradition itself (6). The extant Daoist Canon, compiled in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), as well as “extra-canonical collections,” contains numerous commentaries on earlier Daoist scriptures. As the late Isabelle Robinet (1932–2000), a pioneer in the field of Daoist studies and the foremost Western scholar of Daoist commentaries on the *Daodejing*, has shown, there are hundreds of extant commentaries on the *Daodejing* in the Ming Dynasty canon alone. In addition, we have commentaries on such texts as the *Huangting jing* (Scripture on the Yellow Court; DZ 331; 332), *Yinfu jing* (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman), and *Qingjing jing* (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness), among others. Unfortunately, almost none of this commentary literature has been translated to date. The sheer volume of this hermeneutical tradition points toward the importance of the study and application of Daoist scriptures to the life-worlds of individual adepts and cultivation communities.

It is clear from the extant commentaries that certain texts received a venerated place in the Daoist tra-



dition. These texts were frequently read in terms of the immediate concerns and practice modalities of a given religious community. For instance, in the context of internal alchemy (neidan) lineages, the *Daode jing* was often understood as directly applicable to alchemical transformation. Moreover, Daoist texts were often considered to be revelatory, frequently containing the phrase “as spoken by the great high Lord Lao” (Taishang laojun shuo). That is, particular texts were scriptures (jing); they were understood to be sacred or emanations of the Dao. The character for “scripture,” like Chinese characters in general, 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 that is the Dao and the Daoist tradition, the community of adepts that preceded one, as a historical continuum.

If one then considers how to read Daoist texts as a practitioner, one would engage a given text as directly relevant to one’s immediate situation. That is, Daoist texts provide principles and practice guidelines as well as specific practices for cultivating the Dao (xiudao). 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. One should not read them as authoritarian mandates or fail to consider the ways in which one’s own realizations relate to the text at hand. As the *Lijiao shiwu lun* (Fifteen Discourses to Establish the Teachings; DZ 1233), attributed to Wang Zhe (Chongyang [Redoubled Yang]; 1113–1170), the founder of Quanzhen (Complete Perfection), advises, “The way to study texts is not to strive after literary accomplishments and thereby confuse your eyes. Instead, you must extract the meaning as it harmonizes with the heart-mind (xin). Abandon texts after you have extracted their meaning and grasped their principle (li). Abandon principle after you have realized the fundamental ground. After you realize the fundamental, then attend to it until it completely enters the heart-mind” (2ab).

One also should not fail to confront, nor attempt to domesticate, the radical challenges that often arise through familiarity with Daoist literature. From a praxis-based perspective, these texts are here to clarify one’s practice and to transform one’s life.

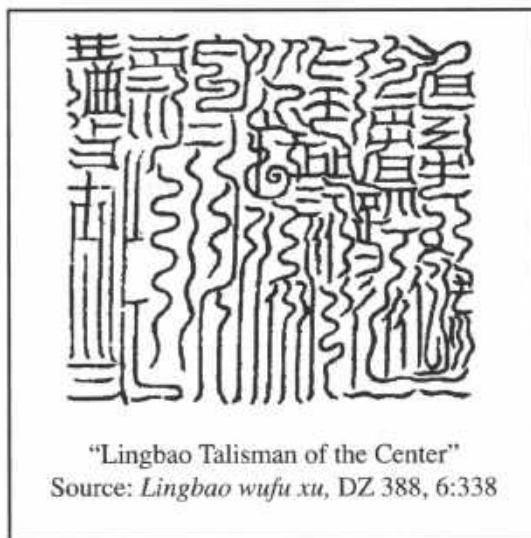
## Daoist Texts as Practice Manuals

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. Daoist cultivation in turn involves self reliance, responsibility (the ability to respond), and transformation. Daoist cultivation aims at a shift in ontological condition, a movement from habituated ways of being to more-refined patterns of interaction. This process may be understood as a return to one’s original endowment from the Dao (suchness or being-so-of-itself [ziran/tzu-jan]) and/or as the emergence of a new being (from ren [human] to xian [immortal or transcendent]). “Returning to the Source” (guigen) is called stillness (jing); this means returning to life-destiny (guiming). Returning to life-destiny is called constancy (chang); knowing constancy is called illumination (ming)” (*Daode jing* ch. 16; also ch. 52).

The later Daoist tradition, specifically internal alchemy lineages, speaks of such an orientation and commitment in terms of innate nature (xing/hsing) and life-destiny (ming). The character xing consists of xin (“heart-mind”) and sheng (“to be born”); innate nature is the heart-mind

with which one was born. The character ming may be associated with ling (“mandate”); life-destiny is a decree from the cosmos made manifest as one’s corporeality. Generally speaking, innate nature relates to consciousness and the heart-mind (xin), while life-destiny relates to physicality and the body (shen). Daoist practice involves the dual cultivation of innate nature and life-destiny, a commitment to both stillness practices (meditation, for example) and movement practices (daoyin/tao-yin, for example).

At the most fundamental level, health and well being are prerequisites for more-advanced training. Here, health is understood as internal harmony and integration. Following a classical Chinese medical understanding, as expressed in texts such as the *Huangdi neijing suwen* (Huang-ti nei-ching su-wen; Yellow Thearch’s Inner Classic: Basic Questions),<sup>7</sup> health consists of the smooth flow of qi throughout the body’s various “organs” (zangfu/tsang-fu) and meridians (mai). However, health and well being also involve attentiveness to larger seasonal and cosmological cycles. Generally speaking, the Yellow Thearch’s Basic Questions, an anonymous text containing textual and historical layers from the second century BCE to the sixth century CE, emphasizes a preventative approach to



“Lingbao Talisman of the Center”  
Source: *Lingbao wufu xu*, DZ 388, 6:338

illness: "Sages (shengren) do not regulate diseases after they are already a disease. They regulate them before they arise. They do not regulate disorder after it is already disorder. They regulate it before it is disorder. This is what we mean" (ch. 2).

The Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions provides principles, guidelines, and models for living in harmony with larger seasonal and cosmic cycles. The text is fundamentally about how to live well, which herein means a regulated and harmonious life that recognizes the larger context of one's being. In some sense, the Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions contains an ecological worldview, emphasizing interconnection and larger patterns of influence and dependency. The text advocates attentiveness to internal and external cycles, which affect one's overall health, well being, and spiritual alignment. It is delusion to believe that one is unaffected by and independent from ever-expanding spheres of relationship: familial, communal, cultural, regional, national, global, and cosmological. For example, how can lunar cycles shift oceanic tides and not influence internal human conditions? The Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions documents the basic constituents and subtle physiology of human beings and the ways in which these are affected by larger cycles.

The first two chapters of the Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions also emphasize conservation and harmonization. When expressed in a vague way such as "be natural," such guidelines can easily be scoffed at and dismissed out of hand or seen as justification for some unregulated ("spontaneous" [read: egocentric and libertine]) way of life. But when considered from an energetic and "astro-geomantic" perspective and knowledge base, various influences and networks become visible. In terms of the view expressed in the Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions, the most fundamental form of harmonization begins with the body-self. One regulates one's eating, drinking, sexual activity, and sleeping. One also becomes attuned to the internal circulation of qi, the condition and tendencies of the organs, and the overall condition of one's being.

The next sphere of influence is one's immediate place; this relates to relationships and communal influences as well as locality and region. These involve the possibility of "invasion" and disruption by external pathogenic influences. The first two chapters of the Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions clearly understand such causes of disease (bing) as relating to one's own way of life and naturalistic harmful influences. The latter includes the "six climatic influences" (liuqi): wind (feng), dryness (gan), dampness (shi), cold (han), summer heat (shure), and fire (huo) (see also ch. 8; chs. 66–74). A more complete understanding also recognizes

other influences such as vacuity (xu), noxious influences (xie), injurious winds (zeifeng), and wind-cold (hanfeng). That is, specific natural phenomena have the capacity to disrupt one's internal equilibrium and health, giving rise to disease. From a practical perspective, this means that, in addition to self regulation and energetic strengthening, one avoids exposure to such potentially harmful influences. For instance, Daoist adepts frequently emphasize not exposing oneself to strong winds, heavy rain, and snow. If one must travel or move in such conditions, certain precautions are taken such as covering the neck, lower back/kidneys,

and shoulders with extra insulation. This involves the more general understanding that the lower body is associated with yin and thus may be especially affected by cold and dampness, while the upper body is associated yang and thus may be especially affected by heat and wind. More specifically, dampness may easily affect the feet, cold the knees and lower back, and wind the upper back, neck, and head.

In a more positive sense, one attempts to live in more-nourishing envi-

ronments and become aware of the energetic qualities of place. There are a number of dimensions to this, including "ecological" and cosmological aspects. With regard to the former, one recognizes the effects of "landscape" (Fengshui; geomancy), the places within which one is located and the communities within which one participates. Generally speaking, "natural places" contain a cleaner and more-refined energetic quality. Locations with specific attributes—mountains, streams, forests, wildlife, and so forth—are most beneficial for human flourishing and harmonization. More specifically, types of mountains, trees, birds, and so forth each have a particular quality and influence. For example, pine trees have a strong yang quality, including a powerful upward movement. For someone with a tendency toward stagnation, it may be beneficial to live among pines. However, for someone with a tendency toward liver-yang rising and headaches, pine trees can exacerbate such conditions.

Cosmologically speaking, the most easily observable and recognizable patterns involve the seasons and the sun and moon cycles. Following the seasonal cycles means becoming attentive to and resonating with their energetic qualities. Spring is associated with birth (sheng) and an outward energetic direction, summer with development (chang) and an upward energetic direction, autumn with harvesting (shou) and an inward energetic direction, and winter with storing (cang) and a downward energetic direction. Agriculturally speaking—and note that the Daoist tradition frequently emphasizes "internal cultivation" (neixiu)—spring is the time to plant seeds, summer to allow maturation,





autumn to harvest, and winter to store. Cosmologically speaking, the cycles of the sun and moon are particularly important (astrology / astronomy). In this respect, practicing Daoists give increased attention to the new and full moon and the Eight Nodes (*bajie*): the beginning of the four seasons and the solstices and equinoxes. The emphasis on harmonious internal conditions, the uninterrupted flow of qi through the organ-meridian networks, and larger patterns of ecological and cosmological alignment and integration are the foundation of Daoist self cultivation.

Another core guideline for Daoist practice centers on conservation or nondissipation. In Daoist texts as historically distant as the anonymous fourth century BCE "Neiye" (Inward Training) and *Laozi* (Book of Venerable Masters), anonymous sixth century CE *Yinfu jing* (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman), and anonymous ninth century CE *Qingjing jing* (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness), one finds repeated admonitions to refrain from behavior patterns that dissipate one's foundational vitality. *Inward Training* understands Daoist practice as ultimately connected to consciousness and spirit (*shen*), with particular emphasis placed on the ability of the heart-mind (*xin*) either to attain numinous pervasion (*lingtong*) or to separate the adept from the Dao as Source. Here the heart-mind is understood both as a physical location in the chest (the heart [*xin*] as organ [*zang*]) and as relating to thoughts (*nian*) and emotions (*qing*) (the heart as "consciousness" [*shi*]). Intellectual and emotional activity is a possible source of dissipation and disruption. However, when stilled (*jing*) and stabilized (*ding*), the heart-mind is associated with innate nature (*xing*), the givenness (*ziran*) and the actualization (*xiu*) of one's innate endowment from and connection with the Dao. This return to one's original nature (*benxing/pen-hsing*) is the attainment of mystical unification (*dedao/te-tao*).

*Inward Training* is clearly concerned with possible sources for the dissipation of vital essence (*jing*), vitality (*sheng*), and spirit (*shen*). As the title suggests, emphasis is placed on cultivating the internal (*nei*), as innate connection to the Dao, over the external (*wai*), as potential disruption of one's personal harmony and stability. *Inward Training* identifies various psychological tendencies and patterns that may lead to disruption and destabilization. Vitality may be lost and the heart-mind confused through specific emotional and intellectual activities. Such conditions include grief (*you*), happiness (*le*), pleasure (*xi*), anger (*nu*), desire (*yu*), anxiety (*huan*), and profit-seeking (*li*). It should be mentioned that these aspects of human being are not, generally speaking, inherently harmful; rather, it is excessive and inappropriate activity and expression that exhausts one's vitality and numinosity. "Considering the vitality (*sheng*) of human beings, it inevitably occurs because of balance (*ping*) and alignment (*zheng*). The reason why balance and alignment are lost is inevitably because of

pleasure (*xi*), anger (*nu*), grief (*you*), and anxiety (*huan*)" (ch. 22). The loss of this vitality, associated with the dissipation of vital essence, destabilizes the foundations for more-advanced inward training, which center on the heart-mind and spirit. An additional source of disruption and disturbance is the "five desires" (*wuyu*), which relate to the "five senses" (*wuguan*) and their concern with the external. These include desire generated by hearing (ears), seeing (eyes), tasting (mouth), smelling (nose), and touching (body). "Regulate the five sense-desires and cast off the two misfortunes (*erxiang*). When both joy and anger [the two misfortunes] are negated, balance and alignment will permeate your torso" (ch. 21).

Similarly, the *Book of Venerable Masters* advocates a way of life based on "decreasing" (*shao*) and "lessening" (*gua*). "Appear plain (*jiansu*) and embrace simplicity (*baopu*); decrease personal interest (*shaosi*) and lessen desires (*guayu*)" (ch. 19; also ch. 37). The heart-mind (*xin*) and one's innate nature (*xing*) become obscured by desire (*yu*), knowing (*zhi*), contending (*zheng*), selfishness (*si*), and excess (*tai*). "Thus we may consider the sage's approach to governing (*zhi*): empty the heart-mind (*xu qi xin*) and fill the belly (*shi qi fu*). Weaken the will (*ruo qi zhi*) and strengthen the bones (*qiang qi gu*)" (ch. 3; also ch. 12). On the most basic level, this passage emphasizes living closer to necessity and sustenance. However, from a Daoist perspective, "governing the country" (*zhiguo*) also relates to "governing (or healing) the body-self" (*zhishen*). To empty the heart-mind is to decrease excessive intellectual and emotional activity; to fill the belly—*fu* also refers to the lower abdominal region—is to increase the qi stored in the body's center.

The emphasis on the sense organs and external concerns as possible sources of dissipation also find expression in the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* and *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness*. The *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* explains that the Five Thieves (*wuzei*) disrupt the human heart-mind. Under one interpretation, the Five Thieves are excitement (*xi*), excessive joy (*le*), grief (*you*), desire (*yu*), and anger (*nu*). Dissipating spirit and qi, the Five Thieves destabilize the heart-mind. The scripture also explains that "The aberrations of the Nine Cavities are in the Three Essentials" (1a). The Nine Cavities (*jiuqiao*) refer to the nine openings in the body, including eyes, ears, nose, mouth, anus, and urethra (see also *Inward Training*, ch. 15). The Three Essentials (*sanyao*) refers to the three orifices through which qi is most easily lost: the eyes (*mu*), ears (*er*), and mouth (*kou*). Here the emphasis is on sealing the senses to prevent dissipation and distraction. This recalls the end of chapter 7 of the *Zhuangzi*:

"The emperor of the southern ocean was called Brevity (Shu). The emperor of the northern ocean was called Suddenness (Hu). The emperor of the Center was

called Primordial Chaos (Hundun). Brevity and Suddenness often met in the land of Primordial Chaos, and Primordial Chaos treated them very generously. Brevity and Suddenness discussed how they could repay the inner power (*de*) of Primordial Chaos. They said, "All people have the Seven Cavities (*qiqiao*) so that they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. Primordial Chaos alone does not have them. Let's try boring some." Each day they bored another hole. On the seventh day Primordial Chaos died."

Like the disruption caused to Hundun's primordial unity through increasing differentiation, the sense organs may confuse and destabilize the Daoist adept's innate nature. Differentiated and conditioned modes of being separate one from one's original context of interrelationship.

The *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* suggests that the practice of observation (*guan*) and the development of clarity (*qing*) and stillness (*jing*) allow one to abide in suchness (*ziran*). In this ontological condition, the "Six Desires" do not arise and the "Three Poisons" are dispersed. The Six Desires (*liuyu*) are those originating from the six sense organs (*liugen*): eyes (sight), ears (sound), nose (smell), mouth (taste), body (touch), and mind (thought). The Three Poisons (*sandu*) are greed (*tan*), anger (*chen*), and ignorance (*chi*). By freeing oneself from the Six Desires and Three Poisons, by developing clarity and stillness, one awakens to innate nature (*xing*). As mentioned, innate nature is the heart-mind with which one is born. It is the personal half of the talisman—one's original connection to and attunement with the Dao. To cultivate clarity and stillness is to realize innate nature. This is nourishing the root; this is returning to the Dao.

In a later development, influenced by internal alchemy (*neidan*), the anonymous twelfth century CE *Nei riyong jing* (Scripture for Daily Internal Practice; DZ 645) advises the aspiring adept to nourish and protect the Seven Treasures (*qibao*); namely, vital essence, blood, qi, marrow, the brain, the kidneys, and the heart. The *Scripture for Daily Internal Practice* suggests that the Daoist adept should consider and reflect on the various ways in which the Seven Treasures are dispersed. These aspects of human being are not simply substances and organs; it is also important to recognize the related associations, specifically the Five Phase correspondences. For instance, becoming overly engaged in listening may be detrimental to the kidneys and dissipate vital essence. Excessive emotional and intellectual activity may injure the heart, thus leading to instability of spirit. One should in turn adopt lifeways and practices that preserve and nourish the Seven Treasures.

Thus, at its most fundamental level, Daoist cultivation involves conservation, self-refinement, and cosmological attunement. Through a commitment to inward training, through the cultivation of clarity and

stillness, one realizes and actualizes one's innate connection with the Dao. One comes to be an embodiment of the Dao through one's being-in-the-world.

For those interested in developing a root in Daoist practice, Daoist texts provide guidance and clarification. Inspired by the Book of Venerable Masters, the "Nine Practices" (*jiuxing*) as contained in the sixth century CE Laojun jinglü (Scriptural Statues of Lord Lao; DZ 786) represent an important beginning:

Practice non-action.  
Practice softness and weakness.  
Practice guarding the feminine. Do not initiate actions.

Practice being nameless.  
Practice clarity and stillness.  
Practice being adept.

Practice being desireless.  
Practice knowing how to stop and be content.  
Practice yielding and withdrawing.

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1. In his book *Standing by Words* (1982), which contains the character *xin* on the cover, Wendell Berry uses the notion of "standing by words" to express his vision of a life lived through ecological awareness and bioregional commitment.

2. The best book-length introductions to the Chinese religious tradition which is Daoism are Isabelle Robinet's *Taoism: Growth of a Religion* (1997), Livia Kohn's *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (2001), and James Miller's *Daoism: A Short Introduction* (2003). Books such as *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Taoism* should be avoided.

3. Harold Roth (Brown University) was the first to use the designation "inner cultivation lineages" for the earliest Daoist practitioners and communities. See, for example, his *Original Tao* (1999).

4. Note that the original Chinese text contains the character *qi* ("subtle breath") here. Most popular interpreters of the *Zhuangzi* follow Burton Watson or others who have relied on his generally excellent translation, in mistranslating "qi" as "spirit" (see Watson 1964, 54).

5. This text was central in the early Quanzhen (Ch'üan-chen; Complete Perfection) movement and its later Longmen (Lung-men; Dragon Gate) branch. In the latter Daoist monastic sub-tradition, Lord Lao is present as one of the Sanqing (San-ch'ing; Three Purities/Three Pure Ones). The Three Purities, representing the three primordial energies

of the cosmos, are *Yuanshi tianzun* (Celestial Worthy of Original Beginnings), *Lingbao tianzun* (Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure), and *Daode tianzun* (Celestial Worthy of the Dao and Inner Power [Lord Lao]). In traditional Longmen temples, the Three Purities most often occupy the central altar, with Yuanshi tianzun at the center, Lingbao tianzun on his left, and Daode tianzun on his right.

6 For a catalogue of Daoist texts in translation see Komjathy 2003c.

7 While the categorization of the *Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions* as Daoist or Daoistic may be problematic in certain respects, especially with regard to its "original context of composition," there can be little doubt that it has exerted a profound influence on the later Daoist tradition. The foundational view of health and well being in Daoist self-cultivation lineages considered more generally is the same as that expressed in the *Yellow Thearch's Basic Questions* and related texts. Emphasis is placed on conservation, regulation, harmonization and alignment.

## HANDBOOKS FOR DAOIST PRACTICE



Translated and introduced by Louis Komjathy (Ph.D. candidate, religion; Boston University), *Handbooks for Daoist Practice* (*Xiudao shouce*) is a series of translations of nine important, representative, and practice-oriented Daoist texts. Each work has been selected for its relevance to self cultivation. Each translation follows a standard format consisting of a historical and technical introduction, the translation proper, and the original Chinese text.

*Handbooks for Daoist Practice* consists of these nine booklets plus an introductory booklet discussing the translation series as a whole. The introductory handbook is intended to be a comprehensive introduction to the study and practice of Daoism. Additional information on this translation series may be found at the website for the Center for Daoist Studies ([www.daoistcenter.org](http://www.daoistcenter.org)).

The cost of the *Handbooks for Daoist Practice* is \$75.00 plus \$5.00 for shipping. This cost includes the ten booklets plus a handcrafted storage case. Interested individuals may send a check or money order for \$80.00 (payable to Louis Komjathy) to Center for Daoist Studies, Attention: Louis Komjathy, 5030 NE 180<sup>th</sup> Street, Lake Forest Park, WA 98155.