

ONE

INTRODUCTION

OPENING COMMENTS

Daoism has always emphasized mental serenity and maintained that good effects will come about from it. To be serene means that the mind is clear (*qing* 清), or free of any thoughts that confuse it; it also means that the mind is calm (*jing* 靜), without any emotions that agitate it. Daoism maintains that you should foster serenity at all times and in all activities. Activity itself is best limited to only what is most natural (*ziran* 自然) and necessary—“nonaction” (*wuwei* 無爲) is thus frequently enjoined.

For Daoists, meditation has been a primary means of fostering serenity and bringing it to greater depths. The greatest depths of serenity are entranced states of consciousness wherein mystical insights or experiences are said to come about,¹ or where vital forces of both mind and body—typically conceived as spirit (*shen* 神), *qi* 氣/炁 and essence (*jing* 精)²—are said to be activated and mobilized in most salubrious and wondrous ways. However, for such wondrous occurrences to come about in full abundance, it is frequently maintained—as we shall see—that your method of meditation ought to be simple and passive, apparently so as not to hinder the wonders that can only arise naturally. Less is more in all things, including meditation.

An immense variety of meditation methods and regimens have been devised within Daoism. Many of these have actually been very complicated, and have involved the active manipulation of the psyche and physiology by means of techniques such as visualizations (especially of deities inside and outside the body), invocations, mental guiding of *qi*, controlling and holding of breath, swallowing of breath, swallowing of saliva, knocking of teeth, self-massages, bends, stretches, drawing or swallowing of talismans, and such. Techniques of this sort—which we refer to as *proactive* (as opposed to the sort that most concerns us, which we refer to as *passive*)—are presented in particular detail and abundance in a category of Daoist scriptures called the Shangqing 上清 or Maoshan 茅山 scriptures, which originated out of divine revelations that are said to have occurred in the latter half of the fourth century in Jurong 句容, not far from present day Nanjing. These scriptures were widely acknowledged as the highest of divine revelations in medieval Daoist circles, to the extent that in the structure of the Daoist canon as conceived in the early fifth century, the canon's first section—the Dongzhen 洞真 section—was reserved for them. Modern scholarship has rightfully devoted a great deal of attention to the Shangqing scriptures, and Isabelle Robinet has provided us with particularly detailed and illuminating studies on their meditation methods.³

However, such elaborate, proactive meditation techniques are not described or endorsed in ancient Warring States (Zhanguo 戰國; 403–221 BCE) period Daoist texts such as the *Laozi* 老子 (The Old Master, aka *Daode jing* 道德經 [Classic of the Way and the Virtue]), the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Master Zhuang) or the *Neiye* 內業 (Inner Training). These texts endorse the habitual fostering of serenity throughout all circumstances and activities; if and when they do specifically speak of meditation, the method seems to involve little more than just calming and emptying out the mind.

As we shall see in this book, despite the profusion of proactive meditation techniques in Daoism during the first millennium of the Common Era, there also continued to exist and develop more passive approaches to meditation that calmly observed the processes that unfold spontaneously within the mind and body. Theorists and practitioners of such methods claimed that through deep serenity one could variously attain profound insights, experience numerous sorts of visions, feel surges of salubrious

qi in the body, overcome thirst and hunger, be cured of all ailments and decrepitude, ascend the heavens, and gain eternal life. While they did not necessarily reject or disdain the proactive methods, they often viewed them as conferring lesser blessings, or as being rudimentary methods that should or can be practiced in preparation for undertaking the more sublime passive methods.

This book is a historical overview of Daoist religious texts of the late Latter Han 後漢 (25–220) through Tang 唐 periods (618–907) that describe meditation methods of the passive kind, along with the various effects that serenity—particularly that of the deep sort—was believed to bring about. These texts, in emphasizing serenity and promoting passive approaches to meditation can be said to follow the legacy of Warring States period Daoism to a significant degree, though they also draw inspiration from other sources, and attribute to serenity effects of far greater variety and magnitude. Also, this material is crucial to our understanding of the subsequent development of some of the major types of Neidan 內丹 (Internal Alchemy) meditation that emerged from the Song 宋 period (960–1279) onward,⁴ which also put a prime emphasis on deep serenity and passive observation. This subsequent development is intended as the subject of a sequel to our current study.

Daoist theories on deep serenity and its effects developed under the influence of far more than just ancient Daoist philosophy. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) and throughout the medieval period (covering roughly the years 220 through 960), the increasing emphasis put on the quest for physical immortality, and the incorporation of various macrobiotic theories and methods developed by various immortality-seeking lineages, led to the development of a much greater variety and complexity of meditation techniques, as well as more extensive, concrete, detailed, and audacious claims regarding the sensory and physical effects that can come about. From the fifth century onward certain key Buddhist doctrines and notions such as rebirth, the Dharma Body [*fashen*] 法身, compassion, skillful means, and Emptiness [*kong*] 空 came to be firmly incorporated into the Daoist worldview. There also emerged a renewed interest in the philosophy of the *Laozi* as reinterpreted through a mode of discourse (the so-called Twofold Mystery [Chongxuan 重玄]) modeled upon that of the Mādhyamika school of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The incorporation of Buddhist ideas provided Daoists with new reasons for

laying prime emphasis on mental serenity, as well as new insights and strategies for the cultivation of serenity. It also caused some Daoists to reexamine the nature and relationship of mind, spirit, and body in a way that apparently engendered a tendency to emphasize the cultivation of the spirit over that of the body. This latter tendency would come under explicit criticism from fellow Daoists, who lamented what appeared to them as an abandonment of the cherished goals of physical longevity and immortality.

The primary scope of this book is Daoist religion of the late Latter Han through Tang periods. To try to ascertain the original teachings and intentions (and identity) of the author(s) of the *Laozi* or other Warring States period Daoist works is a task that has been ably and strenuously undertaken by many others; it is not my objective to try to provide groundbreaking insights to this discussion. However, before proceeding with proper subject matter, it is necessary to overview what some of the Warring States period texts had to say regarding serenity, meditation, and the effects thereof. The ideas on these matters occurring in these texts were carried on and further developed in Common Era Daoist religion. Both the *Laozi* (especially) and the *Zhuangzi* are quoted by Daoist religious authors for inspiration and support of their teachings. The *Neiye*, on the other hand, has been virtually ignored by them. However, the groundbreaking research of Harold Roth has brought it to the attention of modern scholars as a rare and crucial text for understanding the mysticism and praxis of Warring States period Daoism.⁵ The *Neiye* contains some noteworthy observations on the cultivation of serenity and its resultant effects on the condition of the body and its vital forces—observations that anticipate theories that get developed in Common Era Daoist texts.

THE ANCIENT PRECEDENTS

The *Laozi*

In the first chapter of the received version of the *Laozi* (ca. third century BCE) is a passage that relates to the absence of desires (an essential condition for serenity) and that can quite readily be understood as describing

a sort of mystical apprehension that can result from having no desires. The *Laozi* famously starts out by describing the eternal Dao (*dao* 道) as something that can be neither spoken of nor named, and states that this nameless Dao was at the beginning of Heaven and Earth (it also states, in what seems like a more ambiguous statement, that the “named” [*youming* 有名] is the “mother” of all things). After thus speaking of the elusive, ineffable quality of the eternal Dao, it states:

常無欲 以觀其妙 常有欲 以觀其徼

If you are always without desires, you thereby observe its marvels. If you always have desires, you thereby observe its outer fringe. (1/1b)⁶

To see the Dao’s marvels may or may not mean to actually observe the elusive, ineffable Dao itself; however, it would at least seem to mean witnessing something extraordinary that pertains to or is proper to the Dao. To always be without desire is really also something quite extraordinary, for in practice we seem to always be harboring some sort of desire. When we are in our ordinary desire-laden state, we cannot see the Dao’s marvels, but only its “outer fringe” (*jiao* 徼; here I follow the rendering of James Legge).⁷ Meant here by “outer fringe” are perhaps empirically observable natural phenomena, all of which come about through the power and workings of the mysterious Dao, but none of which manifest the Dao itself. By somehow becoming free of desires, it would appear that you are supposed to acquire a capacity to apprehend what eludes the grasp of ordinary consciousness.

At the outset of our discussion it was proposed that serenity is a mental condition where clarity and calmness prevail, and the Chinese words *qing* 清 and *jing* 靜 were presented as designations for these two attributes. The two words do quite often get joined into the compound *qingjing* 清靜, which is used in Daoist literature to describe the cherished state of mental serenity. (One also often finds the homophonic compound *qingjing* 清淨 [“clear and pure”] used interchangeably with it.) One of the most popular and influential scriptures of the Tang period that presents itself as the utterances of Lord Lao is the *Qingjing jing*, or the *Scripture of Clarity and Calmness* (to be discussed in chapter 5). In the ancient *Laozi* itself, the compound *qingjing* is indeed found, but just once. It is found

in the 45th chapter, and occurs within a phrase that reads, “By means of clarity and calmness, you can bring about rectitude under Heaven” 清靜以爲天下正 (3/8b). The meaning of the passage would appear to be that mental serenity—on the part of the king, or perhaps the people more generally—can bring about optimal social harmony. Perhaps the idea is that if the ruler habitually keeps his mind clear and calm, he will be able to see every situation objectively for what it is, and respond in the most fair, appropriate, and effective manner. Or, perhaps, the idea is that if mental serenity prevailed among people in general, the world would be free of conflict and strife.

Separately, the words *qing* (clear) and *jing* (calm) occur four and ten times respectively in the *Laozi*; one of the passages containing the word *jing* is found in the sixteenth chapter, and is of particular interest to us, as it lends itself—intentionally or not—to an interpretation that relates to passive meditation. The passage reads:

致虛極 守靜篤 萬物並作 吾以觀其復 夫物芸芸 各復歸其根 歸
根曰靜 是謂復命

Bring forth the utmost emptiness, and guard your calmness steadfastly.
The myriad things arise all together, and I hereby observe their return.
The things that grow forth in profusion, each return back to their roots.
To return to the roots is stillness. This is called returning to life/destiny
(?). (1/13a–b)

“Emptiness” (*xu* 虛) here can be understood as referring to a condition where the mind has been emptied of all its thoughts and desires. When the mind has been thoroughly emptied out and made calm, it simply observes things as they are, without imposing its own biases and wishes, and without interfering. But what is being observed here? Is it your own mind and body as you experience it in meditation, or is it the world out there as habitually encountered in everyday experience? How you chose to render the meaning of the character *ming* 命 (“life” or “destiny”?) seems to be contingent upon which of these lines of interpretation you take.

If one is to adopt the view that the above passage pertains to meditation, it could be interpreted as saying that when you bring the mind

and body to the condition of utmost emptiness and calm in meditation, this will lead spontaneously to a fresh movement of vital force from your “roots” or the depths of your being. This surge of fresh vitality serves as the key agent for constantly restoring your “life” (*ming* 命). Thus, it is necessary to enter the depths of calm so as to bring about this resurgence, and to calmly witness it so as to harness it for the maximization of your vitality. This, anyway, is the sort of meditation-based interpretation that would come to be given to this passage of the *Laozi*.

It is also plausible that the passage does not by original intent pertain specifically to meditation, and that the things that it tells you to calmly observe are those you see around you in the world. The idea is perhaps that when you observe things around you clearly and calmly for what they are, you realize that it is basic to the nature of all things to flourish and decline. Knowing that such is the inevitable nature of all things—yourself included—enables you to understand and accept your destiny (*ming*).

What subsequently follows in the *Laozi's* 16th chapter seems to support the latter, non-meditation-specific interpretation, because it states that the “returning to *ming*” is what is “constant” (*chang* 常), and that to understand this constant nature of things is to be “enlightened” (*ming* 明). Not understanding the constant principle will make you deluded and prone to malignant behavior, while understanding it will make you “tolerant” (*rong* 容) and “public-minded” (*gong* 公) in a manner befitting a king, or Heaven, or even the Dao itself. As for what happens when this magnanimous virtue attains to the level of the Dao, the text goes on to state that you will be “long-lasting” (*jiu* 久). However, the text then follows with a phrase (*moshen budai* 没身不殆) that is open to conflicting interpretations. One possible rendering of the phrase could be, “you will be without danger till the day that you die”; another could be “you will die, but will still not be in danger.” Rendered in the latter manner, the phrase could be taken as referring to some sort of eternal life that occurs after actual or apparent death (such as is indeed the case in the *Xiang'er* commentary to the *Laozi* [see chapter 2]). Rendered in the former manner, the phrase appears to nicely summarize the 16th chapter as a whole, and the gist of the chapter would seem to be as follows: If you keep your mind serene you can see the nature of things for what it is and peacefully accept your own destiny. This wisdom will make you into an unselfish,

magnanimous person who will not engage in malignant or reckless behavior. Such a person stays out of dangerous situations and lives a long life that concludes only with a peaceful, natural death.

In sum, a coherent message best seems to emerge from the sixteenth chapter of the *Laozi* when it is understood as referring to the habitual serenity that witnesses the world for what it is, and to the resulting wisdom and practical benefits that accrue thereby. Although such might be the reading most truthful to the *Laozi's* author's (or authors') intentions, the other interpretations—those pertaining to meditation, vital force, and immortality—are actually more important to our study, for these were interpretations that were seriously put forth and that impacted the methods and aspirations of subsequent Daoists who cultivated deep serenity through passive meditation methods.

The *Zhuangzi*

In the Inner Chapters (“Neipian” 內篇; chapters 1–7) of the *Zhuangzi*—the portion of the text generally thought most likely to issue from the hands of Master Zhuang (Zhuang Zhou 莊周 [ca. 369–286 BCE]) himself—we find some noteworthy anecdotes pertaining to clearing out and calming the mind. Interestingly, and perhaps oddly, two of these feature Confucius (Kong Qiu 孔丘; 551–479 BCE) and his favorite disciple Yan Hui 顏回 as the protagonists. In both of these anecdotes we encounter what is apparently a fictional Daoist Confucius who expounds teachings contrary to what one would expect the actual Confucius to have expounded.

In the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 4 (“In the World among Humans” [Renjian shi 人間世]) we are told about the time Yan Hui went to Confucius to ask his permission to go to the state of Wei 衛 and remonstrate against its tyrannical ruler. Confucius does not approve, because he doubts that Yan Hui could ever succeed at reforming the Lord of Wei, and even more fears that he could lose his life by angering the tyrant. Yan Hui then proposes to Confucius a few different strategies by which he might approach the Lord of Wei, persuade him, and go home unharmed. However, Confucius explains that these strategies have no hope of success. Yan Hui

then concedes that he has no more ideas as to how to proceed, and begs Confucius for his advice. Confucius advises him that he must undertake “fasting” (*zhai* 齋)—not ordinary fasting, but rather, the Fasting of the Mind (*xinzhai* 心齋). As for what this is, Confucius explains:

若一志 無聽之以耳而聽之以心 無聽之以心而聽之以氣 聽止於耳 心止於符 氣也者 虛而待物者也 唯道集虛 虛者心齋也

You must unify your will (concentrate yourself). Do not listen to it with your ears, but rather listen to it with your mind. Do not listen to it with your mind, but rather listen to it with your *qi*. Listening goes no further than [what] the ear [can hear]. The mind goes no further than [things that] tally [with what it already knows]. *Qi*, however, is something that is empty and which waits for things. Only the Dao gathers where it is empty. To be empty is the fasting of the mind. (1/18b)⁸

It would appear that Confucius wants Yan Hui to keep his mind concentrated and to listen carefully and properly. It is not quite clear here whether Confucius is speaking specifically about Yan Hui’s prospective interview with the Lord of Wei, or whether he is speaking more generally about how to engage the world with the mind and senses. Whatever the case, Confucius maintains that it is better to “listen” with the mind than with the ears. This probably means that he ought to use his mind to discern the true intent that lies behind the surface of words that the ears hear. However, even a clever mind can only understand things in terms of its own past experiences, preconceptions, and agendas. Thus Confucius maintains that it is even better to employ the *qi* 氣 in “listening.” Here *qi* is perhaps best understood as referring to the air that you inhale and exhale, and that sustains your bodily existence. Air in itself has no solid or liquid form that can be seen or grasped, and will accommodate any other object into the space that it occupies—hence it is described as “empty.” To undertake the Fasting of the Mind apparently means to make the mind empty like air—free of any thoughts or desires of its own; it then somehow comes to possess a capacity to apprehend things more accurately and respond more effectively than when it relies on rational thinking or ordinary sense perception. This capacity is there because somehow the mysterious, wondrous Dao “gathers” inside a mind that is empty. The

Dao then seems to somehow function in a manner that generates an intuitive wisdom.

The text then continues with Yan Hui remarking that previously, before knowing about how to carry out the Fasting of the Mind, he had “regarded himself as Hui” 自回, but that now that he is able to practice the Fasting of the Mind, “there has not yet begun to exist any Hui” 未始有回. In other words, he has emptied his mind of even the notion of his own selfhood, and has transcended egocentric concerns that are the source of so much anxiety and conflict (though one wonders how this is possible when he has only now just heard of the Fasting of the Mind; perhaps something has been skipped in the narrative here). Confucius now feels reassured, and tells Yan Hui that he can try visiting the Lord of Wei if he likes. However, he also gives him a few more words of advice, the gist of which seems to be that in his interaction with the Lord he should take care not to become involved or concerned with matters pertaining to reputation, and should not persist in expounding his message if the Lord shows himself not to be receptive to it. Amid such words of advice, Confucius also states, “As for he who stares into that closed space, that empty room will produce whiteness (i.e., brightness), and auspiciousness will abide there; if it does not abide, this is to sit and hurry” 瞻彼闕者 虛室生白 吉祥止止 夫且不止 是爲坐馳 (1/18b–19a). The closed, empty room spoken of here would seem to be the mind of the person who practices the Fasting of the Mind, and the radiance that emerges would seem to be the intuitive wisdom that issues forth. Good results ensue when this sort of wisdom guides you, rather than your own ego-laden thinking processes. To “sit and hurry” seems to mean that the mind is hurried and busy with thoughts even while the body sits still, which means that the mind is not empty and thus the “auspiciousness” cannot abide therein.

In the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 6 (“The Great and Most Honored Master” [Dazongshi 大宗師]) it is described how one day Yan Hui came before Confucius and declared that he was making progress. Confucius asks him why he thinks this is the case, and Yan Hui explains that it is because he has “forgotten benevolence and righteousness” 忘仁義. Confucius acknowledges that this is indeed progress, but also tells Yan Hui that more progress is necessary. Yan Hui comes back another day to report further progress—he has “forgotten the rites and music” 忘禮樂. Confucius once

again approves, but encourages further progress. Yan Hui comes back yet again on another day to report progress. This time, he states that he “sits and forgets” (*zuowang* 坐忘). Confucius is puzzled, and asks him what he means by this. Yan Hui explains:

墮肢體 黜聰明 離形去知 同於大通 此謂坐忘

I destroy my limbs and body and I eliminate my intelligence. I separate from my body and I do away with knowledge. I become identical with the Great Pervader. This is called “sitting and forgetting.” (2/9a)

What Yan Hui seems to mean by this is that he is able to sit down and empty his mind of all thoughts and desires, to the point where he is oblivious to even his own mind and body (clearly, his body has not been literally destroyed). It is by such self-oblivion that he is able to become somehow directly conscious of the Dao (the Great Pervader [*datong* 大通]; again following the rendering of James Legge)⁹ and of the fact that he partakes of and participates in it.

Having been told this, Confucius can only admit that his disciple has surpassed him. This is because such a person who transcends all concern with the mortal, personal self and instead identifies with the eternal Dao that works through all natural phenomena, no longer prefers one thing (“has no likes” [*wuhao*] 無好) over another, and no longer has any set opinions (“has no constants” [*wuchang*] 無常). It can further be surmised that such a person can adapt smoothly to all situations and interactions, and cannot be brought to despair by any circumstances—not even death. It is to be noted that this particular *Zhuangzi* anecdote and its key concept of “sitting and forgetting” were deemed particularly important by certain medieval Daoists, resulting in the appearance of an important treatise entitled *Zuowang lun* 坐忘論 (Treatise on Sitting and Forgetting), which is attributed to one of the most eminent Daoists of the Tang dynasty, Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (647–735). This text has been translated and extensively discussed by Livia Kohn,¹⁰ and is discussed in chapter 6 of this book.

The beginning of the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 2 (“Making things Equal” [Qiwu 齊物]) depicts another apparent practitioner of self-oblivion in the person of Nanguo Ziqi 南郭子綦. One day he was leaning on his desk,

looking up toward the sky, breathing softly and in a swoon. Yancheng Ziyou 顏成子游 sees this and asks him what he has just been doing, and whether it is possible for the body to become like a “withered tree” 槁木, and the mind like “dead ashes” 死灰. Nanguo Ziqi replies that he had in fact just “lost” (*sang* 喪) himself. He then turns around and asks Yancheng Ziyou whether he had ever heard the “pipes of earth” 地籟 or—even better—the “pipes of Heaven” 天籟, rather than just merely the “pipes of humans” 人籟. Yancheng Ziyou, curious, asks what the method for listening to those pipes might be. Nanguo Ziqi proceeds to describe how sounds of various pitch and volume sound forth from the earth when the wind blows through formations that it encounters on the landscape, such as a forest of trees with their various branches, leaves, apertures, and crevices. From this Yancheng Ziyou understands what Nanguo Ziqi means by the “pipes of earth,” but is still compelled to ask what exactly the “pipes of Heaven” are. To this, Nanguo Ziqi says, “It blows upon the myriad differences, and makes them what they are. All things take their own, but who rouses them?” 夫吹萬不同 而使其自己也咸其自取 怒者其誰邪 (1/6a). The pipes of Heaven apparently is a metaphor for the workings of the mysterious Dao that gives rise to all things and makes them what they are, but which is itself utterly imperceptible and incomprehensible. It seems that Nanguo Ziqi had acquired this insight into the pipes by virtue of his ability to make his body like a “withered tree” and his mind like “dead ashes” and thereby “lose” himself; perhaps when in full trance he could even somehow hear the pipes of Heaven?

In *Zhuangzi*, chapter 23 (Gengsang Chu 庚桑楚)—one of the so-called Miscellaneous Chapters (Zapian 雜篇)—we find another mention of the body that is like a withered tree and the mind that is like dead ashes. This occurs within a conversation that is depicted occurring between the wise Old Master, Laozi, and Nanrong Chu 南榮趯, who was a student of Gengsang Chu—himself a former student of Laozi. Gengsang Chu had sent the elderly Nanrong Chu to visit and learn from Laozi, for under his own tutelage he did not seem to be making good progress toward becoming the “Ultimate Man” (*zhiren* 至人). The instructions that Laozi proceeds to give Nanrong Chu are full of themes, terms, and phrases resembling or matching those found in the *Laozi* and the *Neiye*. Among these are the injunction (apparently culled from the *Laozi*, chapters 10

and 55) that one ought to become like a baby or a very small child, whose vitality is so full that he or she can clench the fists firmly and cry all day without getting hoarse. Further expanding on the virtues of the small child, Laozi tells Nanrong Chu:

兒子動不知所為 行不知所之 身若槁木之枝而心若死灰 若是者
禍亦不至 福亦不來 禍福無有 惡有人災也 宇泰定者 發乎天光

The little child moves without knowing what he is doing. He goes without knowing where he goes. His body is like the branches of a withered tree and his mind is like dead ashes. He who is like this does not come to misfortune, nor do blessings come to him. How could he be subject to human misfortunes?

He whose house is peaceful and stable emits a heavenly light. . . .
(4/32a–b)

Here, then, the withered tree/dead ashes condition described is not one of a man sitting in trance, but of a small child going about in a clueless and carefree manner, utterly lacking in self-awareness. The idea seems to be that if you just go about your activities without any self-conscious thoughts, desires, or aims, none of the circumstances you encounter will seem like misfortunes to you—nor like blessings, for that matter. Nothing can thus bring you to anguish or despair. The “house” here would seem to refer to your mental house or mind. The “heavenly light” that emerges when the mind is kept peaceful and stable would again seem to be some sort of intuitive wisdom. Perhaps this is in part so, but from what follows after this in the text it would appear that this “heavenly radiance” is something of an aura that you unwittingly exude, and which brings a particular sort of reaction from people and Heaven, respectively. As for what the reaction is from people, the text’s wording is difficult to comprehend, and could be variously interpreted as saying that people will “abandon” you, or that they will “take up lodging” with you (the key here lies in how to translate the character *she* 舍). However, in regard to Heaven’s reaction, it clearly says that it will aid (*zhu* 助) you. Thus, it would appear that you are immune from disaster not only in the sense that you maintain equanimity under all circumstances, but also because there is some mysterious principle at work by which harm evades you and good happens to you,

all by no effort of your own. It should be noted that such an uncanny principle is also described in the *Laozi's* 55th chapter (3/15a–16a), which praises the abundant virtue of the baby (*chizi* 赤子) that enables him or her to never be stung by poisonous insects, or attacked by ferocious beasts and birds of prey.

In chapter 11 (Letting Be [Zaiyou 在宥]), one of the *Zhuangzi's* so-called Outer Chapters (Waipian 外篇), we find an anecdote in which the Yellow Emperor (Huangdi 黃帝) twice visits Guangchengzi 廣成子 (Master of Vast Accomplishment) on Mt. Kongtong 空同山. Upon his first visit, the Yellow Emperor asks Guangchengzi to instruct him on the “essence of the ultimate Dao” 至道之精, so that he can apply it to the bringing about of prosperity and order throughout the Empire. Guangchengzi sternly rebukes him and refuses to respond to the query. The Yellow Emperor then abdicates the throne and dwells in retreat in a grass hut for three months, before visiting Guangchengzi for the second time. This time he asks him about how to “govern the body” 治身. Guangchengzi responds warmly and enthusiastically with the following words:

至道之精 窈窈冥冥 至道之極 昏昏默默 無視無聽 抱神以靜 形將自正 必靜必清 無勞女形 無搖女精 乃可以長生

The essence of the ultimate Dao is profound and dark. The limit of the ultimate Dao is dark and silent. Do not look, do not listen. Embrace your spirit with calmness; your body will thereby naturally be rectified. You must be calm, you must be clear. Do not belabor your body and do not agitate your essence. Thereby you can live long. (2/25a)

Guangchengzi further goes on to admonish against hearing, seeing, and knowing too much, and reassures the Yellow Emperor that if he just focuses on governing his body in this way, the world and the myriad creatures will flourish on their own. He then reveals that he himself has thus cultivated himself for 1,200 years, and has not declined at all in physical vigor (!).

Whereas the previous anecdotes that we examined from the *Zhuangzi* (all but one were from the “Inner Chapters”) speak primarily of the noetic and psychological benefits that come about from clearing out the mind,

this anecdote from the “Outer Chapters” trumpets the immense physical benefits of serenity. Guangchengzi proclaims that keeping the mind clear and calm makes the condition of the body what it ought to be, and enables you to harness your “essence.” What is unclear is whether essence means seminal essence specifically (as is often the case in Common Era Daoist religious texts) or vital essence as the basis of individual and cosmic vitality (as employed in the *Neiye*, as we shall see); if the former interpretation is taken, the passage entails a specific admonishment against sexual desire and excess. Another nagging question is whether the author here really wants readers to believe that it is possible for a human being to live 1,200 years, or whether this is mere literary hyperbole or a metaphor of some sort (these are very common in the *Zhuangzi*). Whatever the case, the physiological emphasis of this anecdote that distinguishes it from the anecdotes of “Fasting of the Mind” and the “Sitting and Forgetting” can perhaps be taken as betraying the fact that it, like most of the material in the “Outer” and “Miscellaneous” chapters, was probably not written by Master Zhuang himself, but rather by a disciple, follower or admirer of the third century BCE. This, however, in no way diminishes the interest of the anecdote for this book. The teachings conveyed in the anecdote anticipate what Common Era Daoist religious texts would have to say about the physiological necessity and benefits of serenity.

The *Neiye*

The discourse in the *Neiye* more fully explains how the cultivation of serenity facilitates longevity by bringing about a plenitude of vitality in one’s person, along with sagely wisdom. The *Neiye* was never a lost text, and yet was virtually ignored by the Daoist religious tradition. The reason for this was apparently because the received version of the text is found in the 49th *juan* of the *Guanzi* 管子,¹¹ a highly eclectic anthology of treatises, many of which relate to statecraft and present a Legalist tendency of thought. By being in effect “buried” within such an anthology, the *Neiye* was habitually overlooked by Daoist readers and authors who might have otherwise recognized its coherence and resonance with their own convictions and aspirations. Yet, unbeknown to them, some of their basic ideas seem to have derived and evolved out of those in the *Neiye*.

The first section of the *Neiye* (I follow the section divisions proposed by Harold Roth in his critical edition)¹² talks about the “essence of all things” 凡物之精 that brings all things to life, from the five varieties of grain that grow down in the earth, right up to the stars that shine in the sky. It also states that the essence brings about phenomena that we refer to as “ghosts and spirits” 鬼神 when it flows about in space, and that it makes a person into a Sage 聖人 if it is stored inside that person’s bosom. The *Neiye*’s second section is about “this *qi*” 此氣—meaning apparently the essence extolled in the first section—which it explains as being something that cannot be harnessed by means of force or speech, but rather must be “put at ease by virtue” 安以德 (or “inner power”) and “welcomed by awareness” 迎以意 (see Roth 1999, 47).

It is to be noted that in the *Neiye* “essence” (*jing* 精) denotes *qi* 氣 of a more pure, refined quality. The eighth section states, “That which is [known as] ‘essence,’ is the essence of *qi*” 精也者 氣之精也. In other words, it is the purer, subtler essence of *qi* that you obtain by removing its coarser constitution, much in the way one removes the husks and polishes rice to obtain shiny white kernels. (The character *jing* 精 for essence is composed of the character *mi* 米 denoting rice or kernels of grains more generally, and the character *qing* 青, that here denotes clarity or purity.) This essence is what gives vitality, consciousness, and intelligence to living beings. This usage of the term *essence* and its perceived relationship to *qi* is actually different from what becomes common in Daoist religious literature, where essence is usually associated with nourishment, procreation, and bodily (especially sexual) fluids, and generally stands below both *qi* and spirit in the ascending scale of refinement. However, the *Neiye* and the Common Era Daoist religious texts that are examined later fully agree that essence and *qi*—whatever their mutual relationship may be—must be cherished, and that mental serenity is most essential for this purpose. Thus, the first six lines of *Neiye* section 8 (those directly preceding the sentence quoted earlier) read:

能正能靜 然後能定 定心在中 耳目聰明 四肢堅固 可以爲精舍

If you can be rectified and calm, you can subsequently become stabilized. If you stabilize your mind within, your hearing and sight will be clear and acute, and your four limbs will be firm and solid. You can become a dwelling for the essence. (Roth 1999, 61)

Thus, the essence dwells in you if you are good at making the mind calm, stable, and inwardly concentrated. Crucial yet problematic here for understanding the passage is the exact sense of the characters that I rendered respectively as “rectified” (*zheng* 正) and “stabilized” (*ding* 定). This has a direct bearing on whether we understand the passage as related specifically to meditation exercise. Roth renders the character *zheng* as “aligned,” meaning that the body is maintained in a well-aligned, balanced posture of the sort usually recommended in seated meditation practice. Plausible though this is, it also seems possible that the character could mean something to the effect of maintaining a proper state of mind or of following proper conduct in daily life. The character *ding* would during the Common Era come to be used in Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures to refer to states of *samādhi* or meditative trance. It is thus certainly tempting here to interpret *ding* as bearing a similar sense. However, it is probably more reasonable within a pre-Common Era context to understand *ding* as simply meaning that one is calm and under control.¹³

In any case, we are told that the positive effects of this rectified, calm stability will include enhanced sensory acuity and a strong, healthy body. Section 15 of the *Neiye* further explains that when you thus store the essence inside of you, you form within you a “wellspring” (*quanyuan* 泉原) and “pool” (*yuan* 淵) of *qi* that is “flood-like” (*haoran* 浩然; an expression famously used by the Confucian luminary Mencius [Meng Ke 孟軻 372–289 BCE])¹⁴ and inexhaustible (see Roth 1999, 75). Section 16 describes how being “rectified and calm” (*zhengjing* 正靜) improves the texture and appearance of your skin, the suppleness of your muscles and the strength of your bones, along with the acuity of your hearing and vision (see Roth 1999, 77).

In section 13, this all-important essence gets described as a spirit:

有神自在 一往一來 莫之能思 失之必亂 得之必治 敬除其舍 精將自來

There is a spirit that does what it will. Now going and now coming, nobody can fathom it. If you lose it, you will certainly be in disorder. If you obtain it you will certainly be in control. Reverently clean out its dwelling, and the essence will thereby come of its own accord. (See Roth 1999, 71)

The “dwelling” that you need to clean out is your mind, which needs to be freed of all thoughts and desires. What you yourself need to do is just empty out the mind. The actual coming of the essence/spirit is something that it does on its own, and that you passively await with a clear, calm mind.

Elsewhere in the *Neiye* this life-giving force that can be made to stay through steadfast serenity is referred to simply as the *Dao*:

夫道無所 善心安愛 心靜氣理 道乃可止

The Dao has no place. It rests within and cherishes a good mind.¹⁵ If the mind is calm and the *qi* is regulated, the Dao can be made to stay there. (*Neiye*, section 5; Roth 1999, 55)

道也者 口之所不能言也 目之所不能視也 耳之所不能聽也 所以修心而正形也 人之所失以死 所得以生也

The Dao is what cannot be spoken of with the mouth. It is what cannot be seen with the eyes. It is what cannot be heard with the ears. Therefore you cultivate the mind and rectify the body. People who lose it die. People who obtain it live. (*Neiye*, section 6; Roth 1999, 57)

靈氣在心 一來一逝 其細無內 其大無外 所以失之 以躁爲害 心能執靜 道將自定

Numinous *qi* is in the mind. It comes and it goes. In its minuteness there is nothing it cannot enter. In its vastness there is nothing that it does not extend beyond. The reason you lose it is due to the harm brought forth by agitation. If the mind can hold to calmness, the Dao will thereby naturally be stabilized [in there]. (*Neiye*, section 26; Roth 1999, 97)

The Dao, then, is a most numinous *qi* that can reside within you and sustain your life, but does not have to; it can and will go anywhere to work its wonders. The only way to ensure that it will dwell in you is by keeping the mind clear and calm. This same notion (more or less) is forcefully expounded in the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注, one of the important extant texts of early (ca. 200 CE) Daoist religion, and is echoed repeatedly in subsequent texts.

The earlier discussion of the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Neiye* certainly has not covered all that these texts have to say that might be relevant to serenity and its effects. Furthermore, these are not the only ancient materials that represent or preserve views of the Daoist persuasion (among some of the other sources that might be culled are the *Xinshu* 心術 Parts I and II [*Guanzi*, *juan* 36, 37], the *Liezi* 列子, the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, and the *Lüshi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋). However, we have shown how these ancient texts endorse mental serenity variously as a means of gaining apprehension of the Dao's subtleties; generating intuitive wisdom that guides spontaneous, effective action; overcoming stress, fear, and anxiety; staying out of harm's way; and filling and maintaining oneself with vitality. While the serene state is certainly something that should be fostered in all activities and circumstances, there is also considerable evidence suggestive of meditation exercise wherein deep serenity is fostered.

OVERVIEW

In chapters 2 through 7 we highlight fourteen different Daoist texts that range in date between roughly the second and ninth centuries CE. They have been selected for examination because they offer interesting and important discussions on serenity and/or passive meditation, or offer particularly detailed or vivid descriptions of sensory and physical phenomena that are supposed to come about from deep serenity. Note, however, that these texts, despite sharing certain themes, characteristics, or propensities, do not collectively represent a self-conscious tradition. “Passive” and “proactive” are my own analytical categories, and some of our texts endorsing methods describable as “passive” are not necessarily disdainful or critical of methods describable as “proactive.” Their authors may have practiced both sorts of methods and perhaps did not perceive a distinction of the sort (namely, passive versus proactive) that I do.

Grouping and ordering the texts for a discussion that properly traces the historical evolution of Daoist methods and theories of passive meditation is a somewhat difficult and perilous enterprise, because most of the texts to be discussed are not easy to date with much precision, and some of them—most notably the Taiping Group texts—underwent some

fairly complex processes of redaction. Although the intent here is to try to present the material in approximately the proper chronological order, this ordering is imprecise and is based largely on the internal doctrinal and thematic contents of the texts, and the degree to which they match with certain tendencies that we associate with particular known movements and events in Daoist history.

Chapter 2 starts with texts that have long been of interest to many scholars due to their possible connection to the earliest Daoist religious movements known to history—the Way of Great Peace (Taiping Dao 太平道) and the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice (Wudoumi Dao 五斗米道; aka, the Way of the Heavenly Masters [Tianshi Dao 天師道]) that arose in the second century. The Taiping Group texts (meaning primarily *The Great Peace* [*Taiping jing* 太平經],¹⁶ *GP Synopsis* [*Taiping jing chao* 太平經鈔] and *GP Instructions* [*Taiping jing shengjun bizhi* 太平經聖君祕旨]) contain material that has survived from a lengthy second-century text known as the *Taiping qinglingshu* 太平清領書—or more simply the *Taiping jing*—and which according to the standard histories was cherished by the Way of Great Peace that undertook the notorious Yellow Turban Revolt of 184. The *Laozi-Xiang'er* [*Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注] is a partially surviving commentary to the *Laozi* that has been ascribed variously to Zhang Daoling 張道陵, the founder and first Heavenly Master of the Way of the Five Pecks of Rice, or to his grandson, the third Heavenly Master Zhang Lu 張魯.

Because the Taiping Group texts and the *Laozi-Xiang'er* bear such possible connections to the two large and influential organizations at the dawn of Daoist religious history, one might surmise that what these texts say on any matter would set precedents and have a profound bearing on how the religion would subsequently develop. This indeed seems to be the case in regard to matters related to serenity and meditation. The Taiping Group texts offer descriptions of meditation methods of various sorts, both passive and proactive in tendency, and rank the different sorts of methods in a manner that places in the highest position the methods that do *not* involve the visualization of complex, concrete forms. The Taiping Group texts emphasize an underlying inner clarity and calm as fundamental to meditation in general, and also claim that all thirst and hunger can be overcome. They also contain interesting statements on the