

The Natural Process of Internal Alchemy

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Introduction

Daoist cultivation is a process of internal transformation or alchemy which works with the subtle energies of the body in a gradual process of refinement. This process is natural, however, and should not be approached with too much direct intention, as Laozi taught that too much intention interferes with natural process. This article lays a basic framework for understanding the Daoist approach to internal alchemy.

The Three Treasures

According to the Daoist view, all living things are made up of three kinds of subtle energy: essence (jing), energy (qi), and spirit (shen), known collectively as "the three treasures" (sanbao).

Jing is the essence or vital substance we receive from our parents; it is stored primarily as fluid in the kidneys, sexual organs, and bone marrow, but it is present in all the bodily tissues. We gradually lose jing from unbalanced activities such as poor diet, excessive sexual release, physical exhaustion or emotional excess, and it is very difficult if not impossible to restore. When the jing is abundant, our health is strong; when it declines, we lose our vitality; when it completely diminishes, we lose our life. If we maintain a balanced and restrained lifestyle, we can preserve the jing well into old age.

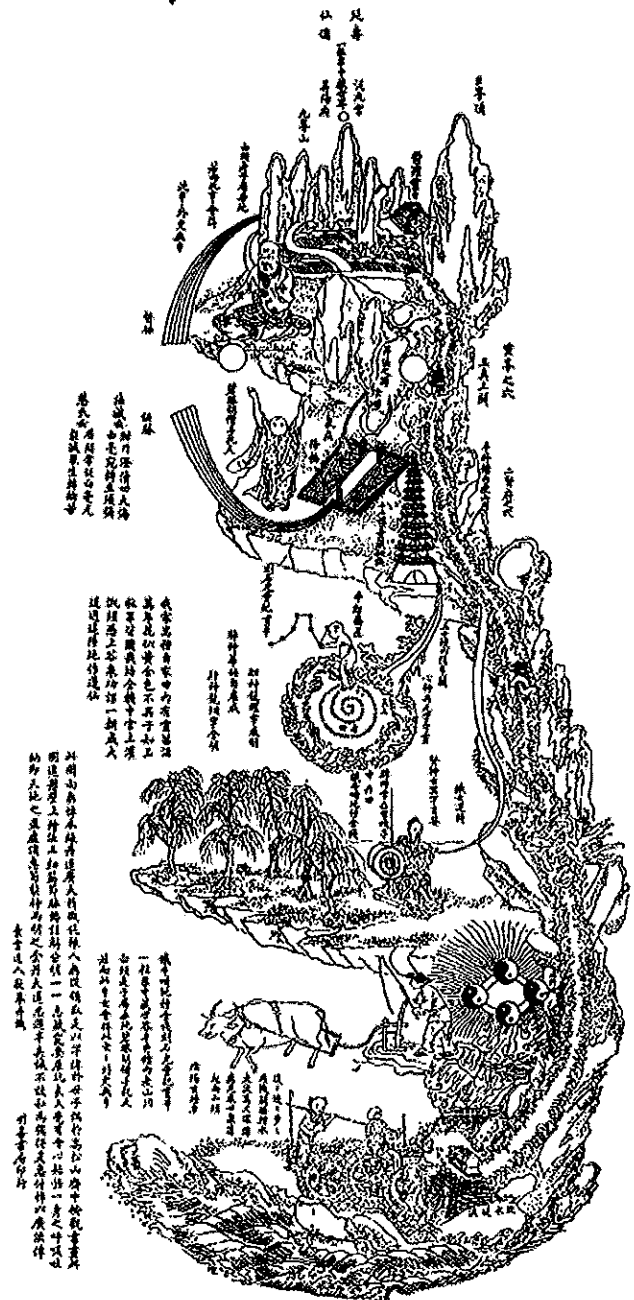
Qi is energy or life force; it manifests as movement, breath, thoughts, and emotions. We receive pre-natal qi from our parents and the cosmos; we draw post-natal qi from air, food, our environment, etc. According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, when qi circulates freely, we have good health, but when it stagnates or scatters, we become ill. Excessive tension blocks the circulation of qi, while excessive activity scatters the qi. If we align and relax our body and mind, the qi can circulate, gather, and grow.

Shen is spirit; it is the divine spark at the core of our being. According to the Chinese, when we are born, the shen gets lodged into the heart-mind (xin). Heart-mind is a Chinese concept similar to the Western concept of mind, but it encompasses the emotional as well as mental sphere. When our heart-mind is entangled in thoughts and emotions, the shen becomes obscured. If we let the heart-mind settle and look into itself, the shen becomes clear and radiant.

Phases of Internal Alchemy

The first phase of alchemy cultivates jing and transforms it into qi by aligning and relaxing the body, stabilizing the breath, and calming the heart-mind. With proper practice, the fire of the heart descends into the lower "elixir field" (dantian) in

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the lower abdomen, where it can heat the water of the kidneys, allowing the qi to rise as a subtle vapor to circulate throughout the body and open the higher dantians. Daoists call this phase the reversal of fire & water.

The second phase of alchemy transforms the qi into shen by stabilizing the flow of qi and concentrating the heart-mind. Daoists call this phase the firing process, or turning the light around. This reversal process is a kind of introversion of both jing and qi which does not happen in any specific place. Signs that this process is happening include the backward flow of seminal essence to nourish the kidneys and bone marrow and an internal perception of pure light.

The third phase of alchemy transforms the shen into emptiness (xu) by letting go of the deliberate reversal process and abiding in a natural state of emptiness and non-action (wuwei). This is a state of utter withdrawal and selflessness.

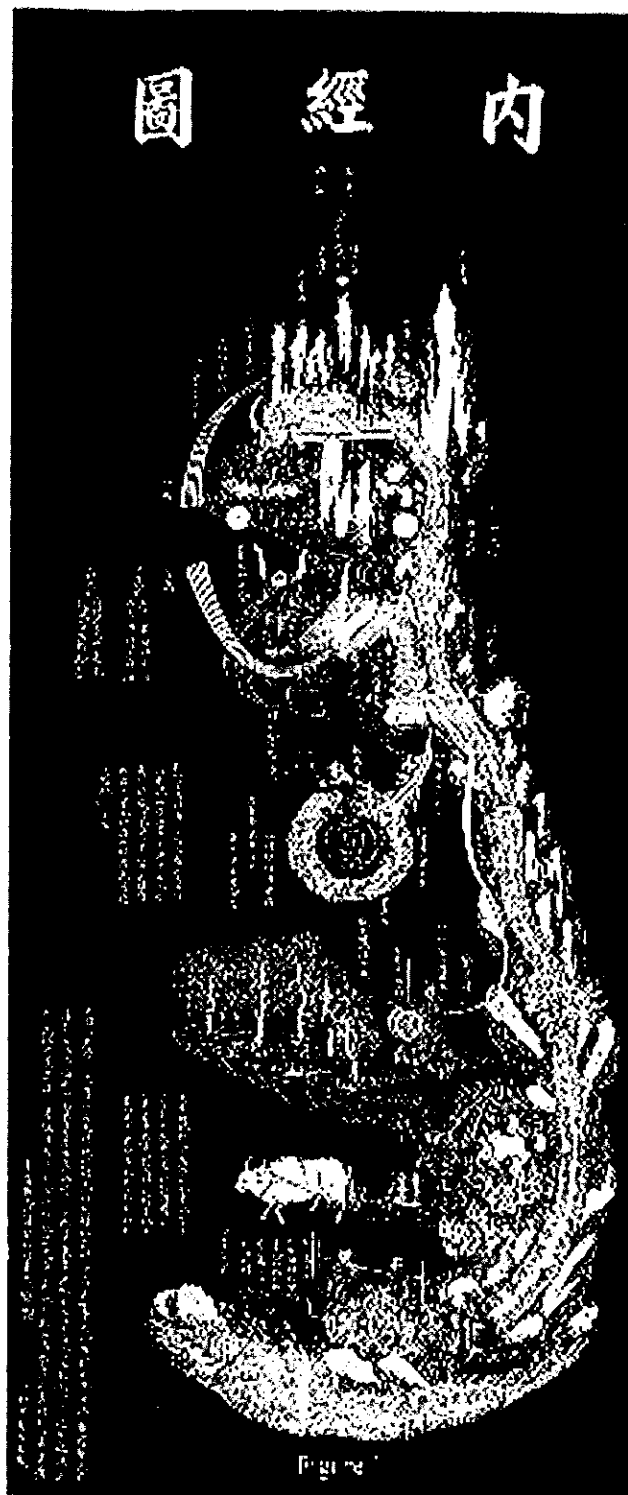
When the cultivation of emptiness is ripe, the alchemist spontaneously merges with the Dao. One has dropped individual selfhood and united with all things. Wuji and taiji co-exist; clouds naturally come and go in the empty sky.

Empty-Mind (Xuxin) Non-Action (Wuwei) & Natural Process (Ziran)

Laozi taught that if we align ourselves with the Dao, the process of internal alchemy will happen naturally. Because alchemy is a process of returning to our original nature, we do not have to do something special to make it happen. The secret of Laozi's teaching is that by emptying the mind and abiding in non-action, we inherently align ourselves with the Dao and "the gate of mystery" opens of itself.

Xuxin ("Shoo-sheen") means "empty heart-mind". Thoughts and emotions are like waves on the ocean; if we are caught up in the waves, we cannot see into the hidden depths. Emptying the mind does not mean suppressing thoughts and emotions, but just disengaging from them and letting them settle like a calm pool of water so the light can shine through.

Wuwei ("Woo-Way") means "non-action". This does not mean inaction or inertia, but natural action according to the situation. Like water flowing downstream - it has a direction, but it is just settling toward that direction. It may appear to be very active at times, but it is really just effortlessly flowing toward its destination, the ocean. The opposite is youwei, which is using intention and control to accomplish something. Although this approach is highly valued in Western culture, it is not the Daoist way. Laozi said: "Sagehood is achieved by letting things follow their course; it is not achieved by interfering." (Ch 48). If we try to approach Daoist cultivation through youwei, we cannot reap the fruit; our effort itself becomes blockage. This not only hinders one's progress, but it can cause other problems as well. Through wuwei, we relax our effort, trusting in the natural process. When we settle into wuwei, the proper



Figure

cultivation starts happening of itself.

Ziran ("Dzi-zhan") means literally "self-so", but the implication is "naturally so", "of itself" or "spontaneously arising". When our cultivation is ripe, our original nature spontaneously shines forth. It happens of itself - it does not come from our intention. This is ziran.

These three concepts join into one, as summed up in the 5th-century CE *Xisheng Jing* (*Scripture of Western Ascension*): "If you empty your heart-mind and abide in non-action, then without your own effort the Dao will spontaneously revert to you." Spontaneously arising alchemy is the Daoist approach to spiritual cultivation. "Sitting quietly, doing nothing, spring comes, and the grass grows by itself."

The Role of Meditation

Daoist meditation is a practice of sitting quietly, emptying the heart-mind, and abiding in non-action. The ancient sage Zhuangzi called this practice *Zuowang*, which simply means to sit and forget. In *Zuowang*, we settle into our posture, breathe naturally, and just let the mind rest. That's it - we are not trying to accomplish anything or create any special experience. We are not deliberately guiding energy, controlling the breath, or trying to transform ourselves. We are just sitting, forgetting, as the 10,000 things rise and fall. This practice embodies Laozi's teaching of *wuwei* and is the core of Daoist cultivation.

Because human beings accumulate many unhealthy habits of body, breath, and mind, we experience various difficulties in settling into this simple practice. There are many elements of proper posture which are essential for enabling the breath to be easy and natural and allowing the agitation to settle from the mind. These include keeping the spine upright and relaxing everything into a stable base. When the body is aligned and comfortable, the qi can sink and the natural cultivation can arise.

To practice Daoist meditation, sit down and relax. Align your body, keep your spine upright, and let your posture be stable and comfortable. Fold your hands in your lap or rest them on your legs. Let the tongue rest against the upper palate, and let your eyes rest half open. Breathe in, breathe out, naturally. Let the breath be smooth, easy, and quiet, as the belly rises and falls. Just forget everything and let go of all concepts. Simply remain present as thoughts come and go. Let the cultivation happen naturally. Gradually, the mind will settle, the energy will stabilize, and the spirit will become bright. It's a natural process. ☯

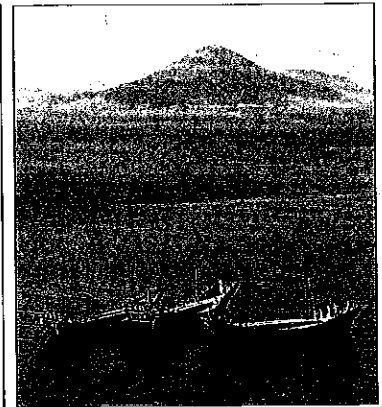
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