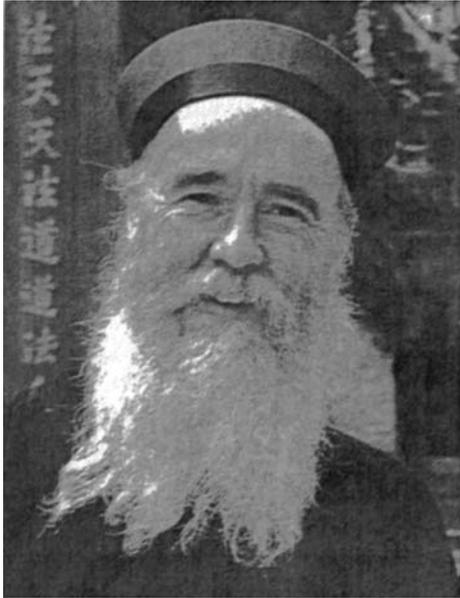


Zuowang (Sitting & Forgetting)

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Dragon Gate is a practice-based tradition that emphasizes that you have to take responsibility for your own cultivation. Daoism has a long history that stretches out some five thousand years, and many traditions have come into being under its umbrella during this time, each evolving their own unique and individual approach to the Dao, developing their own particular view and cultivation practices. Interesting though this may be, you have not come here for me to fill you up with strange and wonderful ideas about what Daoism is. I leave that to the experts! We should take Laozi as our guide, who said:

In pursuit of learning, add something every day;
In pursuit of Dao, drop something every day;
Do less and less until you enter non-action.

Meditation is not about acquiring and filling, but is a process of releasing and emptying. Reading books on Daoism can stimulate your interest and satisfy your intellectual needs, but to embody the teachings, individual cultivation is essential. Daoism is not reliant on academic knowledge or a belief system. Much of the traditional teachings of Daoism are written in such a way that personal participation in the text through your own cultivation is needed. Then reading books becomes something that helps your cultivation unfold.

Some Misunderstandings about Meditation

First let us look at the common misunderstandings about meditation that can become a problem if we don't clear them up at the beginning. Many of us approach life with the idea that something is wrong with us that needs to be put right or changed. That's not the view we should take when we approach meditation. We may be expecting to have some wonderful experience that's going to totally change our life. But unfortunately that's not the way it is. Sitting with grand ideals and expectations only wears you out and leaves you disillusioned.

Some people believe meditation is creating a nice internal space that is quiet and comfortable – a place to hide in when things are not that good. That is also not what we call meditation. We don't sit in meditation to achieve relaxation. While it may be an aspect of meditation, to identify meditation as just relaxation is to totally miss the point. Some forms of meditation have been adopted in the west as therapeutic techniques to help you feel better about yourself, to cope with daily life. Although these approaches have their benefits, they are not what Daoists call meditation.

It is important to uproot these false views, otherwise when we enter meditation we can become caught up in these expectations and miss what is actually happening!

Sitting and Forgetting

Zuowang is a type of meditation which means to sit and forget. What we forget is what we hold most dearly: self, with all its opinions, beliefs, and ideals. We can be so caught up in the concept of self that we only see the world as a place to fulfill personal ambition and desire. Zuowang is a formless meditation – it has no techniques or methods. But if I were to say to you that there's nothing you need to do, then your mind would slip into the habitual pattern of thought and wander all over the place. There are ways of introducing this practice to you. There are techniques, but we must realize that they are not Zuowang, they are just ways to help you discover Zuowang. Really Zuowang is resting in a choiceless awareness that is not dependent on self-reference. This is a natural state, not some transcendental experience.

In meditation, we don't need to be anywhere but where we are now, so if there are a lot of thoughts going on, as long as we don't identify with those thoughts as being us, then it's ok. You can look at this like a wave in the sea. You wouldn't say to the sea, "Oh, you should be calm all the time." No, you know the sea is just the sea, whether it is calm or whether there are waves. So if we can see that a thought is just like a wave coming up and going back down to the sea, we don't need to see it as being a problem. Recognize that it's just the nature of the mind for thoughts to arise. They arise from emptiness and dissolve back into emptiness. Thoughts become self-liberating if we realize that their nature is emptiness. Thoughts are arising, but we are not doing it – they are appearing of themselves. They are not our enemy; it's a natural process that is happening.

Daoists call this process "ziran", which means "occurrence arising of itself". This describes the inner environment as well as the outer. It is the process by which the 10,000 things spontaneously arise, each according to their own nature, eventually dissolving and returning to the source, which is non-being. The best way to become aware of this is by observing our thoughts arise. They never abide for long and eventually dissolve back into non-being. By settling into this process, gradually our activities become an expression of non-being. This allows for a freer, non-reactive response to the 10,000 things, as we fulfill our nature each moment. Daoists say "Sitting quietly, doing nothing; spring comes, and the grass grows by itself." We don't have to DO anything. And in the same way our hair will grow, our heart will beat, and we will breathe in and out, and we don't have to think about it. It just happens, occurrence arising of itself.

Experiences in Meditation

You might think that it is wonderful just to sit and do nothing, but actually it is very difficult. The cultivation is simple, but there are difficulties. For most of our life we've been allowing our mind to roam free, to fantasize and daydream, to plan

and come up with the most fantastic ideas, and when we sit, it just carries on. We actually quite like it like this; our fantasies appear again and again – they are much more appealing than being in the moment as it arises while you sit on the cushion.

As some thoughts arise, we are attracted to them, we adopt them, identifying them as “me” thinking. This is often experienced quite strongly as the “wise commentator” that appears to give us some advice on the practice: “This is not going too well, I must be doing something wrong, I should be concentrating harder. If I were more comfortable, I could really get into this.” If you’re not mindful of it, the commentator will continue for the whole of the sitting. Anyone who has done any meditation will be familiar with the commentator. As long as we identify the commentator as “this is me speaking”, we give it more energy, but in fact it is just another thought that has arisen. We get lost and disconnected from the meditation, and it takes us a while to return to the cultivation. It’s important that we recognize this process and don’t get caught up with identifying with the content of thought. Whatever brainwave we happen to have, we recognize that it’s just a thought, and its nature is emptiness.

We also need to be careful about how we unconsciously create criteria to evaluate the success or failure of a meditation. We are often pleased if a period of meditation passes quickly. This is not the best way to look at it, however, for we may have been sitting in a drowsy state with little awareness regarding the practice at all. This is treating the practice too loosely. On the other hand, we may be sitting with an intense concentration waiting to spring on any thought that arises and strangle it! Although we are to some extent more mindful than when we are drowsy, this is too tight. We need to develop a balance between not too tight and not too loose.

The way we approach Daoist cultivation is very important. We are brought up to control everything, to manipulate, to turn situations to our advantage. This reinforces a false view of the way things are. Daoists say we create many of our own difficulties in life by trying to control too much. Zuowang is not about controlling and manipulating our experience. In meditation we sit to observe how things actually are, without feeling the need to compulsively add something or improve it in some way. We sit with a choiceless awareness; it has no preferences. So if there is some tranquility, we just observe its presence, but we don’t reach to embrace it. If we reach for it, we have become too assertive; we are not sitting quietly - we have made a choice. Alternatively, some anger may arise. If we step back or push it away, we are not sitting quietly. We seem to be either reaching forward to embrace something we like or stepping back to push something away. Then there is a neutral stage when there’s not much arising to reach for or to push away. The tendency in the neutral stage is to get drowsy and fall asleep. We will all experience these three stages in meditation.

There will also be times when you feel the qi moving and get interested in it, become too actively involved, and it will slip away. Or there might be restless qi where you cannot quite get comfortable, and you’ll want to impose some tranquility on the practice, but this very activity only increases the sense of

restlessness. You might experience a smooth patch, and everything seems easy and peaceful, and pretty soon you're falling asleep. It is easy to feel overwhelmed and frustrated by these difficulties, but gradually some stabilization will develop, and you will move beyond reacting in this way. As you become more at ease with this process, the sense of struggle will drop away and you will start to settle into the practice.

Intention and Confidence

I've found it helpful to have an honest intention to do the practice and a commitment to carry it through. After all, it's up to you – no one else can do it for you! So it is good to reaffirm your intention at the beginning of each meditation period. Otherwise you might congratulate yourself for sitting every morning for a year, but you may not have had much awareness of the process for a good part of the time. Cultivation is not just about going through the motions – we have to honestly apply the practice. This is well within the capacities of us all.

We also need to develop confidence in the practice. This can be difficult at first, because our experience of it is only shallow. This confidence really develops with regular practice over a period of time. It's like planting a seed – if we sit regularly it will take root and grow, although it is a slow process. Going to a group meditation can help because it provides an opportunity to share our experiences and give or receive support when difficulties arise. Sitting together with others can be a very nourishing experience.

Whatever way you develop it, confidence is important. What has helped me is knowing that this meditation has been the cultivation choice of many Daoists, going back to Laozi and beyond. Laozi said: "My way is easy, but not many follow it" because there isn't much you can get hold of – it's very simple.

Some people start with a lot of enthusiasm, but enthusiasm actually exhausts your qi. You can only run so long on enthusiasm. But when someone has been sitting regularly, you can see it because the change is big. When someone has learned the basics of meditation they sit in a different way. Their body is aligned and stable, which conserves the qi. They are comfortable and at ease, holding no big expectations; they're just sitting in the moment.

The journey of a thousand miles starts under your feet – where you are now is where you start – sitting here on your cushion. There is nowhere else to be. You embrace everything in your sitting, with no preferences – you reject nothing. Whatever comes up is okay. How can there be any disappointment? Just allow everything to be as it is.