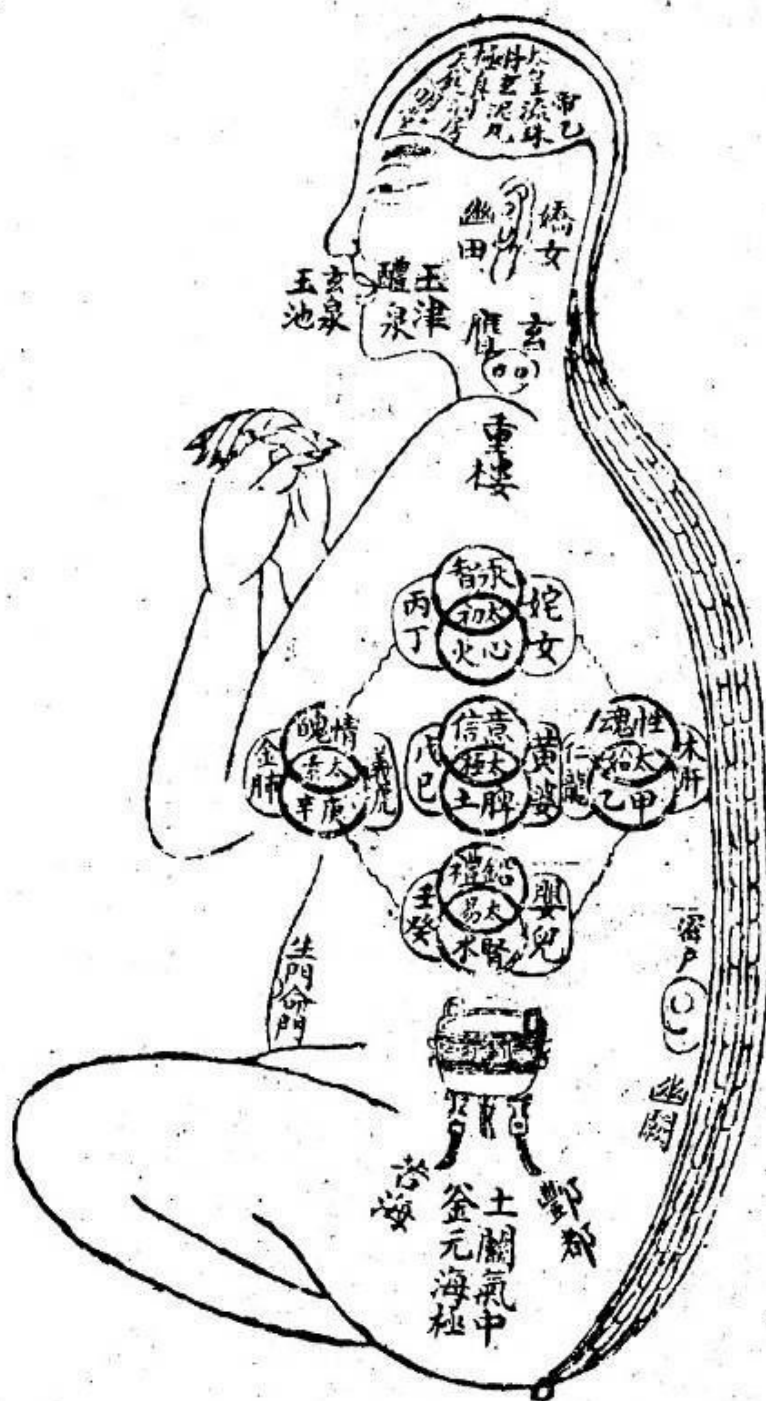


Daoist Body in Internal Alchemy

An exploration of the first stage of
internal alchemy



Written by Timo Pieters (11431741)

24-02-2017

Introduction:

The most common association we as modern people have with the word “alchemy” is probably the image of our medieval ancestors in a smoky dungeon struggling to transform lead into gold. Certainly this aspect (called *chrysopoeia*) has been a significant part of all traditions of alchemy, but probably an overemphasized one. Alchemy was primarily the (pre)scientific discipline of transmuting substances into one another, and was therefore based (in the European traditions) upon an Aristotelian worldview where the four elements constituted all substances, meaning these could be transmuted if one only knew how. The form of alchemy I would like to explore in this paper however is an internal one, and is based on a different worldview altogether. The Chinese tradition of internal alchemy (*neidan*) was preserved largely within the indigenous tradition of Daoism, which I will explicate in the first chapter. For starters the question I would like to pose is the following. To what extent does the cosmological view of the body differ between the (first stage of) internal alchemy practice of the Longmen tradition and that of the Zhengyi Dao tradition? For the sake of brevity I will limit myself to the first stage of the practice of internal alchemy, also because this first stage reveals the most about the implicit worldview of this alchemical tradition, specifically about what the human body is, and how it relates to nature. In order to narrow the subject down even more I have chosen two modern exponents of internal alchemy, each coming from their own tradition, so this discussion stays relevant to the emergence of modern western spirituality as it draws from eastern traditions such as Daoism. First I will establish a base in Chinese/Daoist cosmology or worldview, and then the different “bodies” that this cosmology distinguishes, namely cosmic, national, social, and personal. The personal body being the place where internal alchemy occurs. Then I will look at these two traditions, and their interpretation of the process, to see to what extent these differ in view and method.

1: Chinese/Daoist cosmology

In attempting to understand anything Chinese it is crucial to establish a base in terms of worldview. The Chinese Daoist cosmology that I'll attempt to elucidate shortly is really the cosmology of the Han dynasty (206 BC - 220 AD), standardized around the common era. If one were to pinpoint the exact tradition that Chinese alchemy emerged in and that preserved it, it would be called Daoism.¹ Supposedly this is a religion, but I would argue that this concept can be quite problematic. One major misconception that can arise when attempting to study and comprehend what Western scholars easily denote as “Daoism” is the idea that because Western scholars added the suffix “ism” to the word it must therefore denote a school, well-defined religion or clearly differentiated “authentic” lineage. This is an all too common preconception that is unfortunately unsupported by facts. What has emerged over the last two centuries of the Western study of “religion” is what might be called a confusion of categories. The term and therefore categorical concept seems to have become popular around the 19th century following the Enlightenment where Western culture witnessed its own elaborate fragmentation into isolated disciplines or pursuits.

¹ I'm using Pinyin transliteration in this paper as opposed to the older Wade-Giles system.

This is where philosophy became separated from science (natural philosophy), theology from philosophy, religion from science, art from science, medicine from religion, and obviously this led to opportunities to vilify and marginalize certain disciplines over others, in this case mainly vilifying religion. The first major theorists of religion (Tylor and Frazer) in Victorian times mainly utilized an evolutionist paradigm to comprehend this newly categorized phenomena of “religion”. This meant that they adhered to the main assumption of modernity, namely a narrative of progress and human evolution that implicitly characterizes “the other” as being inferior or uncivilized. This led them (especially Tylor) to believe that animistic and magic-based religiosity was the first and most inferior kind of religiosity, whose polytheism was then subsumed by the more sophisticated pattern of monotheism, where at least there is one supreme deity that brings order in the world of non-hierarchical chaotic animism.² This was a step forward, people were becoming increasingly rational, and of course, ultimately this results in humans relinquishing religion totally by becoming rational enough to understand modern science.³ This basic progressive narrative seems to be inherent still in the way that Western people in general appropriate the phenomenon of religion, even though we must contend that it is but an assumption. If one were to hold this narrative as valid, then that would imply that all non-religious societies should in principle be more civilized and rational, and would therefore exhibit superior conduct on the whole. This would be very difficult to maintain in the face of the atrocious horrors committed by these same Western nations in the mass project of colonialism, systematically enslaving, oppressing and murdering millions of innocent human beings. I digress. Western appropriation of other cultural traditions can still portray this tendency for categorical imposition to this day. Besides this assumption about religion there is another one that’s more subtle. That is the strong tendency amongst Western scholars to this day to (subliminally) assume that probably everyone in the world conceives of religion and spirituality just like Protestant Christians do. This Protestant lens inevitably leads to the stubborn misconception that religion is primarily concerned with orthodoxy (what one “believes”) rather than for instance orthopraxis (right conduct), or the education and cultivation of the body, heart, and mind. This lens will also lead to an instinctive prejudice against religiosity that emphasizes ritual, magical/supernatural effects or beings (superstition), and non-dualistic truth claims. Therefore religion in this paradigm should be based on scripture (preferably one book), it shouldn’t require elaborate ritual or “magic” procedures, and must conceive of a hierarchical cosmos with an immutable Absolute (that also serves as the ultimate safeguard of good, evil, and justice) that may or may not be mediated by a priestly class. Unfortunately none of these criteria apply in the case of Daoism. The term itself has actually been coined by non-Daoists. The only term in Chinese for “Daoist” is *daoshi*, and it specifically refers to an ordained priest, and therefore doesn’t even include lay people. There’s no term for hobbyists. The truth is that Daoism has still not defined itself yet. It has never had a structure that is self-defining, meaning that Daoists were largely defined by other groups, such as Confucianists and Buddhists. In fact the question remains to what extent Daoism even meets any of the characteristics of our notion of “religion”.

² Eight Theories of Religion p. 29.

³ Please don’t miss my sarcasm here.

For instance, the fact that its literary corpus (the *Daozang*) is so humongous (1500 texts) that it took European scholars about four generations to write the index clearly illustrates their different attitude towards scripture. These texts were not compiled by a controlling agency like a Vatican, and they are not at all used like the Christian Bible. Daoism has no centralized authority, no hierarchical cosmos, no transcendent absolute, no prophetic revelation, and is not a “religion” separate from what we would call “science”. Because the Chinese worldview in general does not include a higher transcendent reality separate from this reality (an ontological hierarchy) religion is obviously intertwined with scientific pursuits. When attempting to understand Chinese cosmology it is often useful to consider Chinese language. Chinese thinking has often been described as “associative”, which is reflected in the way their language portrays reality. Chinese does not contain definitive terms at all. Characters have multiple meanings depending on context, and their meanings are associative rather than definitive. Chinese cosmology all starts with this word “Dao”. Many translate it as “Way”, or “the Way”, because the term usually refers to “the way you do something” on the everyday level.⁴ On the more cosmological level Dao refers to the uncreated, unchanging, pristine Origin (Dao) of all beings and things. It is their indiscernible, unnamable Nature (Dao). This vast unknown appears and dances before our senses, thoughts, and feelings as Heaven (Yang) and Earth (Yin). Heaven and Earth are the unborn “parents” of the dual world that arises and resolves of-itself.⁵ This dance is alternation (time), differentiation (space), and change (movement). All interrelating phenomena are various compounds of Heaven and Earth. These compounds come together and fall apart in the flow of time as undifferentiated *qi* (energy/movement). The human being is an apparition of patterns that appears uniquely manifest or separate. It is however but a temporary point of view. Heaven, Earth and human beings are co-emergent, not creator and creature. One who observes and follows the relationship between the non-dual origin and all “10,000 things” between Heaven and Earth is called a cultivator (Adept) of the Way. One further differentiation of this cosmology is found in the five elements and the eight trigrams, which describe the various permutations of Heaven and Earth. Zuo Yang (305-240 BC) is said to have been the first to synthesize the Yin/Yang cosmology with the five elements or phases.⁶ Zuo Yan essentially put names to Nature’s (Dao) alternating currents (Yin/Yang) and its five essential transformations (elements). The Chinese elements are not substantial like the Greek ones, which means you can’t have buckets full of them. They are an abstract appreciation of a procession of transformation in nature. The first element is Wood, which refers to freshness/newness/unformed-ness itself. It’s also described as the Yang within Yin or Lesser Yang (this will become relevant in alchemy). Wood(1) feeds Fire(2), which energizes and stimulates, also described as the Yang within Yang or Greater Yang. Fire creates Earth(3), which is the stability and continuity that supports all transformations, and is Yin and Yang united (balance).

⁴ This has inspired the craze of cheesy Western books on “the Dao of doing the dishes”, and so on.

⁵ Liu An (King of Huainan) and John S. Major, *Essential Huainanzi*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. p. 6.

⁶ According to the British sinologist and scientist Joseph Needham, Zuo Yang was “the real founder of all Chinese scientific thought”.

Earth sort of “incubates” Metal (like metal in ore), which is the process of refining maturation/transformation, and is Yang within Yin, or Lesser Yin. Metal then “carries” Water (like in a bucket), which is the process of resolving completion (death), the Yin within Yin (Greater Yin). Then Water nourishes Wood again, and the cycle keeps going infinitely. It’s becoming clear that Chinese cosmology could be described as mathematical (numerical). Besides the numbers 1 (Dao), 2 (Yin/Yang), and 5 (elements), the number 3 is very significant in describing the Chinese notion of what the “body” means.

2: Microcosmic bodies (cosmic, national, and social)

In the Confucian and Daoist traditions the human “self” is generally understood as a nexus of relationships with other people, nature, and the cosmos, not just a rationally calculating individual with rights that seeks to maximize its own profit. Humanity forms one “body” with Heaven, Earth, and everything “in between”. This relational embodiment can be described in terms of expanding concentric circles. We are part of a cosmic, national, and social body that our personal bodies are microscopic reflections of. It is in this relationship to the cosmos (nature) and the nation that the scientific aspects of Daoism become apparent. The way Daoism interfaced with “science” was primarily through mathematics, which in the Daoist tradition manifested in what one might call “astro-geomancy”, or the joined disciplines of astrology (our relation to time) and *fengshui*/geomancy (our relation to space/place). The Chinese study of celestial patterns was *tian wen*, which now means astronomy in modern Chinese. The classical (Han dynasty) term however also encompassed astrology, cosmology, calendrics, mathematical harmonics, and meteorology.⁷ In the study of our relationship to space and place there was besides obvious geography also an emphasis on important interactions between physical features of terrain and plants, animals, and people. Certain topographical features would have specific physical effects on people living near them, such as different types of soil.⁸ One way this cosmic understanding trickled down to the national body was in the structure of Han government, which consisted of the emperor, three departments, and nine ministers (with their ministries). These nine ministers were not directly subordinated to the members of the cabinet, but they were subject to their censorial supervision.⁹ One of the nine ministers was the Grand Master of Ceremonies, who was in charge of state rituals. He announced the appropriate protocols in advance, and assisted the emperor during the ceremonies. Once each month, he also inspected the imperial graves. He was responsible for the observatory, divination, the recording of portents and auspicious signs, selecting auspicious days, and the Academy (imperial university). Originally, the Grand Master of Ceremonies had also been responsible for the emperor's health through the Prefect Grand Physician (t'ai-yi ling), who had one assistant. This indicates how varied the demands were on the ritual expert of the country, and how these supposedly different domains were not separated.

⁷ Liu An (King of Huainan) and John S. Major, *Essential Huainanzi*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. p. 39-40.

⁸ Ibid, p. 49-50.

⁹ Hans Bielenstein, *The Bureaucracy of Han Times*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980. p. 17.

His ministry had an imperially authorized practitioner of astrological prognostication, called the “Prefect Grand Scribe-Astrologer” (*Tai shi gong*).¹⁰ He was the most versatile and technically trained official in the ministry and, for that matter, the entire central government.¹¹ He was aided by one assistant. He was in charge of knowing the historical precedents to current events, following the movements of the heavenly bodies, constructing the annual calendar, and of informing the emperor about the (astrological) calendar of that month. He also informed the emperor of significant astrological portents, and gave advice on their implication for empire policy based on the by then well-established system of astral–terrestrial correspondences (field allocations). This clearly demonstrates that early Chinese government seamlessly integrated the cosmic and national bodies.

The second way Daoism interfaced with science was through alchemy. Chinese alchemy has a history of at the very least two thousand years, and it was recorded from the 2nd century BCE to the present day.¹² There are two main varieties of alchemy practiced in China, those of Waidan (or external alchemy) and Neidan (or internal alchemy), that share many doctrinal similarities but are quite different in terms of praxis. The earliest to emerge was Waidan, which literally means “external elixir”, and is the discipline that’s basically concerned with laboratory practice, where elixirs made of natural substances are synthesized in a crucible through heating and other procedures. The texts about Waidan mainly contain recipes and descriptions of ingredients, ritual rules and cosmological associations between different minerals, metals, instruments and laboratory procedures. Neidan, which literally means “internal elixir” confusingly borrows big parts of the vocabulary and imagery of external alchemy but has a very different goal in mind. In internal alchemy one seeks to produce an elixir within the alchemist’s body, where one synthesizes certain ingredients of the human being and primary components of the cosmos. One could therefore say that Chinese alchemy represents an interface between the cosmic body (nature) and our personal body. Texts on internal alchemy span a much wider spectrum of subjects than external alchemy. Topics include spiritual teachings on the Dao (the unnamed, beginningless origin of the dual world) and descriptions of physiological practices such as breathing meditation. The term “elixir” can seem somewhat obscure here, so it might be helpful to elucidate its main connotations or meanings. The main ones are *huandan* (Reverted Elixir), and in internal alchemy *jindan* (Golden Elixir). Gold (*jin*) in this case refers to a state of constancy and imperturbability (since gold is not corruptible) beyond the changing, transient, unstable cosmos, what Daoists often call the world of “the ten thousand things”. Some of the semantic shades of the term “elixir” include “essence”, “true nature”, and “most basic element”.

¹⁰ David W. Pankenier, *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China, Conforming Earth to Heaven*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. p. 300.

¹¹ Hans Bielenstein, *The Bureaucracy of Han Times*, p. 19.

¹² http://www.goldenelixir.com/files/The_Way_of_the_Golden_Elixir.pdf p. 1.

Both Waidan and Neidan denote indefinite pluralistic lineages that are not bound to one set of doctrines or practical procedures. The common ground that can be observed in these alchemical traditions however might again be seen as a cosmological one. It is a basic worldview that is shared by these traditions and that informs their objectives and therefore their praxis. It's worth mentioning that all Asian wisdom traditions could be described using the basic heuristic model of (1) view, (2) method, and (3) fruition (result). The reason I gave a sketch of Chinese/Daoist cosmology (view) at the beginning is in order to honor this relationship. It is not really possible to understand and use the methods of a tradition without a comprehensive (world)view that makes sense of the material. It might just be the case that methods without a view actually cannot give rise to their intended result either. The aspect of Daoist cosmology that alchemical methods are an expression of is the following. The cosmos as we know it can be conceived of as the last stage in a series of transformations from Non-Being (*wu*) to Unity (*yi*), duality (*Yin/Yang*), and finally multiplicity (*wanwu*).¹³ The alchemist intends to retrace this process backwards. The temporal nature of the language here can be misleading, because as we established earlier, Daoist cosmology can't really be characterized as having a definite beginning or end, so this language should be taken with a grain of salt. The lifeblood of alchemical practice is the oral instructions (*koujue*) of a master in order to understand the processes that adepts perform with minerals and metals, or undergo within themselves. The fruition of alchemy is variously defined as healing, longevity, and immortality. This immortality has been taken literally by some, but is usually meant in a spiritual sense of either spiritualizing the body (creating a subtle light-body) or recognizing one's own deathlessness. External alchemy is also said to enable communication with deities of the celestial pantheon and protection from various malignant spiritual entities.

3: Microcosmic personal body

What really delineates internal from external alchemy in Daoism is obviously the methodology, but more importantly the view of what our (microcosmic) personal body is. The Daoist notion of the body seems to be the common ground to both Chinese medicine and internal alchemy, because it is the tradition of internal alchemy that has most explicitly elucidated the Daoist notion of the body which ended up also serving as the basis for traditional Chinese medicine as well. First off, the Daoist sense of the body is largely "rhythmic", which means it's mostly related to time, not to substance or to space. This view of the body is very difficult to appreciate if one's worldview is materialistic in the philosophical sense, if one's experience of the body is conceived of in substantial and spatial terms. We all breathe, we eat, we move, we sleep, and we (have the inclination to) reproduce. Everyone of these aspects of our experience is rhythmic and cyclical in nature since they are the non-negotiable aspects of our experience. Everything else we do is optional, and therefore everything we must do keeps emerging rhythmically every single day and night in the flow of time. Health in traditional Chinese medicine is consequently defined as the coherent, rhythmic functioning of our physiology as circulation. One Chinese image of health is flowing water. As long as water keeps moving it actually self-cleans, it purifies itself.

¹³ Ibid, p.3.

As soon as water becomes stagnant it becomes putrid and diseased. Daoist alchemical spirituality is therefore found in being interested in the things that we must do, not necessarily in what we ought to do, and the things we must do every day are inevitably rhythmic and cyclical in nature. It is very common for people writing about Chinese alchemy or medicine to say that these two disciplines are connected to each other somehow, even though this connection is rarely articulated. One reason for this idea is that many of the great early Chinese doctors were hermits and “Daoists”. Probably the earliest doctors in China were called “formula/recipe masters” (*fangshi*) which were more or less “shaman-physicians” (*wuyi* in Han times).¹⁴ By the fourth century BC physicians were transmitting their medical knowledge in written form as “recipe/technique books”. Their expertise included magic, macrobiotic hygiene, and alchemy. There seem to be parallels between the Chinese notions of “recipe” (*fang*), “technique” (*ji*), “calculation” (*shu*), and “art” (*shu*) and discussions around *techne* in Greek civilization. *Techne* in that context meant the skill of an artisan. Around the fifth century B.C. it also meant a “rational discipline”. It was around the same time that medicine was established as the *techne iatriche* in the Hippocratic Corpus.¹⁵ On the basis of this “shaman-physician” tradition we get the basic Daoist view of the body, which is that we are compound. We appear as an indivisible (individual) whole, but the physiology of our embodiment can be observed as being compound. We can be described as a compound of three components: *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*. As early as the fourth century B.C. there are written sources about the notion that *qi* (“vapor”) flows along with blood through *mai* (“vessels/channels”).¹⁶ *Qi* is not only the energy flowing through our channels, but also the energy we get from our food, the air we breathe, it is our vitality itself. *Qi* at this time however was a much more pervasive term than the modern popular interpretation of *qi* as some kind of “bio-electricity” that can be photographed by Russians. *Qi* in pre-modern times actually referred to the omnipresent “basic stuff” of the phenomenal world. The translation of *qi* as “vapor” does clear up the confusion that this “basic stuff” would indicate a solid and substantial world, as our Greco-Roman heritage might prefer. As indicated in the introduction, Chinese/Daoist cosmology describes a world in flux. It’s a *qi*-cosmology that describes the world as movement itself, and therefore *qi* doesn’t really “appear” at all. When we as human beings perceive this chaotic, changing, moving world we are obviously very interested in the patterns of appearance, but this doesn’t mean that appearances are actually substantially real. The *qi* (acupuncture) channels in the human body are like a preface to our form, they do not appear themselves, but when they’re dysfunctional our form (appearance) shifts, which means we might have medical symptoms. This makes the whole enterprise of cutting up cadavers to hunt for acupuncture channels a bit silly. The most thorough testimony of early physio-spiritual theories of human embodiment is found in the *Guanzi* (fourth century B.C.). This text opens with the statement that *jing* is the source of life, and the essence of vapor (*qi*). *Jing* is the second (or first) component of our embodiment, which many translate as “essence” or “quintessence”. I’m obviously no Chinese language expert, so I won’t enter the debate of what it should be called.

¹⁴ Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature, The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts*, London: Routledge, 2015. p. 149.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 52.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 77.

If we take *qi*-cosmology as our base however, we could see *jing* as just the appearance of substance, not substance as such. All so called substances might be long-lived but they're never solid and continuous forever in the flow of impermanence, and their appearance is also dependent upon who's looking! So *jing* could be seen as the tendency for *qi* to appear. Our human embodiment is a compound of *jing/qi*, where *jing* refers to the quintessential aspect of our physicalness. When these occur together we also have something called *shen*. This is variously translated as "spirit" or "countenance/radiance". Every human being possesses an indwelling spirit that resides in the body but is very similar in nature to "external spirits" as well.

¹⁷ This makes the notion of spirit possession from the animistic context sensible.

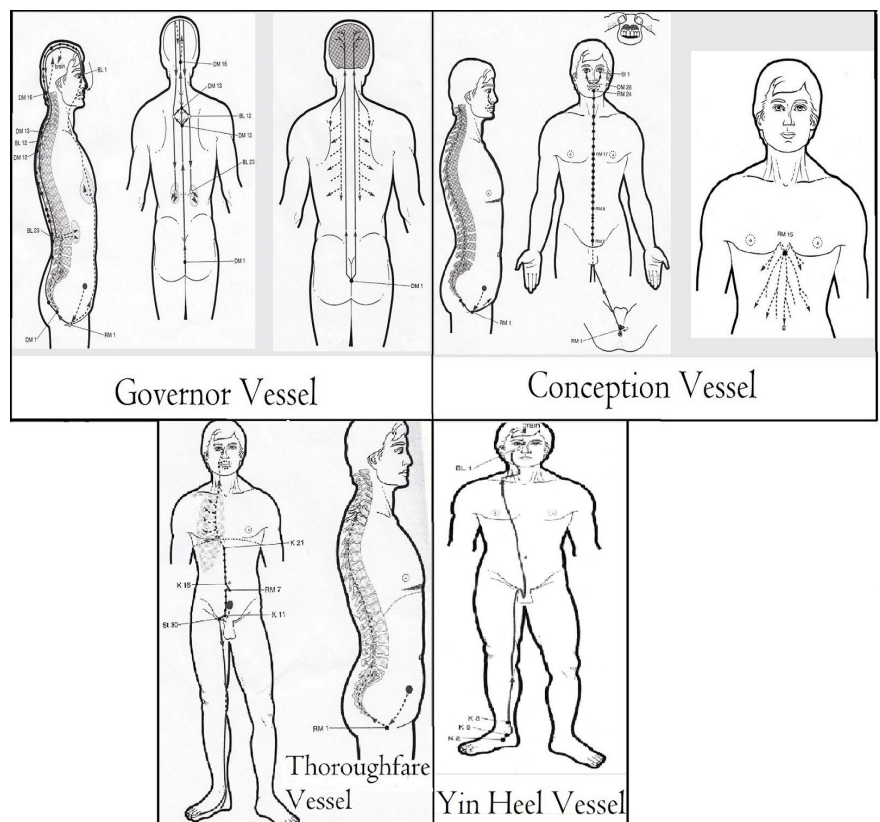
4: First stage of Internal Alchemy (Longmen lineage)

This part of the paper will be based on a summary of the actual stages of the process or practice of internal alchemy by Wang Mu, based on "Awakening to Reality" by Zhang Boduan (d. 1082). Wang Mu (1908-1992) was a board member of the China Taoist Association and initiate in the Longmen tradition of internal alchemy. The text by Zhang Boduan inherits and transmits the principles of self-cultivation of the *Cantong qi* (Han dynasty text), and provides a synopsis of pre-Song dynasty doctrines and practices.¹⁸ Zhang Boduan's text doesn't sufficiently treat the beginning of the practice, so it was supplemented by "The Secret Text of Green Florescence" (*Qinghua biwen*), "The Four Hundred Words of the Golden Elixir" (*Jindan sibai zi*) and "The Book of the Eight Vessels" (*Bamai jing*), also by Zhang Boduan. The first text by Zhang Boduan maintains that the cultivation of *Ming* (Life), or "doing" (*youwei*) should precede the cultivation of *Xing* (Nature), or "non-doing" (*wuwei*), but neither should be cultivated on its own. The practice of "non-doing" or *wuwei* has been wonderfully elucidated in the famous *Daodejing* (by Laozi) and the *Zhuangzi*, so I won't dwell on this here. Wang Mu begins by explaining the first stage of internal alchemy practice, called "laying the foundations", where one cultivates both "doing" and "non-doing". I will be focussing on this first stage of the alchemical practice in the entire paper for the sake of brevity, and because it beautifully elucidates the cosmological view of the body implicit in these traditions. This stage of the practice is performed to replenish the components of our embodiment (*jing/qi/shen*), also called the Three Treasures within the body. Wang Mu translates *qi* as "Breath" in his text. At this initial stage of alchemical practice one replenishes these basic aspects of one's life, which is synonymous with restoring "normal" health in the Chinese medical sense as well. Wang Mu quotes a chapter from the *Jindan dayao* to explain the objective of the internal alchemist in his practice as a whole: "When they (the Three) follow the course, they form the human being; when they invert the course, they generate the Elixir. What is the meaning of "following the course" (*shun*)? "The One generates the Two, the Two generate the Three, the Three generate the ten thousand things." Therefore Emptiness (Dao) transmutes itself into Spirit, Spirit transmutes itself into Breath, Breath transmutes itself into Essence, Essence transmutes itself into form, and form becomes the human being. What is the meaning of "inverting the course" (*ni*)? The ten thousand things hold the Three, the Three return to the Two, the Two return to the One. Those who know this Way look after their Spirit and guard their corporeal form.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 119.

¹⁸ Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy, The Taoist Practice of Neidan*, Golden Elixir Press, 2011. p. 74.

They nourish the corporeal form to refine the Essence, accumulate the Essence to transmute it into Breath, refine the Breath to merge it with Spirit, and refine the Spirit to revert to Emptiness. Then the Golden Elixir is achieved.”¹⁹ The internal alchemist reverses the course of nature itself, and returns to the non-dual origin of all things. As this passage indicates, Essence, Breath, and Spirit are more or less an amorphous intermingling entity, rather than individual substances juxtaposed to one another. The first main point of the practice is called “Guarding the Opening” (*shouqiao*), or “Guarding the Center” (*shouzhong*), which means the cultivation of a state of quiescence. When one enters a state of meditative quiescence the Essence accumulates in the Lower Cinnabar Field (the navel *dantian*), which is the largest energy field in the human body, just 1,3 inches below the navel and inside the lower abdomen. There is some contention as to whether or not attaining this state of quiescence requires concentrating on the navel center, or whether the Essence just accumulates there when one is “concentrated”. It’s called a “field” because the Elixir (which will form later) will coalesce here, and like a seed it will sprout in this field. The Lower Cinnabar Field is the point that directs the functioning of the entire body in both Daoist alchemical physiology and Chinese medicine. Moreover, although the Confucian practice of “quiescence” (*jing*), the Daoist practice of “embracing Unity” (*baoyi*), and the Buddhist practice of “contemplation” (*changuan*) have different names, they all, in fact, seek the stability of the center, and therefore achieve the same intended result of a state of quiescence. This claim by Wang Mu elucidates Chinese spirituality/religion as fundamentally eclectic in nature, since they see Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism as a seamless unity, much like the three legs of a single barstool. The second main point of the practice is called “Clearing the Vessels”. This means that in this stage of the practice one clears certain acupuncture channels/vessels called the Governor and Conception vessels in order to allow Breath to circulate through them. This basically enables Breath and heat to circulate, so as to open a path for the circulation of the “Medicine”, which will be synthesized later in the alchemical process.²⁰ These two “vessels” are part of what are known as the “eight extraordinary vessels” (*qijing bamai*).



¹⁹ Ibid, p. 15.

²⁰ <http://www.shenzhou.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Qi-Jing-Ba-Mai.pdf>

These “extraordinary vessels” refer to eight acupuncture channels that are seen as additional to the standard twelve acupuncture channels of traditional Chinese medical theory. These channels are described identically in Chinese medical theory and Daoist alchemical theory. As opposed to the standard twelve these eight channels (except for *dumai*) are not directly connected with any vital organs, their energy flow is unidirectional, and they are mainly responsible for the circulation and supply of Essence as opposed to Breath (*qi*). Their function can be explained slightly differently since in alchemy the channels have a slightly different purpose. Zhang Boduan in this text clarifies their function in alchemy. The three most important vessels are the Thoroughfare, Conception, and Governor vessels (*chongmai*, *renmai* and *dumai*) which are three channels that spring forth in the space between the kidneys and the lower *dantian* (where Essence is stored) and are responsible for the circulation of Essence in particular. In terms of Yin/Yang balance in the body the Conception and Governor vessels govern the front (Yin) and back (Yang) of the body respectively. These channels are quite important in embryonic development, which is interesting given the symbolic alchemical imagery of the “Embryo” that is used in internal alchemy to denote circulating Essence. The Conception vessel for instance is said to nourish the foetus during pregnancy. The cycles of Essence circulation that these vessels govern also determine the cycles of aging, which are seven year cycles in women and eight year cycles in men. Based on that system women are sexually mature at 14 and men at 16. Beyond these three vessels there are the (4) Girdle vessel (*daimai*) in the waist, the (5) Yin Heel vessel (*yin qiaomai*) before the coccyx and under the scrotum, which is displayed in the image above as well, the (6) Yang Heel vessel (*yang qiaomai*) behind the coccyx, the (7) Yin Linking vessel (*yin weimai*) 1,3 inches before the top of the head, and the (8) Yang Linking vessel (*yang weimai*), which is 1,3 inches behind the top of the head. Even though everyone is born with these vessels in place they are closed in most (according to internal alchemists), since they are connected to the Yin Spirit (*yinshen*), which means that only advanced alchemy practitioners (Immortals) are capable of opening them by infusing them with Yang Breath, which occurs in the final stage of alchemical cultivation. From a Chinese medical point of view the circulation of *qi* (Breath) and blood through unobstructed conduits is also of great benefit for “nourishing life” and for the treatment and prevention of illness. Therefore, alchemical practice in this first stage is still very “medical” in nature, and it clearly shares a cosmological view of the human body with Chinese medicine as well. The vessel to start with is the Yin Heel vessel (see image), since this vessel when opened acts as a fulcrum that produces a domino effect that opens and clears all the other seven vessels as well.²¹ Next one opens the Conception, the Governor and the Thoroughfare vessels, since these are the sources of the transformations of all other channels and vessels. Zhang Boduan places these channels before and behind the navel *dantien*. These three vessels (Conception, Governor and Thoroughfare) are also called the “three Barriers”, and are the most important vessels in internal alchemy because these vessels are the loci where two cosmological principles of our embodiment, namely the “Water of Kan” and the “Fire of Li” conjoin and merge alchemically.

²¹ Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, p. 28.

It's worth going into at this point what exactly is meant by these cryptic terms, because it reveals something about the microcosmic relationship between human embodiment and the cosmic forces at large that is implicit in the alchemical view of the body, and the methods that emerge from this view. Alchemy begins with a binary structure made of two complementary and antagonistic terms: pure Yin and pure Yang. However, their binary structure admits complexity with two other mixed terms, born from the union of the first two: Yin containing Yang, and Yang containing Yin. A neutral term, the Center is beyond the conjunction and the disjunction of the other two.²² A hallmark of the inherently contradictory language of the alchemists is that it introduces a negation of their own system by paradoxically “encasing” or encapsulating the essence of each seemingly dualistic principle in their opposite, thereby expressing a duality that is non-dual simultaneously. This is central to the notion of “Reversal” (*diandao*) that drives internal alchemy. As mentioned before in quote from the *Jindan dayao*, the principle is that those who “follow the course” (the generative cycle) give rise to other human beings; those who go backward (the regenerative cycle), generate an “embryo” of immortality within themselves, in other words, they self-regenerate. The ordinary generative sequence is demonstrated by nature as the four seasons and their corresponding elements (spring/Wood, summer/Fire, autumn/Metal, winter/Water). The Earth element is continuity itself, so it provides the proverbial “ground” for the shifts of the seasons and other elements. In the opposite (alchemical) sequence Water then generates Metal, and Fire generates Wood. Metal here is associated with the West and the Tiger (emblem), so alchemical symbolism often mentions that the Tiger emerges from Water and the North. Similarly, Wood is associated with the East and the Dragon (emblem), but in this sequence emerges from Fire and the South. The backward rotation then is counterclockwise from North to West, and from South to East. Time itself runs backwards here, and therefore leads to youth and birth (the embryo) rather than to aging and death. The main concern for an internal alchemist in all these principles is the reciprocally encased principle in its polar opposite, in this case True Yin, which is the Yin enclosed within Yang, and True Yang, which is the Yang enclosed within Yin. These principles are often depicted using trigrams from the I-Ching (or ZhouYi).

Yin (trigram Kun) and Yang (trigram Qian) joined and gave birth to the other trigrams, two of which are essential to alchemy; Kan and Li. The inner Yang line of Kan is the True Yang, and the inner Yin line of Li is the True Yin, which clearly expresses a fundamental interdependence between these principles. This process of reversal therefore indicates an interesting philosophical shift as well.



²² Isabelle Robinet, *The World Upside Down, Essays on Taoist Internal Alchemy*, Golden Elixir Press, 2011. p. 2.

The object (Yin or Yang) is no longer identical to itself, but contains its opposite (expressed by Kan and Li), and this opposite element enclosed within itself in fact counts as its true identity, which means the object is identified by its opposite. What sets this reverse cycle into motion is the extraction of Metal found within the Water (element). Therefore the Metal is said to “emerge” or to “float” rather than sink in the water, defying the ordinary laws of nature. This means that the entire order is reversed. Kan (Water) and Li (Fire) are reversed, and likewise Qian and Kun are reversed (Earth is now above, and Heaven below). In sexual terms the man is now below and the woman above. In ordinary sexual intercourse and arousal/orgasm Essence (Yin and liquid) descends to the sexual organs along the spine. In the alchemical process this reverses. When the man is in utter serenity and quietude (physically and mentally) the Yang goes to the kidneys and causes the “Lead” (original Essence/*jing*) to move. This Lead ascends to the brain (Upper Cinnabar Field) and then descends to the heart (Purple Palace), and returns to the Yellow Court (which is in the center of the body), where it is transformed into the Elixir. The reversal could be seen as a simultaneous corporealization of the spirit and a spiritualization of the body (becoming pure Yang/Summer). The Yang within the Yin (inner line of Kan) is the “external” that should grow, and the “internal” is the Yin within the Yang (inner Yin line of Li) that should decrease. This is code language for indicating that through the alchemical practices one returns the Yin principle to where it belongs, which is equivalent to the ascent along the Governor vessel, and the Yang principle is transformed, which is equivalent to the descent along the Conception vessel. So when one is “laying the foundations” as in the first stage internal alchemy one full cycle of Breath through the body is called “clearing the Conception and Governor vessels”, however after forming the “Medicine” mentioned earlier it is called the “Lesser Celestial Circuit” (in modern times known as the “microcosmic orbit”). The Medicine in this case is what can circulate through the opened vessels after clearing them. This circulation of the Medicine is called the “Lesser Celestial Circuit”, and when one is “nourishing the Medicine” during later stages of practice it is called “Greater Celestial Circuit”.

So to recapitulate the first practice to engage in is the collecting of the mind and entering a state of quiescence (previously called “guarding the center”). When the alchemical masters sit to practice they in fact coagulate Spirit and stabilize breathing, press the tongue lightly against the upper palate, concentrate the Heart and eyes inwardly, look down at their Cinnabar Field (navel *dantien*), and can rapidly enter the state of quiescence. At the beginning of this practice of collecting the mind one performs ordinary breathing, meaning the belly contracts when exhaling, and inhaling it expands. This is called “harmonizing the breathing” (*tiaoxi*). Before clearing the Function and Control vessels, one should gradually shift toward what’s called “inverted breathing”, meaning the belly expands upon exhaling, and it contracts upon inhaling. Technically this is known as the “breathing of the bellows”, meaning one is metaphorically “fanning” on the circulating Essence and Breath. Without this inverted breathing one cannot cultivate the circulation of the River Chariot (Lesser Celestial Circuit). In the next stage of the practice the inhaled breath rises along the Governor vessel and the exhaled breath descends along the Conception vessel, in fact inhaling and exhaling must join one another, and effectively become so smooth, silent, and uninterrupted that one seems to not breathe at all.

This has been observed in Buddhist meditators as well in a state of deep concentration. The deepest state of concentration in the Buddhist system (*nirodha samapatti*) leads to a complete cessation of breathing, as if one were clinically dead, which is an interesting sidenote. Even more advanced alchemists are said to no longer rely on external respiration at all and spontaneously circulate the internal Breath (*neiqi*). According to Zhuangzi, the alchemist's "breathing through the heels" refers to the circulation of the internal Breath that follows after the inverted breathing practice.²³ Common people however breathe through the throat, and this is the ordinary respiration based on external Breath in and out. Another popular term for this internal circulation is "embryonic breathing" (*taixi*) meaning the breathing through the nostrils has reached that stage of profound subtlety and becomes almost imperceptible (as if it has stopped). The eight extraordinary vessels are now cleared, and the whole body feels comfortable, like an embryo in the womb (hence the analogy). Now circulation is just internal (hidden Breath). As a result of this harmonizing of the breath one pacifies the Heart (discursive thoughts). When this progresses the Heart and Spirit become one, relying on one another, and one reaches a state in which one forgets one's self. By means of this practice of quiescence the "External Medicine" is spontaneously produced, and the stage of "laying the foundations" is concluded. The Medicine therefore is formed by the refining of the Three Treasures, and without this External Medicine one cannot produce the Numinous Medicine (*lingyao*) that is needed later. This term "refining" is actually derived from Waidan (external alchemy), where the ingredients are obviously refined by fire, whereas in internal alchemy Essence is refined by Spirit. Therefore Spirit is analogous to Fire, and Essence is analogous to Water, to draw on the analogies of the trigrams. "Refining Water by means of Fire" is equivalent to saying that Spirit leads Breath and refines the Essence. Other metaphors for this process therefore include "taking from Kan in order to fill Li", and "reverting the course of the Essence to replenish the brain" (*huanjing bunao*).

In general Wang Mu describes the entire alchemical process in four stages where "laying the foundations" is the first one. I will give a brief summary of the other stages to complete the picture. In the second stage one refines Essence to transmute it into Breath (cosmologically; the Three returning to the Two). At this stage, Original Essence, Breath, and Original Spirit coagulate with one another and form a Breath made of the union of Essence and Breath. This stage is also called Compounding the Great Medicine (*zuo dayao*). After one has cleared all the eight "extraordinary vessels" by opening the Yin Heel cavity, and the Conception, Governor, and Thoroughfare vessels one has almost literally "paved the road" for the ascent and descent of the "River Chariot" (the Medicine). The three barriers that one encounters in this stage are three obstructions for the ascending breath along the Governor vessel. Basically there is a downward movement in the front of the body through the three Cinnabar Fields, followed by an upward movement along the Governor vessel that reaches the top of the head. Of these three *dantiens* the middle Cinnabar Field is at the center of the chest according to some authors, or between the heart and the navel according to others.

²³ Wang Mu, *Foundations of Internal Alchemy*, p. 44.

It is the seat of Breath and is also called Yellow Court (*huangting*), Crimson Palace (*jianggong*), or Mysterious Female (*xuanpin*, an emblem of the conjunction of Yin and Yang). This means that here in the body the trigrams Qian (Yang) and Kun (Yin) join and form Kan and Li. The alchemists clearly keep the exact location secret, and can only be uncovered through oral transmission. In the second stage of the Neidan process ("refining breath into spirit"), the Internal Elixir is moved from the lower to the middle *dantian* and is nourished there. In other words, the Embryo coalesces here in the third stage. In the third stage of internal alchemy one refines Breath to transmute it into Spirit (the Two returning to the One). The Great Medicine coagulates with Original Spirit, and they form a Spirit made of the union of the Three Treasures (*jing, qi, shen*). This stage is also called Compounding the Elixir (*zuodan*). At this stage the Yang Spirit (*yangshen*) rises in the Upper Cinnabar Field. The upper Cinnabar Field is located in the region of the brain and is the seat of spirit (*shen*). Also known as Muddy Pellet (*niwan*) or Palace of Qian (*qiangong*, with reference to the trigram representing Pure Yang). In the second stage of alchemical practice this is the Opening where one "reverts the course of the Essence to replenish the brain" (*huanjing bunao*) and "eliminated the ore to keep the gold" (*gukuang liujin*). Moving the formed Internal Elixir to the upper Field marks the fourth and last stage of the Neidan process ("refining spirit and reverting to Emptiness"). By refining Spirit one attains Emptiness and Non-Being (*xuwu*). Now one is a true "Immortal", because one is no longer subject to birth and death.

5: First stage of Neidan (Zhengyi Dao lineage)

In order to get a better understanding of the process of internal alchemy and it's view of the human body I will draw upon a different Daoist tradition, the Zhengyi Dao tradition, stemming from the Han dynasty. All I know of this tradition comes from the way it was portrayed by a very recent and Western exponent of this lineage. Liu Ming was born Charles Belyea in 1946 to a Boston Methodist family and moved to Taiwan in 1977, where he took Mahayana Buddhist vows in the Tibetan tradition. According to Liu Ming's own reports, which he has since modified, while in Taiwan he trained with a Daoist hermit who initiated him into the Liu family tradition, which claims an unbroken lineage of 115 generations. For Belyea to continue on the tradition, he was adopted into the family and given the name Liu Ming.²⁴ Belyea returned to the United States in 1980 and began offering classes based on his Daoist experience. In 1992, Belyea established a nonprofit religious organization called Orthodox Daoism in America (ODA) and taught a "curriculum for lay priests" geared toward textual study and culminating in ritual investiture. Liu Ming's writings tend to demonstrate a penetrating critique of the practice of popularized Western Daoism, as portrayed in many popular books on Taichi, Qigong, and "Embryonic breathing". In Liu Ming's view, these cultivation techniques emphasize personal spiritual development and self-help in ways similar to the modern Western "spiritual quest culture." Thus, to Liu Ming, most American Daoist techniques are products of cultural appropriation in the service of a liberal Protestant ethic in its latest guise as New Age spirituality.

²⁴ Livia Kohn, *Introducing Daoism*, Routledge, 2008. p. 208.

I will mainly draw upon his commentary on his own translation of the *Daodejing* which contains many references to alchemical concepts and how they are interpreted and used in his lineage, so that we can get a sense of the different streams of internal alchemy practice that exist. In the text by Wang Mu we saw a summary of the different steps in the first main process of internal alchemy, the laying of the foundations, where one replenishes the Three Treasures (*jing, qi, shen*). In this practice the first step was to enter a state of quiescence or concentration, so that Essence (*jing*) coalesces in the lower Cinnabar Field (navel *dantien*). It was not specified whether or not one should concentrate on this energy field in the body, or whether merely being deeply concentrated as such causes Essence to coalesce there. In Liu Ming's translation of and commentary on the third chapter of the *Daodejing* he touches on this very point.

The third chapter reads: "*Not rewarding "winners" softens competition. Not prizing what is difficult to obtain calms desire. What is never seen cannot disturb the heart. The wuwei Adept can say, I leave the heart empty and fill up the Middle. I relax longing and my tendons and bones are strengthened. Free of knowing and wanting, my compulsion to do subsides. Action free of the compulsion to act leaves everything in its natural place.*"²⁵ Wang Mu mentioned Zhang Boduan's position that the cultivation of *Ming* (Life), or "doing" (*youwei*) should precede the cultivation of *Xing* (Nature), or "non-doing" (*wuwei*), but neither should be cultivated on its own. Liu Ming's definition of the Daoist cultivator as "the wuwei Adept" signifies an emphasis on "non-doing" primarily, which basically means that the teachings are non-dualistic in nature. They don't posit anything to be corrected or improved, and therefore one needn't expend dualistic effort ("doing") in this interpretation. The usual interpretations and commentaries on this chapter (such as Wang Bi's and Heshang Gong's) maintain that this chapter advises a ruler or healer, because the character "*zhi*" in the original is usually translated as "rule" or "heal". These are both activities that "reunite" what is by nature One (a nation, or health), and therefore resolve conflict or duality. So "*zhi*" is any activity that reunites what is by nature One, which Liu Ming interprets here as meaning *wuwei* cultivation. The meaning of *wuwei* in this context is that resolution is actually effortless and spontaneous (non-dualistic). Liu Ming has mentioned in a talk at CIIS that his Daoist teacher in Taiwan (who completed a 21 year retreat when Ming showed up) gave him transmission (explanation) on the meaning of these characters, most of which were translated in a Confucian way by commentators, emphasizing "governance" (like *zhi* as "rule"), because these Confucian commentators didn't have the (lineage) transmission of the text.²⁶ Without the transmission the text is unreadable. The second section of chapter three describes what happens in meditation practice: "*I leave the heart empty and fill up the Middle.*" Leaving the heart (*shen*) empty refers to the practice of non-conceptual meditation (*zuowang*), or "sitting and forgetting". The basic view of *zuowang* is that all truth is self-evident, and that all temporary phenomena self-resolve in the flow of time. Therefore there's nothing to accomplish or correct, everything takes care of itself. The method is only the posture, which is virtually identical to the posture used in Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen.

²⁵ Ming Liu, *Observing, Wuwei :: The Heart of the Daodejing*, Oakland CA: Da Yuan Circle, 2016. p. 84.

²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xEphouqTF9M&t=1806s> 51:00 onwards.

One sits in this posture for one hour every day and effortlessly remains in the “natural condition” of open, unstructured awareness that is one’s true nature. This is not the same as the practice of mental concentration or trance that seeks to suppress thinking or emotion. When one practices routinely the process of “*filling up the Middle*” occurs, which refers to the natural descent of *qi* from the chest (heart/mind) to the belly (center) which is concomitant with stillness and relaxation. The belly or lower abdomen here again refers to the navel *dantien* (Lower Cinnabar Field), the place where Heaven (Yang) and Earth (Yin) alchemically come together to animate our bodies, which is described identically in Chinese medicine. Therefore in formal meditation this immanent circulation in the *dantien* naturally recalibrates our *qi*, which results in outer and inner stillness (quiescence). When one is effortlessly “centered” in the abdomen, the will (kidney *qi*) is not directed outward, but stays inwardly directed. The kidneys are said to be the organs where *jing* is primarily stored, so by not squandering willpower (“doing”) one conserves *jing*. So “*I relax longing and my tendons and bones are strengthened*,” meaning that *jing* is naturally reserved and sublimated in the bone marrow. This rendition of the chapter therefore suggests that *wuwei* (“non-doing”) cultivation, and not concentration or “doing”, makes alchemy effortlessly occur, specifically in formal *zuowang* meditation, where *qi* naturally descends to the navel center and *jing* is naturally sublimated. But surely a *wuwei* Adept stands up from the cushion at some point, so cultivation must be more than just seated meditation. Since the first stage of internal alchemy is about replenishing the Three Treasures (*jing, qi, shen*), there are likewise three components to *wuwei* cultivation as well. These are also called “the three treasures of Daoism” by Liu Ming: macrobiotics (nourishment), conduct (movement), and meditation (sitting). Implicit in this is the aforementioned Daoist or alchemical physiology, based on the cosmic principles of Heaven and Earth. Here Heaven as breath (*tianqi*) enters through the “gate” of the nose and Earth as nutrients (*guqi*) enters through the “gate” of the mouth. When these two meet in the lower abdomen they alchemically generate *jing/qi*. This is then accompanied by *shen* (heart/mind), and we have experience of life. The facet of macrobiotics refers to how we nourish ourselves (food and drink), and how that rectifies our *jing* at the level of the blood specifically. The facet of conduct means our actions in daily life, but also specifically the way we move our body and breath. This refers to what in modern times became popular as the standardised disciplines of *taichi, qigong, and yoga*. Here it refers to playing around with different patterns of movement and breathing, and how those rectify our *qi*. The last facet as seated meditation rectifies *shen*. Based on the view that Nature (Dao) and all temporary phenomena self-resolve the cultivation of macrobiotics and movement are just as “natural” and effortless as *zuowang* meditation. Rather than relying on preconceived patterns of eating (diets) and moving (routines/forms) one relies on the inherent intelligence and self-rectifying mechanism implicit in our embodiment, which one might call “appetite”. The complete trust in this appetite as the mechanism (method) of resolving conflict (dualism) in our experience is clearly based on a non-dualistic view of life and Nature (Dao), where there has never been a problem, and there has never been anyone who could have a problem, since Dao has been arising and resolving itself forever. In order to establish a “problem” one needs to imagine a place where things are different, but here there is no other place. Nature (Dao) includes everything and nothing, so where could the “problem” arise?

Conclusion:

The question we started out with was: To what extent does the cosmological view of the body differ between the (first stage of) internal alchemy practice of the Longmen tradition and that of the Zhengyi Dao tradition? To summarize, Wang Mu (representing the Longmen tradition) spoke of this first stage as “laying the foundations”, where Essence (*jing*), Breath (*qi*), and Spirit (*shen*) are transmuted/sublimated; they gather in the Cinnabar Field, and coagulate and coalesce together. This is done by “Guarding the Center” (*shouzhong*). By “sitting in quiescence” and “harmonizing the breathing,” and by using the Intention/will (*yi*) as a guide, one clears the eight additional channels, which is concomitant with physical healing as well. This is then the platform on which further alchemical sublimation of one’s embodiment can occur. The implicit view in this practice is that this process “produces” health, and requires the will to do so. Our embodiment does not “naturally” sublimate itself, but requires conscious application of “secret” methods to do so. In Liu Ming’s case (representing the Zhengyidao tradition) “laying the foundations” is also about replenishing the Three Treasures or components of our embodiment, but the way to do so in this case is *wuwei* (“non-doing”) cultivation as macrobiotics, movement, and meditation. This cultivation is not based on some kind of ideal or standardized methodology that will artificially repair our experience from its inherent deficiency. Liu Ming’s tradition therefore suggests that *wuwei* (“non-doing”) cultivation, and not concentration or “doing”, makes alchemy effortlessly occur, specifically in formal *zuowang* meditation, where *qi* naturally descends to the navel center and *jing* is naturally sublimated. Even the natural resolution of our embodiment as *jing/qi* occurs spontaneously through eating and moving in accordance with inherent appetite. This sublimation of “quintessential embodiment” (*jing*) to “insubstantial vapor” (*qi*) reveals our immortal nature (*shen*). The goal/fruition is not “produced” by practice but found or revealed self-existing. We don’t do alchemy, we are alchemy. That seems to be the most significant difference in terms of body cosmology and therefore alchemical methodology between the two traditions. They share an enormous commonality as far as viewing human embodiment as a microcosmic reflection of larger cosmic principles, but the difference lies in whether or not the world is seen as a self-resolving process that doesn’t require meddling or “repairing”.