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We are focus-points of consciousness, enormously creative. When we enter the self-constructed hologrammatic arena we call spacetime, we begin at once to generate creativity particles, imajons, in violent continuous pyrotechnic deluge.

Imajons have no charge of their own but are strongly polarized through our attitudes and by the force of our choice and desire into clouds of conceptons, a family of high-energy particles which may be positive, negative, or neutral.

Some common positive conceptons are *exhilarons*, *excytons*, *rhapsodons*, *jovions*. Common negative conceptons include *gloomons*, *tormentons*, *tribulons*, *miserons*. . .

Every nanosecond, an uncountable number of concepton clouds build to critical mass, then transform in quantum bursts to high-energy probability waves radiating at tachyon speeds through an eternal reservoir of supersaturated alternate events.

Depending on their charge and nature, these probability waves crystallize certain of these potential events to match the mental polarity of their creating consciousness into holographic appearance. The materialized events become that mind's experience, freighted with all the aspects of physical structure necessary to make them real and learn-  
ingful to the creating consciousness. This autonomic process is the fountain from which springs every object and event in the theater of spacetime.

As we fasten our thoughts on positive and life-affirming values, we polarize masses of positive conceptons, realize beneficial probability waves, and bring useful alternate events to us that otherwise would not have appeared to exist.

—Richard Bach, *Hypnotizing Maria* (2009)

# Introduction

## What is *Zuowang*?

*Zuowang* 坐忘, “sitting in oblivion,” signifies a state of deep meditative absorption and mystical oneness, during which all sensory and conscious faculties are overcome and which is the base point for attaining Dao. I translate *wang* as “oblivion” and “oblivious” rather than “forgetting” or “forgetful” because the connotation of “forget” in English is that one *should* remember but doesn’t do so, or—if used intentionally—that one actively and intentionally does something in the mind. None of these holds true for what ancient and medieval Daoists were about. This is borne out both by the language and the writings: the word *wang* in Chinese consists of the character *xin* for “mind-heart,” usually associated with conscious and emotional reactions to reality and the word *wang* for “obliterate” or “perish.” The implication is—as indeed described in the sources—that one lets go of all kinds of intentional and reactive patterns and comes to rest in oneness with spirit and is ready to merge completely with Dao.

*Zuowang* first appears in classical texts from before the Common Era, then forms the title of a key treatise on Daoist meditation in the Tang dynasty (618-907), and still serves to indicate Daoist contemplative practice today. In all cases, moreover, the state of mystical oneness is not isolated, but texts and practitioners describe its surrounding features: which methods to use for attaining it and what to expect after one has reached it. This, then, makes *zuowang* the heart of Daoist meditation.

As a meditation practice, sitting in oblivion shares the same fundamental definition as other forms of meditation as a way of resting the mind within to attain healing, purification, and spiritual transcendence. In its medieval heyday when its procedures are formulated in most detail, it also matches their basic characteristics, such as an emphasis on breathing, a basic ethical code, a strong focus on the mind, and a communal setting for training and practice. Unlike other

forms of meditation, however, which make use of certain sense organs (vision, hearing) or the conscious mind to access the subtler layers of the person, *zuowang* demands the complete abolition of all sensory perception and conscious evaluation, insisting on “immediacy” in attitude and lifestyle.

## Defining Meditation

Meditation can be defined as the inward focus of attention in a state of mind where ego-related concerns and critical evaluations are suspended in favor of perceiving a deeper, subtler, and possibly divine flow of consciousness. A method of communicating with deeper layers of the mind, it allows the subconscious to surface in memories, images, and thoughts while influencing it with quietude, openness, and suggestions.<sup>1</sup> Typically, and commonly among its many different forms, it works with breath awareness, has ethical rules or requirements, creates social communities, and aims at mental transformation.

Breath awareness forms an essential part of all meditation. It may be a count that accompanies inhalation and exhalation, a counting of only the exhalation, the silent repetition of “in-out” as the breath comes in and goes out. Or it may involve a physical awareness of the feeling of the breath—either at the nostrils where it enters and leaves, or at the abdomen which rises and falls with it (the preferred location in Daoism). The practice may also involve a pure awareness of breath, with no specific counts, vocalizations, or kinesthetic locations. Or it may be a special effort at lengthening or holding the breath, making it work in various ways. In all cases, the breath is a bridge between body and mind, as an expression of mental reality, closely linked to emotions, nervous conditions, and peace. The more the breath is deepened and calmed, the quieter the mind becomes and the easier it is to suspend the critical factor and enter into the serenity of the meditative state.

Ethical rules may be highly detailed regulations or a general encouragement to cultivate goodwill and compassion. The idea behind “meditation as an ethical process” (Brazier 1995, 34) is that one cannot connect to the ultimate goals as envisioned by the tradition—however defined—unless one reaches a certain level of purity. This purity carries an ethical dimension and is, at least in the beginning, often expressed as moral rules and precepts. Most common are the four great moral rules against killing, stealing, lying, and sexual misconduct (see

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<sup>1</sup> This is the definition used in this book as well as in my earlier work, *Meditation Works* (Kohn 2008a). There is no consensus on a definition of meditation applicable to the heterogeneous practices usually called by this name. Scholars and scientists tentatively agree that meditation in general is a self-induced state that utilizes a clearly defined technique with a specific anchor of concentration and invokes muscles relaxation as well as the easing of logic and preconceived assumptions (Cardoso et al. 2004; Ospina et al. 2007, 9). Some also define it as a “family of self-regulating practices that aim to bring mental processes under voluntary control through focusing attention and awareness” (Walsh and Shapiro 2006).

Gert 1970), but most traditions—and thus also Daoism—have extensive and often highly specific precepts and regulations.

The community-building aspect of meditation reflects the fact that is best taught in direct contact with a master and most efficiently practiced in groups. Traditionally organized in monasteries or hermitages, they were located at a distance from the ordinary world but today also appear in various kinds of centers in the cities. Communities tend to be hierarchically organized, with the master or teacher and his assistants at the center of command and various kinds of administrators managing the group.

All forms of meditation, moreover, share the dualistic vision that the mind we carry in our ordinary life is not the pure mind necessary to realize oneself or the divine.<sup>2</sup> The practice thus sets out to transform the mind from its ordinary tendencies, which include various emotions and negative feelings, into a purer, gentler, and more positive agency. A powerful way to achieve this is by demanding a complete focus on the present moment. This appears commonly but is emphasized with particular strength in *zuowang*. By being in the present moment, consciousness becomes clear and lucid, and each and every aspect of perception stands out vividly while any fixed identity and any limiting sense of ego are bound to dissolve. This effect is also enhanced by an awareness of death: death, when accepted fully in the midst of living, can provide a strength, an impetus, a preciousness to life that is otherwise hard to find.

Meditative practice, then, usually begins with concentration exercises that tend to involve the breath to allow the conscious mind to rest and thoughts to come to stillness. Beginners are usually be submerged in a torrent of thoughts that jump aimlessly from one to the next, ranging from distant memories of the past to wild expectations of the future. This is what meditators call the “monkey-mind,” the “mind like a galloping horse,” and what Daoists call “the ordinary mind.” It is uncontrolled and wild and does not give the person even a moment’s rest (Brazier 1995, 54-63).

Using concentration and breath awareness, old patterns soften or are eliminated. Then new tendencies can be installed—defined in accordance with specific traditions and thus vastly different among cultures and religions. Still, even here certain general tendencies appear: negative emotions are eliminated, thoughts are changed toward well-meaning patterns, and positive feelings are installed:

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<sup>2</sup> This concept matches the vision of the perennial philosophy, which holds that there is an underlying Ground that pervades and supports all being and which gives rise to a pure level of consciousness or immediate experience that is not accessible with ordinary sense faculties and the everyday mind. For a description, see Huxley 1946; Happold 1970. By saying that meditators typically separate the ideal or pure from the ordinary mind, I do not mean to intend that there in fact is one real universal Ground, but merely that there are highly similar assumptions of such an underlying entity in all meditation traditions.

inner peace, calmness of mind, trust, gratitude, and the like. Eventually practitioners reach a state that goes beyond ordinary consciousness but pervades all levels of the mind—the deep absorption Daoists call *zuowang*.

From here they connect to a wider, greater power, a superconscious way of being, what Daoists refer to as “attaining Dao.” The mental state at this level may be called no-mind, wisdom mind, true self, cosmic consciousness, spirit pervasion, complete cessation, pure experience, true thusness, and so on. It is understood as part of an ultimate power or reality underlies the universe and defined differently in each tradition.<sup>3</sup> The usual claim is that, anchored in the joyous awareness of the infinite and firmly established in wisdom, practitioners are constantly aware of their true cosmic nature and remain undisturbed by the polarities of success and failure, pleasure, and pain. At one with a greater power, they often also attain the ability to communicate with, or travel to, the spirit realm, becoming citizens of the universe at large.

## Classifications

The traditional way of classifying types of meditation follows the Buddhist model and divides it into concentration and insight (Shapiro 1984, 6): *zuowang* matches neither, although it embraces aspects of both.<sup>4</sup> Concentration is one-pointedness of mind; it involves complete control of attention and the absorption in a single object to the exclusion of all else. The object can be a sound, a visual diagram, or a concrete object. Beginners in most traditions start with the breath, observing it with the help of counting either the number or the length of respirations. The goal is to quiet the conscious mind so that subtler levels of the mind can come forth.

Insight, on the other hand, is often also called mindfulness. It involves a general openness to all sorts of sensory stimuli and encourages a sense of free-flowing awareness with detached observation. Insight meditation usually begins with the recognition of physical sensations and subtle events in the body. It also means paying attention to reactions to outside stimuli, recognizing but not evaluating them. Often associated with notions of deeper understanding or wisdom, it encourages the appreciation of life as flow and lets practitioners see body and self as unstable, ever-changing energetic entities (see Brown and Engler 1984).

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<sup>3</sup> On the cosmic mind and the true self, see Austin 2006, 359-60; Bucke 1961; Motoyama 1990; On the mystical experience, see James 1936; O'Brien 1964; Proudfoot 1985; Scharfstein 1973; Stace 1987; Underhill 1911.

<sup>4</sup> The same fundamental distinction, called “stabilizing” and “analytical” is made in Dalai Lama 2002, 118-19. It is also found, supplemented by an “integrated” form in the analysis of meditation by Daniel Goleman (1988).

Developing this fundamental division, the Evidence Report of the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality proposes a division into five broad categories: mantra, mindfulness, yoga, taiji quan, and qigong (Ospina et al. 2007, 3). Authors acknowledge that this classification is problematic, since it merges a number of different methods into one group such as, for example, hatha and kundalini forms of yoga or breath awareness and chanting under the heading of mantra. It also does not allow visualization as a separate category—as much as the ancient Buddhist system does, which subsumes it under “concentration.”

Approaching the problem from a completely different angle and after examining many meditation methods in a comparative, cultural context, I have proposed to classify the various forms according to the venue they use to access the subconscious mind (Kohn 2008a). Most obvious are three ways that match the major modes of human perception: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. That is to say, the meditation forms of visualization, sound immersion (mantra practice), and body awareness

Visualization is a key method in tantric Buddhism and medieval Daoism as well as the essential working tool of hypnosis. It involves focusing the mind on a specific scene or sequence of events, such as energy flows, deities, cosmic patterns, saints' lives, or potential future events. Scenes are either imagined with complete detachment or involve the participation of the practitioner—in all cases opening awareness to subtler levels of consciousness (see Epstein 1989; Korn and Johnson 1983; Samuels and Samuels 1975).

Mantra practice, which I call “sound immersion,” is the vocalized or silent repetition of a sound, word, or phrase. First documented in ancient Hindu sources, it appears as scripture recitation in Daoism and forms an important part of some Mahayana Buddhist schools, such as Pure Land and Nichiren. It approaches the subconscious through the auditory system, creating vibrations in the brain that have a calming effect and, especially if used in conjunction with deity devotion, lead to a sense of selflessness and connection to the divine (see Gass 1999).

Body awareness, sometimes also called kinesthetic practice, centers on the body as it is moved or placed into different postures. Although commonly undertaken in hatha yoga, daoyin, taiji quan, and qigong, most people think of this practice more as a form of body cultivation. Yet, while it does have distinct physical effects, body awareness also has clear meditative purposes. With its deep focus on the movements both of the physical and the energy body, it can release emotional issues and lead to meditative oneness (see Hackett 1977; Kohn 2008b).

Beyond these three fundamental types, three further modes include observation, body energetics, and immediacy. Each utilizes again a different mode of accessing and modifying the subconscious mind, sometimes but not necessarily in

combination with one of the main modes of perception (e.g., awareness of physical sensations in observation).

More specifically, observation, used in Buddhist insight meditation and Daoist inner observation, establishes a detached, objective observer or “witness consciousness” in the mind, the “observing self” (Deikman 1982) which is a mental position of distanced seeing, the faculty of taking a step back from involvement with experiences and emotions. From this viewpoint adepts identify, observe, and cleanse negative emotions while cultivating positive states as defined by the tradition: compassion, calmness, and joy. They also see the world increasingly as a succession of changing phenomena and learn to relax into all kinds of different circumstances (see Goldstein and Kornfield 1987; Rosenberg 1999; Brown and Engler 1984).

Body energetics, next, is a form that appears in Daoist internal alchemy, kundalini yoga, and Western alchemy. The meditative refinement of tangible forms of body energy (most commonly sexual forces) into spiritual forms, body energetics activates subtle energetic powers that connect the person to the ultimate. The method works with an intricate network of subtle energy channels, centers, and passes that need to be opened and activated and ideally leads to the emergence of a new spiritual dimension, through which the adept can communicate and ultimately become one with the divine (see Kohn and Wang 2009).

*Zuowang* matches the last category, which can be described as immediacy and, beyond its development in the *Zhuangzi* and the Daoist tradition, has been adopted also in Far Eastern Buddhism, notably in Chinese Chan, Japanese Zen, and Tibetan Dzogchen. Through its practice, adepts eliminate all sensory perception and the conscious mind as inherently dualistic and potentially misleading, avoiding the use of the sensory apparatus in attaining higher states. Practitioners thus strive to access what they call pure experience or “sitting in oblivion of everything” by letting go of all ordinary perception while strengthening intuition, the potency of the inborn, natural mind—a pure reflection of original cosmos in human beings. Posture and body control become essential; all analytical, dualistic thinking as well as connection to deities are radically overcome. In addition, it has its own understanding of the universe, appreciation of the human role in creation, concepts of mind and body, vision of the ultimate goal, role and importance of the master, and advanced methodology.



## Early Sources

The oldest documentation of *zuowang*, as well as the first mention of the term, appears in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang). The classical passage is part of a dialogue of Confucius 孔子 and his disciple Yan Hui 顏回, the latter reporting that he is “getting better” at attaining Dao. When Confucius asks what he means, Yan Hui says he has “become oblivious of benevolence and righteousness,” two essential Confucian virtues that, according to the *Daode jing* 道德經 (Book of the Dao and Its Inherent Potency; ch. 18),<sup>5</sup> form part of the later unfolding of culture and thus represent a step away from Dao. Confucius tells him that this is good, but that he has not gone far enough. At their next meeting Yan Hui says he has left behind “rites and music,” taking aim at the fundamental Confucian ways of relating to the world, which are similarly denounced as betraying true humanity in the *Daode jing*. When Confucius tells Yan Hui that he still has a ways to go, he leaves, then reports again:

“I’m getting there!”

“How so?”

“I can sit in oblivion!”

Confucius was startled: “What do you mean, ‘sit in oblivion?’”

“I let my limbs and physical structure fall away, do away with perception and intellect, separate myself from body-form and let go of all knowledge, thus joining Great Pervasion. This is what I mean by ‘sitting in oblivion.’” (see Watson 1968, 90; Graham 1981, 92; Mair 1994, 64; Roth 1997, 310; 2010, 198)

*Zuowang* here is an advanced state of meditative absorption, achieved after more common features of worldly connection, social rules and formal virtues, are eliminated. An introverted state and practice, it yet also has an extroverted effect when activated in daily life. Thus the *Zhuangzi* presents various descriptions of mystical states, visions of ultimate ways of being in the world—free and easy wandering, utmost happiness—as well as outlines of the ways people of superb skill and the “perfected of old” live in complete freedom and ease.

For example, “good swimmers . . . are oblivious of the water and its dangers” (ch. 19); “fish are oblivious of one another in the rivers and lakes” (ch. 6); “the snow-goose does not bathe every day to make itself white, nor the crow black-

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<sup>5</sup> I translate *de*, usually rendered “virtue” as “inherent potency.” The term expresses the manifest activity of Dao, the spiritual potential and inherent power of things and people, the sense of inner truth which is both formless and mysterious as part of Dao but also unique to the individual as it is activated in the world. Moral goodness (virtue) forms part of the concept, but it goes beyond that to include the fulfillment of one’s essential inner nature and heaven-given destiny—which may or may not be moral in the common sense.

en itself every day to make itself black” (ch. 14). In other words, *zuowang* in the *Zhuangzi*, in addition to being an introverted, absorbed state of deep meditation is also an extroverted way of being in the world that is free from reflection and intentional action. It is a spontaneous way of living in natural simplicity that is realized by being at one with Dao, joined with Great Pervasion—it is in fact the fundamental human birth right that is lost through sensory involvement and conscious categorizations.

As for concrete methods of how to attain this unified state, the *Zhuangzi* speaks of “mind fasting” (*xinzhai* 心齋), which allows practitioners to reduce mental input and replace ordinary perception with the workings of subtler energies, such as *qi*. It also mentions the possibility of being free from emotions and learning how to avoid conscious classifications by “making all things equal.” However, the *Zhuangzi* overall remains rather vague as to the exact procedures of meditation. Its commentaries, notably those by Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 310) and Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (7<sup>th</sup> c.), do not give specific practice instructions either. This is slightly remedied in pre-Han literature by the “Neiye” 內業 (Inward Training) chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子 (Works of Master Guan; trl. Roth 1999), which outlines concrete instructions leading to a state of “emptiness” and supported by the *Daode jing* which emphasizes ways of “embracing oneness” and reaching “clarity and stillness” (*qingjing* 清靜).

## Tang Works

The other major documentation on *zuowang* dates from the Tang dynasty, when masters of the Twofold Mystery (Chongxuan 重玄) and Highest Clarity (Shangqing 上清) schools wrote extensively about it. They centered their presentations on the same *Zhuangzi* passage but added more subtle philosophical argumentation, vastly more detailed procedures, major Buddhist concepts, as well as visions of the otherworld where Dao is manifest in celestial palaces and immortals. The main source here is the *Zuowang lun* 坐忘論 (On Sitting in Oblivion, DZ 1036, YQ 94; see Robinet in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 306-07)<sup>6</sup> by the Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (647-735). Addressed to a general audience of aristocratic background, it presents seven steps that lead adepts from ordinary consciousness through a variety of practices—including Buddhist-inspired concentration, observation, and absorption—to “attaining Dao,” an ecstatic sense of freedom that is reminiscent of the *Zhuangzi* yet also involves the cessation of karma and ascent to the heavens of the immortals.

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<sup>6</sup> Texts in the Daoist Canon (DZ) are cited by the numbers in Komjathy 2002; Schipper and Verellen 2004. “YQ” stands for *Yunji qiqian*, the Daoist encyclopedia of 1019.

Two further texts are closely related to the *Zuowang lun*. One is an inscription of the same title, dated to the year 829 and placed in front of a temple dedicated to Sima Chengzhen on Mount Wangwu, his latest residence. It summarizes the key features of the other text and is probably an early forerunner. A modern edition has been provided by Wu Shouju (1981), but it is also contained in Zeng Zao's 曾造 *Daoshu* 道樞 (Pivot of the Dao, DZ 1017, 2.7a-8a).<sup>7</sup> The other is the appendix to the *Zuowang lun* in its edition in the Daoist canon (DZ 1036, 15b-18a). This is identical with the *Dingguan jing* 定觀經 (Scripture on Stability and Observation, DZ 400, YQ 17.6b-13a; see Schipper in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 332), an outline of mental transformation in forty-nine verses signed by the otherwise unknown Lingxuzi 冷虛子. Also summarized under the title *Guanmiao jing* 觀妙經 (Scripture on Observation of the Mystery, DZ 326; see Robinet in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 558), it has been cited in longer or shorter parts in quite a number of other texts, ranging from the late Tang to Yuan-dynasty works on internal alchemy.<sup>8</sup>

An essential part of this text, moreover, consists of a comprehensive outline of five phases leading to mental concentration and seven stages of bodily transformation to immortality. These also appear in the *Cunshen lianqi ming* 存神鍊氣銘 (Inscription on Visualizing Spirit and Refining *Qi*, DZ 834, YQ 33.12a-14b; see Lévi in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 375-76), a text closely associated with Sun Simiao 孫思邈 (581-682) of the seventh century. A yet different system of stages to the Dao appears in the *Tianyingzi* 天隱子 (Book of the Master of Heavenly Seclusion, DZ 1026; Robinet in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 303), allegedly transmitted by Wu Yun 吳筠 (d. 778) and edited by Sima Chengzhen. It is more comprehensive than the other texts, beginning with preparatory measures such as fasting and abstinence as well as the establishment of the meditation chamber. The *Tianyingzi* has been published many times also in non-Daoist collections and is still a core work among qigong practitioners today.

Further supplementary materials include first the *Neiguan jing* 內觀經 (Scripture of Inner Observation, DZ 641, YQ 17.1a-6b; trl. Kohn 1989b; see Schipper in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 500), extensively cited by Zhang Wanfu 張萬福 in the early eighth century and thus probably another seventh-century document. Revealed by Lord Lao, it outlines various ways of observing the internal work-

<sup>7</sup> This is a major collection of materials on internal alchemy in 42 *juan*, dated to around 1151, however, materials tend to be copied erroneously or in fragments. See Boltz 1987, 231-34; Baldrian-Hussein in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 780-81.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike in the 1987 book, I render *ding* here as “stability” to distinguish its Daoist from its Buddhist in *samādhi* or *samathā*: there is a more physical dimension to the Daoist practice beyond the mere focus or concentration of mind. I also stick to the rather literal translation of “observation” for *guan*, which also can be (and has been) expressed with terms like “contemplation,” “discernment,” “insight,” and “mindfulness.”

ings of body and mind, adding detailed definitions of mental aspects. Next, the *Wuchu jing* 五廚經 (Scripture of the Five Kitchens, DZ 763; see Verellen in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 351-52; Mollier 2000), by Yin Yin 尹愔 of the early eighth century adds an advanced cosmological dimensions to the picture. Also being transmitted in a Buddhist version, it yet again confirms the close interrelation between the traditions. Last but not least, Wu Yun's *Xinmu lun* 心目論 (On Mind and Eyes, DZ 1038; see Baldrian-Hussein in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 308) provides an imaginary dialogue between the eyes and the mind on who carries more responsibility and has which precise tasks in the quest for oneness with Dao.

## Further Dimensions

“Sitting in oblivion” is much discussed in the classics and in the Tang—but what about the early middle ages and the period since the Song? Only very few passages use the term *zuowang*, but Daoists still strove to attain Dao and entered deep absorptive states. Looking at the sources, it becomes clear that the emphasis on what it meant to “attain Dao” was different—visualizing deities and reaching a spirit-like state to communicate with divine beings and travel to the otherworld in ecstatic excursions in Highest Clarity in the early middle ages; and transforming internal energies and creating an immortal embryo to ascend to the celestial realms in internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) since the Song.<sup>9</sup> In both contexts, when the term *zuowang* is used, it indicates a preparatory or secondary form of practice.

Thus the *Sandong zhubang* 三洞珠囊 (A Bag of Pearls from the Three Caverns, DZ 1139), by Wang Xuanhe 王懸和 (fl. 683),<sup>10</sup> lists many different techniques and experiences under the heading of “sitting in oblivion and focusing one’s thinking” (*jingsi* 精思; 5.1a-2a). These techniques are in each case exemplified by a specific text and personage. Whereas the text links *zuowang* with *Zhuangzi* passages (chs. 2, 4, 6), it describes *jingsi* as the practice of the first Celestial Master Zhang Daoling 張道陵 and claims that it led to his revelation of Dao.

The *Sandong zhubang* explains *jingsi* further by citing Ge Xuan’s 葛玄 *Wuqian wen jingxu* 五千文精序 (Essential Explanation of the Text in Five Thousand Words; lost), presumably of the third century. This states that through focusing one’s thinking “the manifold wonders will duly come together. Looking inside one’s body . . . one can cause *qi* and [inner] deities to live forever” (5.2a). It then ex-

<sup>9</sup> On Highest Clarity meditation, see Robinet 1993; Miller 2008. For practices of internal alchemy, see Baldrian-Hussein 1984; Kohn and Wang 2009.

<sup>10</sup> On the text, see Reiter 1990. For further discussions, see Benn in Pregadio 2008, 832-33; Kohn and Kirkland 2000, 535; Reiter in Schipper and Verellen, 440-41.

pands the definition to include visualization of the body gods as prescribed in the *Huangting jing* 黃庭經 (Yellow Court Scripture, in DZ 263 [chs. 55-57], 402-403, YQ 11-12), one of the classics of Highest Clarity, and further links it with ecstatic journeys to the stars—moving into the realm of intentional visualizations and thus further away from oblivion. In other words, in Highest Clarity as reflected in the encyclopedia, *zuowang* was a meditation practice seen largely as a preparation for a level of mental focus necessary to attain communication with deities and go on ecstatic excursions.

The Song encyclopedia *Yunji qiqian* 雲笈七籤 (Seven Tablets in a Cloudy Satchel, DZ 1032; dat. 1019; see Boltz in Pregadio 2008, 1203-06; Schipper in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 943-45) presents a similar perspective. It, too, sees *zuowang* as preparatory, then links it with “transforming the body-self” (*huashen* 化身) and provides instructions that also involve physical movements and breathing:

Every night after bedtime, lie down flat on your back and close your eyes, then calm your spirit and stabilize your spirit souls, reaching a state of oblivion ready for creative imagination. Next, exhale deeply two or three times, then twist quickly to the right and left and raise [and lower] the hips. Focus your mind on the navel to create a shadow personage three or four *cun* tall. Next, let the shadow figure divide into several million and see them exit from your head. Allow them to penetrate the room and rise up, moving into the heavens and filling all the dharma worlds, thinking: “All these are my body-self.” (35.4ab; see also Eskildsen 2007)

Here the main focus is visualization and traveling ecstatically through the “dharma worlds.” Oblivion is a state that prepares the practitioner for “creative imagination” and not, as in the *Tianyinzhi*, the culmination of “imagination and visualization.”

In internal alchemy, too, *zuowang* appears in a supportive function. A system that integrated previous techniques and specifically used the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) and alchemical metaphors, it focused on the transformation of bodily energies with the goal of creating an immortal embryo. Rather than a central focus, “oblivion” here appears as one form of practice among many, typically associated with inner observation (*neiguan* 內觀) and frequently interpreted in Buddhist terms as comparable to wall-gazing (*biguan* 壁觀) or sitting in absorption (*zuochan* 坐禪).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> I render *chan* as “absorption” because the word originally transliterated the Sanskrit term *dhyāna*, which means “absorption.” Another meditative *zuo* practice is “sitting in enclosure” (*zuoguan* 坐關), a form of long-term isolation in a sealed structure or cage, which be-

For example, the “Discourse on Inner Observation” in the *Zhong Lü chuandao ji* 鍾呂傳道集 (Zhongli Quan’s Transmissions of the Dao to Lü Dongbin),<sup>12</sup> describes both *zuowang* and visualization (*cunxiang* 存想) as forms of inner observation that lead from a state of elementary wisdom to profound sageliness.

Whether acquiring or rejecting, in all cases remain aware just how much the mind is like a monkey and the intention like a wild horse: never stopping, never staying but constantly afraid of pursuing things and losing them, willing [things] and not hitting the target. Instead, establish yourself firmly in the mental image [of observation] to find a state where the ears do not hear and the eyes do not see, the mind is not wild and the intention is not confused. Seeing affairs and things clearly, you cannot fail to practice inner observation and reach complete oblivion. (16.16ab)

Along similar lines Master Wenyuan 文元公, cited in the “Collected Essentials” section of the *Daoshu* explains that ordinary perception is like living under the seal of illusion and magic and that, in order to escape from that state, “students of the Dao must first learn to stop all thoughts and, if ever a thought should arise, be immediately aware of it” (3.1b). As long as they are “unable to be completely without thoughts, use the observation of emptiness” (*guan kong* 觀空) to cleanse the mind; “if not yet able to rest in emptiness, use matching response,” thus moving from immediate response to a sense of emptiness and eventually to complete freedom from thoughts. This, then is what “Zhuangzi did when sitting in oblivion and Bodhidharma practiced in wall-gazing; it is quite beyond the reach of beginning students” (2ab).

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came popular in the nineteenth century (see Goossaert 2002). *Zuowang* was not connected to this.

<sup>12</sup> The text is contained in the collection *Xingzhen shishu* 修真十書 (Ten Works on the Cultivation of Perfection, DZ 263, chs. 14-16). Another complete version being contained in the *Daoshu*, it probably dates from the twelfth century. See Boltz 1987, 139-41; Baldrian-Hussein in Schipper and Verellen 2004, 801; Eskildsen 2009, 88-89.

## Zuowang Today

Inheriting the tradition, twentieth-century Daoists, as reported by Erwin Rousselle who practiced in Peking in the 1920s, often use a combination of concentration, oblivion, and internal alchemy. Rousselle's instruction began with a concentration exercise that tied all thoughts and conscious activities to the lower abdominal area, called in traditional literature the cinnabar or elixir field (*dantian* 丹田), in medicine the Ocean of *Qi* (*qihai* 氣海), and in the modern context "fixation spot."<sup>13</sup> The result was called "relaxation" and led to "peace of mind" in a state of formless absorption (Rousselle 1933, 178). Then "the technique of meditation is changed" and adepts learn a practice closely resembling internal alchemy: they bring internal *qi* into awareness and move it through the body in different ways, reflecting ancient methods of *qi*-guiding as much as observation or mindfulness practice (1933, 184).

Today Daoists use *zuowang* to denote a specific form of practice, describing it as a loss of self and conscious mentation. For example, Liu Xingdi of the Leigu tai Temple in Shaanxi says:

*Zuowang* is allowing everything to slip from the mind, not dwelling on thoughts, allowing them to come and go, simply being at rest. It is important to take a good posture to still the body and calm the mind. Otherwise *qi* disperses, attention wanders, and the natural process is disturbed. Just remain empty and there is no separation from Dao. Then wisdom will arise and bring forth light, with is the clear *qi* of the person. Do not think too much about the theory of this, otherwise you are sure to disturb the mind. It is like the sun rising in the east and setting in the west. To think about stopping it halfway is a futile exercise. Just trust the inherent natural process. (Shi 2005, 6)

While this sees oblivion more of a state that is natural and not separated from Dao, reflecting the ancient *Zhuangzi*, Eva Wong, renowned author and long-term practitioner of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen 全真) Daoism, finds *zuowang* more of an actual method, but then also goes back to the ancients:

*Zuowang* is a dropping of conceptions. When we drop conceptions, what we have is the natural emergence of the natural self, the natural celestial mind, which has been with us all the time. It is only because of our conceptions that we can't experience it. So when we practice *zuowang*, we are

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<sup>13</sup> Jiang Weiqiao 蔣維喬 (1872-1955), also known as Master Yinshi, and author of the *Yinshizi jingzuo fa* 因是子靜坐法 (Quiet Sitting with Master Yinshi), was similarly inclined toward renaming and called it the "center of gravity." He, too, moved from here into the circulation of *qi* in inner alchemical fashion, establishing the microcosmic orbit. See Lu 1964; Kohn 1993b.

simply saying that here is a method where we can begin to drop conceptions. . . .

[For this] there are specific methods of meditation—*zuowang* is one of them and *zazen* is another. Then, of course, there is Highest Clarity visualization, merging with the deities, that's another form of meditation. But if we go back and look at originally what is taught in the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, everything is meditation—walking, sitting, standing—and when we begin to realize this, then that is true meditation. There is no longer a distinction between non-meditation and meditation. (Shi 2007, 8).

Actively taught in the West today both by the British Taoist Association (BTA) under their leader Shi Jing, in Da Yuan Circle (formerly Orthodox Daoism of America, ODA) guided by Liu Ming,<sup>14</sup> and in the Qigong and Daoist Training Center by Michael Rinaldini (an initiate of the Longmen lineage of Complete Perfection), *zuowang* is a formless, non-conceptual meditation that releases the hold of the self. As Shi Jing says:

*Zuowang* is to sit and forget. What we forget is the thing 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. (2006, 11; see also Rinaldini 2008, 187)

The practice releases this through just being with the natural process (*ziran* 自然), in a mental state that is, according to Shi Jing, characterized by “choiceless awareness,” a “detached observation” of reality. Both these terms come directly from Buddhist insight meditation and indicate the creation of a conscious observer as the agent of detachment and observation. It represents the modern interpretation of *zuowang* following the increased Buddhist influence already visible in internal alchemy and not supported in earlier materials, which describe the ultimate state in terms of the *Zhuangzi* as the “falling away of body and doing away with perception.”

While emphasizing that *zuowang* is without special techniques or methods and means just being in the present, both Shi Jing and Liu Ming provide technical instruction—just as the Tang texts give details on breathing awareness, mind control, and proper attitudes.

Shi Jing, in a lecture at the beginning of a *zuowang* retreat, points out that one should always “reaffirm one’s intention at the beginning of every meditation

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<sup>14</sup> The leaders of the BTA were initiated at the Leigu tai in Shaanxi and follow authentic Chinese teachings. Liu Ming (formerly Charles Belyea) claimed to have received the transmission of the Liu family in Taiwan, but in effect cannot show an authentic Daoist lineage. Still, his teachings reflect much of what is going on in China and are representative for American practice. For details on his life and work, see Phillips 2008. Both show a fair amount of Buddhist influence, BTA more of the vipassana type, ODA more Zen.



period,” develop confidence in the practice (rather than enthusiasm which exhausts the *qi*) and make sure that the body is aligned and stable (2006, 13)

Liu Ming, moreover, specifies just how to achieve this stable alignment:

- base like a mountain, legs crossed or folded
- back straight but light, stomach empty
- head drawn upward, eyes holding a relaxed gaze
- tongue touching the roof of the mouth to connect the *qi* channels
- hands resting comfortable in lap
- breath flowing gently and in complete silence (Da Yuan Circle pamphlet)

Just as this is essentially the posture for zazen—with eyes open rather than closed as the Tang texts note—so the beginning method is essentially Buddhist: one should create stability of mind by following the breath and counting the exhalations (see Sekida 1975). From here, Liu Ming notes, one reaches a point of “embracing the One,” a term borrowed from the *Daode jing*, which he interprets to mean being “relaxed” and “calm,” sitting with “that which is naturally arising.” There should then be no more effort, which is “a hazard to complete fruition,” but one should naturally come to “returning to the source,” a state best achieved in complete isolation for one year. As Liu says:

This is liberating our practice from all duality—it is the end of preciousness. Formality and informality, of course, blend seamlessly. Fruition is neither precious nor mundane. Some say this is letting personal practice gain universal dimensions, but there has never been a difference between these two. . . . It is also called “the body of light.” In death we do not survive or become extinct. Submerged in the Nameless Dao, there is no death and no birth; there is neither here nor there.

This moves even the ultimate goal into a Buddhist sphere, replacing immortality with the complete cessation of birth and death, here and there (*nirvāṇa*), while also using Western alchemical terminology, “the body of light” to explain the new dimension.

To sum up, *zuowang* has meant a number of different things in the course of Chinese history. While both Chinese and Western Daoists still actively pursue its practice today, it has once again undergone quite a few transformations, retaining traces of the state outlined in the *Zhuangzi*, using various methods described in the middle ages, and evolving into the complex system of the Tang. Leading masters, and certainly those cited here, work with the traditional model and are familiar with the classical texts, using the *Zuowang lun* to inspire students and encouraging them with citations from the *Dingguan jing*. Yet they do not hesitate to put their own, new visions and practice methods on the old materials, thus keeping the tradition alive through change.

