

42. *Daode baozhang* 道德寶章, *Wuqiu beizhai* edition, 4b.
43. Chapter 2, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 58. See chapter 43 for a similar phrase.
44. Chapter 64, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 126.
45. Chapter 14, cf. Lau, trans., *Tao Te Ching*, 70.
46. *Laozi Daodejing sijuan*, 14a. Cf. Chen Guying's 陳鼓應 modern rendering "those who possess the Dao study what others do not," *Laozi zhuyi ji pingjie* 老子註譯及評介 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1993), 310, n. 5.
47. *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi* 王弼集校釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980), 164.
48. *Daode zhenjing zhushu* 道德真經注疏, *Wuqiu beizhai* edition, 6.19a. "Radiance" here may be thought of as reflected light, and the mind's "doing" as consisting of passive reflection.
49. *Daode zhenjing zhushu*, 6.24b. For the *Scripture of Western Ascension*, see Livia Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
50. *Daode baozhang*, 12b. Gu Huan uses a similar metaphor, but reads *buxing* 不行 to refer to the mind, making it an "unmoved mind" which reflects like a mindless mirror. See *Daode zhenjing zhushu*, 5.5b–6a. Ge, a Song Daoist writer and hermit, is quoting the late seventh-century monk Shenxiu 神秀. See Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 130.
51. *Su Che Laozi Daodejing pingzhu* 蘇徹老子道德經評註, *Wuqiu beizhai* edition, 1:20b.
52. *Su Che Laozi Daodejing pingzhu*, 2:28b.
53. Herbert Giles, *Religions of Ancient China* (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1989), 41.
54. Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 127. Proudfoot is often grouped with Katz among the constructivists, but Proudfoot's position differs from Katz in ways that are important to this analysis (e.g., 244, n. 4).
55. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 131.
56. The relationship of *Dao* to *shu* is explored in Mark Csikszentmihalyi, "Jia Yi's 'Techniques of the Dao' and the Han Confucian Appropriation of Technical Discourse," forthcoming in *Asia Major* 10 (1997).
57. Sima Qian, *Shiji* (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1959), 130:3289.



The Laozi in the Context of
Early Daoist Mystical Praxis

Harold D. Roth

To know others is to be clever
To know oneself is to be clear . . . (*Laozi* 33)

Introduction

One of the few areas of agreement between sinologists and scholars of Comparative Religion is in regarding the *Laozi* as an important work of mysticism. Scholars from Wing-Tsit Chan to Benjamin Schwartz in the former group and from Walter Stace to Wayne Proudfoot in the latter group share this common understanding of the text as they make use of it in a wide variety of intellectual endeavors.¹ While this is by no means a unanimous view (see the contrary opinions of D. C. Lau and Chad Hansen), it is certainly held by a great many scholars.² Despite this surprising unanimity, when one examines the views of these scholars more closely, there is an equally surprising lack of a comprehensive discussion of why they regard the *Laozi* as a mystical text in the first place.

Some scholars simply use the term "mysticism" uncritically, as in Chan's accurate but overly general observation that the *Laozi* is a "combination of poetry, philosophical speculation, and mystical

reflection.³ Others use passages from the *Laozi* to illustrate their general theories about mysticism. For example, Stace uses chapters 4 and 14 in his discussion of the epistemology of mystical experience to illustrate an important characteristic of the “objective referent” of mystical experience, namely that it is paradoxically spoken of as a “vacuum-plenum.”⁴ Proudfoot uses chapter 1 of the *Laozi* to illustrate how the supposed ineffability of mystical experience is really a characteristic of grammatical rules embedded in religious doctrine.⁵

Two fuller approaches are found in the writings of Livia Kohn and Benjamin Schwartz. In her pioneering study of Daoist mysticism, Kohn correctly accepts the assumption that the mystical philosophy of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* is derived directly from the experience of practicing mystics and she usefully defines such philosophy as “. . . the theoretical, conceptual description of the mystical worldview . . . the intellectual framework that provides an explanation and systematic interpretation of increasingly sophisticated spiritual experiences.”⁶ She founders, however, in a largely unsuccessful attempt to integrate several contradictory approaches in mysticism theory to forge her own definition. Furthermore, her discussion of the mysticism of the *Laozi* is simply an analysis of its philosophy with no specific attempt to demonstrate how this philosophy is mystical, according to her definitions.⁷

While hardly a thorough textual analysis, Schwartz provides a more sustained attempt to demonstrate the presence of mystical philosophy in the *Laozi*.⁸ Arguing from a cross-cultural foundation that is rare among sinologists, Schwartz sees mystical philosophy in the *Laozi*'s cosmology of the paradoxically determinate and indeterminate *Dao*, the source of meaning for all human beings that can only be known through the “higher direct knowledge” of gnosis. However, in an effort to deflate arguments asserting the non-mystical nature of the *Laozi* based upon the absence of specific techniques for attaining mystical experience in the text, Schwartz downplays the importance of such techniques and emphasizes, instead, the vision of reality with which they are associated. In my opinion, he does not need to take such an approach.

What I will attempt to demonstrate in the following article is that mystical praxis is at the very heart of the *Laozi*. While, of course, it is not present in all its chapters, there is sufficient textual evidence for both mystical praxis and its resultant mystical experience in the work to provide a firm basis for any future scholars who

wish to pursue the demonstration of how these two closely related aspects of mysticism are the foundations of the mystical philosophy of the text. Prior scholarship has not noted the extent of such textual evidence because the *Laozi* has been largely regarded as a work of philosophy produced by a school of philosophy. In order to counter this prevailing view, I will first summarize my recent research on the historical and religious context from which the *Laozi* emerged. I will next present the elements of mysticism theory that I have found most valuable in developing definitions of early Daoist mysticism. I will then proceed to a study of the passages on mystical praxis and mystical experience in the *Laozi* in which I will attempt to explain their meaning and significance by comparing them with parallel passages in a number of other important textual sources of early Daoist mysticism.

Historical Context

In contrast to the traditional view, I do not regard the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* as the sole foundational texts of Daoism. Nor do I think there was a “LaoZhuang” school of Daoist thought until its retrospective establishment by the Profound Learning (*xuanxue* 玄學) literati of the third century C.E. Indeed, I have grave doubts that any of Sima Tan's so-translated “schools of philosophy” were “schools,” as we might think of today, with a clear self-identity and a well-defined organization and curriculum, much less schools whose principal *raison d'être* was philosophical speculation.⁹

Rather, my research has suggested that, particularly in the case of Daoism, the foundational texts of the tradition were produced within one or more closely related master-disciple lineages whose principal focus was on learning and practicing specific techniques (*shu*).¹⁰ Indeed, these techniques are so central to the tradition that from a very early period, that of the “inner chapters” of the *Zhuangzi* (ca. 300 B.C.E.), they are referred to as the “techniques of the Way” (*Daoshu* 道術).¹¹ While these eventually came to include methods of political and social organization and a variety of investigations of the natural world (and their associated *yinyang* and Five Phase theories), the single most important technique was of guiding and refining the flow of vital energy or vital breath (*qi*) within the human organism.¹² This seems to have been accomplished in two

possibly complementary ways, the first a kind of active or moving meditation whose postures resembled modern positions in *taiji* and *qigong*, and the second a kind of still, sitting meditation that involved regularized natural breathing.¹³ It is this second form, which entails the apophatic practice of removing the normal contents of the mind to produce a profound tranquility with a decisively noetic character, that I have called “inner cultivation.”¹⁴

According to this view, the texts we have come to regard as the foundations of Daoist philosophy are not filled with abstract metaphysical speculation that has no basis in nondiscursive experience, but are, rather, works written to elucidate the insight attained from inner cultivation practices and to discuss their practical benefits. This latter aspect would have been particularly critical in late Warring States China in order to persuade local kings of the value of adapting the teachings being advocated and thereby winning their favor and a position within the court from which to continue these pursuits. We have some historical certainty that such conditions did exist, for example, at such disparate courts as those of the states of Qi (ca. 320–260 B.C.E.), Qin (ca. 241 B.C.E.), and, later, the Han state of Huainan (ca. 150–122 B.C.E.). Each court produced a book containing collections of teachings from a variety of Daoist and not-Daoist lineages: the *Guanzi*, the *Lüshi chungiu*, and the *Huainanzi*, respectively, which are all important sources for early Daoist thought.

Therefore, it is my contention that the *Laozi* can best be understood by placing it—as much as we possibly can, given the limits of the extant textual corpus—within its historical context. Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to do this until now is the work of Michael LaFargue in his innovative application of the Biblical Studies methodologies of form and redaction criticism to the *Laozi*.¹⁵ While LaFargue’s work is not without its problems, it has developed some important hypotheses about the nature of the text and its origins. One of the most important (and one that I currently share) is that the *Laozi* is the product of a group or community whose foundation was first and foremost a shared practice of “self-cultivation.” According to LaFargue, it is from this practice that many of the more “mystical” passages in the text arose, sayings that I shall be examining in the present essay.

The attempt to apply these “mystical” teachings to the problems of governing in late Warring States China constitutes an important element of the *Laozi*. The particular form of political thought it advocates helps to define one of the three principal phases of early

Daoism (the “Primitivist” as opposed to the “Individualist” and the “Syncretist”) I have identified in previous publications.¹⁶ However, in this essay I will focus not on the distinctive political philosophy of the *Laozi* but rather on the evidence it contains for this community’s practice of inner cultivation and how it relates to similar evidence in the other early textual sources of Daoism. Most relevant among these sources is the essay entitled “Inward Training” (“Neiye”) from the *Guanzi*. I will also place the *Laozi*’s evidence for inner cultivation in the context of evidence for analogous apophatic practices and results in the other early Daoist textual sources mentioned above.

Theoretical Context: Mysticism, Meditation, and the *Laozi*

Seeing the *Laozi* as the product of a lineage involved in apophatic practices of directed breathing meditation enables us to put the text directly into dialogue with similar practices in other cultures and traditions and with modern Western scholarship on the philosophical and psychological implications of such practices. In the following section I will define those elements of mysticism theory that I think are most relevant to the study of the *Laozi* and show how they are related to one another.¹⁷

The cross-cultural study of “mysticism” is very much a modern Western phenomenon that began with the publication of William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* in 1902.¹⁸ This work presents a phenomenology of religious experiences and identifies the subset of mystical experiences as being: 1. ineffable; 2. noetic; 3. transient; 4. passive; and 5. transformational.¹⁹ Following the lead of James, scholars from Evelyn Underhill to Robert Forman have pursued the study of mysticism along the following two lines, clearly adumbrated by Peter Moore:

The philosophical analysis of mysticism comprises two overlapping lines of inquiry: on the one hand the identification and classification of the phenomenological characteristics of mystical experience, and on the other the investigation of the epistemological and ontological status of this experience. The first line of inquiry is generally focused on the question whether the mystical experiences reported in different cultures and religious traditions are basically of the same type or whether there are significantly different types. The second line of inquiry

centres on the question whether mystical experiences are purely subjective phenomena or whether they have the kind of objective validity and metaphysical significance that mystics and others claim for them . . .²⁰

In other words, the former line deals with the nature and characteristics of mystical experience and the latter deals with the various philosophical claims that are made on the basis of mystical experience. These overlapping lines of inquiry indicate that two fundamental aspects of mysticism are mystical experience and the mystical philosophy that is derived from it.

Walter Stace delineates two fundamental forms of mystical experience, “extrovertive” and “introvertive.”²¹ Extrovertive looks outward through the senses of the individual and sees a fundamental unity between this individual and the world. In this form there is a simultaneous perception of the one and the many, unity and multiplicity. Introvertive mystical experience looks inward and is exclusively an experience of unity, that is, an experience of unitive or what some scholars (Forman et al.) call “pure” or object-less consciousness.²² I have found this basic differentiation to be extremely useful and see it in early Daoism in what I call the “bimodal” character of its mystical experience, a concept that I will explain further below.²³

For Stace, mystical philosophy takes its most fundamental concepts from mystical experience. First and foremost are the varying notions of “the One” in different religious traditions that are ultimately derived from the introvertive mystical experience of complete union. Brahman for Hindu mystics, God for Christian mystics, the One for Plotinus, the *Dao* for the Daoists, the unconditioned for Hinayana Buddhists, these are all philosophical expressions of the “universal self” that is derived from this unitive experience.²⁴ While scholars may wish to debate whether these concepts are derivative of mystical union or cause this experience, the fact remains that there is a very intimate connection between these two aspects of mysticism.²⁵

Peter Moore argues that a particularly crucial element of mysticism is the intimate connection between mystical experiences and what he calls “mystical techniques,” the practices that are used to “induce” them.²⁶ He distinguishes between two primary techniques that represent the “immediate preconditions” for mystical experi-

ence, “meditation” and “contemplation.” The former entails “the disciplined but creative application of the imagination and discursive thought to an often complex religious theme or subject-matter.” The latter, a development of the former, entails the attempt “to transcend the activities of the imagination and intellect through an intuitive concentration on some simple object, image, or idea.”²⁷ It seems to me that focusing on one’s breathing in a systematic fashion would be an example of the latter. While this differentiation is instructive, because of the relatively poor state of our knowledge of the specifics of early Daoist mystical techniques—in particular how the imagination and intellect are used in them—and because of the use of the former term in common parlance, I have used—and will continue to use—“meditation” to refer broadly to both these techniques.

Mystical techniques are further clarified in the writings of Robert Forman and Donald Rothberg. Forman, following the phenomenological tradition of James and Stace, argues that the “Pure Consciousness Event (PCE)” (defined as a wakeful though contentless [nonintentional] consciousness)—his version of the latter’s introvertive mystical experience—comes about through a systematic process of “forgetting.”²⁸ This is elaborated upon by Rothberg:

Robert Forman . . . has proposed a model of mystical development (in many traditions) as involving the “forgetting” (Meister Eckhardt’s term) of the major cognitive and affective structures of experience. . . . In this process of “forgetting,” there is an intentional dropping of desires, ideas, conceptual forms (including those of one’s tradition), sensations, imagery, and so on. The end of this process is a contentless mystical experience in which the constructs of the tradition are transcended . . .²⁹

Citing the twelve-year research project on meditative praxis in three Indo-Tibetan traditions by the psychologist Daniel Brown, Rothberg argues that the spiritual path involves, in many traditions, “a process of progressive deconstruction of the structures of experience.”³⁰ These include, for Brown, attitudes and behavioral schemes, thinking, gross perception, self-system, and “time-space matrix.”³¹ This is not to argue that the spiritual path is the same in

every tradition. Indeed, as Rothberg argues, "each path of deconstruction or deconditioning is itself constructed or conditioned in a certain way."³² Nor do he and Forman argue that pure consciousness is the only goal of all mystic paths. Indeed, the entire Forman collection intentionally passes over the important extrovertive aspect of mystical experience, unfairly denigrated by Stace, and, I would argue, extremely important to the understanding of early Daoist mysticism.³³

In a recent review essay I argued for the presence of a "bimodal" mystical experience in early Daoism, particularly evident in the "inner chapters" of the *Zhuangzi*.³⁴ The first mode is an introvertive unitive consciousness in which the adept achieves complete union with the *Dao*. This corresponds, in general, with Stace's "introvertive mystical experience" and with Forman's "Pure Consciousness Event." The second is an extrovertive transformed consciousness in which the adept returns to the world and retains, amidst the flow of daily life, a profound sense of the unity previously experienced in the introvertive mode. This experience entails an ability to live in the world free from the limited and biased perspective of the individual ego. This second mode corresponds, in general, to Stace's "extrovertive mystical experience," although I would regard it as a quite profound subcategory of it.³⁵ This bimodal character of mystical experience is, actually, quite prevalent in mystical experience across traditions, but it is often overlooked by scholars, who tend to focus on the introvertive mode exclusively.³⁶ While evidence for its presence is not as strong in the *Laozi* as in the *Zhuangzi*, it is, as we shall see, most certainly there.

Finally, in the philosophical analysis of mysticism there is also a great deal of attention paid to mystical language, and herein I will be concerned with one particular subset of it, the unique language that evolves within mystical praxis. Brown witnessed this in his study of Tibetan monastic communities where there was a body of teachings about the internal states attained through mystical praxis to which an adept could compare his/her experience. He goes on:

In such traditions, where meditation practice is socially organized, a technical language for meditation experience evolved. This language was refined over generations. The technical terms do not have external referents, e.g., "house," but refer to replicable internal states which can be identified by anyone

doing the same practice, e.g., "energy currents," or "seed meditations." Much like the specialized languages of math, chemistry, or physics, technical meditation language is usually intelligible only to those specialized audiences of yogis familiar with the experiences in question . . .³⁷

LaFargue sees this kind of language present in the *Laozi*, and I concur.³⁸ I would also extend this to the other textual sources of early Daoism including, most importantly, "Inward Training." The great challenge facing modern scholars who wish to study this specialized mystical language is to make sense of what it really meant to the people who used it. While this is not as much a problem when technical terms are primarily descriptive, as for example, in *Zhuangzi*'s famous prescription for how to just "sit and forget," the more metaphorical the language becomes (see later in the same sentence, "I . . . merge with the universal thoroughfare") the more challenging it is to interpret.³⁹ In the following article I will attempt to explain the meaning of some of the important technical terms and phrases of mystical praxis in the *Laozi* through extensive cross-referencing to other early Daoist works and through cross-cultural comparisons to mystical techniques in other traditions. I see this attempt as a plausible reconstruction, but certainly not the only one possible.

Using the above definitions of the various aspects of mysticism, I will concentrate on presenting and analyzing the textual evidence for mystical techniques and their resultant mystical experiences in the *Laozi* under the general heading of "mystical praxis." In doing this I will make extensive use of relevant passages from the other important works that I have identified in my research on the historical context of early Daoism. Due to the practical limitations of the present article, I will not make anything more than general assertions about the relationship of mystical experience to mystical philosophy in the *Laozi* and will leave a more detailed study for another time.

Mystical Praxis in the *Laozi*

Mysticism and Meditation in Early Daoism

Perhaps the most direct passage on mystical praxis in the *Laozi* is chapter 10:

Amidst the daily activity of the psyche, can you embrace
the One and not depart from it?
When concentrating your vital breath until it is at its
softest, can you be like a child?
Can you sweep clean your Profound Mirror so you are
able to have no flaws in it?
In loving the people and governing the state, can you do it
without using knowledge?
When the Gates of Heaven open and close, can you
become feminine?
In clarifying all within the four directions, can you do it
without using knowledge?⁴⁰

Because this passage contains the kind of technical language of meditation that Brown found in his Tibetan communities and LaFargue sees in the *Laozi*, it has caused scholars great difficulty. Lau sees “some sort of breathing exercise or perhaps even yogic practice” here, but considers it an atypical passage that could have come from a school interested in the prolongation of life, not the avoidance of untimely death that characterizes the *Laozi*.⁴¹ Chan rejects the entire claim that breathing meditation is involved here: “The concentration of *qi* (vital force, breath) is not yoga, as Waley thinks it is. Yoga aims at transcending the self and the external environment. Nothing of the sort is intended here.”⁴² Their failure to understand the passage has a twofold origin: failure to understand the larger context of early Daoist mystical praxis and the *Laozi* passages that contain evidence of it and failure to understand the nature of mysticism. After examining mystical praxis in the *Laozi* in the light of these two critical understandings, I shall return to an analysis of this passage.

A familiar place to begin discussing the greater context of early Daoist mystical praxis is with the *Zhuangzi* passage on “sitting and forgetting.” Herein Confucius’s favorite disciple Yan Hui ironically “turns the tables” on his master by teaching *him* how to “sit and forget” (*zuowang* 坐忘):

(Confucius:) What do you mean, just sit and forget?

(Yan Hui:) I let organs and members drop away, dismiss eyesight and hearing, part from the body and expel knowledge, and merge with the universal thoroughfare. This is what I mean by “just sit and forget.”⁴³

To let “organs and members drop away” (*duo zhi ti* 堕肢體) means to lose visceral awareness of the emotions and desires, which, for the early Daoists, have “physiological” bases in the various organs.⁴⁴ To “dismiss eyesight and hearing” (*chu cong ming* 黜聰明) means to deliberately cut off sense perception. To “part from the body and expel knowledge” (*lixing quzhi* 離形去知) means to lose bodily awareness and remove all thoughts from consciousness. To “merge with the universal thoroughfare” (*tong yu datong* 同於大通) seems to imply that, as a result of these practices, Yan Hui has become united with the *Dao*.⁴⁵

The *locus classicus* for these apophatic practices is the “Inward Training” essay from the *Guanzi*, which I date to the second half of the fourth century B.C.E. Herein such practices are metaphorically referred to as “cleaning out the abode of the numinous mind” (*shen* 神). The numinous mind refers to an elusive and profound level of awareness that comes and goes within consciousness. It has its own unique physiological substrate, its “vital essence” (*jing* 精) and its presence confers a psychological clarity and centeredness.⁴⁶ Elsewhere in the text, these apophatic practices are linked to a guided breathing meditation that involves sitting with the body erect and the limbs squared and stable and refining the vital breath (*qi*).⁴⁷ It is through the refinement of the vital breath that emotions and desires are stilled, sense perception is restricted, the attention is unified and the mind is concentrated, and experiences of increased tranquility are produced through which one gradually reaches the deepest levels wherein the Way is attained.⁴⁸ This breathing practice is spoken of metaphorically in the following passage:

For all to practice this Way:

You must coil, you must contract,

You must uncoil, you must expand,

You must be firm, you must be regular in this practice.

Maintain this excellent practice; do not let go of it.

Chase away excessive perception;

Abandon trivial thoughts.

And when you reach the ultimate limit (*ji* 極)

You will return to the Way and its Inner Power (*de*).⁴⁹

In this passage, I interpret coiling/contracting to refer to the activity of exhalation in the breathing cycle and uncoiling/expanding to refer

to the activity of inhalation. It is also important to note here the occurrence of the foundational pairing of the Way and its Inner Power (*Dao* and *de*). In this fourth-century B.C. text, its use predates all extant recensions of the *Laozi* and suggests that “Inward Training” may very well be closely connected to it. It also demonstrates a concrete link between the apophatic breathing practice of “Inward Training” and the attainment of a profound level of experience at which one is in touch with the Way and its Inner Power.

This general type of apophatic prescription and result is also found elsewhere in the “inner” *Zhuangzi*⁵⁰ and in other textual sources for early Daoism, including the Daoist essays of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, later chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, the inner cultivation essays of the *Guanzi*, and the *Huainanzi*, as I have discussed in a recent article (see the Appendix for a summary table).⁵¹ Therein I identified a rhetorical structure of mystical praxis in early Daoism that has the following tripartite structure:

1. *Preamble* in which a variety of apophatic practices are listed that prepare the adept for the later stages of meditative experience. Typically, these feature various prescriptions for removing the normal contents of the mind: sense perception, desire, the emotions, knowledge and scheming, wisdom and precedent.
2. A *Sorites*-style argument (if x then y, if y, then z . . .) in which consecutive stages of meditative experience are presented. These include alignment of the body and breathing (*zheng* 正), tranquility (*jing* 靜), equanimity (*ping* 平 or *jun* 均), being unadorned (*su* 素), being concentrated or purified (*jing* 精), being clear or lucid (*ming* 明), having a numinous awareness (*shen* 神), and, finally, attaining the One or the empty Way, (*deyi* 得一, *de xu* 得虛道) or becoming completely empty (*xu* 虛). These practices in the preamble and their results in the sorites section correspond, in general, with the basic deconstructive processes and results of mystical praxis that are enumerated by Brown.⁵²
3. A *Dénouement* in which the practical benefits of the first two parts are enumerated. These include instantaneous accurate cognition (*jian zhi bu huo* 見知不惑), spontaneous responsiveness to things (*ying wu bianhua* 應物便化), being able to return to the Unhewn (*gui yu pu* 歸於樸), having perception in which nothing is unperceived (*shi wu bu jian* 視無不見), and taking no action and yet leaving nothing undone (*wuwei er wu buwei* 無為而無不為).

Examining this rhetorical structure from the standpoint of mysticism theory, we can see that the first part corresponds with the concept of mystical techniques, the second part with that of introvertive mystical experience, and the third part with that of extrovertive mystical experience, or, at least, with a discussion of the unique mode of cognition and action associated with it. I will make use of these three related categories to guide my analysis of mystical praxis in the *Laozi*.

Mystical Techniques in the *Laozi*

The discussion of mystical techniques in the *Laozi* should begin with the second line of chapter 10, which talks of refining the vital breath and parallels material in “Inward Training,” but I will postpone analysis of this line until the end of the article when I can do a comprehensive analysis of the whole passage.

The first aspect of apophatic practice in early Daoism that is usually presented in our sources is to reduce to a minimum or entirely eliminate sense perception. We have evidence of such a practice and advice related to it in several passages in the *Laozi*. In chapter 52 we read:

Block your openings
Shut your doors,
And to the end of your life you will not run dry.
Unblock your openings,
Increase your striving,
And to the end of your life you will never get what you
seek . . .

This is echoed in chapter 56:

Block your openings,
Shut your doors.
Blunt your sharpness,
Untangle your knots.
Blend into your brightness,
Merge with your dust.
This is called the “profound merging.”

Therefore,
 You can neither get close to it nor stay away from it.
 You can neither help it nor harm it.
 You can neither honor it nor debase it.
 Therefore it is honored by all under Heaven.

The openings and doors refer to the sense apertures.⁵³ Both passages suggest the beneficial effects of the limitation or removal of sense perception.⁵⁴ Chapter 56 moves beyond sense perception and makes a broader reference to other aspects of apophatic practice. I take “blunting sharpness” to refer to setting aside clearcut perceptual and conceptual categories and “untangling knots” to refer to removing attachments to various aspects of the self. The next two lines speak metaphorically of merging with two contrasting qualities, darkness and light, which are perhaps symbolic of the emotional moods of the self.

Overall, this process is called “profound merging” (*xuantong* 玄同), another challenging technical metaphor used by the *Laozi* authors. The use of the term “profound,” which is a characteristic of the Way in chapter 1, seems to suggest that this process leads to a merging or union with the Way itself, a foundational introvertive mystical experience that I will discuss further in the next section. This interpretation is further supported by the phrase “merge with the Universal Thoroughfare” (*tong yu datong*) from the sitting and forgetting passage in *Zhuangzi*. The conclusion to *Laozi* 56 provides more evidence for such an interpretation. It suggests “profound merging” is something that cannot be approached through dualistic categories or activities, but only through their removal. This is why it is valued by all under Heaven.

Chapter 12 also makes reference to limiting the sense desires and gives an explanation of why this is needed:

The five colors blind one's eyes;
 The five notes deafen one's ears;
 The five flavors damage the palate;
 Galloping on horseback and hunting madden the mind;
 Hard to obtain goods hinder one's progress.
 For this reason, the sage is for the belly, not for the eye.
 Therefore he discards that and takes up this.

The activities of the senses, riding and hunting, and the pursuit of material goods all seem to reinforce attachment to the individual self and also prevent it from being centered. They must be set aside if one is to make any kind of progress in inner cultivation. In this context, being “for the belly, not for the eye” would seem to refer to restricting sense perception by focusing on the regular circulation of the breath, which is centered in the belly. This is a well-known meditative technique in many traditions.⁵⁵ According to Brown, with “sense-withdrawl,” the meditator “learns to disengage from external reality and the impact of sense objects so as to bring awareness carefully to bear on the stream of consciousness.”⁵⁶ As a result, an increasing inner concentration develops. Furthermore, the belly is the location of the famous lower “cinnabar field” (*dantian* 丹田), so central in later Daoist meditation as the place where the One resides, the vital essence accumulates, and where the practitioner must focus attention in order to eliminate desires and emotions.⁵⁷ While anachronistic for our purposes, this theory could have emerged from such early breathing practices.

A further rationale for restricting sense perception comes from the theories of the inner cultivation tradition. As already mentioned, in these sources the vital essence (*jing*) is associated with tranquility and with the numinous mind as their “physiological” substrate. It is also a source of health and vitality in the human organism. It is therefore extremely important not to waste this vital essence. However, it is normally consumed during the everyday activities of sense perception, which are enhanced by its presence. As the *Huainanzi* says:

When the vital essence flows into the eyes then vision is clear.
 When it resides in the ears then hearing is acute.
 When it rests in the mouth then speech is appropriate.
 When it is collected in the mind then thinking comprehends.
 Therefore if you block these four gateways
 Then one's person will suffer no calamities.
 The hundred joints will not be sickly,
 Will not die, will not be born,
 Will not be empty, will not be full.
 We call (those who can do) this “the Genuine” (*zhenren* 真人).⁵⁸

If one can retain the vital essence, one can also retain the inner tranquility and numinous mind with which it occurs. This is a further reason to restrict sense perception.

To this point we have seen references to the removal of sense perceptions, desires, emotions, attachment to selfish concerns, and conceptual categories in the *Laozi*. There are further references to the removal of various aspects of thought. First, we have the famous prescription in chapter 19: "Eliminate sageliness, discard knowledge, and the people will benefit a hundred fold." This is similar to such phrases as to "cast off wisdom and precedent" (*qu zhi yu gu* 去智與故), which is commonly found in inner cultivation sources.⁵⁹ This chapter ends in the three appended statements:

Manifest the Unadorned and embrace the Unhewn.
Reduce self-interest and lessen desires.
Eliminate learning and have no worries.⁶⁰

This passage restates the need to move past self-interest, desire, and learning, which, as we have seen above, is inherent to early Daoist apophatic practice. The latter connects with the famous passage in chapter 48 about losing accumulated learning in order to cultivate the Way. We also find here two technical terms, the "Unadorned" (*su*) and the "Unhewn" (*pu*), which seem to refer to states of mind that would have been well understood in the community of inner cultivation practitioners that produced the *Laozi*. Our analysis of these terms takes us into the next section on mystical praxis in the *Laozi*.

Introvertive Mystical Experience in the Laozi: The Profound Merging

In the context of mystical praxis that I have been developing, I would argue that both the Unadorned and the Unhewn refer to states of mind that arise from apophatic practice. In *Laozi* 19, the Unadorned is associated with selflessness. In the "*HuangLao boshu* 黃老帛書" it refers to a meditative state that arises after tranquility and equanimity and precedes the refined state of inner concentration that is linked to the vital essence (see Appendix). In

Laozi 19, the Unhewn is linked with having few desires. In chapter 28 the Unhewn appears as an undifferentiated state attained through being like a valley and developing constant Inner Power (*de*). In chapter 37 it is referred to as "nameless" and free from desire, and it is said that this desireless state is brought about through tranquility. As technical terms of meditation, it is difficult to know for certain what their meanings are. However, what we can say is that both arise from the cultivation of tranquility and stand in the spectrum of stages of introvertive meditation bounded by two other important technical terms in the *Laozi*, tranquility (*jing*) and emptiness (*xu*). Chapter 16 presents them both:

Complete emptiness is the ultimate limit (*ji*).
Maintaining tranquility is the central (practice).

The myriad things arise side-by-side
And by this I contemplate their return.
Heaven makes things in great numbers.
Each one returns to its root.
This is called "tranquility."

Tranquility: this means returning to the inevitable
(*ming* 命).

To return to the inevitable is a constant.
To know this constant is to be lucid.
Not to know this constant is to be confused.
If you are confused you will create misfortune.

To know this constant is to be detached.
To be detached is to be impartial.
To be impartial is to be kingly.
To be kingly is to be with Heaven.
To be with Heaven is to be with the Way.

If you are with the Way, to the end of your days you will
suffer no peril.⁶¹

The statement that "complete emptiness is the ultimate limit" fits well with the fact that emptiness appears as the penultimate meditative state in several of our early Daoist sources, as can be seen in the Appendix. So, too, does the emphasis on maintaining tranquility, which develops directly from apophatic practice at an earlier level, just following the alignment of the body and breathing.

These two terms frame a series of meditative stages in early Daoist praxis that include the Unadorned and the Unhewn. Given its nameless, desireless, and undifferentiated characteristics (all adjectives applied also to the Way), the latter term seems to refer to the unitive consciousness attained by merging with the Way.

As for the remainder of this chapter, whereas many commentators—starting with Wang Bi—see this as referring to the production of the things of the phenomenal world, in the context of the opening lines on emptiness and tranquility, I would argue that it is a phenomenological description of how one observes the arising and passing away of the contents of consciousness during guided breathing meditation. Accordingly, the myriad thoughts, emotions, and perceptions are metaphorically spoken of as the things that Heaven makes. Just as inevitably as these things arise while one is sitting in meditation, they pass away and out of consciousness. As one deepens this practice, when all these contents disappear and no longer recur, one returns to a condition of tranquility. This proceeds through a series of stages of increasing profundity until one reaches an ultimate level at which one is utterly empty.

If one knows about this inevitable process, one will realize that the variegated contents of the stream of consciousness are transient, and one can become detached from them. This lack of attachment confers the ability to be impartial in everyday interactions, as even the opinions and preferences of the individual self are also seen to be transient. This impartiality is the human counterpart of the dispassionate objectivity of Heaven, which “treats the myriad things as straw dogs” (chapter 5), and an important aspect of the desireless Way (chapter 37). It is a quality of mind the *Laozi* authors see as critical to cultivate in the ruler and I will have more to say about it in the following section on extrovertive mystical experience. Following the apophatic practice of the *Laozi* authors will produce it.

Chapter 16 also appears to be connected to the coiling and uncoiling passage from “Inward Training” through the concepts of reaching the ultimate limit (*ji*) of apophatic practice and returning to the Way found in both. The coiling and uncoiling of breathing meditation yield a profound tranquility which, at its ultimate level, results in complete emptiness. In complete emptiness, one returns to the Way. Moreover, as we have seen, the attainment of, first, tranquility, and then emptiness through apophatic practice is found

in the *Lüshi chunqiu* 25, *Zhuangzi* 23, and *Guanzi* “Techniques of the Mind I” (“*Xinshu, shang*” 心術上) meditation passages summarized in the table in the Appendix. Indeed, in the last passage, the ultimate result is “to attain the empty Way” (*de xu Dao*). Finally, in *Zhuangzi*’s “fasting of the mind” passage, the attainment of emptiness through apophatic practice leads directly to merging with the Way: “It is only that the Way coalesces in emptiness. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”⁶² All these passages provide a fuller context from which to interpret *Laozi* 16.

The cultivation of this state of emptiness is highly prized by the authors of the *Laozi*. This valuation results in some of the most famous images of the text: the nothingness at the hub of the wheel, inside the clay vessel, and within the empty room in chapter 11; the empty Way that use cannot drain in chapter 4 (*chong* 冲; not *xu* 虛 repeated in chapter 35, where its emptiness is implied by the recurrence of this non-draining metaphor and in chapter 45 where the Way is implied by the emptiness and non-draining metaphor from chapter 4); the empty space between Heaven and Earth that is never exhausted in chapter 5; the spirit of the empty valley that use will never drain in chapter 6, the empty ravine and valley in chapter 28 and the expansive valley in chapter 15; and, the blank mind of the fool in chapter 20.

Furthermore, tranquility, the “central practice” and the root to which all things inevitably return from chapter 16, is repeatedly emphasized in the text. The prescription to hold fast to the center (*shouzhong* 守中) in chapter 5 seems to refer to this “central practice” (*zhong* 中) of tranquility (chapter 16). In chapter 37 we read that “if one ceases to desire by being tranquil, all under Heaven will settle of its own accord.” Chapter 45 states that “if one is clear and tranquil, one can set all under Heaven aright.” Chapter 61 states that the feminine overcomes the masculine through tranquility. Both emptiness and tranquility are central to the metaphorical description of the ancient skilled practitioners of the Way in chapter 15:

The ancients who excelled at manifesting the Way:
Were subtle and marvelous, profound and penetrating,
So deep they could not be conceived of.
It is only because they could not be conceived of that if I
were forced to describe them I would say they were:

Tentative, as if fording a stream in winter.
 Hesitant, as if in fear of being surrounded.
 Solemn, as if someone's guest.
 Melting, like thawing ice.
 Undifferentiated, like the Unhewn.
 Murky, like muddy water.
 Vast, like a valley.

When muddy water is made tranquil, it gradually becomes clear.

When the calm is made active, it gradually springs to life.
 Those who maintain this Way do not wish to become full.
 It is only because they do not wish to become full that they can wear out yet be complete.⁶³

The apophatic practice of breathing meditation is the process through which the normal contents of the self become emptied out and the murky consciousness gradually becomes clear. Tranquility, the Unadorned, emptiness, the Unhewn, and the "profound merging," all discussed above, are technical terms that refer to various stages in the process of introvertive meditation leading to the experience of union with the Way. The attainment of the state in which all normal conscious contents are emptied out would certainly qualify as an "introvertive mystical experience" for Stace and a "Pure Consciousness Event" for Forman. Yet, for the *Laozi* authors, as we begin to see in chapter 15, when completely calm, one can still return to activity. The sages who do so maintain a clear and empty mind and detachment from the self that present few clearly defined characteristics to others. Hence they can only be described metaphorically. This, then, leads us to our third and final category of mystical praxis in the *Laozi*.

Extrovertive Mystical Experience in the Laozi: Holding Fast to the One

This detachment from self spoken of in chapter 15 is also mentioned in chapter 7, where the sage's lack of self-interest (*wusi* 無私) parallels that of Heaven and Earth and confers longevity, and in chapter

19, where lack of self-interest is called "manifesting the Unadorned" (*xiansu* 見素). It is an integral part of the *Laozi's* unique expression of extrovertive mystical experience that places a strong emphasis not on some unitive conscious experience, but on the mode of cognition and being in the world that it confers. An excellent place to begin examining it is chapter 48:

Those who cultivate learning gain something every day.
 Those who cultivate the Way lose something every day.
 They lose and further lose until they arrive at the point of taking no deliberate action.
 They take no deliberate action and yet nothing is left undone . . .

This saying is a succinct summary of apophatic practice, which can be thought of as the systematic loss of thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and eventually, the self. Deliberate action comes from the biased perspective of the individual self. When this perspective is eliminated through apophatic practice, one still acts, but from a different center. While there are no passages that explicitly identify this new center for nondeliberate action, we can identify it through the famous phrase *wuwei er wu buwei*. For not only is this a mode of acting that develops as the result of apophatic practice, it is the mode of acting of the Way. Chapter 37 begins with the sentence: "The Way constantly takes no deliberate action and yet nothing is left undone." Thus the sage, when completely empty, acts precisely as the Way acts. This suggests that the sage has become one with the Way and gives further support for our interpretation of the "profound merging" in chapter 56.

The table of early Daoist meditative stages in the Appendix shows a similar pattern to *Laozi* 48. The *wuwei* phrase—or some variation on it—is the result of apophatic practice in each of the six passages summarized therein. I would argue that this table indicates the presence of the two basic modes of mystical experience, introvertive and extrovertive. The final stage of the introvertive mode is spoken of as becoming empty, but also as both "attaining the One" in *Lüshi chunqiu* "Assessing Others" and "attaining the empty Way" in *Guanzi's* "Techniques of the Mind I." The former suggests the attainment of a unitive consciousness, in other words, Stace's

introvertive mystical experience and Forman's "Pure Consciousness Event." The latter suggests that the "object" of this unitive consciousness is the Way, and seems to confirm LaFargue's theory that the concept of the Way developed as the hypostatization of "the quality of mind one is cultivating internally" in the *Laozi*.⁶⁴

The extrovertive mode of mystical experience occurs in the Table as the result of the introvertive. The variations on *wuwei* are modes of selfless experience, experience that is extremely efficacious precisely because it is selfless. It comes from the Way and not the individual self. If this is true, we would expect that there would be some evidence in the *Laozi* of the retaining of some sense of the empty Way experienced at the pinnacle of introvertive mystical experience when one returns to the phenomenal world. I would assert that such evidence is found in the closely related concepts of holding on to (*zhi* 執), maintaining (*bao* 保) or holding fast to (*shou* 守) the Way, and embracing (*bao* 抱) the One.⁶⁵

There are several important prescriptions to "hold on to" or "maintain the Way" in the *Laozi*. In chapter 14 we have the saying:

Hold on to the Way of the present
In order to manage the things of the present.
And to know the ancient beginning.
This is called the thread running through the Way.⁶⁶

Chapter 15 talks of one who "maintains the Way" being first tranquil and clear, then calm and active. In chapter 32, "holding fast to the Way" results in all things spontaneously submitting to one's rule. In chapter 52, we read of the Way as mother of all things (as in chapters 1 and 25):

All under Heaven had a beginning
And we take this to be the mother of all under Heaven.
If you attain the mother, you will know the children.
If you know the children, return to hold fast to the mother,
And to the end of your life you will never see danger.

As in chapter 14, holding fast to the Way (the mother) enables one to know intimately all things that are generated because of it (its children) because the Way continues to be their basis, as well as one's own. Other benefits of being in touch with the Way come about because of the transformed consciousness this confers. Because of it

one is able to be selfless and desireless and to take no deliberate action and yet accomplish everything one undertakes.

Further related aspects of these benefits are explored in the other early sources of Daoist inner cultivation theory. Some examples are given in the table. According to the *HuangLao boshu* essay "Assessing," "seeing and knowing are never deluded." In the "Assessing Others" essay of the *Lüshi chungiu*, after attaining the One, one can "respond to the alterations and transformations of things and return to the Unhewn." In the "Numinous Essence" essay of the *Huainanzi*, "in seeing, nothing is left unseen, in hearing nothing is left unheard, in acting, nothing is left undone." All of these are possible because after the "profound merging" with the Way at the pinnacle of introvertive mystical experience, one retains a sense of this unitive power when one returns to the world of the myriad things. Retaining this experience of unity upon this return is further presented in the "embracing the One" passages in the *Laozi*.

In chapter 22, after a description of the sage as being "bowed down then preserved" that contains further metaphors of self-yielding as opposed to self-asserting, we read:

Therefore the Sage embraces the One and is a model for
all under Heaven.
He does not show himself, and so is conspicuous.
He does not consider himself right, and so is illustrious.
He does not brag and so has merit.
He does not boast and so endures . . .⁶⁷

This means that sages can be selfless because of being able to embrace the One. Why? Because by retaining a sense of this unitive ground amidst daily life they have an unbiased source for their actions that is not the individual self. For *Zhuangzi* in the "Essay on Seeing Things as Equal" (*Qiwu lun* 齊物論), this non-self-based orientation leads to a complete freedom from attachment to basic conceptual categories, as in the famous "three every morning" story in which the monkey keeper spontaneously adapts his feeding plan to that of the monkeys.⁶⁸ For *Zhuangzi*, to "see all things as equal" means to regard them from this unbiased perspective of the One. Therefore, "holding fast to the One" (and its many variants) can justifiably be seen as the central descriptive metaphor in the *Laozi*

for its understanding of what, in mysticism theory, is called the extrovertive mystical experience.

Laozi 10 as a Summary of Mystical Praxis

With this understanding of mystical praxis in the *Laozi* we can now return to analyze the critical chapter 10 that discusses “embracing the One” and links it with guided breathing meditation and other aspects of inner cultivation and its application to daily life:

Amidst the daily activity of the psyche,⁶⁹ can you embrace
the One and not depart from it?
When concentrating your vital breath until it is at its
softest, can you be like a child?
Can you sweep clean your Profound Mirror so you are
able to have no flaws in it?
In loving the people and governing the state, can you do it
without using knowledge?
When the Gates of Heaven open and close, can you
become feminine?
In clarifying all within the four directions, can you do it
without using knowledge?

This passage is probably the most important evidence for guided breathing meditation in the *Laozi* and it contains three close parallels to “Inward Training.” In the first line “embracing the One” is seen as something one adheres to amidst everyday psychological activities. I take this to be talking about retaining the sense of the unitive consciousness experienced in introvertive mystical experience when one returns to the phenomenal world. It is paralleled in “Inward Training” by the concepts of “holding on to the One” (*zhiyi* 執一) amidst the daily transformations of things and the daily alterations of events, thus enabling the sage to “master the myriad things,”⁷⁰ and of “holding fast to the One” (*shouyi* 守一) in the following passage:

When you broaden your mind and relax it,
Expand your vital breath and extend it,

And when your physical form is calm and unmoving:
You can hold fast to the One and discard the myriad
vexations.
You will not be lured by profit,
Nor will you be frightened by harm.
Relaxed and unwound, yet acutely sensitive,
In solitude you delight in your own person.
This is called “revolving the vital breath.”
Your thoughts and deeds resemble Heaven’s.⁷¹

This passage implies that “holding fast to the One” is accomplished through guided breathing meditation. It confers a selflessness that prevents being lured by profit or frightened by harm, results similar to those in *Laozi* 22 for the sage who “embraces the One.” “Inward Training” contains the *locus classicus* for this concept of *shouyi*, a central tenet of the early inner cultivation tradition that became extremely important in the practice of meditation in later Daoist religion. There it sometimes refers to what I have called the extrovertive mystical experience of seeing unity amidst the multiplicity of the phenomenal world and sometimes refers to a specific meditative technique for focusing on the One, both in sitting in silence and in the affairs of daily life.⁷²

“Concentrating the vital breath” is a second important tenet in the inner cultivation tradition of early Daoism. It seems to refer to developing a refined and subtle level of breathing in introvertive meditation. Once again, its *locus classicus* in the extant literature is in “Inward Training”:

By concentrating your vital breath as if numinous,
The myriad things will all be contained within you.
Can you concentrate? Can you unify?
Can you not resort to divination yet know bad and good
fortune?
Can you stop? Can you halt?
Can you not seek it in others,
But attain it within yourself?
You think and think and think further about this.
You think, yet still do not penetrate it.

The daemonic and numinous in you will penetrate it.
 It is not due to the inherent power of the daemonic and
 numinous.
 But rather to the utmost refinement of your essential vital
 breath.
 When the four limbs are set squarely
 And the blood and vital breath are tranquil:
 Unify your awareness, concentrate your mind.
 Then your eyes and ears will not be overstimulated.
 Then even the far-off will seem close at hand.⁷³

When one sits in a stable posture and practices a form of guided breathing meditation, one becomes increasingly tranquil and the breathing becomes concentrated and subtle. This leads to a well-focused mind, minimal perception of the external world, and a numinous awareness in which "the myriad things will all be contained within you." This sounds very much like the attainment of a unitive consciousness. Retaining it when one returns to interact with the phenomenal world results in the lack of self-consciousness possessed by the child in the second line of *Laozi* 10.

In the third line of this chapter, we encounter the phrase "sweep clean your Profound Mirror" (*ti chu xuan jian* 澹除玄鑿), an abstruse meditational metaphor which Lau interprets as cleaning out the mind.⁷⁴ This phrase is extremely close in meaning to one of the most important metaphors for apophatic practice in the inner cultivation tradition, which is first found in "Inward Training":

There is a numinous awareness that naturally lies within.
 One moment it goes, the next it comes,
 And no one is able to conceive of it.
 If you lose it you are inevitably disordered;
 If you attain it you are inevitably well-ordered.
 Reverently clean out its abode (the mind)
 And its vital essence will come on its own.
 Still your attempts to imagine and conceive of it.
 Relax your efforts to reflect on and control it.
 Be serious and reverent and its vital essence will naturally
 settle.
 Grasp it and don't let go,
 Then the eyes and ears will not be overstimulated,

And the mind will have no other focus.
 When a properly aligned mind lies within your center,
 The myriad things will be seen in their proper context.⁷⁵

To "reverently clean out the abode" of the numinous awareness shares the syntax and key verb (*chu* 除) of *Laozi* 10's "sweep clean your Profound Mirror." The metaphor is repeated in the related *Guanzi* essay "Techniques of the Mind I," where emptying the mind of desires is synonymous with "sweeping clean" (*saochu* 掃除) the abode of the numinous awareness.⁷⁶ The "Inward Training" verse seems to imply that the cleaning process involves setting aside the attempt to conceive of or control the numinous awareness. Then the mind will be ordered and concentrated on an inner meditation that allows the "myriad things to be seen in their proper context," a rather vague phrase that perhaps parallels the "myriad things will all be contained within you" from the previous passage.

The presence of all three parallels between *Laozi* 10 and "Inward Training" provide further evidence that the two works are closely related. I would hypothesize that the lineages of practitioners that produced each work shared a common apophatic meditative practice but, due to perhaps regional traditions and to the particular experiences of individual teachers, developed somewhat different metaphors for conceiving of their practice and its results.

Conclusion

When taken together, these passages provide important testimony to the presence of mystical praxis in the *Laozi*. They further indicate that the *Laozi* is not an isolated product but was part of a greater tradition of lineages that shared a common meditative practice as their basis. Furthermore, this practice, as much as we can tell from the surviving textual evidence, is similar to apophatic meditative practice in many other cultural and religious traditions. This practice also yields both introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences that seem to be similar to those in other traditions; I have made no attempt here to claim that these experiences are identical. What I have claimed is that these experiences are the likely basis of the distinctive cosmology and political theory of sage rulership for which the *Laozi* is renowned.

APPENDIX:
Comparative Table of Early Daoist Meditative Stages

TEXT	HUANGLAO BOSHU, "NORMATIVE STANDARDS" 6: "ASSESSING"	LÜSHI CHUNQIU 3.4: "ASSESSING OTHERS"	LÜSHI CHUNQIU 25.3: "HAVING LIMITS"	ZHUANGZI 23: "GENGSANG CHU"	GUANZI 13.2B: "TECHNIQUES OF THE MIND, I"	HUAINANZI 7: "THE NUMINOUS ESSENCE"
Preparatory stages	[Knowledge of preservation and loss] generates wisdom. Wisdom generates alignment.	Relax hearing and seeing; limit lusts and desires; let go of wisdom and scheming; cast off cleverness and precedent . . .	Break through perturbations of the will; Release the fetters of the mind; Cast off the constraints to Inner Power; Break through blockages of the Way.	Penetrate perturbations of the will; Release the fetters of the mind; Cast off the constraints to Inner Power; Pass through blockages of the Way.	Clean out the abode; cast off desires; direct inner concentration.	Concentrate blood and breath; fill chest and belly; eliminate lusts and desires; purify seeing and hearing; conquer perturbations of the will . . .

Consecutive stages of meditation	aligned	nothing injures the heavenly	aligned	aligned	aligned	patterned
	tranquil	tranquil	tranquil	tranquil	tranquil	balanced
	equanimous					
	serene					
	unadorned					
	concentrated	concentrated		concentrated	concentrated	absorbed
				solitary		
	numinous	numinous	clear and lucid	lucid	lucid	numinous
		attain the One	empty	empty	attain the empty Way	
Benefits	perfectly numinous; then seeing and knowing are never deluded . . .	respond to alterations and transformations of things; be grand and deep; be unfathomable . . . return to the Unhewn (<i>pu</i>)	take no action and yet nothing is left undone	take no action and yet nothing is left undone	take no action and yet nothing is left undone	seeing: nothing is unseen; hearing: nothing is unheard; acting: nothing is unaccomplished.

NOTES

1. Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963); Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985); Walter Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan Press, 1960; reprint Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1987); Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Specific references will be given as the ideas in these works are discussed below.
2. D. C. Lau, trans., *Chinese Classics: Tao Te Ching* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1982), xxv–xxvii; Chad Hansen, "Linguistic Skepticism in the *Lao Tzu*," *Philosophy East and West* 31, no. 3 (July 1981): 321–336.
3. Chan, *Sourcebook*, 137.
4. Stace, *Mysticism*, 168, 255.
5. Proudfoot, *Religious Experience*, 126–129.
6. Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 34.
7. Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism*, 45–52. For a critical assessment of this work, see my review article, "Some Issues in the Study of Chinese Mysticism: A Review Essay," *China Review International* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 154–173.
8. Schwartz, *World of Thought*, 192–201.
9. Harold D. Roth, "Psychology and Self-Cultivation in Early Taoistic Thought," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 51, no. 2 (1991): 599–650; and "Who Compiled the Chuang Tzu?" in *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, ed. Henry Rosemont Jr. (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1991), 79–128.
10. Harold D. Roth, "Redaction Criticism and the Early History of Taoism," *Early China* 19 (1994): 1–46.
11. See the first traditional occurrence of this term in *Zhuangzi*, 6/73. *Zhuangzi yinde* 莊子引證. Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series no. 20 (Peking, 1947). All references to the *Zhuangzi* are from this edition. In this passage, a dialogue between Confucius and Zigong in which the former explains to the latter how the Daoist sage Sanghu and his friends "are at the stage of being fellow men with the maker of things, and go roaming in the single breath that breathes through heaven and earth,"

we read that it is through the techniques of the Way that such men can forget themselves. A. C. Graham, *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), 89–90. The only other use of this term in the *Zhuangzi* is also significant. It occurs in the thirty-third and final chapter, "Below in the Empire" (*Tianxia* 天下), in which the comprehensive Way of Heaven and Earth advocated by the Syncretist author is contrasted with the "techniques of one-corner" (*fangshu* 方術) found in other, less complete teachings, such as those of Zhuang Zhou himself (*Zhuangzi* 33/1 ff.; Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, 274 ff.) These two occurrences, separated by a century and one-half and found in both "Individualist" and "Syncretist" sections, serve like bookends to indicate an important continuity in this tradition's self-understanding and demonstrate how the "techniques of the Way" developed beyond breathing methods to include methods of political and social organization.

12. My hypothesis on the origins of Daoism is that it began as a lineage of masters and disciples that practiced and transmitted a unique form of guided breathing meditation involving this regular circulation of vital breath. Political and social concerns and naturalist techniques and philosophy represented later developments. One of the strongest pieces of evidence for this is presented in my article, "Redaction Criticism and the Early History of Daoism," in which I demonstrate that "Inward Training," a collection of verses on this practice of guiding the vital breath that dates from the origins of Daoism, was deliberately summarized and restated in the much later work, "Techniques of the Mind II." This deliberate abridgment and restatement was done for the purposes of commending this practice of inner cultivation to rulers as one of the principal arcana of governing.

13. For the former, see Catherine Despeux, "Gymnastics: The Ancient Tradition," in *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*, ed. Livia Kohn, vol. 61, Michigan Monographs in Chinese Studies (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Chinese Studies, 1989), 225–262. The precise relationships between these two techniques and their practitioners is still unclear. However, by the time of *Zhuangzi* 15, which criticizes the practitioners of "gymnastic" exercises, the groups who advocated these two techniques seem to be clearly differentiated (*Zhuangzi yinde* 15/5–6).

14. I use the term "apophatic" in its more general and original sense of "(of knowledge of God) obtained by negation," *Concise Oxford Dictionary Sixth Edition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). It has come to be associated with a particular mode of approach to the nature of God in the writings of Christian mystics, the so-called "*via negativa*," in which God is described using negative language. I consider this a subset of "apophasis" and I wish to clarify that I use the term more broadly to indicate a method

of negating the self in order to facilitate an experience of the Absolute, however that is conceived. While more culturally specific than my own use, A. H. Armstrong argues for this kind of more general meaning of apophasis in *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London: Variorum, 1979), especially in essays XXIV and XXIII. I wish to thank Janet Williams of the University of Bath for this reference.

"Inner cultivation" (*neixiu* 內修) refers to the apophatic methods of emptying the mind practiced by the various master-disciple lineages of early Daoism. Its *locus classicus* is in the "Inward Training" text of the *Guanzi*, which will be discussed below. "Self-cultivation" (*zixiu* 自修) is a more general term that I take to refer to all methods of practical discipline aimed at improving oneself and realizing one's innate nature and potential to the fullest. Self-cultivation was practiced by Confucians and Yangists as well as Daoists. Daoist self-cultivation is what I call inner cultivation.

15. Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992); *Tao and Method: A Reasoned Approach to the Tao Te Ching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). The former book is an abbreviated version of the latter. Both contain the same translation of the *Laozi*.

16. The Individualist aspect is the earliest. It advocates a cosmology of the Way and the inner cultivation practices that I will be adumbrating in the present essay. Its representative extant texts are *Guanzi's* "Inward Training" and the "inner chapters" of the *Zhuangzi*. The Primitivist contains the same cosmology of the Way and inner cultivation practices as the former but to these adds a political philosophy that rejects social conventions (especially Confucian and Mohist) and recommends returning to a political and social organization based on small agrarian communities. Its representative works are the *Laozi* and chapters 8–11 (1–57) and 16 of the *Zhuangzi*. The Syncretist embraces the same cosmology and inner cultivation practices as the other two aspects but in its political thought conceives of a complex hierarchically organized society whose customs and laws are modelled on the overarching patterns of heaven and earth and which freely uses relevant techniques and ideas from other intellectual lineages. Representative texts include the "HuangLao silk manuscripts" from Mawangdui, chapters 12–15 and 33 of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Huainanzi*. For further details, see my "Psychology and Self-Cultivation," especially 599–608; "Who Compiled the Chuang Tzu?" especially 80–88 and 95–113. See also A. C. Graham, "How Much of Chuang Tzu Did Chuang Tzu Write?" in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 283–321 and Liu Xiaogan, *Zhuangzi zhexue ji qi yanbian* 莊子哲學及其演變 (Peking: Chinese Social Sciences Press, 1987).

17. This presentation is not intended to be comprehensive but will deal principally with the theoretical role of mystical praxis and its relationship to mystical experience. I differ from Kohn by focusing more on the phenomenological and typological studies of William James and Walter Stace and "anti-constructivists" such as Donald Rothberg, which seriously entertain the possible veridicality of the epistemological claims of the mystics, rather than on the "constructivist" theories of Steven Katz, Wayne Proudfoot et al., which reject the veridicality of such claims. For details, see my "Some Issues," 161–168.

18. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902; reprint, New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 380–381.

19. This fifth characteristic is implicit. James uses the transforming influence of mystical experience as a means of clarifying where they differ from religious experiences in general but he does not include it in his list of characteristics. See 381–382, 400–401, 413–415.

20. Peter Moore, "Mystical Experience, Mystical Doctrine, Mystical Technique," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Steven Katz (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), 101.

21. Stace, *Mysticism*, 67–87.

22. See Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness, Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

23. The two modes correspond well with Stace's introvertive and extrovertive mystical experiences. Where I would differ from him is in his devaluing the latter (Stace, *Mysticism*, 132); I see no evidence of this in early Daoist sources. See "Some Issues," 160–162.

24. These concepts are discussed throughout Stace's third chapter, "The Problem of Objective Reference."

25. The foremost champion of the latter position is Steven Katz. See his "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in Steven Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 22–74, especially 26.

26. Moore, "Mystical Experience," 113.

27. Moore, "Mystical Experience," 113.

28. Robert Forman, "Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," in Forman, *Problem*, 3–49, especially 3–9, and 30–43.

29. Donald Rothberg, "Contemporary Epistemology and the Study of Mysticism," in Forman, *Problem*, 184.

30. Rothberg, "Contemporary," 186.
31. Daniel Brown, "The Stages of Meditation in Cross-Cultural Perspective," in *Transformations of Consciousness and Contemplative Perspectives on Development*, ed. Ken Wilber, Jack Engler, and Daniel Brown (Boston: Shambala, 1986), 263–264. In his analysis of the results of this study, Brown states that he has discovered "a clear underlying structure to meditation stages, a structure highly consistent across traditions . . ." which, despite the "vastly different ways they are conceptualized", "is believed to represent natural human development available to anyone who practices" (223).
32. Rothberg, "Contemporary," 186.
33. Forman, *Problem*, 8. This is a deliberate strategy on the part of Forman, who recognizes that this extrovertive form can be a more permanent mystical state that is typically thought of as a more advanced stage in the mystical journey. He omits it, not out of disregard, but in order to limit the focus of his collection of essays.
34. Roth, "Some Issues."
35. Roth, "Some Issues," 159–161. See also n. 14, which calls for further research to clarify various types in a continuum of extrovertive mystical experience.
36. Roth, "Some Issues," 167–168.
37. Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 221–222.
38. LaFargue, *The Dao*, 61.
39. *Zhuangzi yinde*, 6/92–93.
40. In this article, I will most often use the text of the received recension of the *Laozi* as found in the edition of D. C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*. However, whenever I find their readings preferable, I will also make use of the Mawangdui manuscript redactions as found in the edition of Robert Henricks, *Lao-Tzu Te-Dao Ching* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. I will explain the unique elements of it when I fully analyze this passage below.
41. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*, xxxvii.
42. Chan, *Sourcebook*, 144.
43. *Zhuangzi yinde*, 6/92–93; Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, 92. I deviate only in translating *tong* 同 as "merge" instead of "go along."
44. I follow Graham in understanding *zhiti* as the four limbs or members and the five orbs or visceral organs that are the physical manifesta-

tions of the five basic systems of vital energy in the human body. This is preferable to the alternative "drop off limbs and body" because two lines later the text refers to parting from the body (*lixing*), which would be redundant if the second interpretation were taken. For the associations of the emotions with the various internal organs or "orbs" see Manfred Porkert, *The Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 115–146.

45. On the imagery of the character "Dao" in *Zhuangzi* see A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Dao* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1989), 188: "Chuang-tzu . . . sees man as coinciding with the Way by ceasing to draw distinctions. To be on the unformulable path is to merge into the unnameable whole, so that what we are trying to pin down by the name 'Way' is revealed as nothing less than the universe flowing from its ultimate source . . ."

46. For the link between psychological states and physiological substrates, see Roth, "Psychology and Self-Cultivation," 599–603.

47. *Guanzi*, *Sibu congkan* edition, 16.2a5, 2b6, 3b6. All textual citations for the *Guanzi* are to this edition. For translations, see Roth, "The Inner Cultivation Tradition of Early Daoism," 131–132.

48. *Guanzi*, 16.5a4, 5a5, 1b10 and 4a2. For translations, see Roth, "Inner Cultivation," 133–134, 130, and 133.

49. *Guanzi*, 16.3b6.

50. See, for example, the other famous passage on meditation, the "fasting of the mind" dialogue, also between Confucius and Yan Hui (wherein Confucius is now the teacher): *Zhuangzi yinde*, 4/24–34; Graham, *Chuang Tzu*, 68–69.

51. Harold D. Roth, "Evidence for Stages of Meditation in Early Daoism" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 60.2 (1997): 295–314. These important sources for early Daoist mystical praxis include the "HuangLao boshu," chapters 3, 5, 17, and 25 of the *Lüshi chunqiu*, chapters 15 and 23 of the *Zhuangzi*, and the "Inward Training" and two "Techniques of the Mind" works from the *Guanzi*.

52. Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 230–245 and 272–276.

53. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*, 77.

54. The restriction of the senses through focusing on the breathing is discussed in Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 232–24. As a result, the meditator becomes "less sensitized to external events and more to internal events" (233).

55. Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 232–233.

56. Brown, "Stages of Meditation," 233.

57. According to the *Baopuzi* 抱朴子 (ca. 300 C.E.), the "lower cinnabar field" is located 2.4 inches below the navel. It is one of the major locations of the One in the human being. In the later *Huangtingjing* 黃庭經, the Daoist adept makes the vital breath circulate through the lower cinnabar field where it helps to nourish and retain the vital essence. In the Tang dynasty meditation texts of Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎, fixing the attention on the lower cinnabar field is a technique used to control the desires and emotions. See Livia Kohn, "Guarding the One: Concentrative Meditation in Taoism," and "Taoist Insight Meditation: The Tang Practice of *Neiguan*," in *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*, ed. Livia Kohn, 135 and 194–195, respectively; and Henri Maspero, "An Essay on Taoism in the First Centuries A.D.," in Henri Maspero, *Daoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank Kierman (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 339–345.

58. *Huainanzi*, *Sibu congkan* edition, 8.8a1–3. All references to the text of the *Huainanzi* are to this edition.

59. Roth, "Who Compiled," 96, finds this phrase in "Techniques of the Mind I," chapters 13 and 15 of the *Zhuangzi*, and chapters 1, 6, and 7 of the *Huainanzi*. I can add *Lüshi chunqiu* 3.4 to this list (see "Evidence for Stages of Meditation in Early Taoism," 302).

60. I follow Henricks, 234, in moving the first line of chapter 20 to the last line of chapter 19, where it constitutes the third of the three statements indicated above in the text of chapter 19.

61. Here I follow the Mawangdui B manuscript reading from Henricks, 219: *zhi xu ji ye; shou jing du ye* 至虛極也守靜督也.

62. *Zhuangzi yinde*, 4/28.

63. I follow Lau in emending the negative *bu* 不 ("not") to *erh* 而 ("and"), based on semantic considerations. Lau, *Tao te Ching*, 23.

64. LaFargue, *The Dao*, 245.

65. For the purposes of this article, I have taken the concept of the One to be the functional equivalent of the Way as it is manifested within the phenomenal world. This certainly seems to be the implication of chapter 39 in which the most important phenomena (Heaven, Earth, numen, the valley, the myriad things, sage-rulers) each attain their essential defining characteristics as the result of the One. Chapter 42, in which we read that the "Way generated the One," indicates that there is some difference be-

tween them. This could simply mean that there is a certain aspect of the Way that transcends its manifestation as the solitary unifying power within the phenomenal world. For a fuller discussion of the polysemy of the concept of the One in the Daoist tradition, see Livia Kohn, "Guarding," 127–137.

66. Here I follow the Mawangdui variant *jinzhi Dao* 今之道 (not *guzhi Dao* 古之道; Henricks, 215), because it better fits the phenomenological interpretation I have been developing in this article. The Way, as both the source merged with in introverted mystical experience and the constant source of the universe from before its beginnings, is directly experienced in the present (not past, as in the received versions). Because it has existed from antiquity, if one knows it in the present, one can know it in the past and, through it, "know the ancient beginnings."

67. Lau, *Tao te Ching*, 33–34.

68. *Zhuangzi yinde*, 2/38–40.

69. The phrase *dai ying po* 戴營魄 is extremely problematic and has puzzled commentators since *Heshanggong*. The *po* is the "bodily soul," associated with *yin*, and the counterpart of the "spiritual soul" (*hun* 魂) associated with *yang*. The former governs the body; the latter governs the mind. They work harmoniously together during life, but separate after death, the *po* returning to Earth and the *hun* to Heaven. According to Yü Ying-shih, the former concept developed first; there are a few references in the oracle bones. The concept of *hun* seems to have been derived from it and intended to represent the locus of daily conscious activities, somewhat akin to our modern notion of the conscious mind, in my interpretation. Along these lines, I would suggest that we might think of the *po* as rather like our modern notion of the unconscious mind. That is, the mental phenomena we now associate with the conscious and unconscious minds were explained in early China by the concepts of the *hun* and *po*. Eduard Erkes follows the *Heshanggong* commentary by taking the term *ying* as the functional equivalent of *hun*; he suggests it was a variant of *ling* 靈 in Chu dialect. Thus, a literal translation of this phrase would be "to sustain the conscious and unconscious souls." I have rendered it more freely because the constant activity of these two aspects of the mind does constitute "the daily activity of the psyche." For more information see Yü Ying-shih, 'O Soul, Come Back! A Study of the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China,' *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 47, no. 2 (December 1987): 363–395; and Eduard Erkes, trans., *Ho-Shang-Kung's Commentary on Lao-Tse* (Ascona: Artibus Asiae, 1950), 141–142.

70. *Guanzi*, 16.2b1–3. Translated in Roth, "Inner Cultivation," 133.

71. *Guanzi*, 16.5a2–4.

72. Kohn, "Guarding," especially 154–156.

73. *Guanzi*, 16.4a2–7. Close parallels of this passage are found in "Techniques of the Mind II" from *Guanzi* (13.5a2) and in the "Gengsang Chu" chapter of *Zhuangzi* (*Zhuangzi yinde*, 23/34–35).

74. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*, 15. The mirror is one of the most important metaphors in Chinese religious thought. The mirror is often seen to symbolize the clarified mind of the sage, which reflects things exactly as they are without even an iota of personal bias. For further details, see the pioneering study by Paul Demieville, "Le miroir spirituel," *Sinologica* 1, no. 2 (1948): 112–137.

75. *Guanzi*, 16.2b9–3a1.

76. *Guanzi*, 13.1a11.



Qian Zhongshu on Philosophical and
Mystical Paradoxes in the *Laozi*

Zhang Longxi

As an honorary member of the Modern Language Association of America, Qian Zhongshu 錢鍾書 is certainly known to many Western scholars, especially sinologists, but compared with the other scholars honored with this prestigious membership in the same year (1985)—Jacques Derrida, Umberto Eco, Gérard Genette, Wolfgang Iser, and Robert Weimann—Qian's rich and important scholarly works are still largely unknown in the West.¹ Perhaps this is due not only to the content of Qian's writings, which comment on ancient Chinese texts in an extremely dense intertextuality of both Chinese and Western writings, many of which are works little known outside the small circle of specialists, but also due to the form of his writings, because they are not systematic treatises but fragments of insight, written in the elegant but difficult language of classical Chinese. The commentary form of Qian Zhongshu's *Tan yi lu* 談藝錄 [*Discourses on Art*] and *Guan zhui bian* 管錘編 [*The Tube and Awl Chapters*] is surely traditional, but it is also deeply personal and related to his deep suspicion of systems and systematic argument. All philosophical systems will collapse in time, Qian argues, and when they do, they will lose all their impressive structural complexity and organization, but bits and pieces of their original ideas may retain their value and validity, just as bricks and timbers may still be of use when huge buildings