

Models of Daoist Practice and Attainment

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There are a variety of outdated interpretative frameworks for understanding the religious tradition which is Daoism. The most ubiquitous is the bifurcation of Daoism into so-called “philosophical Daoism” and “religious Daoism,” including the inaccurate claim that the former is “pure” or “original” Daoism. Daoism was a religious community from the beginning, here dated to the Warring States period (480-222 BCE). A second, and perhaps equally problematic, view claims that Daoism originates with Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (fl. 142) and the Tianshi 天師 (Celestial Masters) movement. While the Celestial Masters do represent one of the earliest forms of organized Daoism, many later Daoist religious communities (e.g., Quanzhen 全真 [Complete Perfection]) gave little recognition to its importance.

One alternative interpretative approach involves understanding the diverse models of Daoist practice and attainment. In combination with historical contextualism, this approach provides a means by which to appreciate the diversity of the Daoist tradition, including possible continuities and departures among different Daoist adherents and communities.

While it may seem self-evident that “realization of the Dao” or “attunement with the Way” is both the origin and culmination of a Daoist training regimen, one cannot deny that Daoists have developed and advocated different and perhaps competing models for such realization or attunement. In terms of traditional models of Daoist praxis, one may identify at least the following: (1) quietistic; (2) ritualistic; (3) cosmological; (4) exorcistic; (5) behavioral/ethical; (6) mediumistic/shamanic; (7) dietetical; (8) ascetical; (9) literary/artistic; (10) alchemical; (11) meditative; (12) hermeneutical; (13) medical; (14) mystical; and (15) syncretistic. Many more could be proposed, and these various models can be either individualistic or communal. While such categories may have heuristic value, careful historical study of the Daoist tradition shows that various models and methods were combined and integrated in unique and convincing ways. Some Daoists may have embraced, applied, and developed one particular model, but most Daoist sub-traditions employed and recommended a combination.

For example, available historical information suggests that the early Tianshi (Celestial Masters) movement, emerging in the late second century C.E. under Zhang Daoling, the legendary founder, and his grandson Zhang Lu 張魯, emphasized a cultivation program which combined (at least) the following models: ritualistic, meditative, cosmological, exorcistic, behavioral, dietetical, and medical. The Celestial Masters saw disease as relating to moral transgressions (medical/behavioral/ethical) and to the negative influences of deceased family members (ancestral/communal). The sick were, in turn, sent to so-called “pure chambers” (*jingshi* 靜室), where they meditated on their mistakes and purified themselves (meditative). In the process, a libationer performed a communal rite (ritualistic/exorcistic), after which a confession in the form of a petition was submitted to the Three Bureaus (ritualistic/cosmological). It seems that the early Celestial Masters also emphasized precept adherence (behavioral/ethical) and dietary regimens (dietetical) (see Barbara Hendrichske’s contribution to the *Daoism Handbook*).

The Tianshi cultivation system stands in contrast to the one advocated by the Tang-dynasty (618-907) Daoist Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 (647-735) in his *Zuowang lun* 坐忘論 (Discourse on Sitting-in-Forgetfulness; DZ 1036). Here Sima Chengzhen, the twelfth

Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) patriarch, recommends a training regimen that utilizes a quietistic model, in combination with meditative, alchemical, hermeneutical, and mystical models. According to the *Zuowang lun*, the Daoist adept should follow a meditation practice (meditative), adapted from Buddhist insight (Pali: *vipassana*; Skt.: *vipaśyana*) meditation (syncretistic), which also integrates principles from the *Daode jing* and *Zhuangzi* (quietistic/hermeneutical). This involves a stage-based process of self-transformation (alchemical) (see Livia Kohn's *Seven Steps to the Tao*).

As a thorough and detailed account of these various models is beyond the scope of the present discussion, I will here simply make a few comments on differences between the “quietistic” and “alchemical” models. The quietistic model is most clearly expressed in classical Daoism, or the early “inner cultivation lineages” as Harold Roth of Brown University has referred to this moment in Daoist history. Representative texts include the *Daode jing*, *Zhuangzi*, and “Techniques of the Heart-mind” chapters of the *Guanzi*. The alchemical model is advocated and employed both in early medieval external alchemy traditions and in late medieval internal alchemy lineages. Representative texts of the latter include those associated with the so-called Zhong-Lü textual tradition. In the quietistic model, the adept endeavors to “return to” his or her original nature, which is a manifestation of the Dao. Emphasis is placed on “nonaction” (*wuwei* 無為), “simplicity” (*pu* 朴), and “suchness” (*ziran* 自然). Here death is part of the natural, cosmological process, and the adept accepts his or her death as a dissolution into, a merging with, the cosmos. In the alchemical model, the adept endeavors to perfect or transform his or her nature, which is simultaneously “biological” limitation and the latent spark of Perfection. Emphasis is placed on cultivation, refinement, and transformation. Here death as dissolution is the destiny of the ordinary human being, but the aspiring adept wishes to *transcend* such a given. The alchemist attempts to alchemically-transmute defilements and to actualize a transcendent spirit, which may transcend physical mortality. One aspires to move from ordinary human being to perfected and immortal being.

For some the question of the complementarity or mutual exclusivity of the alchemical model and the quietistic model may seem irrelevant or a mere academic exercise, but this is not the case. Leaving aside the importance of examining the ways in which seemingly competing models were reconciled and modified, the adoption of a particular model *matters* in terms of both Daoist practice and Daoist soteriology. If the principles and methods of the alchemical model are followed, then the Daoist adept must *transform* his or her self. The Daoist practitioner must literally shift ontological conditions, must become a different kind of being. One is no longer merely human (*ren* 人); one becomes immortal (*xian* 仙) or perfected (*zhen* 真). What exactly this means remains open to debate and differs from tradition to tradition, and often from practitioner to practitioner. However, what is clear is that one must become other than what one is when one begins the alchemical process. This is not the case in the quietistic model. From the beginning, one is “perfect” or “complete.” There is nothing to perfect or complete; one must simply return to one’s original connection with the Dao, one’s original place in the cosmos. That is, the quietistic model emphasizes “decreasing” and “sufficiency.” Here the Daoist adept is not trying to become something else or something more. The upshot is the following: either one learns more, does more, and becomes more, or one unlearns, undoes, and simply is. These are different practice regimens with different outcomes. In the alchemical model, one seeks personal survival and transformation; in the quietistic model, one merges with and disappears into the cosmos.