

INTERNAL
ELIXIR
CULTIVATION

The Nature of Daoist Meditation

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Robert James Coons



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FOREWORD

Robert Coons is an interesting individual. He is a Canadian who became enamored with Asian culture as a child, and later immersed himself in the traditional ways of China. He has studied areas as diverse as Daoism, internal martial arts, tea culture, poetry, calligraphy, brush painting, and pottery. And he is an expert in Daoist meditation, specifically the methods of cultivating the internal elixir, or life force energy; the topic of this book.

As a fellow traveler on the path of Chinese traditions including martial arts, traditional medicine and qigong practices, I have read several hundred books on the subject including contemporary works and translations of ancient texts. I was hoping to find a book on the topic to publish that would be fresh in its approach and clear in its lessons. I found these attributes in Coons' manuscript.

What makes *Internal Elixir Cultivation: The Nature of Daoist Meditation* special is the author's concise yet detailed approach to the topic. Unlike many works wherein the author seems compelled to shroud the content in

enigmatic ideas and esoteric expressions, Coons instead uses direct, clear and simple language to teach the essence of the Daoist meditative method. In short, his work is deep and detailed, drawing on the most treasured ancient texts and teachings, yet at the same time is accessible and practical in its approach.

The work's editor, Herb Borkland, expressed the uniqueness of Coons' manuscript the best, when he wrote me the following sentences. "This is the work of an autodidact, and I bless his dedication and strength of mind and how he has digested and so can make legible so many elusive concepts. To use many words to advertise how to shut up is always the trap in meditation manuals. It seems to me he surmounts that paradox through a very Chinese quality of modest but unshakeable expertise."

And so Tambuli Media is proud to present to you Robert James Coons' *Internal Elixir Cultivation*, for which we are grateful to Robert Cory Del Medico for connecting us with the author. We hope you enjoy and benefit from this book as much as I have.



—Dr. Mark Wiley
Publisher, Tambuli Media

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Robert James Coons and his teacher Yang Hai, seated in Master Yang's home in Montreal. Master Yang studied in the Beijing White Cloud Temple with Cao Zhenyang, abbot of the temple and leader of the Dragon Gate sect of Quanzhen Daoism at the time. He also studied in the Sanfeng lineage of Daoism and Tianjin, and with many other teachers who had Daoist teachings either passed down through family, or who had deep personal research into Daoist methods. He specializes in meditation, Chinese medicine, martial arts, qigong, knows various other Daoist arts such as face reading, and holds an MBA.

PREFACE

The West has come to a place of economic prominence in the world, leading to lifestyles which had never been imagined in the ancient world. People are now free to eat and drink whatever they wish – they are able to have access to the best health care and have the richest economy in the entire history of mankind. The West is the best it has ever been, and yet people feel a discord.

There is a lack of harmony in the physical and spiritual world of the western psyche—and although things are good, people are beginning to see that what they have gained in riches, they have begun to lose in spirit. People have also begun to feel the negative effects of a lavish lifestyle—with diseases such as addiction and mental illness at the forefront of society. Almost everyone has been touched by depression, anxiety, obesity, and severe emotional trauma and in the West today, there are very few people who are completely at ease and happy with their own lives.

There is a great move toward new ways of life, but it seems that there are too many roads and not enough maps. There are many promises of salvation, but almost none of them actually yield results.

People see the value in spirituality, but spiritual teachers are often more concerned with lining their own pockets or espousing political and cultural beliefs than with teaching people how to take control of their lives. Worse yet is the pseudo psychology of the pharmaceutical institutions, and the push for doctors to prescribe powerful drugs to people with simple-to-resolve emotional problems or even naturally-occurring states such as sadness. This is perverse and troubling. People are beginning to lose touch with their autonomy and to imagine that they have no control of their own lives.

It can be very difficult to find a good teacher; each practice has its own value. The special quality of Daoism is that the entire practice is laid out in the various meditation and philosophy classics that exist within its canon. With the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher and a good work ethic, students of Daoism may gradually improve their lives by learning to cultivate a feeling of inner awareness and understanding of how to accord with nature in a more harmonious and spontaneous way.

Although this knowledge is available in western religion and philosophy, it has mostly been lost over the racket of “buy now, pay as you go” style pop spirituality.

With the exception of orders such as the Jesuits, Christianity has basically lost its root in contemplative prayer. As such, many western people have begun to feel that the Christian doctrine is something which is taught to them rather than directly experienced. This has created a growth of interest among people in Eastern spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Daoism, but because these fields are still relatively new in the west, it is hard for people to contextualize all of the different facets of these practices. This leads to teachers coming forth and if not willingly cheating their students, at least, not being completely prepared for what the western student may face on the spiritual path. People often assume that meditation is a panacea and cure-all, so when they begin learning how to cultivate the practice, they often come to it with unrealistic expectations, and many people are let down and quit early. The meditation industry supports this type of behavior because although it is not beautiful, it is true that even spiritual teachers must put food on their tables, and, as such, many parts of the industry are quite reliant on making big promises in order to pull in new students. It is safe to say that nothing good ever comes to people who don't work for it.

The good news is the wisdom of past masters is still available, and people who wish to pursue the way of attaining the same wonderful benefits of meditation may continue to reap the benefit of a mindful practice.

Among spiritual cultivation practices, Daoism is a very special method. Daoism, although having a religious practice associated with it, is not constrained by the requirement of belief in any gods, prophecies, or proscribed methods of worship. Daoism works as a three part system, with each of the sections harmoniously operating together. Daoism is comprised of Daoist philosophy, religious practice, and meditation. Although it is good to know about each separate section of Daoism, it is also quite normal to specialize in one area of practice alone. Some people combine Daoist philosophy practice with meditation, while others combine meditation with religious practice. There is nothing wrong with that, and it is possible to make progress in Daoism even without believing in the religion.

I was fortunate enough to have followed a path of self-actualization from my early childhood. As a boy, my father, a teacher who was very interested in philosophy, religion, and science, gave me several books to read on the subjects of Daoism and Buddhism. Principally, he gave me, the *Tao of Pooh*, a children's book explaining Daoist philosophy, and *Zhuang Zi Speaks*, an excellent book by a Taiwanese cartoonist on the subject of the second great Daoist philosopher, Zhuangzi. The free and natural spirit of these books caught my imagination. It seemed as though the words jumped off the page and the open-hearted spirit of the authors made the spirit of their writing as plain as the blue sky. Zhuangzi especially writes in a very free and

open way, suggesting that instead of imagining we know all of the answers of life, it is more useful to imagine that there are many things we don't know, and that we are always capable of learning and growing. From that time the long search for an enlightened life began.

Over the years, I encountered many spiritual sicknesses—bullied by my peers in school and always treated as an outsider. I grew withdrawn from normal children of my age. In my late teens, this culminated in a serious rejection of the public school system and a downward turn into a lifestyle of partying and wildness. It eventually culminated, at 19 years of age, when I had a serious accident that led to my hospitalization.

After that, I really needed to get my life on track and so began to search out new ways to understand both my relationship with the world around me, and also if there was a way to live a better and fuller life. I studied qigong, taijiquan, vipassana, baguzhang, xingyiquan, and many other modalities, but I found that the practice which always intrigued me the most was Daoist meditation. Daoism is a somewhat elusive practice in that it can be quite hard to find a teacher, and when I set out to find a good teacher, it took me quite a long time. I went to visit many different teachers in the internal martial arts, qigong, and meditation, and eventually did manage to find a great teacher who took me under his wing and shared many subtle and profound things with me.

Although it can be hard to find a teacher, there is still enough true Daoist practice remaining in the world for serious students to discover the real thing, so to speak. All varieties of spiritual practice have their strong and weak points, and each is suited to different personalities. That means that the truth which is contained in Daoism can also be found in Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, or any other type of practice which joins the mind of the practitioner with something larger than their own thoughts and feelings. I wrote this book for people who are interested in Daoism, and I hope that it will be useful and informative to help you start your journey into the very interesting world of meditation and spiritual illumination.

My journey started with a local Taijiquan teacher who focused much of her practice on obtaining internal quiet through qigong. Because of this, I was able to relieve some of the symptoms of my PTSD and to gain a feeling of calm and relaxation that I had not achieved since the time after my hospitalization. Naturally, I fell in love with the Daoist arts and wished to seek out the most genuine teachers with whom to study. The practice took me all over North America in search of great teachers—I had heard many stories of the seemingly magical skills of the ancient masters of martial arts and Daoism.

At the time, I was most interested in the internal martial arts of taijiquan, xingyiquan, and baguazhang and had read some excellent books, such as BK Frantzis' *Power*

of the Internal Martial Arts, and the various books of Stuart Alve Olson, among others. The stories they conveyed of their own training, and stories of past masters who were able to defeat even the strongest opponents by only using four ounces of strength simply enthralled my young mind. Perhaps it was naïveté and lack of experience, but I thought of internal martial artists and Daoists as being somewhat like the Jedi in the film “Star Wars.” It seemed like they could command their minds to defy gravity, and do things which were beyond the abilities of normal men. I had heard stories of people breaking huge piles of bricks with just their fingers, or running directly up tall walls, jumping along the lined roofs of houses. These high-level skills seemed so interesting, and in the world of Chinese martial arts, it is quite commonplace to venerate past masters by telling stories of their great achievements. This can be truly inspiring to beginner students as it shows some of the possibilities of these fantastic arts.

Eventually, I found two teachers who I feel really have the skills I so desired to learn. One was Peter Ralston, and although my time studying with him was admittedly short, his take on the world of the mind has always had an influence on the way I practice.

Peter works according to the philosophy of “not knowing.” That is to say, much of his practice is focused around the art of remaining aware and conscious, rather than making assumptions about how a movement, an op-

ponent, or the world should work. He teaches martial arts with a strong focus on developing the mind toward being effectively conscious. I truly took a great deal of benefit from his ideas as I progressed in the martial arts. I continue to use many of his concepts of relaxation and an open awareness as staples of my practice.

The act of being willing not to know something is the beginning of true honesty.

When people assume they know the answers to the problems which are presented to them by life, they stop themselves from really seeing the truth of what is going on. I have always respected Peter because he is able to convey to his students very directly that the ideal way to understand oneself is to remain open-minded and able to respond to situations as they arise, rather than simply creating a series of pre-programmed reactions to stimuli.

My other teacher, Yang Hai, a Chinese man from Tianjin who currently resides in Montreal, was the one who had the greatest impact on my study. He is a martial artist, a Daoist, and a Chinese medicine doctor who teaches according to the concept of unifying the tasks of everyday life so they may work harmoniously together. I learned more than martial arts and Daoism from him, but also how to live a more complete and harmonious life. One of his main principles can be summed up as “using culture and art to cultivate beauty.” He believes that Chinese culture may be used as a spiritual cultivation system and allow

people to reach their greatest potential: the potential to live a happy and long life. A good example of this is his grandfather, Yang Qinlin, who lived to be ninety-seven years old and practised martial arts and Chinese culture every day with great spirit and vitality, even up to shortly before he passed away. My teacher takes a great deal of his inspiration from these true Chinese gentlemen, who dedicated their entire lives to mastering themselves and attaining great achievements in the cultivation of health, longevity, and beauty.

Yang Hai is a family man, a spiritual cultivator, a master, and a student. I was so touched by his honest teachings on the subject of martial arts and Chinese culture that I took it upon myself to travel to China and learn the essence of China's 5,000 year old culture.

During the four years I spent in Shanghai, I became fluent in Mandarin Chinese, learned to read classical Chinese, studied tea, martial arts, painting, music, pottery, calligraphy, Daoism, poetry, and many other studies. My teachers are from all walks of life, and I have gone to places such as Beijing, Tianjin, Taipei, Tokyo, Sapporo, Fujian, Hangzhou, and Henan in order to seek out teachers and research this foreign culture which I have taken as my own.

At some point, it occurred to me that the knowledge which I have literally sweated, cried, and bled to learn may be of some use to others. I feel that although my ac-

accomplishment pales in comparison to my teachers', it has been of such great use to me that I must share it. I have gone from being a troubled young man with horrible symptoms of PTSD, such as night terrors, hallucinations, and affective schizophrenic tendencies, to a confident and happy person within the time of under a decade. I have made such a complete recovery that I feel as if I have been given a new life; and a large part of that life I owe to the practice of self-cultivation.

Were my path of cultivation some other art, such as yoga, I would now be writing a book about that; the first step on the path is the most important, and it does not matter which practice you choose, as long as you seek out competent teachers and study assiduously and without ceasing. It just so happens that the inclusive spirit of Daoism speaks to me, and as such, I have written this book. I suspect Daoism also speaks to you, so I hope that my words here will have a positive effect on your life and practice. If you work hard to understand the material presented in this book, you will also have a chance to develop a practice which can balance the mind and body, make you feel more healthy and dynamic, and help to clarify the thoughts in your mind into a more well-organized and productive way of understanding the world. As an adherent of the ethic of kindness, I would be remiss not to share the benefit of the insight I have gained through this lifestyle.

Many of the sicknesses of the modern world are easy to cure; most illnesses begin in the mind. People feel the pressure to conform placed on them by society; they are given stress in the workplace, home, and are constantly bombarded with information from the media. It seems like the modern mind is not allowed to rest, and so people are always wired on caffeine, sugar, or simply by their desire to perform according to expectations.

One of the ways the nervous system heals itself is through rest; and this is a lucky fact because the spirit of meditation is to allow the mind to rest. Essentially, there are two types of meditation, one which actively uses the mind to feel, and one which attempts to flick a dimmer switch on the consciousness for long enough that the body enters a state of deep tranquility and restfulness. Daoist meditations tends toward using the slowing of the thoughts as a way to cause the body to slow down and relax, thus allowing the parasympathetic nervous system to do the important work of regulating the hormones and repairing the body. Many of the true diseases of modernity, such as cancer, heart disease, and profound depression, can all be prevented and helped simply by following a healthy and happy lifestyle. Practicing meditation is a very good method to guard against becoming ill. Meditation allows the mind to become calm and the body to have time to reset itself. Sometimes a full night of sleep is not enough to heal the psychic trauma of the work place. In this situation, even half-an-hour of meditation each

day can assist in allowing people to let their minds filter out the various stresses of their lives. I hope the practice presented in this book will allow you to take control of your mind, learn to relax, and give yourself enough time to heal.

Daoism as a practice is based on four basic concepts:

- 1) Embracing simplicity
- 2) Cultivating positivity
- 3) Nurturing energy
- 4) Retaining (not wasting) life's energy

Done with consistent practice, each of the exercises in this book embraces these basic virtues. The principles discussed here are not esoteric and they are achievable now, in this lifetime. In this book, I have laid out many of the best steps you can take to achieve this level of calm, clarity, and happiness. I think you will be able to learn my method quite quickly.

All of the great sages of human history were not great because they allowed people to live in ever higher realms of luxury. They were great because, to paraphrase the words of Jesus Christ, instead of giving a man a fish to feed him, it is better to teach him how to fish, thereby he may feed himself.

They themselves, who may have been poor in the physical realm, were rich enough in spirit to serve as lighthouses to guide others through the dark. People like

the Buddha, Laozi, Christ, Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and others underwent deprivation, taunting, and even risked their lives to help people on the path to freedom. I am not risking my life to write this book, and I am not a saint, but my goal is to do the small bit that I can to help extend the heart of righteousness and offer a helping hand to the people around me. I think the key behind the achievements of the ancient and modern masters is that they embraced the lives of others as being of equal important to their own. The teaching left behind by these compassionate spiritual teachers are all good, and all worthy of investigating. In this book, I will present what I believe to be a genuine shortcut to spiritual achievement. Daoism cuts out many of the filters of belief associated with religion and leaves behind principles which may be used regardless of one's affiliations or groups.

Although my spirit is not as well-developed as those of my teachers, it is my sincere desire to share with as many people as possible the benefit I have enjoyed through my studies.

Yang Hai once said to me that every day of his life feels like a holiday. At the time, I did not completely understand his meaning, but now, after a sufficient period of cultivation, I think I can say with clarity: the practice of calming the mind and developing spirit will make even the most stressed of people feel as though a great weight has been lifted from their chests.

The true benefit of Daoism is simply to become happier, and although happiness is ultimately in the hands of the individual, I think correct practice and a positive attitude can help people on the way to living happier lives. This book is a good primer in how to begin a correct practice. Daoist practice can provide people with time to reflect, to experience less interference from thoughts and emotions, and less attachment to desires. It is also a very good way to regain a sense of being rested and at ease in the world. These concepts are the foundation of the book, the premise upon which the reader will move into the next pages.

Although Daoist practice is not a panacea, it is a very good place to begin the study of achieving true happiness. The body and mind are inseparable, and if the state of the mind is full of the illness of stress, anger, fear, judgment, and hate, it will not be possible for the body to last long without also developing illnesses. People all have one primary responsibility which is more important than any other and that is to their own health. The belief of the Daoists is that once people have developed their health sufficiently, they should share with others. In this case, I am offering this book to you so you may also share the benefit of gaining in both happiness and a feeling of health, vitality, and well-being. The way of doing and understanding presented in this book can help to cure many of the stresses and ills inflicted by modern society and allow people to overcome many obstacles which may

originally have seemed impossible. It is my sincere hope you will get as much benefit from this book as I have from the instruction of my teachers and my own practice.

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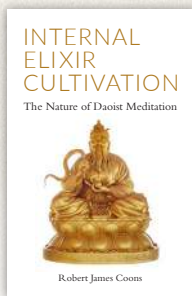
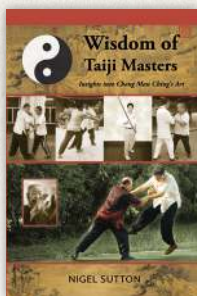
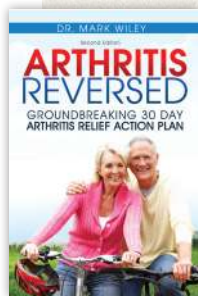
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Tambuli is the name of a native instrument in the Philippines fashioned from the horn of a carabao. The tambuli was blown and its sound signaled to villagers that a meeting with village elders was to be in session, or to announce the news of the day. It is hoped that Tambuli Media publications will “bring people together and disseminate the knowledge” to many.



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