

# Daoist Zuowang Meditation

by Shifu Michael Rinaldini

Just watch out that  
Above the concentrated mind  
Everything is free and open and coverless,  
Beneath the concentrated mind  
Everything is wide and spacious and bottomless.

Zuowanglun[1]

My own personal journey in meditation began in the early 1970's. This was a very turbulent and exciting period of time for the entire country: The Vietnam War was coming to an end; the Green Revolution was taking roots, and a large segment of the alternative movement was undergoing a shift in consciousness. One aspect of this shift in consciousness was a turning to the East for its richness of philosophies. The direction I took was towards the philosophies of China and Japan, especially their meditation traditions.

My first encounters in Eastern meditation practices were in the yogic practices of India. I recited mantras and chanting and was even initiated into the advanced practices of Kriya yoga. This was one of my motivations for going to India, to further explore the extensive riches of Hinduism. But this all changed, as I, by chance, discovered the rich mystical tradition of Catholicism, something I was never exposed to during my youth growing up in a Catholic family. This awakening led me to explore the culture of Catholic monasticism during the last six years of the late 1970's. The Jesus Prayer was one of the practices I focused on. Its aim was to center on the heart chakra, producing a sense of warmth as the prayer prays itself. This method was historically inspired by the admonitions of St. Paul of the Epistles, who said to pray unceasingly. But, another interesting thing was happening during this same period. I was turning my attention back to my previous explorations of Zen Buddhism which I encountered briefly while still a college student. By 1980, I left Catholicism completely, and turned my attention to the 'enlightenment' experiences of Buddhism. For the rest of the 80's, I focused my efforts on two different Buddhist paths: zen, and insight meditation or mindfulness.

By the early 1990's, I thought I would continue as a Buddhist practitioner for the rest of my life. I even contemplated what I would need to do to become a Lama in the Tibetan tradition. But being a Buddhist, I realized the truth of impermanence when I saw myself reading more and more books on qigong, Chinese medicine, and Daoism. I was changing, and just like the fundamental Buddhist precept says, everything is impermanent. A new passion was arising in my mind and heart and it was steering me beyond Buddhism towards the mysteries of the Chinese indigenous religion of Daoism.

Another motivating factor was my own health problems, for which I sought help from Traditional Chinese medicine and the study of medical qigong. These areas of study led me further into the Daoist worldview, and even woke up some old memories which were buried deep inside me. These memories confirmed my strong resonations with Daoism. So it was not surprising that by the year 2000, I had completed a 200 hour course in acupuncture with a Traditional Chinese medicine concentration. I had a firm foundation in medical qigong, and was even beginning to teach at the National Qigong Association annual conferences. And I had completed my first study trip to China and met a prominent qigong master who would prove to be exceedingly instrumental in my future qigong and Daoist development.

Meditation has been at the core of all my varied explorations of the inner life. I had several important breakthrough experiences that provided the foundation for the motivation to continue pursuing spiritual truths. In a way, you could say, I wasn't acting on belief any more, but actual experience. And one thing I knew with certainty, there was still a lot more to come.

When I started studying and exploring the Daoist inner cultivation practices, I was naturally interested in learning all about Daoist meditation. I read many books by Livia Kohn, formerly a Professor of Religion and East Asian Studies at Boston University. She wrote and edited numerous books on Daoism and Daoist cultivation. Some of them are [Taoist Mystical Philosophy](#), [Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques](#), [The Taoist Experience](#) and others. I wasn't very drawn to all the esoteric and archaic practices which were so prevalent for the early Daoists. I was looking for the pure Daoist experience of the Dao. For instance, I found the emphasis on cultivating Daoist deities residing in my inner organs distracting. Some texts spoke of developing inner observation of them as necessary for spiritual cultivation. I didn't relate to these kinds of texts and instead, I looked for forms of meditation closer to my earlier Buddhist practices on emptiness, mindfulness and non-conceptual experiences.

However, as I continued my studies, I realized I was overlooking an important historical fact. Daoism was and is a mix of Buddhism, Confuciusism and an original Daoist source. It was a surprise to me to find many Buddhist elements mixed in with the Daoist cosmology and esoteric terminology. In my searching's for a purely Daoist form of meditation, I realized that there is no such thing as a unique Daoist form of meditation. After studying many texts on Daoism, I understood that Daoist meditation consisted of a strong Buddhist influence, mainly the Chinese Chan (zen) and the insight meditation vipassana with the Daoist principles of wuwei, clarity (qing), stillness (jing), stability (ding), suchness (ziran), heart-mind (xin), and other principles.[2]

### **Introduction To My Current Daoist Meditation Practice**

Now that I have filled you in on some of my Daoist wanderings, it is time to discuss where my present practice is focused. The overall focus is on zuowang meditation, looking at key principles of its practice, and examining some related Buddhist practices. I also make comments about drinking Chinese tea, as the way of tea is an important Daoist cultivation practice, past and present.

### **Wuwei and Youwei**

This discussion on zuowang, and wuwei and youwei, begins with an article I read several years ago in the British Taoist Association's magazine, Dragon's Mouth (Summer 2001). It is an interview with Liu Sichuan, a Dragon Gate priest. First, Liu Sichuan points out the importance of sitting in the cross-legged posture. He says it is very important for meditation to help "align the body so the qi can flow." It also has a sealing effect to stop leakages, adding, "When the body has the right foundation there is no resistance or struggle in the cultivation."

Liu Sichuan's advice on how to meditate is what I really want to share. "To start with join the breath and the mind together...very difficult and takes a long time but it's very important." He goes on to talk about the thoughts and so on. He says eventually, "the body starts to dissolve and at this stage you cultivate qi and shen. The shen is not in one place. There is no body focus used in this technique, if you want to call it a technique. Actually the qi and shen is a high level and it seems most simple but really it's the highest one."

Liu contrasts this method with the usual way of focusing on the lower Dantian. He says that method is for those who "can't work with the qi and shen." He adds it is more for "health practices" and good for "nourishing the shen/spirit with the qi."

Liu then discusses visualization and wuwei and youwei. Wuwei is the "natural way, and youwei is using "intention and control." He says people who are starting out or have difficulty meditating can use youwei, especially if they are not able to "reach stillness to cultivate qi and shen." He ends this discussion on meditation by saying, "But if you can do wuwei practice at the beginning it's not necessary to use the other method."

I read this several years ago and keep returning to it. I share it often in my qigong classes during meditation time. It doesn't say much about the actual method of joining the breath and mind. It does say it is not a body-focused method, meaning not on the lower Dantian, middle Dantian, or some other energy/spiritual center. It reminds me of the Tibetan Buddhist Dzogchen method of skygazing, looking into the open sky with no focus on the body, just a unifying of one's whole experience into an open awareness.

Before proceeding, it's time to further explore the meaning of wuwei. Daoist scholar Livia Kohn says in her book on the Daode Jing, Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching: "The Way, in its formlessness and nonaction, sustains and completes the ten thousand things. Therefore, those who follow the Way take nonaction as their master[ or, dwell in nonaction]...Then, things will obtain their true nature and become one with Tao." In the pursuit of the Dao, there is daily "decrease" or loss until the state of nonaction is reached, and "nothing is left undone." This means there is a return to emptiness and nonbeing. What is decreased, lost? The Daoist response is that desires and any false sense of self is decreased until "one reaches the tranquil depth of emptiness and nonbeing." Thus the sage finds fulfillment by embodying nonaction as his/her own natural state. Living so, the sage harmonizes with nature-the natural way, "the ten thousand things assume their proper place or station, as if the Way had done nothing for them." [3]

Contrasting to wuwei is youwei. This is the way of "taking action, the common way to govern a country, control people, pursuing goals, and the seeking of satisfying desires." This is the goal directing behavior which supports the ego driven actions which keep one in the cycle of "aggression, greed, and violence." [4] In my own words, I would say that youwei is the behavior of trying to accomplish something, however, noble, but with too much effort, too much energy. And all this doing requires a lot of energy, and keeps us looking in a direction other than the truth. This last part was mine. Doesn't that make sense! We use a lot of energy going after things that have no sense of truth to them. But if you turn all this around and stop the doing then we stop losing our energy, and start finding the truth deep within the stillness of our being.

### **Zuowang is wuwei.**

This next section will explore what contemporary American Daoist teacher Liu Ming has said about zuowang. I first came across Liu Ming, who currently lives in the SF Bay Area, when he went by the name of Charles Belyea in his book, *Dragon's Play*. More recently, he has been a regular contributor to the British Taoist Association's *Dragon Mouth* magazine. In the Autumn, 2002 issue, he wrote "The view of Daoism is that we are already a part of a complete whole, a Oneness – Dao." And how do we get to this realization, especially since it is something we cannot gain or attain. Ming says, "We don't get there through effort or strength; we are simply 'there' by nature. The complete or constant experience of this is found in weakness – wuwei."

Ming expounds on this view in a CD recording I obtained from him. Some of his key points are: Zuowang is non-conceptual meditation. The View is the expression of our Original Nature. The practice is just sitting still, doing nothing. No preferences. Effort is not appropriate – wuwei. Final traces of effort yield to non-effort. Wuwei is relaxing the need to hold on to or sort out our thoughts.

### **The Chinese and British Perspective**

In this next section, I will present what three separate Daoist priests have said about zuowang. The material came out of the *Dragon's Mouth* magazine, and they are all present day practitioners. (Liu Xingdi has since died.) Liu Xingdi is a Daoist priest with many years of experience in Daoist cultivation practices. Eva Wong has written many books on Daoism and has been a Daoist most of her life. Shi Jing is the head of the British Taoist Association.

In the 2005, Issue 3 of the *Dragon's Mouth*, Liu Xingdi when asked in an interview about the importance of zuowang meditation in Daoist cultivation, replied: "Zuowang is an ancient Daoist practice handed down within the Daoist traditions. Zuowang, or sitting and forgetting, is allowing everything to slip from the mind, not dwelling on thoughts, allowing them to come and go, simply being at rest." Liu stresses a good body posture which helps

to quiet the mind. Otherwise, he says “qi disperses, attention wanders, and the natural process is disturbed. Just remain empty and there is no separation from the Dao. Then wisdom will arise and bring forth light, which is the clear qi of a person.” Lastly, he adds “Don’t think too much about the theory ... you are sure to disturb the heart-mind. Just trust in the inherent natural process.”

In the 2007 Issue 1 of the Dragon’s Mouth Eva Wong answered a question about zuowang in an interview: “So yes, in some sense the practice is about dissolving self. Dissolving self is dissolving the conceptual mind. When we drop conceptions, what we have is the natural emergence of the natural self, the natural celestial mind, which has been with us all the time. It is only because of our conceptions that we can’t experience it. So when we practice zuowang, we’re simply saying that here’s a method where we can begin to drop conceptions.”

And lastly, we have the comments of Shi Jing. He is one of the founders of the British Taoist Association and was ordained a Daoist priest in China in 1995. Shi Jing writes extensively about zuowang and leads retreats on it in England. Speaking at length about zuowang, he says “Zuowang is a formless meditation-it has no techniques or methods in it, but if I was to ask you to sit here and say there is nothing you need to do, then your mind would slip into the habitual pattern of thought and wander all over the place. There are ways of introducing this practice to you. There are techniques, but we must realize they are not zuowang; they are ways to help you discover zuowang. Really zuowang is resting in a choiceless awareness which is not dependent on self reference. This is a natural state, not some transcendental experience. Thoughts arise from emptiness and dissolve back into emptiness. Thoughts become self-liberating if we can recognize that their nature is emptiness. Thoughts are arising, but we are not doing it, they are appearing of themselves. They are not our enemy. It’s a natural process that is happening.

When thoughts dissolve into emptiness, it means they have returned to the source, which is non-being. By becoming familiar with this experience, gradually our activities become an expression of non-being.” (Dragon’s Mouth, 2006, Issue 1)

In an earlier issue of Dragon’s Mouth, Shi Jing states very strongly about the place of zuowang in the Daoist tradition and then goes on to share important insights on the zuowang view:

Shi Jing is asked what he feels is the main practice of Daoism that people can follow.

His answer follows: “The original practice which is really the core of Daoism, regardless of what tradition, is zuowang, which means to sit and forget. When you sit you are actually freeing yourself up from the “baggage” that you carry. You forget about your persona, who you think you are. Things are gradually dissolved. Zuowang is the formless meditation, if you like. True zuowang has no form. It’s resting in the non-dual awareness, your original nature. There is actually no method or teaching or technique in this at all.” And then he talks about the view: “So how do we approach zuowang? The first step is the view. The view is that our dualistic state of being is a distorted reflection of the non-dual mind. We hold this view lightly in practice because in the beginning we apply it from a dualistic perspective. The view and the method

[ eventually become one ] until they dissolve into emptiness and are forgotten. So zuowang is no more than resting in the non-dual awareness.” (Dragon’s Mouth, 2005, Issue 1)

### **Pu-erh Tea and Zuowang**

Make a cup of pu-erh tea, and as you mindfully drink it, sit in meditation, and assume a comfortable posture, back straight, eyes open or slightly open, and gently gazing. Briefly recite or think of the view. And then just rest in open awareness. From this point forward, whatever arises is just it. You don’t need to count breaths, make mental notes of the kinds of thoughts/perceptions you are having. No self-judging of how you are doing. Basically, whatever happens you bring open awareness to it. This is actually the easiest of all meditations because no matter what you experience, as long as you are aware of it, is part of the experience. I know, easier said than done! The Zuowanglun is your scripture text to study to nourish this practice. You can also go back to the early Daoist classic, the Zhuangzi

and find in Chapter six, the story of Yen Hui and Confucius, talking about making progress and Yen Hui says, “I just sit and forget.” “I am not attached to the body and I give up any idea of knowing. By freeing myself from the body and mind, I become one with the infinite. This is what I mean by sitting and forgetting.” Shi Jing refers to this passage as the original teaching on zuowang: “The essence of Daoism.” (Dragon’s Mouth, 2005, Issue 1)

### **Conclusion to Zuowang**

A very inspirational book I’ve recently read was Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind. It was written by a young Irish woman, Maura O’Halloran. It is her memoirs of living for three years in a traditional Zen monastery in Japan in the 1970’s. Recognized as a Zen Master just before her tragic death, she tells the story of balancing effort and no effort. Her insight ties in very well with our discussion of wuwei and Zuowang:

“There’s nothing really to achieve, but until I really realize that, I must go on trying to achieve, though really realizing that there is nothing to achieve.”[5]

So, there we are again, back to our original discussion on wuwei. Yes, to fully grasp the meaning of zuowang, we have to live by the principles of wuwei. To be true Daoist cultivators, our actions must remain with our Original Nature. Liu Xingdi, in the Dragon’s Mouth interview I quoted much earlier, said it all so clearly:

“Our cultivation is to remain with our original nature, then whatever arises is a natural activity of Dao. Every action is wuwei. In meditation you stay quiet and allow the mind to empty. So wuwei means to remain empty and be totally present with whatever you are doing.”[6]

This is my practice now: cultivating the present awareness of whatever arises in the moment, and maintaining the view of Original Nature. I make use of different disciplines in my sitting practice, like sitting in formless, open awareness, making no preferences, asking “who’s sitting forgetting,” and occasionally sitting throughout the night in meditation.

I am aware of the way [Dao = Way] that lies before me, yet firmly keep my feet planted deeply in the wuwei of the earth. I am aware of the gradual process of the dissolving ego-identity; the ego that tries with all its strength to encourage me to give up these spiritual endeavors. And I am aware of the possibility that at any moment, a flash, a nuclear-explosion of sudden awakening can transform my being and I can say the same words as Maura O’Halloran.

*“Ten ni mo chi ni mo tada ware hitori.*

In heaven and earth, there is but I, myself.  
Everything is perfect. Everything is enlightening,  
just as it is by virtue of being.”[7]

I have said a lot – an extreme amount in my opinion on the subject of Daoist meditation. It is now time to put an ending to all this speculation, have another cup of pu-erh tea (and some French toast I am presently eating) and get on to the real business – of just sitting in oblivion.

## Footnotes

[1] Seven Steps To The Tao: Sima Chengzhen's Zuowanglun. Livia Kohn. St. Augustin/Nettetal: Monumenta Serica Monograph 20. 1987. pg. 138.

[2] Handbooks For Daoist Practice #4, Scripture on Clarity and Stillness. Louis Komjathy. Wandering Cloud Press. 2003

[3] Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching. Edited by Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue. State University of New York Press. 1998. Pg. 110.

[4] Ibid., pg. 202. Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching.

[5] Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind: The Life & Letters Of An Irish Zen Saint. Maura O'Halloran. Wisdom Publications. 2007. pg. 143.

[6] The Dragon's Mouth, British Taoist Association, 2005 Issue 3

[7] Ibid., pg. 199-200. Pure Heart, Enlightened Mind.

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