

of “absorbing” “new theories.” A more nuanced way of expressing what must surely have been Song’s point is something like, “In light of new theories, the number of texts considered Classics increased over time from the original five to ultimately thirteen or even twenty-one.” Elsewhere, reading Song’s intent is even more difficult. In chapter 8, we have the following: “More specifically, the pairs relate to local and regional leaders who ‘harmonize and converge’ (*xie’ou*) the ten thousand people in the regional states in order to ‘incorporate the populace’ (*demin*)” (p. 189). The choice of translations here is an issue, but even an editor who is not a specialist would recognize that in English “converge” is not a transitive verb, and neither “converge” nor “incorporate” takes people as objects. It is difficult to know what such phrases actually mean. As such examples multiply in the course of the book, the risk of confusing the reader increases.

My reservations above notwithstanding, I learned much from Song’s book. Although the organizational and stylistic issues impact its clarity, Song’s erudition is indisputable. And the value of his framing of Wang Anshi’s New Policies and their aftermath as a debate over constitutional arrangements that takes seriously the way that classical exegesis was intimately entwined with political debate comes through in the work.

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Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity: From the Latter Han Dynasty (25–220) to the Tang Dynasty (618–907). By Stephen Eskildsen. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 387. \$85.00 hardcover, \$29.95 paperback.

In Chinese religious texts we can find descriptions of meditation practices that aim to actively manipulate the processes in the mind and body in the hope of obtaining insight, healing, longevity, immortality, or other results. These practices include visualization, respiratory exercises, dietary practices, and sexual techniques. The most well-known and primary example of such complex ideas and proactive practices are probably those of the Shangqing 上清 tradition, although many lesser known and less influential texts produced by other religious communities can likewise be found in the Daoist Canon. Some texts describe much simpler and more passive methods of meditation that aim at similar goals by simply making the mind as calm and clear as possible or by turning the attention inward and focusing it on a single location, often the lower elixir field in the abdomen. When such “serenity-based” meditation practices

are performed, the practitioner is supposed to be able to observe or experience the spontaneous effects that unfold in his person.

Eskildsen, explicitly noting that he is not a practitioner himself, has long been fascinated by the textual representations of such meditation practices and the descriptions of the experiences of its practitioners. We could see this fascination already in his earlier works, especially in *The Teachings and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters*.¹ In this latest book, Eskildsen shifts his focus from a particular period or tradition to the phenomenon of what he calls passive meditation methods and the descriptions of the resulting experiences. He examines a range of texts dating from the Latter Han to the Tang (25–907), selected because they “vividly attest to the variety and magnitude of sensory and physical phenomena that may be brought about just by making the mind clear and calm” (p. vii). Noting that texts on these subjects were published down to the modern period he announces that he will continue this project in a further volume to examine materials from the Song period onward, focusing on inner alchemy materials.

It should be noted that some parts of chapters 3 and 4 of the present volume have appeared in publication before. Part of the *Xiandao jing* 顯道經 has been published in “Some Troubles and Perils of Taoist Meditation,”² part of the *Rushi si chizi fa* 入室思赤子法 and the *Taishang hunyuan zhenlu* 太上混元真錄 has been published in “Red Snakes and Angry Queen Mothers: Hallucinations and Epiphanies in Medieval Daoist Meditation,”³ and part of the *Xuwu ziran benqi jing* 虛無自然本起經 has been published in “Mystical Ascent and Out-of-Body Experience in Medieval Daoism.”⁴

The book is structured in eight chapters, of which the first is an almost thirty page introduction and the eighth chapter the nearly thirty page conclusion. Chapters 2 to 7 present a chronological overview of Eskildsen’s topic, each chapter focusing on specific themes and organized around an examination of two or three texts, including many translated passages.

The introduction (chapter 1) is organized in three parts. In the “Opening Comments” the author sets out the theme of his work. Significantly, he makes a distinction between “proactive” and “passive” approaches to meditation. Proactive meditation involves the “active manipulation of the psyche and physiology” (p. 2) by a variety of techniques and is best represented in the Shangqing scriptures. Passive meditation on the other hand, involves “the habitual fostering of serenity throughout all

¹ Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004.

² *Monumenta Serica* 56 (2008), pp. 259–91.

³ In *Hindu, Buddhist and Daoist Meditation: Cultural Histories*, ed. Halvor Eifring (Oslo: Hermes, 2014), pp. 149–83.

⁴ *Journal of Chinese Religions* 35 (2007), pp. 36–62.

circumstances and activities” (p. 2), and meditation primarily consists of “calming and emptying out the mind” (p. 2). The term *qingjing* 清靜, describing a “clear and calm” mind, is identified as the Chinese concept of “serenity,” but this does not appear to be taken as a strict definition and the discussion takes many other descriptions of “serenity” into account. The earliest sources of such passive types of meditation are found in the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Neiye* 內業 (Inner Training).

These early sources are briefly discussed in “The Ancient Precedents,” the second part of the introduction. Here, Eskildsen does not seek to contribute groundbreaking research but simply needs to provide a background for his main discussion, summarizing what these early texts had to say about serenity and its effects in the context of meditation.

The *Laozi*’s first chapter can be interpreted to describe a state of being without desires (one aspect of serenity) that facilitates a mystical apprehension of the marvels of the Dao. The forty-fifth chapter describes *qingjing* (serenity) as a quality that brings about social harmony. Especially in the sixteenth chapter, we find a description of calmness (*jing* 靜) that is relevant to the further discussion. Eskildsen clarifies that the reading of this chapter that is most probably truthful to the author’s (or authors’) intentions is one where serenity refers to the wisdom of seeing the world “as it is” and the resulting social harmony, but that later interpretations took these same messages to refer to the cultivation of a state of deep serenity through passive meditation methods leading to immortality.

In the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, several passages describe the “fasting of the mind” (*xinzhai* 心齋) that appears to involve making the mind empty like air (*qi* 氣) so that the Dao can gather in it and one can “apprehend things more accurately and respond more effectively than when it relies on rational thinking or ordinary sense perception” (p. 9). Other passages describe the “sitting and forgetting” (*zuowang* 坐忘), which similarly refers to an emptying of the mind of all thoughts and desires until one becomes oblivious to one’s own mind and body and as a result conscious of the Dao. Similarly some passages describe the state of mind (and body) of a successful practitioner as a “withered tree” (*gaomu* 槁木) and “dead ashes” (*sihui* 死灰) enabling one to hear “the pipes of heaven” (i.e., the workings of the Dao). In the Miscellaneous Chapters there is another reference to the withered tree/dead ashes metaphor that associates this state with the condition of a child “utterly lacking in self-awareness” (p. 13). In the Outer Chapters, we find the most explicit reference to the importance of the body (in the context of cultivation) when the Yellow Emperor is urged to control his “essence” (*jing* 精).

The less well known *Neiye*—a text that has come down to us “hidden” in the “legalist” anthology *Guanzi* 管子 and recognized by Harold Roth as the oldest mystical text and the foundation of “Daoist mysticism”—is now recognized as one of

the basic texts of early Daoist ideas on cultivation.⁵ At odds with its usual meaning in later Daoist texts, “essence” as the *Neiye* describes it is a more pure and refined form of *qi*, instead of less refined than *qi*. In agreement with later traditions, the *Neiye* suggests that both *jing* and *qi* should be cherished and that this should be accomplished by practising mental serenity. When a person can be “rectified” (*zheng* 正) and “stabilized” (*ding* 定)—possibly referring to meditation but according to Eskildsen more likely simply referring to proper behaviour and being calm and under control—essence will dwell in him and one will enjoy enhanced sensory acuity and a healthy body. Significantly here, the essence (or Dao or *qi*) comes to you “on its own” when you passively await it with a serene (clear and calm) mind.

In conclusion, serenity can be identified in these early sources both as a quality to be fostered in one’s general activities as well as in what seem to be references to meditation practices. Relevant passages ascribe various effects to the quality of serenity, including the emergence of wisdom and understanding of the Dao, effective action, and vitality. The last part of the introduction offers an “Overview” of chapters 2 to 7.

The second chapter examines “The Earliest-Known Daoist Religious Movements,” represented by the second century Way of Great Peace (Taiping Dao 太平道) and the Way of the Heavenly Masters (Tianshi Dao 天師道). Eskildsen frames his discussion around two texts: the *Taiping jing* 太平經 associated with the Way of Great Peace and the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* 老子想爾注 associated with the Heavenly Masters. More specifically, he examines a group of texts he refers to as the “Taiping Group texts” which presumably contain materials originating from the non-extant complete original text from the second century: the *Taiping jing*, the *Taiping jing chao* 太平經鈔, and the *Taiping jing shengjun bizhi* 太平經聖君祕旨.⁶ After a survey of the textual issues (as he provides in each chapter), Eskildsen demonstrates the value attached to serenity in meditation practice alongside minimalist sorts of proactive meditation, including the paradoxical visualization of formlessness. Reduction or elimination of food intake is variously presented as an aid to or an indication of progress. The visualization of bodily deities and eating of *qi* (*shiqi* 食氣; probably referring to swallowing air in the stomach) presage two of the principal proactive methods of medieval Daoism.

The *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* contains just a few passages on meditation or serenity and *qi* practices. Most important, this text recommends keeping the mind clear and

⁵ Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

⁶ These and some further sources that presumably contain material originating in the original *Taiping jing* are conveniently collected in Wang Ming 王明, *Taiping jing hejiao* 太平經合校 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1960).

calm (serene) to facilitate moral behaviour and cause the Dao to enter the body (the belly) in the form of life sustaining *qi*. The text suggests a relation between flow of *qi* and the physiology of sexual arousal that may suggest *heqi* 合氣 practice or, alternatively, may resemble the value attached to spontaneous arousal found in inner alchemy texts. Again the ability to do without food is described as a characteristic of immortals. In its attack on visualizing deities and some other practices, Eskildsen suggests that the *Laozi Xiang'er zhu* may have in part been a polemic against the Taiping Group Texts.

The third chapter examines “Dramatic Physical and Sensory Effects” by focusing on three texts: the *Xiandao jing*, the *Rushi si chizi fa*, and the *Taishang hunyuan zhenlu*. All of these texts, each of which presents itself as the teachings of Laozi or Laojun, are little studied and contain rather obscure theories and methods. They are of interest because they contain “vivid and concrete descriptions of sensory and physical phenomena that occur in the deep serenity of meditation” (p. 75). Also, they probably date from before the fifth century as they betray no discernible Buddhist influence. They contain simpler and more passive methods than in the more well-known and contemporaneous texts like *Taishang Laojun zhongjing* 太上老君中經 and *Taishang huangting waijing yujing* 太上黃庭外景玉經.

The *Xiandao jing* describes a simple method of meditation whereby one is supposed to mainly focus on the elixir field and await the spontaneous effects. These effects are the most remarkable in the text and they include visions of lights and spiritual beings, but also disturbing things like shaking and babbling. The *Rushi si chizi fa* also describes a simple, calm type of meditation which is supposed to spontaneously cause certain effects. These do not include the explicit physical sensations of the kind described in the *Xiandao jing*, but most important, they describe a specific vision sequence. This vision includes the image of a baby taking shape in the heart. At first, this baby resembles a red snake, then it ascends to the top of the head where it is met by a perfected one (*zhenren* 真人). Then, a vision of the Queen Mother of the West appears and disappears. When this test of the practitioner is passed, the Dao will appear.

The last text examined in this chapter, the *Taishang hunyuan zhenlu*, contains the most extended and detailed version of what Eskildsen calls the Red Snake-Queen Mother vision sequence. On the basis of a detailed examination and comparison of this and other texts that contain the same vision sequence, he concludes that this particular vision is probably supposed to be caused by a meditation method that is based on serenity and that is described in the second of four segments of discourse attached at the end of the narrative of this text.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the integration of Buddhist terminology and metaphysics in Daoist texts on cultivation, distinguishing an early phase that sees the influence of notions of *karma*, rebirth, and compassion and a later phase during

which Daoist texts adopt the Mahāyāna ontological discourse on emptiness and the emptiness of emptiness (the Twofold Mystery). This examination demonstrates a gradual shift away from emphasis on the body to emphasis on the “spiritual” aspect of meditation. In chapter 4, the *Xisheng jing* 西昇經 still affirms the importance of the body as the vehicle that harbours the spirit and enables its perfection. The text assumes a dualistic notion of the body-mind relation and the existence of a transmigrating spirit. Paradoxically, the best way to maintain the body is by disregarding it and thus by practising serenity. The *Xuwu ziran benqi jing* suggests a “significant rift . . . in regard to basic issues of ethics, diet, and ritual praxis” (p. 179). As the supreme method it emphasizes the notion of emptiness, in a cosmological rather than ontological sense, as the original condition of the spirit. When the spirit is able to return to this condition, it embodies the Dao and its “sublime” attributes.

In the *Benji jing* 本際經 (chapter 5), the influence of Buddhist metaphysics is so pervasive as to make it almost indistinguishable from Buddhist texts. Friederike Assandri identifies it as one of the first texts with mature Twofold Mystery teachings (i.e., a combination of Madhyamika thought and the *Laozi*).⁷ Its approach revolves around fostering serenity and obtaining the “correct insight” about the original condition of the spirit. The *Wuchu jing* 五廚經, contrary to what its title suggests, is not focused on fasting although it was recited in some circles to overcome hunger. Again, the main theme is the maintenance of serenity and a detached state of mind. Seeing its impermanent nature, the body does not merit attachment.

The famous and influential *Qingjing jing* 清靜經 is still part of the morning liturgy of the Quanzhen 全真 order. Despite some references to the *Laozi*, Eskildsen describes it as a “Mahāyāna Buddhist-inspired exposition along the lines of the Twofold Mystery doctrine” (p. 209). It presents serenity as a goal in itself, instead of a state of mind that is helpful in bringing about other results. Finally, one is to realize the “ultimate religious paradox”: highest attainment is the understanding there is nothing to be attained. The text is almost exclusively focused on the mind/spirit, but “creative interpretations” of later inner alchemy authors succeeded in supplying the ideas of this text with a physical interpretation.

In chapters 6 and 7, Eskildsen examines four texts that demonstrate a gradual reaffirmation of the importance of the body. The *Zuowang lun* 坐忘論 (in chapter 6, “Serenity and the Reaffirmation of Physical Transformation”) uses the same Buddhist reasoning on emptiness and detachment that is used in earlier texts to preclude a concern for the body and the main emphasis is on the psyche, but at the same time the *Zuowang lun* posits immortality as a soteriological goal which it attributes to serenity. The *Dingguan jing* 定觀經 is also mainly focused on the mind (Eskildsen says, “The

⁷ Friederike Assandri, *Beyond the Daode jing: Twofold Mystery in Tang Daoism* (Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2009).

text could easily be accused of being Buddhism in Daoist clothing” [p. 237]) except for the last part in the discussion of “Seven Phases” that describe the transformation of the body.

The *Cunshen lianqi ming* 存神鍊氣銘 (in chapter 7, “Serenity, Primal *Qi*, and Embryonic Breathing”) again presents a simple serenity-based meditation method that revolves around focusing on the elixir field to finally become an immortal being (*zhenren*). It combines Tang dynasty Buddho-Daoist theory with notions such as *qi* and *shen* and, criticizing the Buddhist influence on Daoist texts that has resulted in a disregard for the body, it sets out to make a correction to this tendency. Its scheme of transformation anticipates similar schemes in later inner alchemy. In his discussion of the *Taixi jing zhu* 胎息經註, Eskildsen notes that the concrete methods of embryonic breathing are varied and complicated and many of them are proactive. This particular text however describes a more simple and passive method that resembles the *Cunshen lianqi ming*. The text is very brief and he consults four related texts to interpret it. By positing the creation of a new entity in the body, its claims go beyond those of the *Cunshen lianqi ming* and are an important precursor of inner alchemy theories.

In the conclusion, after a summary of the chapters, Eskildsen reviews the main arguments of the preceding chapters. His study demonstrates the existence of a genre of texts from the Han to Tang period that display a wide variety of techniques but have in common that they emphasize serenity-based meditation during the practice of which the practitioner is supposed to passively observe what happens spontaneously in his mind and body. These experiences include visions, decrease of hunger, circulation of *qi*, and a range of other phenomena. A second theme in this book is the influence of Buddhist ideas on Daoist texts and the development of the Daoist reaction to this influx of ideas. While early Daoist texts had emphasized the importance of the body, the initial influence of Buddhism was a turn to an emphasis on the mind and along with it a neglect of bodily cultivation. This influence of Buddhist ideas is permanent but already in the late Tang some texts discussed in this book show a protest to the Buddhist influence in the guise of a reassertion of the importance of the body. The book is completed with almost fifty pages of endnotes, a bibliography, and an index.

Let us briefly look at some minor limitations before we turn to the contributions of this volume. I did notice a handful of obvious errors and instances of careless editing. On page 256, the term *zhonghuang*, appearing in the title *Taiqing zhonghuang zhenjing*, is cut off and hyphenated to read “zhon-guang.” On page 246, the “n” in “*vinaya*” is curiously replaced with the icon of an envelope. On page 298, Wu Shouyang’s dates are given as 1573 to 1640 but on page 303 they are given as 1574 to 1644.⁸ More examples can be given, but none of these infelicities of editing really

⁸ As a matter of fact, according to both his autobiography (*Wu zhenren xiuxian ge* 伍真人修仙
(Continued on next page)

distracted me from the arguments in this otherwise excellent book. Something I would have liked to learn more about is the social context of these texts. Who were the audiences of these texts, where did they live (geographically), to which social groups did they belong, and how large was the actual impact of the ideas in these texts? Many of these questions cannot be answered of course and it was clearly the author's intention to focus on the texts and the ideas.

One thing I believe the author could have given more reflection is the very notion of “passive” versus “proactive” approaches to meditation. This book has convinced me that this can be a useful analytical distinction and one that can be added to other typologies of meditation practice such as “focused attention” versus “open monitoring,” or “concentrative” versus “insight” meditation, or “visualization.” Although Eskildsen briefly discusses this distinction in the introduction, after reading the book I still wonder how these different approaches should be defined, how (and if) we can draw (sharp?) lines between the different types of practice in concrete instances in the passages that we read and to what extent passive meditation is indeed “passive” or whether the “spontaneous” effects of meditation are actually caused by the active imagination. The author notes himself (for example on page 286) that it is sometimes not clear whether you are (passively) supposed to see something or (proactively) visualizing something. In a few passages, Eskildsen prudently makes some remarks about visions as images or archetypes that emerge from the subconscious but such remarks never turn into the beginning of a theory.⁹ I would not have

(Note 8—Continued)

歌, in *Xian Fo hezong yulu* 仙佛合宗語錄, *biji* 畢集 3, pp. 45a–59b [pp. 7533–40], in vol. 17 of the *Xinwenfeng* 新文豐 reprint of the *Daozang jiyao* 道藏輯要) and his biography in the Wu family genealogy (*Wushi zupu* 伍氏族譜, in author's collection), Wu's mother became pregnant in 1573 and he was born in 1574. We do not have a reliable source on his date of death. The only biography mentioning a date, namely 1644, is the *Jin'gai xinding* 金蓋心燈 which has been convincingly shown by Monica Esposito to contain otherwise mostly unreliable information; see her “The Longmen School and Its Controversial History during the Qing Dynasty,” in *Religion and Chinese Society, vol. 2, Taoism and Local Religion in Modern China*, ed. John Lagerwey (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press; Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2004), pp. 621–98. On the other hand, the last information on activity we have is 1641 (date of his mother's death) and it appears that soon after this Wu retreated from public life to perform his last meditations as a recluse. A date of death in the first half of the 40s of the seventeenth century therefore seems likely. We may therefore give his dates as “1574–1644?” or perhaps better as “1574–after 1641.”

⁹ There is an endnote on page 321 in which Eskildsen refers to the Jungian theory of archetypes, suggesting that the vision of an old woman or a girl could perhaps be understood as the *anima*, the subconscious archetype consisting of the “deposit of all experiences that men have with women.” Another interesting reference to Jungian theory can be found in an endnote on pages 349–50.

minded to have read more about Eskildsen's thoughts on some of these issues, in exchange for leaving out a few of the more tangential excursions through texts and passages that are only remotely related to the central topic of serenity.

The format of this book as a chronological survey of fourteen Daoist texts (including comparisons with a few other texts) makes it ideally suited for use in the setting of a course on Daoism or the topic of "cultivation" in Chinese religion. Eskildsen adds little new information on the textual history issues but he provides each examined text with a very useful survey of editions, authorship, and textual critical issues. His translations are smooth and reliable and the publisher is to be commended for including the original text of translated passages. The choice to omit modern style punctuation from the Chinese passages is certainly defensible seeing that these premodern texts did not include punctuation, but one could just as well argue that they have been changed radically in many ways anyway—taking passages out of context, changing the fonts, applying a horizontal typesetting, et cetera—so that providing modern style punctuation is only one among several transformations that increase the ease of reading and help the reader identify the syntactic units corresponding with the translation.

Eskildsen's distinctive tone is set in the first sentences of the acknowledgments:

I have never taken up the practice of meditation because I seriously lack patience and bodily flexibility. Attempting certain meditation postures such as the full lotus position would probably kill me. The restricted dietary regimens that frequently accompany meditation practice are also problematic, as I tend to require more nutrition than the average person. However, the experiences of people who meditate—especially if they are Daoists—somehow fascinate me. (p. vii)

This book is dense in information and translated passages and regularly digresses in comparisons and examinations that are related to the main line of argument in his book only because they appear in the same source texts. This requires some effort on the part of the reader to work through the book, but Eskildsen's light-hearted tone, his elegant prose, and his often witty observations (the "cranky" Queen Mother of the West had me laughing) make it a pleasant read that is worth the effort. The passage above, besides showing this playful tone, informs us, I believe, about Eskildsen's approach to the subject. This approach is characterized by a pleasant distance from the subject coupled with a real effort to understand these texts in their own terms. Not having any discernible stakes in promoting a certain interpretation, his obvious fascination with the subject leads him to take the ideas presented in these texts utterly seriously and he attempts to follow their claims to their logical consequences. Thus, he asks the kind of questions that are often left unasked. What does it actually mean when, for example, the vision of a "baby" is supposed to ascend to the head and how

is one supposed to do that? Continuously asking questions such as these to really try and understand what the author could have meant, he unpacks each passage, opening up a new world of thought at every turn.

This brings me to another characteristic of this book that also makes it useful for classroom use. That is, at no point does the author try to make the texts look more coherent than they are; instead, at every turn, he shows the reader the inconsistencies and ambiguities that are inherent in the texts. By doing so, he shows the reader how the actual reading of a premodern text proceeds and ultimately how fragile and indecisive our conclusions and analyses are. Carefully translating selected passages, Eskildsen shows the problems in a text, identifies possible interpretations, and tries to find additional evidence from other locations in the same text or in comparison with other texts to offer what he feels are the most plausible interpretations.

There are many examples of this. Let us take the term *ding* 定. Literally meaning something like “stability,” the term appears in early texts such as the *Zhuangzi* to denote some state of mind and possibly something we would call meditation. The translations of Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) typically use *ding* as a translation of the Sanskrit “*samādhi*” in Buddhist scriptures instead of the transliteration *sanmei* 三昧. Including all other possible connotations, by the late Tang the term *ding* can mean various things. How does a reader know what it means in a specific text? Can we know? How do we know as readers whether the author was thinking of the Buddhist term *samādhi* (and if so, in what Buddhist interpretation of this term) or of a pre-Buddhist interpretation of meditation or whether he is using it in a more general sense of enhanced concentration or perhaps simply being calm? Sometimes, such nuances are immediately clear from the direct context in which the term appears. Sometimes, we are able to infer such nuances from intra-textual analysis, comparing several instances of the same term in one and the same text. Sometimes, we have to rely on inter-textual analysis to examine the appearance of one and the same term in different but related texts. Often times, we simply have no way of knowing exactly what an author had in mind when he used a certain term. Perhaps it is often even erroneous to assume that an author himself even had a clear definition in mind when using a specific term. Do we always have an exact definition in mind when we use a term such as “meditation” or “mind”? Could a hypothetical reader a thousand years onward from now perhaps be equally puzzled when reading twenty-first-century English texts in which the word “meditation” is used? Was the writer implying associations with the Latin *meditatio*? Or was he alluding to the kind of methodical philosophical inquiry referred to by Descartes as “meditations”? Did he have the kind of devotional prayer in mind that was practised by some of the saints of Christianity and was called meditation? Was he seeking to refer to the Hebrew *hāgā* that entered the Vulgate as “*meditatio*” and English translations of the Bible as “meditation”? Or was he referring to any of the specific kinds of religious practice of pre-Buddhist India, Indian

Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, Daoism, et cetera that scholars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries called “meditation”?

These are not merely academic issues but they are at the basis of every decision we continuously have to make as translators and interpreters of texts and they determine the outcome of our efforts in the final version we present to our readers for another round of interpretation. For example, in her studies of the Qing period Longmen school, Monica Esposito translates *ding* as *samādhi*, including in passages from the late Ming author Wu Shouyang. When we examine passages in this author’s texts, we find that he definitely was aware of the Buddhist provenance of this term and that he used the term in ways that clearly suggest a Buddhist interpretation. But he also clearly attaches significances to this term that are very different from anything we find in Buddhist scriptures. He appears to apply this term in a literal way to the *shen* 神 that moves about in the body (and can be “stabilized”), providing it with a physical dimension that is absent (I think) in a Buddhist context. Thus, when he speaks of “exiting *ding*” (*chuding* 出定), which in a Buddhist interpretation would suggest that a practitioner comes out of a state of deep concentration, Wu suggests that the *shen* actually leaves the body and dwells outside of it. When, at this point, we would retranslate this late imperial use of *ding* into the Sanskrit *samādhi*, are we really rendering the term in a way faithful to what the author had in mind? Does it ever really make sense to “retranslate” Chinese “translations” of terms originally appearing in Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures back into Sanskrit?

The present book does not cover up such ambiguities but instead brings them to the centre of the discussion. This results in a sometimes meandering inquiry that goes off on tangents listing various possible interpretations. What appears at the end of this discussion is not a forced and misleading image of a unitary tradition of meditation but a kaleidoscope of related traditions that simultaneously show a lot of continuity and unity on the one hand and an enormous variety in interpretation on the other. The continuity exists on the level of themes and terminology. The term *ding*, to stick with the same example, appears in religious texts from the *Zhuangzi* to modern texts. Most texts on cultivation display a selection of topics taken from a gamut including manipulation of mental function, breathing, posture, sexual function, diet, and a few other main themes. But when we examine in detail how specific authors deal with these themes and terms, we do not see a unitary tradition but instead a complex, continuously developing debate in which traditions are mutually influenced, fight their polemics and perform their apologetics while expressing themselves in a shared vocabulary on a shared range of themes.

In the unity of these shared themes and idioms we can identify some larger historical developments, as Eskildsen also does in this book. Such a development is the major event of the introduction of Buddhist ideas in the form of terms and themes and the changing views on ontology, cosmology, and human nature that these

terms and themes suggest. First, some Daoist texts start to incorporate such ideas that people have series of rebirths and that during these rebirths they create *karma* which can then be eradicated again through certain practices. Later texts introduce less straightforward ideas such as emptiness of things and of the self and the emptiness of emptiness. These changes in ontological assumptions led some traditions to ignore the themes of the body, the notions of *qi* and “essence” and physical longevity or immortality. This in turn seems to have led to a reaction that is already visible in the late Tang when new texts start to reassert the importance of the body in cultivation practice. The impact of Buddhist doctrine is not eradicated but new codifications of ideas and practices rearrange old themes and assign a variety of new emphases.

This book mentions various ways in which the religious practices from Han to Tang anticipate the development of inner alchemy in the early Song and the author announces a planned second volume that extends the discussion in the present volume from the Song onward to focus on the traditions of inner alchemy. I for one very much look forward to this next volume as it would be great to be afforded the opportunity to look over Eskildsen’s shoulders as he reads with us the often extremely difficult to understand textual tradition or traditions that we now call “inner alchemy,” in order to share with us his careful and insightful translations and interpretations. Too often inner alchemy has been presented to the general public as a unitary tradition without, to use Robinet’s words, “any true doctrinal divergencies.”¹⁰ It would be hoped that Eskildsen shows us, as he did in this book, a variety of related text traditions that share a common repertory of themes and terms but that also show a splendid variety of viewpoints on the interpretation of these terms and a diverse debate in which we can identify idiosyncratic positions, appropriations, polemics, reactions, and reassertions that define the field of inner alchemy. Authors of inner alchemy texts, for example, made their own explicit distinction between proactive (*youwei* 有為) and passive (*wuwei* 無為) approaches (as well as the closely related distinction between gradual and sudden approaches). These distinctions belong to the shared terms and themes, but how did various authors interpret these terms and what does that tell us about their worldviews and concrete practices? It is in these “doctrinal divergencies,” which Robinet glossed over to be able to provide a cohesive picture of inner alchemy, that we can discover the actual human beings who produced these texts with all their personal views and ideas about human nature and its place in the cosmos.

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¹⁰ Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 225.