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A stairway to heaven : Daoist self-cultivation in early modern China

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The Way of Immortality

Immortalists, says Wu Shouyang, cultivate the way in order to become immortal. This “way” is the “way of immortality.” The idea of a “way” or “path” suggests that this practice involves a sequence of steps. The adept of inner alchemy (the way of immortality) travels a gradual path, as if gradually ascending the steps of a stairway that leads to heaven. As with a stairway, the way of immortality can be divided into discrete steps or stages. Stages can be further divided into substages. In this manner, the whole process of inner alchemy can be described as a sequence of stages. Inner alchemy is of course much more than a sequence of steps—it is also a theory, an ethical teaching, a social activity, and so on—but it is especially the sequence of the stages that provides a clear structure to the practice.

Wu Shouyang’s writings are characterized by their relative comprehensiveness, explicitness, systematicness, and detailedness and hence offer a unique possibility to analyze the process of cultivation practice. I have tried as much as possible to reconstruct this process on the basis of what can actually be found in these texts without assuming certain interpretations on the basis of other texts or the secondary literature. In this way, I have tried to reconstruct the cultivation process from the ground up. This is not always possible since several parts of the texts assume preknowledge on the part of the reader or because a detailed explanation is only transmitted through oral instruction. Although it is of course impossible to “un-read” what one has already read, I have tried to indicate each time when I have based my interpretation on other texts or other interpretations.

The chapter can be seen as having two parts which are divided in five sections. In the first part, I explain my approach to this analysis in more detail. Specifically, I focus on the idea of stages and examine the different elements of the texts that function as markers of these stages. This part ends with a schematic outline of the complete cultivation process in which these stages are integrated in a sequence. This sequence is framed by the twelve oral instructions of Wu Shouyang’s lineage which are arranged in the general framework of the Three Passes and what I call the “five periods.”

The second part of this chapter is a detailed examination of these stages of the cultivation process. This part is divided in four sections, conforming with four major distinctions in the sequence. First, I examine the preliminary stage that precedes the Three Passes. This is the so-called “refining of the self” that needs to take place before the practice of inner alchemy proper can begin. I distinguish two aspects. On the one hand, the ideal is here to “return to emptiness” whereby the mind is immediately freed of all disturbing thoughts. On the other hand, the adept is offered a program of discipline which allows him to take gradual control of his thoughts and behavior. Second, I examine the First Pass of inner alchemy proper. With all its complex details, this is perhaps the most difficult part of the process. Through an intricate coordination of breathing and concentration, the adept aims to intervene in the normal physiology of essence in order to conserve his *qi*. At the end, he has terminated the leakage of essence and replenished his original stock of *qi*. Third, I examine the Middle Pass during which the adept aims to use this accumulation of yang *qi* to transform his spirit. Through a process of approximately ten months of meditation, gradually increasing to what appears to be continuous meditation, the adept circulates the *qi* through the body, uniting it with the spirit as it becomes increasingly “yang.” Along with this, the spirit becomes increasingly clear, needing less and less sleep, culminating in the attainment of all of the spiritual powers. In the fourth and last section, we examine the Upper Pass during which the adept first aims to train his newly created yang spirit to travel outside the body and finally, at the end of his physical life, let his spirit return to emptiness. The first objective is a technique while the second objective is more of an indication of an ineffable “state” that is supposed to be attained, in an instant, while the adept (or rather the adept *as a spirit*) remains in constant samadhi. While the last stage is the most difficult to comprehend because of its mystical objective and its paradoxical descriptions, it is the easiest to describe in terms of practice because it only involves effortless meditation.

The Stages

In this first part of the chapter, I start by identifying eight different structures that arrange the process in discrete stages. First, the idea of the integrated cultivation of inner nature and lifespan that divides the process in two stages. Second, the idea of the “three passes” that divides the process in three transformations based on the three treasures. Third, the idea that these three passes are associated with three accomplishments. Fourth, the three relocations which describe the location of action associated with each stage of the process and the systematic changes of these locations. Fifth, the idea that these passes and accomplishments are associated with the five ranks of immortality. Sixth, the twelve oral instructions which describe the discrete actions and results of the process. Seventh, the five periods which provide the process with a periodization scheme, dividing the stages in discrete time blocks labelled on the basis of their metaphorical significance and presumed duration. Eighth, the five phases that describe the process in the terms of the alchemical metaphor, imagining the steps of cultivation as a sequence of alchemical operations. At the end of this examination, I provide a schematic outline of the cultivation process in which I arrange the twelve oral instructions in the general framework of the Three Passes and the Five Periods.

The Integrated Cultivation of Inner Nature and Lifespan

The concept of the integrated cultivation of inner nature (*xing*) and lifespan (*ming*) is in many ways the most basic concept in inner alchemy, describing human life as characterized by a spirit (*xing*) and a physical lifespan (*ming*). Here, we are concerned with establishing how this dyadic scheme of inner nature and lifespan relates to the stages of the cultivation process. First, there has been some debate over the notion that we can distinguish between the inner alchemy traditions of the Northern and Southern Lineages on the basis of how they prioritize the cultivation of inner nature and lifespan.²⁷³ It is suggested that the Northern Lineage advocates cultivating inner nature before lifespan (*xianxing houming* 先性後命) while the Southern Lineage advocates cultivating lifespan before inner nature (*xianming houxing* 先命後性). While some texts indeed contain such notions, Isabelle Robinet remarks that all schools advocate the simultaneous cultivation of inner nature and lifespan and that these divisions are artificial.²⁷⁴ Clarke Hudson notes that, no matter if such distinctions are artificial in practice, they are important in the discourse on inner alchemy because inner alchemists rely on them to think about their own tradition.²⁷⁵

Wu Shouyang does not mention a priority of cultivating inner nature or lifespan and instead continuously emphasizes that inner nature and lifespan cultivate each other; the adept uses his lifespan to cultivate his inner nature and his inner nature to cultivate his lifespan. Put differently, the adept uses his spirit to control his *qi* and make it return and accumulate in the lower elixir field, thus securing his lifespan. Then, he uses this *qi* to transform his spirit, thus cultivating his inner nature. But, as we can see, there is a logical sequence at play here. The adept needs to replenish his *qi* before he can use it to transform his spirit. Hence, the First Pass involves the cultivation of lifespan (*xiuming* 修命) and the Middle Pass involves the cultivation of inner nature (*xiuxing* 修性).²⁷⁶

But this is only part of the story. Several passages indicate that, all through the cultivation process, the adept needs to cultivate his spirit, which is his “self” or his inner nature.²⁷⁷ In the preliminary stage of refining the self, the adept is cultivating the inner nature and also in the last stage where the spirit is returned to emptiness, he is cultivating his inner nature. We could speculate that this is not part of the simple scheme that relates these concepts with stage one and stage two because the preliminary stage is not part of the inner alchemy process proper and because the last stage actually involves the deconstruction of the very idea of “cultivation.” In any case, the main importance of the concept of the integrated cultivation of inner nature and lifespan as explained in Wu Shouyang’s texts is that he sees the first two stages of inner alchemy as a two-step process of replenishing the *qi* (cultivating lifespan) and transforming the spirit (cultivating inner nature).

²⁷³ The historical nature of these lineages is a matter of debate. Here and elsewhere in this study, I treat them primarily as concepts appearing in doctrinal debates. For more on the history of the Southern Lineage, see Lowell Skar, “Golden Elixir Alchemy.”

²⁷⁴ Robinet, *Taoism*, 226.

²⁷⁵ Hudson, “Spreading the Dao,” 275.

²⁷⁶ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun, biji*, 4.21a, 7559.

²⁷⁷ If I appear to be confusing several different concepts it is only because these concepts are treated as synonyms in the texts: the inner nature (*xing*) is the spirit (*shen*) and is the “self” (*wu*); these are all different aspects of what is thought of as the same “entity.”

Table 3: Sequence of cultivating inner nature and lifespan

cultivating inner nature	refining the self
cultivating lifespan	the first pass
cultivating inner nature	the middle pass
	the upper pass

Three Passes

The cultivation process is divided in “three passes” (*sanguan* 三關), which are described as:

1. The “first pass” (*chuguan* 初關) of “refining essence and transforming it into *qi*” (*lianjing huaqi* 煉精化炁)
2. The “middle pass” (*zhongguan* 中關) of “refining *qi* and transforming it into spirit” (*lianqi huashen* 煉炁化神)
3. The “upper pass” (*shangguan* 上關) of “refining spirit and returning it to emptiness” (*lianshen huanxu* 煉神還虛)²⁷⁸

This model is mainly based on the three treasures and how they are supposed to interact during cultivation.²⁷⁹ Several studies of inner alchemy add a preliminary stage to this triad, called “laying a foundation” (*zhuji* 築基). Wu’s writings however explain this concept differently, as will be seen below. Some studies add additional stages to this triad, suggesting a fourth stage of “refining emptiness and uniting with Dao” (*lianxu bedao* 煉虛合道). This formulation can be found in some late imperial inner alchemy texts.²⁸⁰ For Wu Shouyang, the “uniting with Dao” appears to be the same as “returning to emptiness” and he does not refer to this fourth stage.

Three Accomplishments

The three passes are associated with the “three accomplishments” (*sancheng* 三成): the small accomplishment (*xiaocheng* 小成); the intermediate accomplishment (*zhongcheng* 中成); and the great accomplishment (*dacheng* 大成). These “accomplishments” signify the results of a stage and are associated with the ranks of immortality.²⁸¹ In the Zhong-Lü texts, human immortality represents the small accomplishment, terrestrial immortality the intermediate accomplishment, and spirit immortality the great accomplishment.²⁸² Wu Shouyang refers to these Zhong-Lü texts when he mentions the “three accomplishments” but describes them differently. He associates human immortality with the small accomplishment but, glossing over terrestrial immortality, he associates spirit immortality with the intermediate accomplishment and celestial immortality with the great accomplishment.²⁸³

²⁷⁸ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.5b-6a, 7599.

²⁷⁹ I discuss these three stages and the concept of the three treasures more elaborately in van Enkevort, “The Three Treasures.”

²⁸⁰ The literal phrase “refining emptiness and uniting with Dao” (*lianxu bedao* 煉虛合道) does not appear in any text of the *Zhengtong daoze* nor in the *Daoze jiyao*. It can be found in the *Xingming guizhi* and in Min Yide’s *Shangpin danfa jiec* 上品丹法節次 (in *Daoze xubian* 道藏續編). Min describes it as “destroying emptiness” (*dapo xukong* 打破虛空). Other terminology that is often mentioned as having the same meaning includes “smashing emptiness” (*jensui xukong* 粉碎虛空 or *xukong jensui* 虛空粉碎). Chen Yingning regarded this introduction of the idea of the “empty void” as an aspect of Buddhist influence and as a shift in Daoism, after the Tang, towards the “insubstantiality of the body.” See Xun Liu, “Scientizing the Body for the Nation,” 163–64. Wu Shouyang does not use the literal phrase “refining emptiness and uniting with Dao” and does not present this concept as a separate stage of the cultivation process. He appears to regard “uniting with Dao” as an aspect of “returning to emptiness” and he says, for example, “refining the spirit, returning to emptiness, and uniting with Dao 煉神還虛而合道.” He also says, “Striking emptiness means smashing emptiness to pieces 擊虛空者是打破虛空成粉碎也.” In yet another passage, he associates this idea with the standard formulation to indicate that the idea of emptiness or nonbeing itself should also be rejected: “not nonbeing and nonbeing 無無亦無.”

²⁸¹ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 2.16b, 7472.

²⁸² *Zhong-Lü Chuandao ji* 鍾呂傳道集 (DZ 263), 5b: “Zhong said, ‘Human immortals do not go beyond the method of the small accomplishment, all terrestrial immortals do not go beyond the method of the intermediate accomplishment, and spirit immortals do not go beyond the method of the great accomplishment. 鍾曰：人仙不出小成法，凡地仙不出中成法，凡神仙不出大成法.’”

²⁸³ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.109a-b, 7457.

The Three Relocations

We can also structure the inner alchemy process by looking at the location of action and the systematic changes of this location. During the process, the location of action is changed three times. In the terminology of the Zhong-Lü texts, this is called the “three relocations” (*sanqian* 三遷). It is also called “relocating the furnace and changing the tripod” (*yilu huandǐng* 移爐換鼎).²⁸⁴ Wu describes these three relocations. During the first stage, the action takes place in the lower elixir field as all essence is returned there and retransformed into *qi*. The tripod is a metaphor for the elixir field. The first relocation takes place after the successful completion of the first stage. The location of action is now relocated from the lower elixir field to the middle elixir field. During the second stage, the adept transfers all the *qi* from the lower elixir field to the middle elixir field. To be precise, the lower and middle elixir field should have merged at this point into one empty space, but many references are still to the middle elixir field. After the second stage, the location is relocated from the middle elixir field to the upper elixir field as the spirit moves from the heart to the Mud Pellet Palace in the head. Finally, at the end of the third stage, the location of action should be relocated from the upper elixir field to outside the body, through the celestial gate and returning to emptiness. These relocations also conform, according to Wu, with the notion of “returning the elixir” (*huandan* 還丹):

According to the discussion regarding “returning the elixir,” [Zhongli] answered Chunyang saying, “To return means to go somewhere and have something to go back to. The elixir refers to the elixir field. There are three elixir fields. *Qi* is in the middle elixir field. Spirit is in the upper elixir field. Essence is in the lower elixir field. From the lower elixir field, you relocate to the middle field, from the middle field you relocate to the upper field, and from the upper field you relocate out of the Celestial Gate. These are the Three Relocations. When the practice is completed, seeing that you have gone from the lower to the upper, there will be no more return.” I saw these remarks from Zhongli and they are the same as my master’s explanations.

按鍾離答純陽論還丹云“還者，往而有所歸。丹者，丹田也。丹田有三，炁在中丹，神在上丹，精在下丹。自下田遷至中田，中田遷至上田，上田遷出天門，是為三遷。功成，既自下而上，不復更有還矣。”吾見鍾離此語矣，聞吾師之說同。²⁸⁵

The Ranks of Immortality

The Zhong-Lü texts have defined five “ranks” (*deng* 等) of immortality. I discuss these in more detail in the next chapter. Here, I examine how they are associated with the stages of the cultivation process. Of these five, the first one is a yin spirit and is not something an adept should strive for. The four other ranks are all yang spirits. From human immortal to celestial immortal, they refer to the chronological attainments of cultivation. According to the Zhong-Lü texts, ghost immortality is undesirable and celestial immortality an ideal.²⁸⁶ The three accomplishments are associated by them with human, terrestrial, and spirit immortality. Wu associates these three accomplishments, slightly differently, with human, spirit, and celestial immortality.²⁸⁷

Table 4: Correspondence between “accomplishments” (*cheng*) and ranks of immortality

three accomplishments	Zhong-Lü texts	Wu Shouyang	
lesser accomplishment	human immortal	first stage	human/terrestrial immortal?
intermediate accomplishment	terrestrial immortal	second stage	spirit immortal
greater accomplishment	spirit immortal	third stage	celestial immortal

These are the explicitly stated associations. However, if we read the texts with these associations in mind, some passages will turn out to be problematic. To understand this, we need to examine the process in more detail. The human immortal is defined as the result of the small accomplishment, the first pass of building a foundation and refining essence and transforming it into *qi*. The terrestrial immortal is also associated with the first stage and with the building of a foundation.²⁸⁸ The key difference seems to be that, while a human

²⁸⁴ This term appears in the *Haiqiong Bai zhenren yulu* 海瓊白真人語錄 (DZ 1307), compiled by the disciples of Bai Yuchan.

²⁸⁵ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.15b, 7604.

²⁸⁶ *Zhong-Lü Chuandao ji* 鍾呂傳道集 (DZ 263), 5b: “something one dare not hope for 未敢望.”

²⁸⁷ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun houba*, *biji*, 4.86a, 7591.

²⁸⁸ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.67b-68a, 7582.

immortal still has sexual function and can only live forever as long as he keeps transforming his essence into *qi*; a terrestrial immortal is supposed to have eradicated sexual function permanently; all essence has been transformed into *qi*, he has left the realm of desire (*yujie* 欲界), and he has attained the “mark of the retracted horse penis.”²⁸⁹ Because the difference between the human and terrestrial immortal is not always clear in every context, they are both loosely associated with the first stage and with the small accomplishment.

The spirit immortal is defined with the second stage, the complete transformation of *qi* into spirit, and the exit of the yang spirit. But this is also not fully clear. The exit of the spirit is something which should take place in the beginning of the third stage after the adept experiences the signs to do so. And indeed, in several passages Wu states that the three years of nursing are associated with spirit immortality. The idea seems to be this. The second stage ends with the full transformation of *qi* into spirit, which means that the yang spirit is completed. In principle, this spirit could now also leave the body. But the adept should wait until it is ready to exit the body and then train it for three years. This takes place in the beginning of the third stage. Thus, we could conclude that spirit immortality is attained at the end of the second stage and continues through the first part of the third stage. Celestial immortality is associated with the return to emptiness and it is attained when the yang spirit leaves the body permanently to ascend to the heavenly realms. This coincides with physical death.

The Twelve Oral Instructions

In the *Straightforward Essays*, Wu lists twelve oral instructions that he claims were transmitted in the lineage from Qiu Chuji.²⁹⁰ Elsewhere, Wu refers to the transmission of oral instructions to his disciple Zhu Taihe, suggesting four groups of instructions without listing them individually.²⁹¹ When we compare these lists and assume that the transmission of Zhu Taihe was representative for the process of transmission, it would suggest that the twelve oral instructions were transmitted in four sets, as follows:

1. oral instruction for refining the essence in one hundred days (百日煉精口訣)
 - inner sign of the generation of the medicine (*yaosheng neijing* 藥生內景)
 - true work of gathering the medicine (*caiyao zhengong* 採藥真工)
 - work of operating the fire (*xinghuo gong* 行火工)
 - sign to stop the fire (*zhibuo jing* 止火景)
2. oral instruction for gathering the great medicine (採大藥口訣)
 - work of gathering the great medicine (*cai dayao gong* 採大藥工)
 - sign of obtaining the great medicine (*de dayao jing* 得大藥景)
3. oral instruction for the five dragons bearing the saint aloft (五龍捧聖口訣)
 - work of the three barriers (*sanguan gong* 三關工)
 - work of ingesting (*fushi gong* 服食工)
 - principle of maintaining the center (*shouzhong li* 守中理)
4. complete instructions of the united lineages of immortals and buddhas (仙佛合宗全旨)
 - sign to let the spirit exit (*chushen jing* 出神景)
 - method to let the spirit exit and to collect the spirit (*chushen shoushen fa* 出神收神法)
 - principle of refining the spirit and returning it to emptiness (*lianshen huanxu li* 煉神還虛理)

It is not clear if the maintaining of the center should indeed belong to the third set. Strictly speaking, the five dragons bearing aloft the saint specifically refers to the work of the three barriers. In any case, what these sets suggest is that an adept would first learn the first stage in full. Then, he would learn the second stage in two phases. Finally, he would learn the third stage. Here, Wu suggests that it is specifically this third stage that is referred to as the teachings of the united lineages of immortality and buddhahood.

The oral instructions divide the first part of the process in what I translate as “work” (*gong* 工) and “signs” (*jing* 景).²⁹² We could also say “actions” and “results,” because that is what they are. Each action

²⁸⁹ *Xianfo hezong yulu, biji*, 2.17a-b, 7473. This concept is explained further on in this chapter.

²⁹⁰ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun, biji*, 4.81a-82a, 7589.

²⁹¹ *Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.20a, 7630.

²⁹² Wu occasionally uses the two-character compounds “skill, labor, effort” (*gongfu* 工夫) and “sign, circumstance, view” (*jingxiang* 景象), thereby limiting the interpretive options of these individual characters. When we look at the context, both *gong* 工 and *gongfu* 工夫 clearly suggests the actions that need to be performed, hence “work.” The term *jing* 景 remains a bit more ambiguous; in

describes something that the adept should do and each sign describes something that the adept should expect to experience. Often, this sign is simultaneously also the indication that another action is due, as in the “sign to stop the fire” that is the result of operating the fire and the indication to stop operating the fire. In the last part, Wu speaks of a method (*fa* 法) followed by a principle (*li* 理) instead of “work.” Presumably this is because the third stage is supposed to involve only effortless (*wuwei*) practice.

The Five Periods

Inner alchemy texts often mention the approximate, expected duration of a stage of practice. These periods are named on the basis of the relevant metaphors associated with the stage. When we identify and list all these periods, we obtain a sequence of the whole cultivation process. Since there does not appear to be a name for this periodization scheme, I will refer to it here as “the five periods.” They are:

1. One hundred days of laying the foundations (*bairi zhujī* 百日築基)
2. Seven days of gathering the great medicine (*qiri cai dayao* 七日採大藥)
3. Ten months of nourishing the embryo (*shiyue yangtai* 十月養胎)
4. Three years of nursing (*sannian rubu* 三年乳哺)
5. Nine years of facing a wall (*jiunian mianbi* 九年面壁) or nine years of great samadhi (*jiunian dading* 九年大定)

The Fire Phases

Finally, another way to look at the structure of the cultivation process is provided by the alchemical metaphor of the fire phases (*huohou* 火候). Each of these fire phases refers to a discrete stage of the process. Wu mentions all kinds of fire phases. In one passage, he mentions a list of eleven phases which he says were transmitted in his lineage:

1. phase of gathering the medicine (採藥之候)
2. phase of sealing (封固之候)
3. phase of starting the small heavenly cycle (起小周天之候)
4. phase of the inversion of advance and retreat (進退顛倒之候)
5. phase of bathing (沐浴之候)
6. phase of sufficient fire and stopping the fire (火足止火之候)
7. phase of gathering the great medicine (採大藥之候)
8. phase of obtaining and ingesting the great medicine (得大藥服食之候)
9. phase of the great heavenly cycle (大周天之候)
10. phase of the completion of the spirit (神全之候)
11. phase of the issuing of the spirit (出神之候)

Daoist texts it often refers to the inner landscape or to what is sometimes translated as “effulgences,” which are “both deities and luminescent points” (Isabelle Robinet, EOT, 210). When we look at the usage and context of *jīng* 景 in these inner alchemy texts, it clearly specifically denotes the experiences of the meditator during or after meditation—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic—that are interpreted as indications of the efficacy of the “work” which preceded it. For example, the sign to let the spirit exit (*chushen jīng* 出神景) is described as a visual experience of falling snowflakes. The compound *jīngxiàng* 景象 is also glossed as “indication, sign” (*jìxiàng* 跡象)—as used for example in a medical context—and this seems closest to the meaning intended.

Outline

Table 5: Outline of cultivation process

Great Way of the Golden Elixir of Celestial Immortality (<i>Tianxian jindan dadao</i> 天仙金丹大道)	
<i>Preliminary Stage</i>	
0. Refining the self (<i>lianji</i> 煉己)	
First Pass (<i>chuguan</i> 初關) Refining essence and transforming it into <i>qi</i> (<i>lianjing huaqi</i> 煉精化炁)	
(1) One hundred days of laying the foundations (<i>bairi zhujī</i> 百日築基)	
1. inner sign of the generation of the medicine (<i>yaosheng neijing</i> 藥生內景)	
2. true work of gathering the medicine (<i>caiyao zhengong</i> 採藥真工)	
3. work of operating the fire (<i>xinghuo gong</i> 行火工) (i.e., <i>xiao zhoutian</i> 小周天)	
4. sign to stop the fire (<i>zhihuo jing</i> 止火景)	
Middle Pass (<i>zhongguan</i> 中關) Refining <i>qi</i> and transforming it into spirit (<i>lianqi huashen</i> 煉炁化神)	
(2) Seven days of gathering the great medicine (<i>qiri cai dayao</i> 七日採大藥)	
5. work of gathering the great medicine (<i>cai dayao gong</i> 採大藥工)	
6. sign of obtaining the great medicine (<i>de dayao jing</i> 得大藥景)	
7. work of the three barriers (<i>sanguan gong</i> 三關工) (i.e., <i>wulong pengsheng</i> 五龍捧聖)	
8. work of ingesting (<i>fushi gong</i> 服食工)	
(3) Ten months of nourishing the embryo (<i>shiyue yangtai</i> 十月養胎)	
9. principle of maintaining the center (<i>shouzhong li</i> 守中理) (i.e., <i>da zhoutian</i> 大周天)	
Upper Pass (<i>shangguan</i> 上關) Refining spirit and returning it to emptiness (<i>lianshen huanxu</i> 煉神還虛)	
(4) Three years of nursing (<i>sannian rubu</i> 三年乳哺)	
10. sign to let the spirit exit (<i>chushen jing</i> 出神景)	
11. method to let the spirit exit and to collect the spirit (<i>chushen shoushen fa</i> 出神收神法)	
(5) Nine years of facing a wall (<i>jiunian mianbi</i> 九年面壁); or nine years of great samadhi (<i>jiunian dading</i> 九年大定)	
12. principle of refining the spirit and returning it to emptiness (<i>lianshen huanxu li</i> 煉神還虛理)	

* In this outline, I have arranged the twelve oral instructions in the general framework of the Three Passes and the preliminary stage combined with the Five Periods.

Refining the Self and Returning to Emptiness

Before an adept can start with the cultivation of the inner alchemy process proper, he must first prepare his “self” to be able to function as the agent of this process. Wu describes two different approaches to this task: a gradual, active approach and a subitist, effortless approach. The gradual approach is called “refining the self” and it is described in chapter five of the *Straightforward Essays*. The subitist approach is called “the first return to emptiness” and it is described in the first chapter of the *Recorded Sayings*.

Refining the Self

The “refining of the self” (*lianji* 煉己) is described as a “preliminary task” (*xianwu* 先務) that precedes the cultivation of the three passes. Wu explains that the “self” (*ji* 己) is another name for the “original spirit” (*yuanshen* 元神), or the “intelligent inner nature” (*lingxing* 靈性) that resides in the heart. When inactive, it is one’s “true inner nature” (*zhenxing* 真性) and when active it is one’s “true intention” (*zhenyi* 真意), meaning the focus of one’s thoughts.²⁹³ This true self is distinguished from the “spirit of everyday use” (*riyong zhi shen* 日用之神). The self describes what we usually call the soul or the spirit, an aspect of the human being that is associated with mental activity, that represents the personal identity, and that is thought to survive the body after physical death. An important aspect is its role in what we call perception, as this is perhaps the main reason for distraction and thus hinders the concentration of mental focus. The self is thought to exit through the faculties of perception (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mentality) to contact the objects of perception (sights, sounds, scents, flavors, touch, and dharma).²⁹⁴

The term refining (*lian* 煉) suggests that this is an active practice that proceeds gradually. Wu defines “refinement” as involving six specific aspects: (1) to practice painstakingly; (2) to practice continuously so as to become skilled; (3) to maintain complete abstinence from what should be abstained from; (4) to have total commitment; (5) to completely get rid of desire; and (6) to get rid of all old habits and to avoid acquiring new habits. The refining, in other words, involves a complete program of training self-discipline and effecting behavioral change. Wu also compares the restless self with a monkey that needs to be tamed.

The self has to be disciplined before cultivation because it is the self or the spirit that is in control of the movements of essence and *qi*:

But that one has to first refine the self is because the true inner nature in our minds actually controls the essence and *qi*. When it is controlled in the normal manner so as to procreate, that is because of this inner nature. When it is controlled in an inverted manner so as to become a saint, that is also because of this inner nature. If you do not first diligently refine it, the familiar conditions are difficult to forget. How could you then liberate yourself from falling into bad habits and return the *qi* to [create] the embryonic spirit?

然必先煉己者，以吾心之真性，本以主宰乎精炁者。宰之順以生人，由此性；宰之逆以成聖，亦由此性。若不先為勤煉，熟境難忘，焉能超脫習染，而復炁胎神哉！²⁹⁵

The self needs to be disciplined so that it will be able to ignore all distractions, especially sexual distractions, and guide the *qi* in the inverted direction. Getting rid of desires is accomplished by disciplining one’s hearing, vision, and thought.²⁹⁶ Although this disciplining is not said to involve an actual meditation method, Wu does suggest that it helps in developing power of samadhi (*dingli* 定力; S. *samadhi-bala*), a skill that is essential for advanced meditation. Discipline is essential in all stages of the process. To determine the right timing, to finish the meditation process, to ignore sexual desires, and to ignore any kind of mental distractions.²⁹⁷

²⁹³ Intention is the conventional translation for *yi* 意, but this term should not be taken to suggest the “intention” to follow a certain course of future action to reach a specific goal. Rather, *yi* 意 suggests something we more commonly call “focus” or “attention,” that is, the focus of one’s mental activity. It is described by Wu as a function of the self, the active application of the spirit.

²⁹⁴ While the first five of these six senses should be self-explanatory, the sixth sense differs from these because it is not associated with a physical organ nor with physical sense objects. The sense of mentality has “phenomena” (*dharmā*) as its object, which can be physical or non-physical.

²⁹⁵ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.54b-55a, 7575-76.

²⁹⁶ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.55b, 7576.

²⁹⁷ In his autobiography, Wu gives an example of this kind of self-discipline in practice when he relates the story of being insulted and harassed. The method of refining the self (正煉己法) allowed him to ignore it (聞而不聞) and to not do anything in return (不還), thereby making it disappear (消之). See *Xianfo beizong yulu*, *biji*, 3.56b-57a, 7538-39.

The objective of cultivation is to attain a spirit that is serene (*jing* 靜) and concentrated (*ding* 定).²⁹⁸

There are several kinds of distractions. There are the obstructions of internal demons (內魔障). This can be all kinds of random thoughts that suddenly arise in one's mind. They become problematic when you cannot extinguish (*mie* 滅) these thoughts or when they keep coming back. There are also external demons (外魔障). These include external demons from heaven (外來之天魔): delight (*xi* 喜), fear (*ju* 懼), disbelief (*yi* 疑), and belief (*xin* 信). The external demons further include all kinds of other visual or auditory hallucinations. All of these demons become obstructions when you respond (*yingdui* 應對) to them. Refining the self enables the cultivator to ignore all such distractions.²⁹⁹

The First Return to Emptiness

Returning to emptiness does not describe a technique but rather an objective or an attainment. Emptiness is described in this context by Wu as Ultimate Nonbeing (*wuji* 無極), the cosmogonic state of unitary *qi* that precedes the division in yin and yang, activity and inactivity. He characterizes it as time (*shi* 時), suggesting that ultimate nonbeing is a cosmological state in the sequence of cosmogony. He says that, in this time, there was no heaven, no earth, no mountains, no rivers, no people, no self, no fauna, and no flora. Everything was empty (*kong* 空). At the same time, this emptiness is also described in psychological terms as the original substance (*ti* 體) of one's self or inner nature. Hence, emptiness is also a metaphor for a state of mind.

To return the self to a state of emptiness amounts to what is called maintaining a state of “no-mind” (*wuxin* 無心) when facing objects (*duijing* 對境). These “objects” are the sensory objects outside of the body; forms, sound, scents, flavors, and tangible objects. The term “no-mind” appears in the *Zhuangzi* and was adopted in early translations of Buddhist literature as a translation (and interpretation) of emptiness (*sunyata*). In the Chan tradition, it referred “either to a state in which all mental activity had ceased or one in which the mind was free of all discrimination, making it effectively equivalent to nonconceptualization.”³⁰⁰ In Wu's explanation, being mindless one realizes the emptiness of all phenomena, the thought process comes to a halt, and the faculties of perception become stable and uncontaminated.³⁰¹ Everything appears without shape (*xing* 形), trace (*ji* 跡), appearance (*xiang* 相), or shadow (*ying* 影).³⁰² The mind of the past, present, and future will disappear; that is, the mind becomes free from “conventional types of cognition.”³⁰³ Thus, Wu explains this state of mind as free from conceptualization and free from thought all together. A mind completely without cognitive activity.³⁰⁴

Subitism and Gradualism

How do the refinement of the self and the first return to emptiness relate to each other? Wu says:

The refinement of the self in the very beginning is merely the first entrance of its gate and one must still return to emptiness before one can enter its inner sanctum.

最初煉己，不過初入其門，仍要還虛，方入闔奧。³⁰⁵

Wu says that if one succeeds to return to emptiness one “immediately realizes the supreme vehicle.”³⁰⁶ The refinement of the self on the other hand is the “gradual method” (*jianfa* 漸法). The return to emptiness is an advanced form of refining the self. When the self has been refined it still needs to return to emptiness. But if an adept succeeds in returning his self to emptiness, there is no need anymore to practice the gradual technique of refining. Here, before actual cultivation begins, Wu speaks of the first return to emptiness. The final stage of cultivation also involves a return to emptiness. Wu calls it the last return to emptiness.

²⁹⁸ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun, biji*, 4.57a, 7577.

²⁹⁹ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun, biji*, 4.58a, 7577.

³⁰⁰ PDB, 1005.

³⁰¹ *Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.22b, 7631.

³⁰² Ibid.

³⁰³ Ibid. On “noncognition” (*bukede* 不可得; S. *anupalabdhī*), see PDB, 52.

³⁰⁴ Also see chapter six on the notion of emptiness.

³⁰⁵ *Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.22a, 7631.

³⁰⁶ *Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.22b, 7631: 頓證最上一乘

What Wu does here is to introduce the notion of immediate realization versus the gradual method of refining. The final objective of cultivation is the realization of the return to emptiness. The idea of inner alchemy is that an adept practices a method which allows him to gradually work towards this ultimate goal. Before cultivation begins, any adept needs to discipline the self because this self is the agent that performs the transformation. Simultaneously, the self is also the object of transformation; it is the self that is refined and returned to emptiness. When an adept practices the refinement of the self and somehow succeeds in suddenly entering the inner sanctum and realizing a return to emptiness this means he has attained immediate realization. In that case, there would be no more need to practice the gradual method of refining the self.

The First Pass

The first stage initiates the process of cultivation and transformation. Now, the adept actually starts to intervene in the normal course of human nature by transforming essence back into *qi*. This is expressed in the formula “refining essence and transforming it into *qi*” (*lianjing buaqi* 煉精化炁). It is the “first pass” (*chuguan* 初關) and since its projected duration is one hundred days it is also referred to as the “pass of one hundred days” (*bairi guan* 百日關). In the terminology of the Zhong-Lü texts, it is referred to as the “small achievement” (*xiaocheng* 小成). This stage also corresponds with the task of “laying a foundation” (*zhuji* 築基) or “building a foundation in one hundred days” (*bairi zhuji* 百日築基).

The retransformation of essence into *qi* is the first step in the reversal of the three changes that characterize the ordinary human life cycle.³⁰⁷ This intervention should take place at the precise moment when *qi* is activated and about to change into semen. This happens continuously at a critical moment in the endless cycle of activity and inactivity, at the ultimate of the inactive phase right before the start of activity. Here, a window of opportunity presents itself to the adept and every time this happens there is a chance to start cultivation and choose the path of salvation instead of the path of procreation. The objective of the first stage is to intervene each time that *qi* is activated and retransform this activated *qi* (essence) into inactive *qi* again. When the adept has done this for a certain amount of time, the *qi* will not move anymore and will remain inactive in the elixir field in the abdomen. Since *qi* does not become active anymore, there is by definition no more essence.

Wu distinguishes four sub-stages of the first stage, four distinct events and actions, that are identified with four oral formulas: the “inner sign of the generation of the medicine” (*yaosheng neijing* 藥生內景), the “true work of gathering the medicine” (*caiyao zhengong* 採藥真工), the “work of operating the fire” (*xinghuo gong* 行火工) and the “sign to stop the fire” (*zhihuo jing* 止火景). Before we examine each of these sub-stages in detail, let us briefly look at this sequence in general terms and with reference to the dynamics of the three treasures.

First, the adept has to await the activation of *qi*. This event is signaled by distinct conditions or “signs” (*jing* 景) that take place inside and on the outside of the body. In brief, due to the supposed connection between spirit and *qi*, the spirit is constantly aware of the *qi*’s movement and hence when the *qi* is activated the spirit automatically becomes aware of this. This is called the “inner sign” (*neijing* 內景). Simultaneously, there is an “outer sign” that is only explained in less explicit terms but strongly appears to signify a spontaneous erection of the male organ.³⁰⁸ In the metaphor of inner alchemy, the activation of *qi* signifies the generation of the medicine. Omitting the “outer sign,” this sub-stage is thus simply referred to as the “inner” sign of the generation of the medicine.

When these signs of the activation of *qi* occur, the adept knows he must intervene and thus what should follow is an action initiated by the adept. As a matter of fact, what follows are two consecutive actions. In brief, the adept first turns his attention inward to focus his awareness (his spirit) in the cavity of *qi* (*qixue* 炁穴), a location in the lower elixir field in the abdomen. When he does so, the activated *qi* will automatically follow the movement of the spirit and return to its original location in the elixir field. This, in brief, is the “true work of gathering the medicine” (*caiyao zhengong* 採藥真工).

Then, the adept initiates a complicated meditational exercise commonly known as the Lesser Celestial

³⁰⁷ On these “three changes” that characterize ordinary human life, see van Enkevort, “The Three Treasures.”

³⁰⁸ To be precise, Wu only suggests the notion of an “outer sign” but does not even directly use this term. He literally states, “on the outside, there is another sign 外別有景.”

Orbit (*xiao zhoutian* 小周天). This sub-stage as a whole is referred to as the “work of operating the fire” (*xinghuo gong* 行火工). First, the adept “starts the fire” (*qihuo* 起火), then he “operates the fire” (*xinghuo* 行火). The “fire” refers in the first place to breathing patterns.

The last sub-stage of the first stage is again an event that indicates the necessity to initiate an action. When the refining of essence has resulted in the complete retransformation into *qi*, the adept should stop the “fire;” if he fails to do so he might harm the process. The moment to stop the fire is signaled to the adept by the “sign to stop the fire” (*zhihuo jing* 止火景). There are actually three distinct conditions that indicate to the adept that all essence has been transformed into *qi*. At a certain point during the practice of the Lesser Celestial Orbit, the adept will experience a flash of light between the eyebrows, the so-called appearance of “yang radiance” (*yangguang* 陽光). When this happens for a second time, the adept should stop the fire and by the time it happens for a third time, the fire should be stopped. Second, the adept should be aware of the number of Celestial Orbits he has performed and at the time of the three hundredth Celestial Orbit, the fire should be stopped. Third, having completely stabilized his *qi* in the elixir field, the adept will experience the complete absence of normal sexual function signaled by the complete absence of penile erection.

1. The Inner Sign of the Generation of the Medicine

The cultivation process starts with the signs that the *qi* has been activated. In the alchemical metaphor, this active *qi* or “essence” is the “medicine” and the moment of activation of *qi* is thus also called the “generation” (*sheng* 生) of essence or the medicine. The oral instruction signifying this sub-stage is called “inner sign of the generation of the medicine” (*yaosheng neijing* 藥生內景). Although this only suggests an “inner sign,” the explanations of this instruction reveal that the generation of the medicine is actually signaled by two separate conditions; one “inner condition” (*neijing* 內景) and one “outer condition” (*waijing* 外景).

The Inner Sign

The inner sign is summarized in the formulaic expression “when the time arrives the spirit knows it” (*shizhi shenzhi* 時至神知). This expression suggests that the adept will become spontaneously aware of the fact that the moment of the generation of the medicine has arrived. This notion is based on the understanding that the activation cycles of spirit and *qi* are connected, expressed in the proposition “spirit and *qi* move together” (*shenqi tongdong* 神炁同動).³⁰⁹ As a result, when *qi* starts to move, spirit also starts to move and therefore the spirit becomes aware of the movement of *qi*. In theory, according to the same principle, the spirit could also activate the *qi*. When the spirit is activated because of something it perceives or because of certain thoughts, it might induce the *qi* to move. The adept should avoid this and therefore the refinement of the self is of paramount importance. Instead, the adept should maintain a detached state of mind and await the spontaneous activation of *qi*. This is expressed in the formula “outer medicine is generated before it is gathered” (*waiyao sheng er hou cai* 外藥生而後採). The outer medicine refers to active *qi* (essence) that has left its original location in the elixir field and has to be “gathered” and returned to this elixir field. But, importantly, the adept first waits for the spontaneous activation of *qi* before he actively starts to gather it.

The Outer Sign

Wu alludes to the idea of an “outer sign” (*waijing* 外景) indirectly by saying “when the medicine-*qi* spreads outside, there will be another sign on the outside” without further explaining this allusion.³¹⁰ Everything suggests that this refers to a spontaneous erection of the male organ. For some reason, Wu seems reluctant to explicitly say this. In later texts, the discussion of this topic appears to become increasingly more explicit. Liu Huayang speaks about “the time, is the time when the ‘exterior thing’ moves.”³¹¹ He summarizes the whole experience of the generation of the medicine in the following fragment:

³⁰⁹ We find this same idea expressed in many different ways. In the *Daoyuan qianshuo*, in a passage explaining the moment when the adept has to start intervening, Wu simply says, “When *qi* moves, the spirit moves 炁動，即有神動” (*Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.8b, 7600).

³¹⁰ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.81a, 7589: 藥炁馳外則外別有景

³¹¹ Liu, *Jinxian zhenglun*, 14b, 430: 時即外物動之時也

Moreover, when the *qi* is complete and the medicine numinous, when there is total quietude the natural mechanism will start to move. The whole body will naturally blend together and [you will experience] gentle and continuous happiness extending from the ten fingers gradually to the body. One's body will spontaneously rise straight up as a towering mountain out of rocks. One's mind will spontaneously become empty and quit, like the clear blue waters of autumn. The pores of the skin will start to itch, the body and mind will feel joyful, the penis will suddenly erect and the elixir field will feel nice and warm. In a sudden roar, spirit and *qi* will fold together like a magnet and intention and respiration will embrace each other like dormant insects. Some of the signs are difficult to describe.

且炁滿藥靈，一靜則天機發動，自然而然周身融和，酥綿快樂，從十指漸漸至於身體，吾身自然聳直，如岩石之峙高山，吾心自然虛靜，如秋月之澄碧水，痒生毫竅，身心快樂，陽物勃然而舉，丹田暖融融，忽然一吼神炁如磁石之相翕，意息如蟄虫之相含，其中景象難以形容。³¹²

Zhao Bichen similarly is more explicit when he says:

Now, the gathering of the external medicine consists of quickly tightening the Yang Gate and regulating the external medicine when the “outer yang” (i.e., male organ) erects and one recognizes whether or not the moment of the living *qi*³¹³ in the body has arrived.

夫採外藥者，外陽舉時，認清是否身中活子時到，速勒陽關，調外藥。³¹⁴

The fact that later sources present this interpretation is in itself not enough to draw any firm conclusions. But in combination with other facts the implication is clear. First, when we reflect on the significance of this particular moment in the cultivation process, a spontaneous erection is exactly what one could expect at this moment when essence is about to change into semen. Second, Wu's indirect terminology suggests a spontaneous erection, for example, when he reminds the reader of the importance of the refining of the self and its crucial role in order to be able to ignore any sexual desires. Third, one of the results of the first stage is that the penis erects no more. A reasonable conclusion might be that Wu's apparent reserve is instigated by the morals of the period. We can notice however that in other contexts, the discussion of sexually-laden topics is less problematic. We can find various passages on the inability of getting an erection (as a result of impotence or as a result of practice) or on the practices of sexual adepts. I believe that the reluctance to discuss the activation of *qi* in sexual terms is based in the fact that this was not interpreted as a sexual event and it should be avoided that readers would be tempted to read it as such.

2. The True Work of Gathering the Medicine

When the *qi* starts to move and the adept has become aware of this movement through the inner and outer signs, it is time to act. The adept must now intervene to avoid the natural process in which the essence takes the route that leads to “leakage” by turning it into the opposite direction that leads back to its original location in the cavity of *qi*, located in the lower elixir field. The first step is called “gathering” and is signified by the oral formula the “true work of gathering medicine” (*caiyao zhengong* 採藥真工). The “medicine” has moved outside its place of origin to the sexual organs and is therefore also called the “outer medicine.” The adept “gathers” this “outer medicine” from its location outside the elixir field and returns it to let it “enter the tripod” (*ruding* 入鼎). Hereafter, the tripod can be “sealed” (*fenggu* 封固), after which the fire can be started (*qihuo* 起火) to refine (*lian* 煉) the “medicine” and turn it into an “elixir” (*dan* 丹).

The gathering itself is not presented as extremely complicated. Its rationale is based again on the connection between spirit and *qi*. It is not only the case that *qi* is activated when the spirit is activated, the *qi* also moves where the spirit moves. This proposition is traced to the *Scripture of Embryonic Respiration*: “when the spirit goes, the *qi* goes and when the spirit halts, the *qi* halts.”³¹⁵ This harmonized movement of spirit and *qi* is however not to be taken for granted, it is something that the adept should bring about. Spirit and

³¹² Ibid., 39a, 479.

³¹³ The “living hour *qi*” (*huo zishi* 活子時) contrasts with the “death hour *qi*” (*si zishi* 死子時). The latter refers to the double hour from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. in the sequence of the fixed twelve double hours of a solar day. The living hour *qi*, on the other hand, is flexible with regards to the fixed double hours and determined by the generation of the medicine. It can occur at any time of the day and when the medicine is generated, the clock starts to run.

³¹⁴ Zhao, *Xingming fajue mingzhi*, 196.

³¹⁵ *Tianxian zhengli zixu, biji*, 4.3b, 7544: 神行即氣行神住即氣住. A quote from the *Scripture of Embryonic Respiration* (*Taixi jing* 胎息經; DZ 14). On this text, see Eskildsen, *Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity*, 258, which has “When the spirit goes, the *qi* goes. When the spirit stays, the *qi* stays.” I translate *zhu* 住 as “halt” in line with my other translations.

qi should “unite” (*heyi* 合一) and should “not [be allowed to] separate” (*bu xiangli* 不相離) and then they will move together and thereby enable the adept to “steer the *qi* with the spirit” (*yishen yuqi* 以神馭炁). When the right moment to gather the medicine has arrived, the adept needs to turn his full attention inward, or “revert the gaze and shine inward” (*fanguan neizhao* 返觀內照) and “concentrate his spirit in the cavity of *qi*” (*ningshen ru qixue* 凝神入炁穴). When he does this, the *qi* will “follow” (*sui* 隨) the spirit and return to its origin at the cavity of *qi*.

The real difficulty of the gathering is not in the gathering itself but in deciding the right moment to perform the gathering. The adept has to carefully evaluate the “medicine” and make two crucial “distinctions” (*bian* 辨). He has to differentiate his own state of mind at the time of the generation of the medicine, explained in the metaphor of the water source, and he has to differentiate the degree of maturity of the medicine, expressed on a scale from pre-mature to post-mature.

The Clear or Turbid Water Source

The first metaphor that illustrates the evaluation of the medicine uses the image of a water source (*shuiyuan* 水源) that can produce either clear (*qing* 清) or turbid (*zhuo* 濁) water. The “source” refers to the cause of the generation of the medicine.³¹⁶ More specifically, it refers to the state of mind of the adept during the generation. The “water” from this source refers to the essence. “Clarity” is associated with pre-heaven (*xiantian* 先天) and “turbidity” with post-heaven (*houtian* 後天). More concretely, a turbid source refers to having thoughts, in particular sexual thoughts, at the moment of generation of essence. A clear source refers to the absence of such thoughts; the spontaneous activation of essence in a state of complete serenity. When the alchemist in the metaphor would use turbid water in his operation, it would result in a “false elixir” (*huandan* 幻丹) while clear water would contribute to producing a “true elixir” (*zhen dan* 真丹).

Importantly, while the water signifies the essence itself, the evaluation concerns the source of this essence signifying the quality of the spirit. Hence, this metaphor reiterates the importance of the refinement of the self that should have been completed before starting cultivation. The spirit should be “without thoughts” (*wunian* 無念), in a state of “maximum emptiness and ultimate quiescence” (*xuji jingdu* 虛極靜篤). If, despite having refined the self, the adept had all sorts of thoughts, perceptions and cognitions while generating the original essence—signifying especially sexual thoughts—it would mean that the source of the water was turbid and the adept should “discard” (*qi* 棄) this medicine. If the adept was truly in a state of thoughtlessness while his *qi* started to move, he can consider the source of the water as clear and he can proceed to gather the medicine to refine it into a “true elixir.”

The Old and the Young

The second metaphor imagines a scale of maturity of the medicine that ranges from the “young” (*nen* 嫩) or pre-mature to the “old” (*lao* 老) or post-mature. When applied to the “medicine,” this scale of maturity signifies the degree of activity of the *qi*. When the medicine is too young, the *qi* will be too weak (*wei* 微) and when it’s too old it will tend to “scatter” (*san* 散) and be weak too. In both cases, the “force” (*li* 力) of the *qi* is too weak (*wei* 微) and this *qi* will be “not efficacious” (*buling* 不靈) and not useable to “form an elixir” (*jiedan* 結丹). Such weak *qi*, either too young or too old and scattered, is unable to replenish (*bu* 補) the stock of original *qi*, which is the objective of this first stage of cultivation. Further, this replenished stock of original *qi* is supposed to form an elixir or, in other words, form the “great medicine” (*dayao* 大藥) or “inner medicine” (*neiyao* 內藥) that will be used in the second stage of the cultivation process. The first purpose of this great medicine—this concentrated “pearl” of pure yang *qi* created during the first stage—is to “break through the barriers” (*tongguan* 通關) that obstruct the route of the *qi* through the body. To be able to do this, it must have “sufficient” (*zu* 足) strength. For these reasons, the adept must make sure to differentiate the exactly right moment of gathering when the degree of maturity of the medicine is not too young not too old but “accords with the time when it is not excessive nor insufficient.”³¹⁷

This idea is also expressed with reference to the commentaries that accompany the hexagrams of the *Book of Changes*, specifically the explanations of the Qian 乾 hexagram. This hexagram consist of six

³¹⁶ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.7b, 7406.

³¹⁷ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 3.24b, 7522.

unbroken lines of yang and each line is provided with its own explanation. This metaphor uses the explanations of the first, the second and the last line. The commentary to the first line reads “hidden dragon, do not use” (*qianlong wuyong* 潛龍勿用) and this illustrates that the force of yang *qi* is insufficient and useless. The commentary to the last line reads “haughty dragon, there is regret” (*kanglong youhui* 亢龍有悔) and illustrates that the yangness of *qi* is overdue and, again, has become useless. The right moment of gathering is indicated by the second line, which has the commentary “appearance of dragon, beneficial to meet” (*jianlong lijian* 見龍利見). The message of this metaphor is the same as the one seen above: the adept should be neither too impatient nor wait too long but, instead, wait for the opportune moment to gather the active *qi* when it’s exactly strong enough.

How does the adept do this? When does he know that the activation of the *qi* has reached the right degree of maturity? This, beyond the metaphors, is ultimately a subjective taxation on the part of the adept who has to evaluate his own inner experiences and can only be expressed in ambiguous terms: “sensing and not sensing it, sensing it again it is truly profound.”³¹⁸ The key thus seems to be that the adept should not act on the first awareness of moving *qi* but he should wait for the awareness to return a second time. First, he waits for the *qi* to move, then he waits for a second confirmation of this feeling and then he should act. The idea is formulated as a sequence: “there is no awareness but there is movement; there is real movement and you are aware of it; you are aware of it and then you are not aware of it; you are again aware of it and then it is truly mysterious.”³¹⁹ The adept has to wait for a second awareness of movement. Then, he has to act quickly, because, citing the perfected man Xu Fuyang, “when you first have to put on your clothes it is to be feared that you rise up too late.”³²⁰

Gathering Muni in Two Phases

Yet another metaphor that applies to the work of gathering is attributed by Wu to Bodhidharma and condensed in the formula “gathering *muni* in two phases” (*erbou cai muni* 二候採牟尼). *Muni* is a Sanskrit term for saint or holy one.³²¹ It refers here to the medicine. This formula occasionally appears together with two further formulae attributed to Bodhidharma: “four phases have a mysterious application” (*sibou you miaoyong* 四候有妙用) and “six phases [have] another spiritual skill” (*liubou bie shengong* 六候別神功). The mysterious application in four phases is explained as referring to the phases of the Lesser Celestial Orbit divided in a phase of “rising” (*sheng* 升), “descending” (*jiang* 降), and two phases of “bathing” (*myu* 沐浴) or, in terms of the double hours, the phases of *zi* 子, *wu* 午, *mao* 卯, and *you* 酉. The last phrase of the “six phases” refers to the sum of the two phases of gathering and the four phases of the Lesser Celestial Orbit.

But what are these two phases of gathering? The relevant passages in Wu’s texts are somewhat ambiguous, but the crux is clearly that the start of cultivation consists of a few distinct phenomena that occur in sequence: the generation of the medicine, the starting the fire, and the gathering. Consider Wu’s remarks:

Because the medicine is generated the fire is started; which means that when you make flexible use of the *zi* hour to start the fire this is called the living *zi* hour. The generation of the medicine and the generation of the fire occur at the same time and therefore the living *zi* hour of the fire is used to also refer to the medicine in terms of the living *zi* hour. Damo said: “in two phases *muni* is gathered” explaining that the gathering of the medicine uses two phases.

因有藥生而起火，即活用子時起火，曰活子時。藥生與火生同時，故以火之活子時，而稱藥亦曰活子時。達摩云“二候採牟尼”，言採藥用二候也。³²²

The “gathering of the medicine” takes place before the fire of the *zi* hour and the starting of the fire is the event of the fire of the *zi* hour. These two have to be clearly distinguished. Hence, this is what Damo said: “in two phases *muni* is gathered, four phases have a mysterious application.”

採藥者，子時火之前也；起火者，子時火之事也。二者必要分明，所以達摩云：“二候採牟尼，

³¹⁸ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.12a, 7554: 覺而不覺復覺真玄

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*: 非覺而動實動而覺覺而不覺復覺真玄

³²⁰ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 3.25a, 7523: 披衣又恐起來遲

³²¹ The Sanskrit *muni* means sage (or holy one, saint, et cetera) and is transcribed as *muni* 牟尼 or translated as *shengzhe* 聖者. It is part of one of the most common epithets for the historical Buddha Siddhārtha Gautama, namely Śākyamuni (*Shijia muni* 釋迦牟尼), the holy man from the Śākya tribe.

³²² *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.63b, 7580.

四候有妙用。”是也。³²³

Both passages are in agreement that the fire is started at the *zi* hour. This starting of the fire is the beginning of the Lesser Celestial Orbit examined below. It signifies that the adept has gathered the medicine in the tripod and is ready to start the fire to refine the medicine. Before the fire can be started, two things should happen first. The medicine must be generated, that is the *qi* must become active, and this medicine must be gathered, that is the active *qi* must be returned to its origin at the cavity of *qi* location. Now, in some passages both these events are also referred to as occurring at the same hour of *zi*. In other words, in various passages the hour of *zi* is associated with the start of the fire, the generation of the medicine, and the gathering of the medicine. It is apparently therefore that the perceived need arises to distinguish these events as happening in sequence instead of exactly simultaneously. As Wu makes clear in the passages above, in general terms the *zi* hour signifies the generation of medicine, the gathering, and the start of the fire, but in detailed sequence, one awaits the generation of the medicine, gathers the medicine, and then starts the fire at the hour of *zi*. The generation of the medicine is something that happens spontaneously and does not describe an action. The two phases of gathering *muni* thus signify the actual gathering and the starting of the fire.

That this somewhat unclear way of phrasing things was also considered confusing by the adepts themselves is confirmed by this passage in Liu Huayang's writings:

But “phases” are also not [just] one term. Whether yang is produced or the medicine is produced, only if *qi* is moving then that is one phase. Using the *qi* with the spirit is yet another phase. These are then the two phases of spirit and *qi* meeting and uniting. It is also said that when yang is produced it is one phase and when the medicine is produced is another phase; these are then the two phases of the occasions produced by the medicine and *qi*. Therefore, it is said “in two phases you gather *muni*” which is [the same as] this. Since the medicine and *qi* are produced at the outside, gathering and returning to the stove is one phase and sealing firmly in the stove is another phase and these are also called “in two phases you gather *muni*.” Or: To gather *muni* in two phases.

然候者，亦非一說。不論陽生及藥產，但有炁動者，即為一候；以神用炁，又為一候；此乃神炁會合之二候也！又曰：陽生為一候，而藥產又為一候，此乃藥炁所生之時節之二候也；故曰“二候採牟尼”者，即此也。藥炁既產往外，採歸爐為一候；而爐中封固，又為一候；亦謂之“二候採牟尼”。³²⁴

Liu Huayang suggest that there are different explanations of the “two phases of gathering *muni*” but that there are only two events: (1) the generation of yang or the medicine, which is the activation of *qi*; and (2) the uniting of spirit and *qi* to direct the *qi* with the spirit, or the “gathering.” The phrasing of the two phases may now be explained in two ways. We could distinguish the activation of *qi* or the generation of yang as the first phase and the production of the medicine as the second. Alternatively, we could consider the gathering and returning of the medicine as one phase and the “sealing” of the tripod as the second. In any case, Liu concludes a few sentences onward in this passage that these different explanations are not important when one understands what is actually going on in the body:

Although there are many phases there is no need to get obsessed about this. It merely amounts to blending the medicine when yang is generated, blending it until the *qi* is replenished and the medicine is produced, to gather it and return it, to move the orbit through [the hours of] *zi*, *mao*, *wu*, and *you*, and to return to the root. 候雖多，亦不必執著。不過是陽生調藥，調到炁滿藥產時，採歸運行子卯午酉，歸根即是也。

³²⁵

3. The Work of Operating the Fire

The third sub-stage of the first stage of cultivation is referred to with the oral instruction the “work of operating the fire” (*xinghuo gong* 行火工) and is explained to consist in performing the Lesser Celestial Orbit (*xiao zhoutian* 小周天). This sub-stage signifies the main task of the first stage. The first formula explains to the adept how to recognize the right moment to take action, the second formula explains how and when to

³²³ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun, biji*, 4.25b-26a, 7561.

³²⁴ Liu, *Jinxian zhenglun*, 53a, 507.

³²⁵ Liu, *Jinxian zhenglun*, 53b, 508.

initiate the cultivation process, this third sub-stage explains what the actual task is, and the final sub-stage explains when to stop with the operating of the fire. This sub-stage is the most complex part of the first stage and perhaps the most complex part of the whole cultivation process. Therefore, we will systematically unpack it as follows. First, we examine the concept of the Celestial Orbit and all its basic associations. Then, we will examine a range of concepts which are used to describe the respiration of the adept. Respiration includes breathing but also the flow of *qi* in the body. Next, we will examine the role of the spirit. Finally, we examine the alchemical metaphor.

The Lesser Celestial Orbit

Celestial Orbit

The Lesser Celestial Orbit is modelled after what appeared to be a daily orbit of the sun around the earth—caused, of course, by the rotation of the earth around its own axis—as well as a yearly path of the sun along the ecliptic, caused by the revolution of the earth around the sun. Rising in the morning and setting in the evening, the sun travelled along an imaginary path on the celestial sphere called the Yellow Path (*huangdao* 黃道). Another important imaginary path is the Red Path (*chidao* 赤道) which is described as the trajectory of the moon.³²⁶ During one day, the sun is seen as rising from below the earth, going to the top of the celestial sphere and going under the earth again. Completing this circle, the sun completes one celestial orbit (*zhoutian* 周天). Everyday completing one orbit, during a year the sun performs 365 ¼ orbits while everyday progressing along the ecliptic. The circumference of the celestial sphere (*tianti zhouwei* 天體周圍) is described as a circle of 365 ¼ degrees (*du* 度).³²⁷ However, the 5 ¼ degree are considered “intercalary” (*runwei* 閏位) and are sometimes dropped to define a circle of 360 degrees. Alternatively, the orbit is described as being 360 degrees and a “surplus” (*fenyu* 分餘 or *youyu* 有餘) or 360 degrees plus “five-odd degrees” (*wudu youling* 五度有零).

Common Explanations

The actual route of *qi* through the body during the Lesser Celestial Orbit is often identified as the closed circuit of the “control channel” (*dumai* 督脈) along the spine and the “function channel” (*renmai* 任脈) along the ventral axis. Wu Shouyang does not use these terms. He does describe a route that closely conforms with this one, but also appears to deviate in some details and hence we should be careful to assume that these terms are indeed considered to be the same routes. Further, most studies associate the Greater Celestial Orbit (*da zhoutian* 大周天) with a larger circuit that includes additional channels. This also does not conform with Wu’s texts, where the Lesser and Greater Celestial Orbit both travel the same route. The difference between them pertains to the way in which the adept controls the spirit and the breath, not the trajectory itself. Another issue is that the route is only explicitly described in the context of the unblocking of this route during the “work of the three barriers” and “ingesting of the medicine” in the beginning of the Middle Pass. Although this is not explicitly described, it appears that the great medicine of the second stage, the accumulation of yang *qi* that has form, can only travel this route after it has been unblocked. During the first stage, one transports formless *qi*. This appears to be the reason why it is not important during the first stage that the route of the Lesser Celestial Orbit is blocked.

Hours

The Lesser Celestial Orbit is characterized by “hours” (*shi* 時), referring to the system of the twelve double hours (*shichen* 時辰) which are named after the twelve Earthly Branches.³²⁸ These hours divide the Orbit in twelve spatiotemporal intervals. Cosmologically, the hours conform with the movement of the sun along its orbit as a function of time during one day. Applied to the Orbit in the body, they are abstract comparisons (*xubi* 虛比) used to provide the Orbit with what Wu calls regulated intervals (*jieshi chengxian* 節制程限). Hence, spirit and *qi* move along the Orbit in twelve stages, covering a given distance over a given amount

³²⁶ The common explanation of *chidao* 赤道 is the equator or the celestial equator (a projection of the earth’s equator on the celestial sphere). But in Wu’s texts and other Daoist texts, the Red Path is described as the path of the moon. The path of the moon cuts the ecliptic at a slight angle, but both are located in the zodiac.

³²⁷ *Xianfo hezhong yulu*, *biji*, 1.53b, 7429. In other words, a “degree” was defined as the distance daily travelled by the sun.

³²⁸ See table 11, first row.

of time. Four hours are particularly important. The hours *zi* and *wu* divide the trajectory in the two parts of ascent and descent. The hours *mao* and *you* divide these two parts in two again, marking the locations where the adept should pause for a moment during “bathing.” They are sometimes called the “four proper” (*sizheng* 四正) hours or simply the four hours (*sishi* 四時) and they are compared with the four seasons (*siji* 四季).

Sovereign Hexagrams

The twelve double hours are associated with the twelve hexagrams of the so-called “sovereign hexagrams” (*bigua* 辟卦) sequence.³²⁹ This particular arrangement of the hexagrams visualizes the alternations of yin and yang.³³⁰ This sequence of twelve stages is divided in two phases: a segment of yangization and yinization. Combined with the “hours,” there are “six yang hours” (*liu yangshi* 六陽時) and “six yin hours” (*liu yinshi* 六陰時). The waxing and waning of yin and yang during these twelve stages corresponds with the alternations of yin and yang during the twelve hours of a day, the lunar phases of a month, and the twelve months of a year, as well as with the twenty-four solar terms (*jieqi* 節氣). The most important moment in this sequence is symbolized by the first hexagram of “return” (*fu* 復) which represents the moment when yin has reached its maximum and yang starts its new cycle. The hexagram has one line of yang as its first line starting from the bottom and is described as “the return of the first yang” (*yiyang laifu* 一陽來復).³³¹ Hence, most of the metaphors of time refer to this moment.

Numbers

The Lesser Celestial Orbit is also characterized by numbers (*shu* 數). These numbers are based on *Book of Changes* numerology and they are associated with the twelve hexagrams and the twelve hours. They are calculated based on the lines (*yao* 爻) and the appropriate number of stalks (*ce* 策) corresponding with the hexagrams. Yang corresponds with Qian 乾 and the number nine. Yin corresponds with Kun 坤 and the number six. These numbers are then multiplied by four, referred to as “sorting out” (*she* 揲). Hence, every yang hour corresponds with 36 and every yin hour with 24. The yang hours correspond with 216 and the yin hours with 144 and they add up to 360, which corresponds with the rounded number of degrees of one complete Orbit. During the practice of the Lesser Celestial Orbit, the hours *mao* 卯 and *you* 酉 in the middle of each segment are designated as hours of “bathing” (*myu* 沐浴), when the fire is to be temporarily stopped (*xihuo* 息火) and thus they “have no numbers” (*wushu* 無數). The remaining five yang hours correspond with 180 and the five yin hours with 120 and thus add up to 300. The remaining five and a quarter degrees or days are thought of as intercalary (*run* 閏) numbers. They are also referred to as the “surplus” (*yonyu* 有餘).

Table

We can now arrange the twelve “hours” named after the twelve Earthly Branches, the twelve sovereign hexagrams, and the corresponding “numbers” in a table as follows:

Table 6: Correspondence of “hours,” “numbers,” and hexagrams

子	丑	寅	卯	辰	巳	午	未	申	酉	戌	亥
復	臨	泰	大壯	夬	乾	姤	遯	否	觀	剝	坤
初九	二九	三九	四九	五九	上九	初六	二六	三六	四六	五六	上六
36	36	36	-	36	36	24	24	24	-	24	24
180/216						120/144					
300/360											

³²⁹ See table 11, row two and three.

³³⁰ This cycle is sometimes also referred to as “waxing and waning” (*xiaoxi* 消息). Wu does not use this term.

³³¹ This phrase appears in Zhu Xi's *Zhuizi yulei* 朱子語類, in the chapters on the *Yijing*, in notes on the hexagrams Qian 乾 and Fu 復. It also appears in the Longmen lineage poem.

The first row from above shows the twelve hours named after the twelve Earthly Branches. The first phase consists of the six yang hours from *zi* 子 to *si* 巳. The second phase consists of the six yin hours from *wu* 午 to *hai* 亥. Seen as a cycle from *zi*, to *wu*, and back to *zi*, the cycle is divided by the hours *mao* 卯 and *you* 酉. The second and third row show the corresponding hexagrams and their names. The first phase shows the beginning and gradual accumulation of yang lines and the second phase shows the gradual accumulation of yin lines. The fourth row shows the names of the important lines.³³² The fifth row shows the corresponding “numbers,” 36 for every yang hour, 24 for every yin hour, and no numbers for the hours *mao* and *you*. The last two rows show the total numbers for each phase and for the two phases together, showing both the numbers including and excluding the numbers for the hours of *mao* and *you*.

Respiration

The Two Qi

The whole first chapter of the *Straightforward Essays* is devoted to the idea that ordinary breathing plays an essential role during cultivation. The two *qi* are what I call the pre-heaven *qi* and post-heaven breath. The adept of inner alchemy uses the three pre-heaven treasures as well as post-heaven breath. Wu laments the fact that writers emphasize either *qi* or breathing exercises.³³³ The idea is that, similar to the relation between spirit and *qi*, both *qi* and breath require each other in cultivation. As explained in one passage, the adept can gather and refine the *qi* and let the spirit and *qi* become one because of the breath. Vice versa, the breath can be subjugated and stabilized because of the *qi*.³³⁴

But what is it exactly that the breath is supposed to do? Wu says that the breath has the function of binding spirit and *qi* together, or put the other way around, making them “reluctant to part” (*liulian* 留戀). When the ordinary respiration is used in the correct way, it has the function of binding spirit and *qi* together but when it is used incorrectly, the breathing will only impede the movement of *qi* through the body. When you practice breathing exercises when the *qi* is not active, meaning that there is no generation of the medicine, then it would make no sense to use the breath to refine the essence because there is no essence. That would be like heating an empty pot. When you randomly practice breathing exercises without keeping measure it will impede the generation of active *qi*.³³⁵

Using Fire to Gather

In another passage, Wu explains that, contrary to the second stage where the medicine can be felt, during the first stage the *qi* is formless (*wuxing* 無形) and without appearance (*wuxiang* 無相) and hence the “medicine” cannot be felt. The adept can only feel the fire, which here appears to mean the effect of abdominal breathing in combination with concentration. In this way, the adept uses the fire to gather the medicine (*jiehuo wei cai* 借火為採). In other words, the “fire,” a feeling of heat produced by breathing, creates a sensation that acts as a placeholder for the *qi*. Cao Huanyang is cited as calling this, “sending a letter through the void in the Jiaji and Weilü [points] 夾脊尾間空寄信.”³³⁶

Respiration

The term respiration (*xi* 息) refers both to breathing and to the transport of *qi* through the body.³³⁷ Both are seen as an interconnected process of the two *qi*. In the sense of “breathing,” one respiration (*yi xi* 一息) is defined as a process consisting of one phase of exhalation (*hu* 呼) and one phase of inhalation (*xi* 吸).

³³² These names are “first nine,” “second nine,” “third nine,” “fourth nine,” “fifth nine,” and “top nine,” “first six,” “second six,” “third six,” “fourth six,” “fifth six,” and “top six.”

³³³ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.8a-b, 7552.

³³⁴ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun zhixu*, *biji*, 4.4a-b, 7545.

³³⁵ See, for example, *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.11a-b, 7602. The idea is that when one randomly practices breathing exercises, it impedes the generation of *qi*. Instead, breathing exercises are only useful at the moment when active *qi* (essence) is generated. Otherwise, the adept is boiling an empty pot (水火煮空鍋).

³³⁶ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.16a, 7604.

³³⁷ The modern notion of respiration refers both to the process of breathing or ventilation (inhalation and exhalation) as well as the transport of oxygen to the cells. Hence, while noting that the actual processes of respiration were imagined to function in a very different way, the term “respiration” is an appropriate translation for *xi* 息.

When specifically referring to the circulation of *qi*, this is called the “true respiration” (*zhenxi* 真息). The route of the true respiration is along the yellow and red path described below.³³⁸ True respiration is described as the “exhalation and inhalation of a perfected man” (真人之呼吸) and it contrasts with the respiration of ordinary men (凡夫) and their exhalation and inhalation through mouth and nose (口鼻之呼吸). The *Zhuangzi* famously describes the respiration of the perfected man as “through the heels” and Wu cites this passage once.³³⁹ He explains that the respiration of the perfected man, in contrast with the ordinary man, does not go in and out of the body. Further, it means that the adept should search for the location(s) of exhalation and inhalation of the perfected man (真人呼吸處). In one passage, this location appears to refer to the cavity of *qi* and it is suggested that the breath should reach this location.³⁴⁰ This suggests deep abdominal breathing, whereby it was apparently thought that the breath actually went down into the abdomen. In another passage, this “location” is described as the location where there ordinarily is no breath.³⁴¹ Here, the suggestion seems to be that, after unblocking the trajectory of the Celestial Orbit, the two *qi* can travel freely in places where there normally is no breath.

Three Hundred Respiration

The hours of the Lesser Celestial Orbit are associated with numbers and these numbers are associated with the respiration. Each of the yang hours, except for the hour of *mao*, corresponds with 36 respirations. Each of the yin hours, except for the hour of *you*, corresponds with 24 respirations. The *mao* and *you* hours in the middle are moments of rest. The first part of this cycle adds up to 180 respirations and the second part adds up to 120 respirations. Thus, one complete Orbit adds up to three hundred respirations (*sanbai xi* 三百息). But what does this mean? Are these the actual amounts of respirations the adept should perform during one Orbit? Some passages appear to suggest this and refer to “number of respirations” (*xishu* 息數). The 20th century interpreter Chen Zhibin appears to understand it in this way. Zhao Bichen, however, claims that this “counting breaths” (*shuxi* 數息) is a metaphor (*piyu* 譬喻). According to him, one inhalation conforms with the ascent along the back channel and one exhalation conforms with the descent along the front. Some passages in Wu Shouyang’s and Liu Huayang’s writings seem to suggest the same.

Three Hundred Celestial Orbits

When the *qi* starts to “move” (*dong*), it by definition becomes essence and tends to move to the male organ. Thus, each time this happens, the adept will experience the sign of the generation of the medicine—that is, the inner feeling and the spontaneous erection—and he will have to act immediately. The “medicine” should be gathered in the elixir field and transported through the Orbit in the body while the adept performs another cycle of three hundred breaths (real or metaphorically). This process should be continued until the *qi* shows no more activity and becomes totally inactive (*jing* 靜). When there is no more active *qi*, there is by definition no more essence and hence, all essence is said to be transformed into *qi*. How long this process actually takes is dependent on a number of factors. First, the replenishment of *qi* depends on how much *qi* has already been lost and this ordinarily corresponds with someone’s age. The older one starts to cultivate and the more *qi* has been lost through sexual activity, the longer it takes to replenish the stock of yang *qi* to its original amount. Second, the progress in practice depends on one’s adeptness (*shan* 善) in performing cultivation.³⁴² Thus, depending on one’s age and skill in practice the transformation of essence and replenishment of yang *qi* takes longer or shorter. When this process has been successful, the practitioner will experience three signs that indicate that all essence has been transformed; these are the conditions to “stop the fire” and thus to stop practicing the Lesser Celestial Orbit. One of these indications is that the adept has completed at least three hundred Celestial Orbits (*sanbai zhou tian* 三百周天). Although Wu does not explicitly make this calculation, one can surmise that in an idealized scheme the average practitioner would practice for one hundred days, performing an average of three Orbits per day.³⁴³ Presumably, one would practice more Orbits per day in the beginning when the *qi* is still very active and only occasionally at

³³⁸ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.19a, 7412.

³³⁹ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 3.37b–38a, 7529.

³⁴⁰ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun, biji*, 4.5b, 7551.

³⁴¹ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun, biji*, 4.23a, 7560.

³⁴² *Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.25b, 7633.

³⁴³ The first stage is supposed to take one hundred days. See the notion of the five periods in the beginning of this chapter.

the end, when the *qi* becomes calmer and calmer.³⁴⁴ In practice, it would depend on a combination of one's skill in practice and deficiency of *qi*. Some might need two or three hundred days or even more. On the other hand, some may accomplish this stage much faster. We are told that Cao Huanyang succeeded in fifty days and Wu Shouyang in two and a half months.³⁴⁵

Yellow Path and Red Path

There are several ways in which the route of spirit and *qi* through the body is described. The transport of *qi* through the body is the respiration of *qi* and this route is called “the path of the true respiration” (*zhenxi zhi dao* 真息之道). When spirit and *qi* are united, they travel together along this route. In cosmological terms, the spirit is the sun and *qi* the moon, the abdomen (*fu* 腹) is the Earth and the hexagram Kun and the head (*shou* 首) is Heaven and the hexagram Qian. Their path through the body is described as the Yellow Path and Red Path (*huangchi erdao* 黃赤二道). These yellow and red paths are described as “white channels,” located in the pathway formed by the left and right orifices in the vertebrae.³⁴⁶ The details of this route are described below, in the context of the unblocking of this route. It is considered a risk when the “fire” flows outside of these paths.³⁴⁷ When spirit and *qi* travel around the body, that is one Orbit.³⁴⁸

Moving, Halting, Starting, and Stopping

The movement of *qi* in the body is characterized by four dynamics: “moving” (*xing* 行), “halting” (*zhu* 住), “starting” (*qi* 起), and “stopping” (*zhi* 止). The “starting” and “stopping” position is in the lower elixir field, corresponding with the hour *zi*. When the *qi* travels through the body, making a full Orbit from the hour *zi* to the hour *hai* and back to *zi*, it continuously “starts” to move, “moves” to the next position, “stops” and “halts” at the next position.

Ascent and Descent

The revolution of one Orbit is described in two phases whereby the spirit and *qi* “ascend” (*sheng* 升) along the spine and “descend” (*jiang* 降) along the ventral axis. It is usually discussed in general terms, saying that there is ascent in the back (*hou* 後), or from the abdomen to the head, and descent in the front (*qian* 前), or from the head back to the abdomen. Some passages emphasize that when one practices ascent, there should be no descent and vice versa. Other passages suggest that during ascent there is also descent and vice versa, suggesting that it is a matter of emphasis. The knack of ascent and descent is said to be in its reversal (*diandao* 顛倒), meaning that ascent turns into descent at the hour *wu* and at the location of the Mud Pellet Palace in the head.³⁴⁹

Advance and Retreat

The two phases of the revolution of the Orbit are also referred to in alchemical terms as a phase of “advancing the yang fire” (*jìn yanghuo* 進陽火) and a phase of “retreating the yin tally” (*tūi yīnfú* 退陰符). Wu explains that these terms from alchemy refer to heating the furnace by “advancing” the fire or cooling the furnace by “retreating” the fire. Hence, these terms suggest, Wu says, “increase” (*jiāduo* 加多) and “decrease” (*jiǎnshǎo* 減少).³⁵⁰ In cultivation, this metaphor refers to the two segments of the Orbit. During the phase of ascent of the yang hours, the adept advances the yang fire and during the phase of descent during the yin hours the adept retreats the yin tally. This logic is based on the numbers: yang hours are higher in number than yin hours. Wu emphasizes that these terms do not mean that there is some increase or decrease or something coming in or going out of the body. For practical purpose, advance and retreat

³⁴⁴ Although the passage translated in chapter one on “practising the first stage” suggests the opposite since Wu informs his readers that he practiced more and more orbits per night as he progressed.

³⁴⁵ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.33a, 7613.

³⁴⁶ This notion of “white channels” (*baimai* 白脈) appears to derive from Tibetan medicine, which makes a distinction between black and white channels whereby, apparently, black channels describe blood vessels and white channels describe nerves. Wu does not elaborate on his own understanding of these concepts.

³⁴⁷ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.32a, 7418.

³⁴⁸ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.54a, 7429.

³⁴⁹ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.78b, 7441.

³⁵⁰ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.38a-b, 7567.

are synonymous to ascent and descent and Wu also speaks of “advance and ascent” (*jinsheng* 進升) and “retreat and descent” (*tuijiang* 退降).

Reversal

The concept of reversal (*diandao* 顛倒) is mentioned several times as a crucial aspect of cultivation, particularly in connection with the fire phases of “advance and ascent” and “retreat and descent.” The reversal of yin and yang refers here to the fact that after the yang hours the sequence continues with the six yin hours. Thus, at the middle of the cycle, at the hour *wu* and at the location of the Mud Pellet Palace in the head, the cycle reverses from yang to yin and from “advance and ascent” to “retreat and descent.”

Bathing

At the hours of *mao* 卯 and *you* 酉, the adept must practice “bathing” (*myu* 沐浴). This bathing signifies a period of rest in between the operation of the fire. During these periods, the adept should not practice the fire (*buxing huo* 不行火) but “practice bathing” (*xing myu* 行沐浴).³⁵¹ A few times, Wu refers to it as a time of “nourishing” (*yang* 養) or more specifically “warming and nourishing” (*wenyang* 溫養), or perhaps “nourish with warm [fire].” This last image is suggestive of the alchemist who temporarily keeps his concoction on a low fire—on the back burner, so to speak—in between periods of active refinement and the term is occasionally contrasted with “steaming” (*xunzheng* 薰蒸) which suggests that the fire is poked up until the brew starts to boil. Some texts use the term “civil fire” (*wenhuo* 文火) to denote a gentle fire and “martial fire” (*wuhuo* 武火) to denote an intense fire. Wu’s use of these terms however suggests that the “martial fire” applies to the Lesser Celestial Orbit during the first stage of practice while the civil fire applies to the Greater Celestial Orbit during the second stage of practice.

One Qi

Wu only uses the expression “one *qi*” (*yiqi* 一氣) one or two times, but it suggests an important idea to understand the logic of cultivation. During the practice of the Orbit, the breath that is inhaled and exhaled should intertwine (*guan chuan* 貫串) with the *qi* and from beginning to end they should not part again. When they do part, they become two threads (*ertou xu* 二頭緒) or even more. This is caused by a scattered mind and distracting thoughts (*tajian* 他見). It prohibits the creation of “fire.” Hence, the adept needs to avoid any distractions and use his undivided spirit to direct breath and *qi*.³⁵²

Regulating the Respiration

Wu mentions the concept of “regulating the respiration” (*tiaoxi* 調息). He emphasizes that this does not merely refer to counting the breath or “holding the breath” (*bixi* 閉息), as it was apparently often understood. What needs to be regulated, Wu says, is the mysterious mechanism of the inner function (內用之玄機) of respiration. This means that it refers to the inner circulation of *qi* rather than “the ordinary man’s” breathing practices. But breathing, that is, inhalation and exhalation of breath, is part of the concept of respiration and when we examine the relevant passages, Wu merely seems to be emphasizing that the ultimate objective is the manipulation of inner *qi* but that regulating breathing is an important part of this process.³⁵³ It is closely connected with the concepts of “interdependence of mind and respiration” (*xinxi xiangyi* 心息相依) and “harmonious flow” (*chonghe* 沖和) discussed below.

The Interdependence of Mind and Respiration

The concept of “interdependence of mind and respiration” (*xinxi xiangyi* 心息相依) refers to the idea that during meditation, the activity of the mind and respiration should be coordinated. The mind is associated

³⁵¹ This analogy between *xinghuo* 行火 and *xing myu* 行沐浴 further confirms my decision to read *xing* 行 as “carrying out” or “practicing” instead of the commonly seen “circulating.”

³⁵² *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.39a-b, 7568.

³⁵³ Many concepts of inner alchemy have several layers of meaning and disciples are gradually confronted with deeper layers. The discussion of “regulating respiration” is a good example of this. Wu explains this logic explicitly as gradually progressing from the coarse (*cu* 粗) and superficial (*qian* 淺) to the refined (*jing* 精) and profound (*shen* 深). It applies to topics which are hard to put into words (難言) because they are so complex. See *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.18a-b, 7411.

with the spirit and the respiration with the two *qi*, that is, with ordinary breathing and with the movement of *qi* in the body.³⁵⁴ It applies in the first place to the first stage, when spirit and *qi* should be united during the Lesser Celestial Orbit.³⁵⁵ It is usually expressed in terms of spirit and *qi* following each other (*xiangsui* 相隨) in their movements (moving [*xing* 行] or halting [*zhu* 住]). Spirit and *qi* are compared with husband and wife, and when they are coordinated and follow each other they are like “husband and wife standing shoulder to shoulder” (*fuqi bingjian* 夫妻並肩). It is also discussed as one aspect of the regulation of the respiration (*tiaoxi* 調息). When the respiration is regulated, mind and respiration are coordinated and when they are not coordinated the respiration is not regulated.

Harmonious Flow

The concept of “harmonious flow” (*chonghe* 沖和) is explained as the flowing in harmony of the two *qi* during respiration.³⁵⁶ It signifies that breath and *qi* are completely merged and flow uninterrupted through the whole body. This flow is not obstructed by breathing nor limited by ascent and descent. Harmonious flow is the objective of the regulation of respiration.³⁵⁷ The signs (*jingxiang* 景象) of harmonious flow are evenhandedness (*bupian buyi* 不偏不倚), freedom from excess and deficiency (*wuguo buji* 無過不及), being neither too fast nor too slow (*buji buxu* 不疾不徐), and not being absent nor present (*feiwu feiyou* 非無非有). These are described as the eight illnesses (*babing* 八病).³⁵⁸ The first one means that one is too rigid and unbalanced. The second is explained as referring to the use of the intention that should not be too impatient (*ji* 急) nor too relaxed (*huan* 緩). The third illness suggests that when one is too fast, the *qi* “floats away” (*fudang* 浮蕩) and when one is too slow, the *qi* stagnates (*tingzhi* 停滯). The fourth illness appears to mean that one should not imagine something to be there when there is nothing there and vice versa one should not ignore something that is actually there. When these eight illnesses are cured, one can obtain a harmonious flow. The effects of harmonious flow are described as “husband and wife standing shoulder to shoulder,” “yin and yang united as one” (*yinyang beji* 陰陽合一), “moving together during the daytime without going in front or lacking behind” (晝則同行，不前不後), and “halting together during the night, staying put without being compelled” (夜則同住，不逼不離).³⁵⁹

Subjugating the Breath

The breathing technique of the first stage is called “subjugating the breath” (*fuqi* 伏氣) and is contrasted in some passages with the embryonic breathing of the second stage. It is explained as returning and subjugating the breath in the lower elixir field at the “root of *qi*” (*qigen* 炁根), which is the cavity of *qi*. By doing so, the *qi* and the spirit also return to this point and the three unite as one.

Closing and Opening

Breathing is explained as involving a mechanism of closing and opening (*hepi* 闔闢).³⁶⁰ Normally, Wu explains, when one exhales, the “pivot of breath” (*qishu* 氣樞) turns outward and opens (*pi* 闢). When one inhales, the pivot of breath turns inward and closes (*he* 闔). During the practice of the Orbit, the adept follows the “axis of breath” (*qizhou* 氣軸) and reverses (*nizhuan* 逆轉) the opening and closing. Wu further explains, when the “inhalation” (*xiji* 吸機) closes, “I turn and reach Qian using rising as advancing 我則轉而至乾以升為進也” and when the exhalation (*hujì* 呼機) opens, “I turn and reach Kun using descending

³⁵⁴ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.70a-b, 7437.

³⁵⁵ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 3.26a-b, 7523.

³⁵⁶ *Tianxian zhengli zhilun*, *biji*, 4.64b, 7580; *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.28b, 7416.

³⁵⁷ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.29b, 7417.

³⁵⁸ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.30a-b, 7417. We might say that there are four aspects with each two types of excess. For example, the aspect of speed is characterized by the excesses of being too fast or too slow.

³⁵⁹ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.30b-31a, 7417-18.

³⁶⁰ The phrase closing and opening (*hepi* 闔闢) seems to be derived from the *Yijing*, which says, in James Legge’s translation: “Thus, a door shut may be pronounced (analogous to) [Kun] (or the inactive condition), and the opening of the door (analogous to) [Qian] (or the active condition). The opening succeeding the being shut may be pronounced (analogous to what we call) a change; and the passing from one of these states to the other may be called the constant course (of things). 是故，闔戶謂之坤；闢戶謂之乾；一闔一闢謂之變；往來不窮謂之通” (James Legge, *The Sacred Books of China*, Part IV, 372).

as retreating 我則轉而至坤以降為退也。”³⁶¹ Wu’s remarks remain ambiguous. Liu Huayang explains that opening and closing refers to inhalation and exhalation. It applies to the interaction of breath and *qi* and their rhythm (*xiaoxi* 消息). When the adept inhales, the *qi* ascends and when he exhales, the *qi* descends.³⁶² Zhao Bichen gives a similar explanation and adds that the adept should simultaneously roll his eyes in circles.³⁶³ According to Lu K’uan Yü, in his 1970 translation of Zhao Bichen’s texts, closing the mechanism of inhalation signifies the inhalation of air simultaneously with the ascent of *qi* through the control channel. The opening of the mechanism of exhalation signifies the exhalation of air and the simultaneous descent of *qi* through the function channel.³⁶⁴ Chen Zhibin’s interpretation appears to explain the mechanism of closing and opening as referring to what is normally called reverse abdominal breathing, whereby one contracts the abdominal muscles during inhalation and expands the abdomen during exhalation.

The Spirit

Concentrating the Spirit in the Cavity of Qi

The role of the spirit is to “control” or “direct” (*zai* 宰; *zhu* 主宰) the movement of *qi*. The *qi* can act on its own or it can be directed by the spirit. When it starts to move, the spirit can direct its movement in two ways: along the natural course (*shun* 順) from the elixir field to the male organ, to change into essence and exit the body as semen, or contrary to the natural course (*ni* 逆) back upwards from the genital region to the elixir field and then upwards along the spine to the head transforming back into *qi*. The main technique of the spirit during the first stage is described as “concentrating the spirit in the cavity of *qi*” (*ningshen ru qixue* 凝神入炁穴).

The cavity of *qi* is located in the lower elixir field. It is the native location (*benwei* 本位) of *qi*, just like the heart is the native location of the spirit. Its location is fixed during pregnancy as the location where the *qi* settles (*zhuoluochu* 著落處), suggesting that its position cannot be defined precisely in spatial terms because it differs per person.³⁶⁵ This location has various different names, including “root of *qi*” (*qigen* 炁根) and “mysterious valley” (*xuangu* 玄谷). During the first stage, it is in alchemical terms also the location of the tripod (*ding* 鼎) and furnace (*lu* 爐). In the second stage, the lower and middle elixir field merge and hence the cavity of *qi* can then also refer to this fusion of the cavity of *qi* and the “yellow court,” the location where the embryo is conceived (*jietai* 結胎). Even though its exact location varies per person, we can say that it is located in the abdomen, in the lower elixir field, somewhere between the heart and the male organ, between the navel and the kidneys in the back.³⁶⁶

To gather the medicine, the adept reverts the gaze and shines inwardly (*fangan neizhao* 返觀內照), concentrates the spirit (*ningshen* 凝神) or his intention (*yi* 意) in the cavity of *qi* and by doing so the *qi* follows the spirit to this location.³⁶⁷ This is described in various ways, such as, “when the spirit returns inside the body, the *qi* returns by itself 神返身中炁自回.” The rationale is based on the idea that the spirit and *qi* follow each other and move and halt together. Although this is discussed as a natural mechanism, the adept

³⁶¹ I am not certain what this means.

³⁶² See several passages in Liu Huayang’s *Jinxian zhenlun*.

³⁶³ Zhao Bichen, *Xingming fajue mingzhi*, 144–147.

³⁶⁴ See Lu K’uan Yü, *Taoist Yoga*, 38–39 and 187.

³⁶⁵ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 3.32a, 7526.

³⁶⁶ Wu quotes Liao Chanhui’s 廖蟾輝 *Sansheng neipian* 三乘內篇 saying, “in front facing the navel wheel, in the back facing the kidneys; in the middle there is a true golden tripod 前對臍輪後對腎，中間有個真金鼎。Liao was a disciple of Bai Yuchan. This text only seems to be known through a quote in Yu Yan’s *Zhouyi cantong qi fabui* 周易參同契發揮 (DZ 1005). On this text, see Eskildsen, “Some Wondrous Effects of Inner Calm.” This suggests that the tripod is located between the navel chakra and the “kidneys,” which could mean the kidneys in the back or the testicles. In another passage, Wu answers a disciple who cites claims that the tripod is the navel, one and a half cm (一寸三分) below the navel, at the suprapubic margin (外腎上之毛際), between the heart and the “kidneys” (the testicles), or just above the navel. Wu ridicules these claims and says that the field is located where the elixir is generated. It is not, he says, an acupuncture point. See *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 3.35b, 7528.

³⁶⁷ There is not really a difference here between *shen* 神 and *yi* 意. The true intention (*zhenyi* 真意) is described as the function (*yong* 用) of the spirit, whereby the spirit is the substance (*ti* 體). As Wu says, “Now, when the original spirit is inactive it is the substance and when the true intention has stimulus and fulfilment this is the function. The original spirit and the true intention are originally one thing. One can call it original spirit or one can call it true intention. 蓋元神不動為體，真意感通為用，元神真意本一物也；言元神可也，言真意亦可也。” In some context, it is the spirit that is concentrated while in other contexts it is the intention.

is also told to let the spirit and *qi* become one (神炁合一), to let the spirit be within the *qi* (神在炁中), to let spirit and *qi* have intercourse (神炁有交媾), to let them continuously have awareness of each other (相知), to let the medicine (*qi*) and fire (here, the spirit) be as one, and so on. The objective is to be able to “direct the *qi* with the spirit” (以神馭炁). When the adept starts the fire and begins the Lesser Celestial Orbit, during which the *qi* is directed through the trajectory of the Orbit, spirit and *qi* should remain united and hence this is also called “concentrating the spirit in the cavity of *qi*.”³⁶⁸

The Alchemical Metaphor

The Tripod

In the alchemical metaphor, the “tripod” (*dingqi* 鼎器 or *ding* 鼎) represents the location of the action.³⁶⁹ Simply put, the tripod refers to the elixir field. Just like the alchemist refines lead and mercury in the tripod to create precious metals, the adept refines his *qi* and his spirit in the elixir field to achieve perfection (*zhen* 真). However, the tripod is not one specific location in the body but rather a location that can be found at different places during different stages of practice. Although the meaning of the term “tripod” is thus not fixed, it is also not random. It has a different meaning according to the three stages of the cultivation process. Wu makes a distinction between an “inner tripod” (*neiding* 內鼎) and an “outer tripod” (*waiding* 外鼎). The outer tripod refers to the shape (*xing* 形) of the elixir field. The inner tripod is the *qi* within this elixir field. During the first stage, the outer tripod functions as the location for the *qi* (the outer medicine) to return to; it is located somewhere in the middle of the abdomen between the navel and the kidneys. The inner tripod is in this case the spirit, as it is used as the “master” of the *qi* to guide it to the outer tripod. During the second stage, the location of the action shifts to the middle elixir field in the heart area. Now, the accumulated *qi* in the lower elixir field is the inner tripod and the middle elixir field—the location of the spirit, which is now also the object of cultivation—the outer tripod.

The notion of the tripod is another symbol of the interdependency (*buxiang yi* 互相依) of spirit and *qi*, or inner nature and lifespan. During the first stage, lifespan (*qi*) depends on the inner nature (spirit) to find its own completion; *qi* depends on spirit to be transformed. During the second stage, likewise, inner nature depends on lifespan to accomplish itself; spirit depends on *qi* to be transformed. Without *qi*, the spirit has nothing to focus on and without spirit, *qi* has nothing to guide it. They are each other’s “refuge” (*guiyi* 歸依) and the tripod symbolizes their point of convergence.

The Medicine

The term “medicine” (*yaowu* 藥物 or simply *yao* 藥) has a general sense and a specific sense. In the general sense, it refers to the ingredients of the cultivation process, the three treasures. However, in the specific sense the medicine is a metaphor for “original *qi*” (*yuanci* 元炁), itself a synonym for pre-heaven *qi*. From the perspective of the adept, who tries to restore his original supply of *qi*, this “medicine” has to be regained from the “true essence” (*zhenjing* 真精). Hence, we also see it referred to as essence-*qi* (*jingqi* 精炁).³⁷⁰ The “outer medicine” (*waiyao* 外藥) is the *qi* that during the first stage of practice is returned to its origin in the elixir field. The “inner medicine” (*neiyao* 內藥) or “great medicine” (*dayao* 大藥) is the result of the first stage, the accumulation of *qi* in the elixir field, that in turn forms the ingredient (the medicine) for the next stage. The difference in conceptions of the medicine during the first and second stage of practice has implications for the “gathering” (*cai* 採) of the medicine during these stages. Wu’s standard formula is that “the outer medicine is first generated and then gathered 外藥生而後採者” and “the inner medicine is first gathered and then generated 內藥則採而後生者.” Simply put, during the first stage the adept has to await a spontaneous moment in which the essence-*qi* is activated before starting to return it to the elixir field. In the second stage, the adept has to actively stimulate the accumulation of *qi* in the elixir field to cause it to start moving through the channels in the body.³⁷¹

³⁶⁸ *Xianfo hezhong yulu*, *biji*, 3.25b, 7523.

³⁶⁹ Various terms applied to the tripod express the idea of “location,” including *di* 地, *suo* 所 or *wei* 位.

³⁷⁰ As for example in, “the essence-*qi* of the one particle of true yang within our bodies 吾身中一點真陽之精炁”

³⁷¹ This is referred to as “gathering the great medicine in seven days 七日採大藥.”

Refining the Medicine

The alchemical metaphor of “refinement” (*lian* 煉) suggests the use of fire to transform the quality of the ingredients in the tripod; to perfect them by getting rid of all impurities. In inner alchemy, refining also refers to the use of “fire.” When the medicine is generated and the adept has returned this medicine to the tripod, he starts the fire and performs the Lesser Celestial Orbit. That is when the refinement of the medicine takes place. The characteristics of the fire can and should be manipulated by the adept to achieve the desired effect. There are many facets to this. First, one has to be able to recognize the “true hour” (*zhenshi* 真時). This true hour—or true moment actually—occurs when the “true medicine” (*zhenyao* 真藥) is generated. This refers, again, to the ambiguous moment just before *qi* is activated and about to change into essence. This moment at the trigger of activation is the “true trigger” (*zhenji* 真機).

The Fire

The main elements of the alchemical metaphor are commonly identified as the tripod, the medicine, and the fire phases. Along with this come other notions which are implied by the metaphor, including the “fire.” I believe it will be easier to understand the metaphor when we distinguish between elements of the metaphor with a direct referent and elements that originate in the metaphor itself. During the first stage, the tripod is the cavity of *qi* and the medicine is the essence-*qi*. But the fire does not have a direct referent and is a form of metaphorical extension. In the alchemical source of the metaphor, the fire is the element that effectuates the transformation. When the alchemist “refines the medicine,” he applies the fire to the materials in the tripod. By manipulating the intensity of the fire, he regulates the process of refinement. In cultivation, the fire also suggests the effect of the adept’s actions on the medicine. The inner alchemy texts suggest at various points that “fire” and “fire phasing” refer to the spirit, or breathing, or something else but I suggest that we should understand these different referents as approximations of the idea that all these elements play a role in the manipulation of the *qi*.

The Medicine and the Fire

In passages that concern the couple medicine and fire, the medicine refers to *qi* and the fire to the spirit. Hence, to refine the medicine with fire means to drive the *qi* with the spirit.³⁷² But because the spirit and *qi* are supposed to unite, fire and medicine also unite and this unity can be described as medicine or as fire. As a result, spirit and *qi* can both be called fire and medicine.

Fire Phasing

The alchemical metaphor of fire phasing (*huohou* 火候) refers to several things, including primarily the regulation of the “true respiration” (*zhenxi* 真息), that is, the flow of *qi* through the body. When we describe the first stage in terms of the fire phases, we can distinguish the phases of “gathering the medicine” (*caiyao* 採藥), “sealing” (*fenggu* 封固) the tripod, “starting the fire” (*qihuo* 起火), “advancing the yang fire” (*jinyanghuo* 進陽火), “retreating the yin tally” (*tui yinfu* 退陰符), “bathing” (*muayu* 沐浴), the phase of “sufficient fire” (*huozu* 火足), and the phase to “stop the fire” (*zhibuo* 止火).

The Living Hour Zi

The fire phasing begins with the living hour *zi* (*huo zishi* 活子時) that signifies the generation of the medicine, the moment when the *qi* becomes active and changes into essence. The hour *zi* is the double hour from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. But this is the “death *zi*” (*sizhi* 死子), meaning that its time is fixed. The living hour *zi* is flexible and is determined by the moment when *qi* starts to move; the moment when the medicine is generated or when yang is generated. At this moment, the adept should start the fire and begin the Lesser Celestial Orbit. It can occur at any time of the day. All correspondences of the hour of *zi* are put into play to refer to the generation of the medicine: the “Fu hexagram” (*fugua* 復卦), “the return of the first yang” (*yiyang laifu* 一陽來復), the initial movement of the first yang (*yiyang chudong* 一陽初動), the “winter solstice” (*dongzhi* 冬至), “midnight” (*zhongxiao* 中宵), “full moon” (*yueyuan* 月圓), “from the last day of the lunar month to the first day of the new lunar month” (*huizhi shuodan* 晦至朔旦), and so on. All these images illustrate the alternation

³⁷² *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.24b, 7414.

of the yin phase to the yang phase, signifying the generation of yang, the generation of the medicine, and the moment when the *qi* is activated and the adept needs to start cultivation. The moment is indicated by the sign of the generation of the medicine discussed above. Wu explains it as a sensation and an outer sign. Liu Huayang and Zhao Bichen are more explicit and describe the outer sign as a spontaneous erection.³⁷³

Starting the Fire

Starting the fire refers to initiating the regulated respiration.³⁷⁴ The “fire” should only be started after the medicine is generated at the living hour of *zì*.³⁷⁵ When the medicine is gathered in the tripod, the adept starts the fire. Would he fail to do so, he “let’s slip a chance” (*dangmian cuoguo* 當面錯過). When, on the other hand, the adept would practice breathing exercises while the *qi* is not active yet—that is, while there is no medicine generated—then it would make no sense to use these practices to refine the essence because there is no essence. That would be like heating an empty pot.³⁷⁶ The attitude that is required of the adept while waiting for the generation of the medicine is described as “like a cat catching a mouse” (*rumao bushu* 如貓捕鼠). If one does not know how to recognize this moment, it is described as “like a cat guarding an empty hole” (*rumao shou kongku* 如貓守空窟).

Operating the Fire

The actual task of the Lesser Celestial Orbit is called “operating the fire” (*xinghuo* 行火). Hence, it has the same meaning as refining the medicine and practicing the Lesser Celestial Orbit. Liu Huayang notes that the fire refers here in the first place to breathing.³⁷⁷ The fire should not be started too soon or too late. The operating of the fire should not continue too long. When the elixir is ready (*dan shu* 丹熟), continuing the fire could damage the elixir (*shang dan* 傷丹).

4. The Conditions to Stop the Fire

The last oral instruction of the first stage informs the adept when the outer medicine has been refined enough, when it has been transformed into the inner medicine or great medicine, and when he should stop refining in order not to damage this elixir. These circumstances to stop refining, to end the circulation of the Lesser Celestial Orbit, are signaled by the “conditions to stop the fire” (*zhibuo jing* 止火景).

The Inner and Outer Signs

When the adept reaches the time that he has sufficiently practiced the Lesser Celestial Orbit, he will go through a series of experiences, divided in “inner” and “outer” signs, that indicate how far he has come in the cultivation process. These conditions indicate, in other words, at which stage the retransformation of essence into *qi* is. At some point during the process, the adept will suddenly experience the “condition of the first appearance of yang radiance.”³⁷⁸ This experience occurs in the “hall of light,” which is defined as the location “between the eyebrows.”³⁷⁹ The experience itself is described with the formulaic expression “whiteness is generated in the empty room” and is further qualified as appearing “as sudden as lightning.”³⁸⁰

³⁷³ Liu Huayang, *Jinxian zhenyuan*, 20b, 442: “When the outer kidneys are about to erect, that is the living hour of *zì* within the body 外腎欲舉之時即是身中活子時”; Zhao Bichen, *Xingming fajue mingzhi*, 93: “As soon as the outer kidneys erect it is called the arrival of the living hour of *zì* and you need to gather it without thought 外腎一舉名為活子時到，須要無念採取。” Although the “outer kidneys” are usually explained to mean “testicles,” these examples seem to indicate that they can also refer to the male organ as a whole or perhaps to the penis specifically.

³⁷⁴ See also Liu Huayang, who says, “The starting of the fire refers to the post-heaven breath of respiration. 起火者，後天呼吸之氣。” (Liu, *Jinxian zhenyuan*, 27b, 456)

³⁷⁵ *Xianfo hezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.69a, 7437.

³⁷⁶ “When there are no True Seeds in the Tripod, it is like water and fire boiling an empty pan 鼎內若無真種子猶將水火煮空鑪”

³⁷⁷ There is a passage in Liu’s *Jinxian zhenyuan* (in chapter six) where he discusses several types of fire. Zhao Bichen, in chapter five of the *Xingming fajue mingzhi*, cites Liu and further develops this notion by explicitly defining eighteen types of fire.

³⁷⁸ The “condition of the first appearance of yang radiance 陽光一現之景”

³⁷⁹ The location of the Hall of Light (*mingtang* 明堂) is described as “between the two eyebrows” (*liangmei jian* 兩眉間). This seems to be the same location that is elsewhere called the Hall of Seals (*yintang* 印堂), which is described by Wu as “on top of the nose 鼻上”

³⁸⁰ The expression “whiteness is generated in the empty room” (*xushi shengbai* 虛室生白), in Burton Watson’s translation “the empty chamber where brightness is born,” is borrowed from the fourth chapter of the *Zhuangzi* where Confucius teaches Yan Hui about

After this first sign, the adept has to continue practicing the Lesser Celestial Orbit until he experiences this flash in the hall of light for a second time, which is formulaically known as the “second appearance of yang radiance.” At this point there are three things said to be happening in sequence. First, this inner condition of the second appearance of yang radiance occurs. Second, the adept will internally have completed “exactly” three hundred Lesser Celestial Orbits. Third, the adept experiences the “outer” condition indicated with the formulaic expression “the turtle withdraws and does not erect” (*guisuo buju* 龜縮不舉). This image compares the “retraction” of the head of the penis into the foreskin to the retraction of a turtle’s head in its shell.³⁸¹ This expression suggests that the adept, who during the fire phasing of the Lesser Celestial Orbit acted on each spontaneous erection, does not get an erection anymore.³⁸²

These three inner and outer experiences are the actual conditions to stop the fire. At this point the adept should enter samadhi (*ruding* 入定) to foster (*peiyang* 培養) the *qi* in the elixir field. The adept now waits for a “third appearance of yang radiance.”³⁸³ The phase of the stopping of the fire actually extends from the second to the third appearance of yang radiance and so they can both be referred to as the “signs” for stopping the fire. The stopping of the fire begins with the second appearance and should be finished by the third appearance. The third appearance is at the same time also the signal to start the gathering of the great medicine and thus it is also the point where the first stage leads into the second stage. If the adept would not stop the fire before the third appearance, there might be a “fourth appearance of yang radiance.” This is considered a risk since the concentrated pure *qi*—the great medicine that has been stabilized (*ding* 定) in the elixir field—would certainly “spill over to the outside 溢出於外” and transform into semen. In other words, the adept would run a risk of involuntary ejaculation. That would not only mean that all the previous work was in vain, but it would also mean that the adept had missed the chance to gather the great medicine at the third appearance.

Summary of the First Pass

Many aspects of the first stage of cultivation are explained in clear terms in Wu Shouyang’s texts. Other aspects, however, remain unclear unless we introduce interpretations from other texts or studies. Let us try and sort out these different elements, starting with what appears to be clear. The rationale of the first stage is based on the ideas that: (1) the supply of *qi* in one’s body determines one’s lifespan (*ming*); (2) this *qi* continually alternates between activity or movement (*dong*) and inactivity or rest (*jing*); (3) the cycle of activity of *qi* is connected with the spirit; (4) when this *qi* starts to move, it is called “pre-heaven essence;” (5) when it moves, it’s natural tendency is to exit the body and change into semen; (6) this depletion of *qi* through the leakage of essence is the main natural cause of death or the end of lifespan.

The rationale of cultivation based on these ideas is that an adept, in order to “cultivate lifespan” and secure his continued physical existence, needs to intervene in this natural process, stop the leakage of essence, conserve the supply of *qi*, and use the generation of “pre-heaven essence” to replenish the already depleted amount of *qi*. This is the “refining of essence and transforming it into *qi*.” The first stage begins with an adept with a leaking body and a depleted supply of *qi* and ends with a non-leaking body and a replenished supply of *qi*. To accomplish this, the adept needs to control his spirit because it is the interaction of the spirit and *qi* that leads to the natural scenario or the inverted scenario. First, he disciplines his spirit in the preliminary tasks of the refining of the self. Then, during cultivation, he uses the spirit to direct the *qi* in the counter-natural direction back to its source. In the second place, the adept needs to apply his breath to connect the spirit and the *qi*. In its details, the task of the first stage is very complex. First, the adept is working simultaneously on his mental activity and his breath. Second, the cultivation is a process that goes through several stages. The adept needs to respond to the reactions of his body and mind. Third, some elements are typical examples of tacit, personal knowledge that can only be learned by doing it. Fourth, what can be learned from texts is mostly expressed in an indirect way by reference to the alchemical metaphor.

If we follow the oral instructions, we can describe the process through four main stages. The first stage

meditation. Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 58.

³⁸¹ The turtle, or rather the turtle’s head (*guitou* 龜頭), is (still) a common name for the glans or the head of the penis.

³⁸² The description leaves ample room for interpretation, from a simple absence of erection to a retraction of the testicles in the abdomen.

³⁸³ Although some of these translations may be obvious, I provide the exact phrasing to indicate that we are dealing with a formulaic expression that always occurs in the same way. Other inner alchemy texts also use these expressions in the same way or develop very similar alternatives. Zhao Bichen, for example, uses the term “golden radiance (*jinguang* 金光).

begins when the *qi* is activated. This signifies the generation of the medicine and is signaled by (1) the sensation of active *qi* and (2) a spontaneous erection. As soon as this happens, the adept needs to intervene, starting with the gathering of the medicine. The gathering itself simply consists of concentrating the spirit in the cavity of *qi* in the lower elixir field in the abdomen. By doing so, the *qi* will follow the spirit and return from the sexual organs to the cavity of *qi*. The key to successful gathering is in the recognition of the medicine. There are two criteria. The medicine should be generated spontaneously while the adept is in a serene state and maintains this serenity as the medicine is being generated. This mental state is expressed in the metaphor of the water source and the state of serenity is described as a clear source instead of a turbid source. The second criterium is the timing of gathering and the decision of when to intervene. If the *qi* is gathered prematurely, it has no force and if it is gathered too late, its own force makes it scatter. That is expressed in the metaphor of the old and young medicine.

When the medicine has been gathered and returned to the tripod—that is, when the adept has let the *qi* return from the male organ to the cavity of *qi* by concentrating his spirit in this location—he starts the actual practice of the Lesser Celestial Orbit by “starting the fire.” He subjugates his breath in the cavity of *qi*, unites breath and *qi*, and directs the two *qi* through the Orbit along the twelve stages. Every time the *qi* is activated, he performs this practice. This continues for at least three hundred Orbits which should take an average of one hundred days. After a minimum of three hundred Orbits, the adept should experience a series of flashes of light between his eyebrows called the “yang radiance.” Further, he will have no more erections, referred to as “the turtle shrinks and erects no more” or as the “mark of the retracted horse penis” (*mayin cang xiang* 馬陰藏相).³⁸⁴ In the alchemical metaphor, the adept waits for the generation of the medicine, gathers the medicine in the tripod, seals the tripod, starts the fire, operates the fire according to a sequence that alternates intense fire, less intense fire, and periods of bathing, until the fire has been sufficient and should be stopped.

There are some details of this practice which are less clear. First, the actual route of the *qi* is never discussed in any detail except for general references which suggest that the *qi* flows from the abdomen to the head and back to the abdomen or that this route goes along the yellow and red path along the spine. The suggestion seems to be that it is exactly the same path that is described in the beginning of the second stage, when the great medicine is used to open a specific route along the yellow and red path in the spine, descending through the throat and into the heart region. This route roughly conforms with the so-called control and function channel but is different in its details.³⁸⁵ The question is how the *qi* can travel through this route when it has not been unblocked yet. Perhaps the answer is that the *qi* is thought of in the first stage as being “formless.” This also conforms with the idea that it is only in the beginning of the second stage that the accumulation of *qi* begins to take form and therefore can be used to unblock the route. It further conforms with remarks that suggest that the fire is thought of as a placeholder for the medicine itself which cannot be felt at this stage. All of this is not stated in enough detail to state as fact.

Another unclear aspect concerns the breathing method, its coordination with the flow of *qi*, and the number of breaths. Wu says that the adept should inverse the mechanism of opening and closing, but the relevant passages fail to make clear what this really means. Different interpretations by later writers demonstrate that it was equally unclear to inner alchemy practitioners. Further, it is not clear to me how the inhalations and exhalations are coordinated with the ascent and descent of *qi* in the Orbit and how this exactly relates to the “numbers” associated with every “hour” along the twelve segments of the Orbit. Some passages seem to suggest that every inhalation and exhalation conform with one ascent and one descent.

³⁸⁴ The “mark of the retracted horse penis” (*mayin cang xiang* 馬陰藏相) is one of the thirty-two marks (*sanshi'er xiang* 三十二相; S. *dvātriṃśadvaralakṣaṇa*) that distinguish a great man (*darenxiang* 大人相; S. *mahāpuruṣalakṣaṇa*). This category of “great men” includes buddhas as well as “wheel-turning emperors” (*zhuānlun wáng* 轉輪王; S. *cakravartin*). In the same way as the image of the turtle retracting its head, it signifies the retraction of the male member. Bernard Faure calls this body of the buddha as described by these marks a “semiotic body” or “a kind of living symbol that embodies the Buddhist teaching... [constituting] a “religious program,” an illustration and a memento of the Buddhist doctrine.” Faure, *The Red Thread*, 60.

³⁸⁵ In traditional Chinese medicine, the Control Channel (*dumai* 督脈) and Function Channel (*renmai* 任脈) are the channels that run along the spine and the ventral axis. Each of these channels has a separate textual history, but eventually they were seen as a pair and included in the “eight extraordinary channels” (*qijing bamai* 奇經八脈). See Elisabeth Hsu, EOT, 389–91. The path of these channels roughly conforms with similar conceptions of channels in Daoist texts, such as the pathway of the Lesser Celestial Orbit. As a result, they are often treated as interchangeable, by inner alchemy authors as well as modern scholars. Liu Huayang, for example, uses these terms to describe the Lesser Celestial Orbit. Modern books on inner alchemy almost invariably describe the Orbit as consisting of these two channels. However, the terms Control Channel and Function Channel do not appear in Wu’s writings and when we examine the details of descriptions of these channels and the channels described by Wu, they are conceptualized in different ways. Therefore, I treat all of these terms as distinct concepts.

Other passages seem to suggest that the *qi* flows gradually from “hour” to “hour” while the adept breathes the associated number of breaths; 36 for every yang hour going up the spine and 24 for every yin hour going down the chest, except for the hours of bathing in the middle of each sequence.

The Middle Pass

The main task of the second stage is the “refining of *qi* and transforming it into spirit” (*lianqi huashen* 煉炁化神). This is the “middle pass” (*zhongguan* 中關) and the adept is now concerned with the cultivation of his inner nature (*xiuxing* 修性). In terms of the five periods, it includes the “seven days of gathering the great medicine” (*qiri cai dayao* 七日採大藥) and the “ten months of nourishing the embryo” (*shiyue yangtai* 十月養胎) or “ten months of conceiving the embryo” (*shiyue huaitai* 十月懷胎). In the terminology of the Zhong-Lü texts, it is referred to as the “intermediate achievement” (*zhongcheng* 中成). It includes five oral instructions: (1) the work of gathering the great medicine (*cai dayao gong* 採大藥工); (2) the sign of obtaining the great medicine (*de dayao jing* 得大藥景); (3) the work of the three barriers (*sanguan gong* 三關工); (4) the work of ingesting (*fushi gong* 服食工); and (5) the principle of maintaining the center (*shouzhong li* 守中理).

The objective of the second stage is to transform all *qi* into spirit. This *qi* is the accumulation of yang *qi* in the abdomen that has been collected during the first stage. The spirit is the yin spirit in the heart. The *qi* is “transformed” into spirit by circulating it through the body and uniting it with the spirit. At the end of this process, there is no more *qi* and the yin spirit has changed into a yang spirit. How is all of this supposed to happen? The second stage begins with the third appearance of yang radiance at the end of the first stage. All yang *qi* has now been gathered in the elixir field and there is no more essence. The adept should enter samadhi and focus his attention in the elixir field. This is called the gathering of the great medicine and it is this gathering that is supposed to cause the generation of the great medicine. When this great medicine is generated, the adept should experience the signs of obtaining the great medicine. These signs are six kinds of psychosomatic experiences. When that happens, the adept can commence the task of the “three barriers” and the “ingesting.” This means that the accumulation of yang *qi*, the medicine in the elixir field, is going to be transported through a route in the body from the lower elixir field to the heart. This route moves downwards from the abdomen to the pelvic floor, upwards along the spine, across the head, and downwards through the face and throat to the heart. Along this route there are several obstructions and risks. The crossing of the three barriers in the spine and the crossing of the nose signifies the clearing of this route. When the *qi* enters the heart—the middle elixir field—the lower and middle elixir field transform into one empty space. Up to this point, the adept has been preparing for the last and main task of the second stage. When the route has been cleared, the adept keeps his attention in the elixir fields and the *qi* will continuously circulate to the heart until all *qi* is gone and the spirit has been transformed into a yang spirit. This should take about ten months and is known as maintaining the center, the ten months of conceiving the embryo, or the Greater Celestial Orbit. Towards the end of the process, the adept will experience several signs that his work has been successful and that the yang spirit has been completed.

5. The Work of Gathering the Great Medicine

The first oral instruction of the second stage is the “work of gathering the great medicine” (*cai dayao gong* 採大藥工) and this work begins where the first stage ended with the stopping of the fire. The “third appearance of yang radiance” is the sign that indicates the time when the adept should have stopped the fire and it is also the sign that the great medicine can be gathered. But contrary to the gathering of the medicine during the first stage, where the medicine was first “generated before it is gathered” (*sheng er hou cai* 生而後採), the great medicine (or inner medicine) should first be “gathered before it is generated” (*cai er hou sheng* 採而後生). Thus, while the yang *qi* is concentrated at the cavity of *qi* and the yang radiance has appeared for a third time indicating that the medicine can be gathered, the medicine itself has not come into existence yet. The adept must first perform the action of gathering to make the medicine come into existence. Let us examine how the medicine should be gathered, how the efficacy of gathering is explained, and how the medicine is generated.

Gathering the Medicine

The gathering of the medicine at this stage is in itself not described as something very complex. It is supposed to take place in approximately seven days and is therefore also referred to as the “work of gathering in seven days.” The adept should during this period enter samadhi, turn his attention inward and constantly focus on the middle elixir field or the heart region. The mechanism of this focus is associated with the eyes which are imagined to revert their “radiance” (*guang* 光) and thereby illuminate or shine inside the body. Wu refers to this as “the skill of concentrated vision.”³⁸⁶ He adds that this state of meditation should continue day and night. In Wu’s words, during the day the adept should focus the vision on the middle elixir field and during the night he should maintain this concentration without neglect.³⁸⁷ When the adept does this, the medicine should automatically be generated within the seven-day period.

Explaining the Efficacy of the Gathering

Wu offers four explanations of how this practice of gathering results in the generation of the great medicine. The first explanation is that there is “generation after intercourse” (*jiaogou erhou sheng* 交媾而後生). The “intercourse” refers here to the metaphorical intercourse of “water” and “fire,” whereby water refers to the *qi* in the “kidneys” and fire to the spirit in the heart. Because the adept continuously focusses his attention on the middle elixir field, the “fire” of the spirit concentrates (*ning* 凝) in the heart. Because of this concentration of fire in the heart, the “water” of the *qi* in the “kidneys” is said to be “fumigated” (*xunzheng* 薰蒸) and rise to the heart where water and fire (*qi* and spirit) have intercourse. This yang *qi* “accumulates” (*ji* 積) and “clusters” (*luan* 團) to form the great medicine. This great medicine, which is shaped like a “pearl of fire” (*huozhu* 火珠), appears (*fa* 發露) in the lower elixir field.

The second explanation is that there is “generation after seduction” (*gouyin erhou sheng* 勾引而後生). In this image, the “true intention” (*zhenyi* 真意), which is the function of the spirit and thus the act of the focusing of the attention, is likened to a “matchmaker” (*meishuo* 媒妁).³⁸⁸ True intention is associated with the phase of Earth and thereby with the Yellow Dame (*huangpo* 黃婆) who resides in the Middle Palace (*zhonggong* 中宮); that is, the heart or middle elixir field. This Yellow Dame is the matchmaker who from the heart seduces the *qi*, or the great medicine, to follow her and then appear again in the lower elixir field.

The third explanation is that there is “generation after quiescence and samadhi” (*jingding erhou sheng* 靜定而後生). Here, the focus is on the movement of spirit and *qi*. Because of the focus on the heart, the spirit concentrates there and becomes stable (*ding* 定). Because the spirit is stable in its native location (*benwei* 本位) of the heart, the *qi* also becomes stable at its native location in the lower elixir field. In the elixir field, the *qi* is said to be stable but also to move or vibrate (*dong* 動). When it does so, it remains inside the elixir field.

The fourth and last explanation is that there is “generation after the respiration is stable” (*xiding erhou sheng* 息定而後生). Now Wu refers to the “true respiration” (*zhenxi* 真息) of the *qi*. Again, because of the focus on the middle elixir field, the spirit and *qi* become stable at their respective native locations at the middle and lower elixir fields. As a result, the respiration has a location of “refuge” (*guiyi* 歸依) and it will automatically return to and stabilize at the elixir field and not ascend and descend anymore.

The Generation of the Medicine

These four explanations of the logic of the gathering already hint at what the generation of the medicine actually signifies. After the stopping of the fire of the Lesser Celestial Orbit, when the yang radiance appears for the second and third time, the *qi* is stabilized at the cavity of *qi* in the elixir field where it vibrates without leaving this location.³⁸⁹ The essence has completely retransformed into *qi* and the *qi* is now pure yang

³⁸⁶ The literal expression is something like “the skill of exclusively using the radiance of the pupils 專用眸光之功.” The pupils *mou* 眸 are also a *pars pro toto* for the eyes. The “radiance of the eyes” (*muguang* 目光) is a common term for “vision.”

³⁸⁷ *Dandao jupian*, *biji*, 6.27b-28a, 7634.

³⁸⁸ In Wu’s words, the “radiance of the two pupils is delivered by the true intention in the spirit 雙眸之光乃神中真意之所寄.” Thus, the function of focusing the spirit is referred to as its “true intention” and this true intention carries the light of the eyes to the location of focus.

³⁸⁹ The idea is that the *qi* does not move outside of the cavity of *qi* but only moves inside the cavity of *qi* (只內動於炁穴). Hence, *dong* 動 should be understood here as activity, vibration, or pulsation rather than movement.

(*chunyang* 純陽) but it is still “formless” (*wuxing* 無形). But because of the “gathering” or the focusing on the middle elixir field, this *qi* begins to accumulate and cluster at the cavity of *qi* and it forms into a spherical shape referred to as a “pearl of fire.” Since this is still formless pre-heaven *qi*, Wu emphasizes that the “form” here is no “material form” (*xingzhi* 形質). The *qi* only “has a form that resembles burning heat” (*you sihuore zhi xing* 有似火熱之形). There are many terms to refer to this *qi*, including “great medicine,” “inner medicine,” “golden elixir,” or “reverted elixir.”³⁹⁰

What Wu appears to suggest is that the *qi*, or the medicine, used during the first stage is not something that can be directly experienced by the adept since it has no form. Therefore, the adept relies on the “fire” to gather the medicine, since the fire can be felt. The fire seems to refer here to the heat created by the breathing and the focus of intention. In Wu’s words, “you do not see any form or trace of the medicine and you only know that there is fire.”³⁹¹ Thus, the “fire” of the breath is needed as a marker or a placeholder during the first stage to be able to gather and refine the *qi* since in itself it has no form that the adept can identify in order to act on. During the second stage, however, the accumulated yang *qi* acquires a form that can be perceived by the adept and therefore he also does not need the fire as a stand-in for the *qi* to focus his attention on.

6. The Signs of Obtaining the Great Medicine

The next oral instruction describes the “signs of obtaining the great medicine” (*de dayao jing* 得大藥景). During the approximate seven-day period of gathering the great medicine, the adept is expected to experience a series of six phenomena that may take place in about three to four days and that indicate the successful generation of the great medicine. When the adept is indeed successful, he is said to “obtain” (*de* 得) the great medicine. These six phenomena are said to appear in sequence.³⁹² They are described as spontaneous “vibrations” (*zhen dong* 震動) of the “six roots” (*liu gen* 六根). These six roots refer to the six sense faculties: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mentality.

The first vibration is described as a “fire ablaze in the elixir field” (*dantian huochi* 丹田火熾). This suggests a feeling of intense warmth in the elixir field in the abdomen. The second vibration is referred to as “boiling water in the two kidneys” (*liangshen tangjian* 兩腎湯煎). Again, the sensation appears to denote a feeling of intense warmth. The third vibration is described as “golden radiance spitting out of the eyes” (*yantu jingguang* 眼吐金光), which clearly suggests a visual experience of light. Wu further specifies this as meaning that the radiance of the eyes has become perfect like golden radiance and this is taken as a confirmation of the fact that the yang *qi* has returned to perfection.³⁹³ The fourth vibration is described as “a wind generated behind the ears” (*erhou fengsheng* 耳後風生), suggesting an auditory experience of noise. The fifth vibration is described as “behind the brain a vulture is calling” (*naobou jiuming* 腦後鷲鳴). In another passage this same vibration is described as “a vulture shrieking [at Jade] Capital Mountain” (*jiuzao jingshan* 鷲噪京山). As Wu explains, Jade Capital Mountain refers here to a location behind the brain and above the “jade pillow barrier” (*yuzhen guan* 玉枕關) at the top of the spine. This seems to suggest another auditory experience, this time originating in the back of the head. The sixth and last vibration is described as “the body flushes and the nose twitches” (*shenyong bichu* 身湧鼻搐). This suggests a quivering feeling extending throughout the body, perhaps especially notable as a twitching feeling in the nose.

Although Wu explicitly says that the vibrations are associated with the six sense faculties, the descriptions only partly confirm this statement. There are indeed sensations in the eyes, ears, nose, body and mind, but there is no sensation explicitly associated with the sense of taste and the sensations in the elixir field, kidneys, and at the backside of the head are not explicitly associated with specific sense faculties.

³⁹⁰ Wu also mentions a few times the term “relics” (*sheli* 舍利; S. *śarira*), a term of Buddhist origin, which is more frequently used by Liu Huayang and Zhao Bichen to refer to the great medicine. The idea is that the relics are what remains after the use of fire. Other synonyms for the great medicine include “fire pearl” (*huozhu* 火珠), “mysterious pearl” (*xuanzhu* 玄珠), “mysterious pearl in the red water” (*chishui xuanzhu* 赤水玄珠), “golden lotus emerging from the earth” (*dijong jinlian* 地涌金蓮), “flowers presented by celestial girls” (*tiannü xianhua* 天女獻花), “pearls presented by dragon girls” (*longnü xianzhu* 龍女獻珠), “pagoda emerging from the earth” (*dijong baota* 地涌寶塔), “a spatula” (*daogui* 刀圭), “yellow sprouts” (*huangya* 黃芽), “true lead” (*zhenqian* 真鉛), et cetera. The term “small medicine” was coined, according to Wu, by his master Cao Huanyang.

³⁹¹ “you do not see any form or trace of the medicine and you only know that there is fire 不見有藥形跡唯知有火而已.”

³⁹² Wu says, “appear in sequence 次第而現.”

³⁹³ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.49a, 7427.

A further point to note is that Wu describes the sensations in the elixir field and the kidneys in one passage as, respectively, an “inner sign” (*neijing* 內景) and an “outer sign” (*waijing* 外景).³⁹⁴ What this might suggest is that the “kidneys” actually refer to the “outer kidneys” (*waishen* 外腎), the external part of the *shen* 腎 organ system comprising the testicles or the male organ as a whole. If this interpretation is correct, the adept is supposed to experience a feeling of intense warmth in the testicles instead of the “kidneys” in the lumbar region of the back. This then would also put into question other references to the “kidneys,” but the texts are not explicit enough to further pursue this thought here.

7. The Work of the Three Barriers

The great medicine of pure yang *qi*, that has been gathered in the tripod of the lower elixir field is now going to be “transferred” (*qian* 遷; or *qianyi* 遷移) to the tripod of the middle elixir field in the heart region. There, this yang *qi* will be used to transform the yin spirit into a yang spirit. The yang *qi* is transferred to the heart region by going through a circular route through the body, from the abdomen downwards to the lower end of the spine in the back, upwards along the spine, through the head and then downwards through the chest. This does not happen at once, but is accomplished gradually during an approximately ten-month period during the main task of the second stage, the “maintaining of the center” or the “great celestial cycle” examined below. Before this task can be begun though, this route has to be “opened up” (*kaitong* 開通). The route is marked by “barriers” (*guan* 關) that signify locations which are crucial to pass but also difficult to go through.³⁹⁵ Here, the spine is filled with “marrow” (*sui* 髓) and the *qi* can normally not go through. Along the spine there are three such barriers. The route is also marked by locations where the *qi* might “leak” (*lou* 漏) from the body through open orifices. These orifices conform with the six sense faculties. The next two oral instructions, the “work of the three barriers” (*sanguan gong* 三關工) and the “work of ingesting” (*jushi gong* 服食工), signify the task of opening up this route for the first time.

The opening of the route involves a few important issues. The main difficulty is presented by guiding the *qi* through the three blocked barriers along the spine, the work of the three barriers. The technique to accomplish this is called the “five dragons bearing aloft the saint” (*wulong pengsheng* 五龍捧聖). When this is accomplished, the medicine is “ingested,” meaning that the *qi* descends along the chest to the heart region. But before and during these two tasks, the adept needs to take certain precautions. First, he has to prevent the six roots, the sense faculties, from leaking. Second, as part of these six roots, he has to establish the two so-called “magpie bridges” (*queqiao* 鵲橋) across the anus and the nostrils to guide the *qi* along the proper route instead of escaping through these orifices. Let us examine each of these steps in more detail.

Preventing Leakage of the Six Roots

In the beginning of the second stage, the adept gathers the great medicine and when this medicine is successfully generated, he obtains the great medicine. This is signaled by the “signs of obtaining the great medicine,” the six vibrations associated with the six sense faculties or “roots.”³⁹⁶ Now, each of these roots presents a risk of “leakage” since these are locations where the medicine could escape from the body. The adept must take several measures of precaution to prevent this leakage. Among the six senses, the nose and the “body” have a special role as these orifices are situated directly along the route of the medicine. These orifices have to be circumvented by forming the “magpie bridges” and I will return to them below. Let us first briefly look at the other four sense faculties.

The “root of the eyes,” or the faculty of sight, is prevented from leaking by “containing the radiance of the two eyes” (*ban liangyan zhi guang* 含兩眼之光) and “not letting [them] look outwardly” (*wuling waishi* 勿令外視). This thus appears to conform with the practice of turning the gaze inward and the idea seems to be that the adept turns his attention inwardly. The “root of the ears,” the sense faculty associated with the perception of sound, is prevented from leakage by “fixating the sound of the two ears” (*ning liang'er zhi yun* 凝兩耳之韻) and “not letting [them] hear outwardly” (*wuling waiting* 勿令外聽). Thus, the adept should

³⁹⁴ *Xianfo hezhong yulu*, *biji*, 1.48b, 7426.

³⁹⁵ Note that I have translated *guan* 關 here as “barrier” to differentiate it from the *guan* 關 that signifies the three stages of the cultivation process, which I have translated as “pass.” In some other cases, I have translated this same *guan* 關 as “gate,” for example, Yang Gate (*yangguan* 陽關).

³⁹⁶ These roots are associated with the eyes (*yan* 眼), ears (*er* 耳), nose (*bi* 鼻), tongue (*she* 舌), body (*shen* 身), and mentality (*yi* 意).

close himself off from outside sounds and turn his hearing inwardly. The “root of the tongue,” the sense faculty associated with taste, is prevented from leaking by “pressing the lips and teeth together” (*chunchi xianghe* 唇齒相合) and “pushing the tongue against the palate” (*shedi shang'e* 舌抵上齶). Thus, the mouth is closed and the tongue presses against the palate to prevent the faculty of taste from “leaking.” Finally, the “root of the intention,” the faculty associated with mental content, is prevented from leakage by “not letting one thought arise” (*yinian busheng* 一念不生) and “not becoming soiled by the six [types of] dust” (*liuchen buran* 六塵不染). This precaution thus relates specifically to control of the mind by not allowing any thoughts to arise but it also combines the functions of the other sense faculties by telling the adept not to be affected by any of the six specific types of perception; that is, the six types of “dust” (*chen* 塵).³⁹⁷ This sixth type of dust does not originate from the sense faculties but arises independently in the mind.³⁹⁸ Preventing the root of mentality from leaking suggests a state of mind that is completely focused and deprived of any form of sensory stimulation.³⁹⁹

Noteworthy here is the fact that the tongue should be pressed against the palate to prevent leakage through the taste faculty. In some modern formulations of inner alchemy, the tongue is pressed against the palate to close the route of the cycle of *qi* through the body. This is how the adept forms the “upper magpie bridge” as the tongue acts as a switch that connects the “control channel” and the “function channel” and the *qi* is imagined to flow from the palate through the tongue further downwards through the throat.⁴⁰⁰ Wu’s description differs from this commonly seen understanding. The tongue is only pressed against the palate to prevent leakage from this sense organ. The upper magpie bridge refers in Wu’s texts to a different location, as explained below. There is no mention of *qi* flowing through the tongue. Rather, the *qi* is supposed to flow from the “hall of seals” (*yintang* 印堂) at the top of the nose between the eyebrows directly to the throat.

The Magpie Bridges

The image of a “magpie bridge” (*queqiao* 鵲橋) originates in the myth of a cowherd (*ninlang* 牛郎) and a weaver girl (*zhinü* 織女) first mentioned in the *Book of Odes*. According to the story, these two lovers live on opposite sides of the Milky Way and they are only able to meet each other once a year because a flock of magpies gathers to form a make-shift bridge.⁴⁰¹ In the body, the adept has to form two such bridges, the “lower magpie bridge” (*xia queqiao* 下鵲橋) and the “upper magpie bridge” (*shang queqiao* 上鵲橋). The use of this image originates in the short poetic *Mirror for Compounding the Medicine* but the actual application differs in various interpretations.⁴⁰²

According to Wu, the lower magpie bridge is formed to bridge the exit of the anus, associated with the sense faculty of the “root of the body.” The sense of the body does not just refer to the sense of “touch” or “sensation” as it usually does in Buddhist texts but also incorporates the male organ, the anus, and sexual function. When the adept transports the medicine from the lower elixir field in the abdomen to the coccyx at the lower end of the spine, it has to cross the “route of the grains” (*gudao* 穀道), the anus, which signifies a potential escape route for the medicine. Thus, the adept has to take precautions to prevent leakage from this location.⁴⁰³ To do this, he can make use of a “tool” (*ju* 具) for the “exterior firming” (*waigu* 外固) and a method (*fa* 法) for “interior firming” (*neigu* 內固). The tool is described as a “wooden seat” (*muzuo* 木座)

³⁹⁷ The six types of dust or impurities are: “form dust” (*sechen* 色塵) accumulated through sight; “sound dust” (*shengchen* 聲塵) accumulated through hearing; “scent dust” (*xiangchen* 香塵) accumulated through smelling; “flavor dust” (*weichen* 味塵) accumulated through tasting; “sensation dust” (*chuchen* 觸塵) accumulated through touching; and “dharma dust” (*fachen* 法塵) accumulated through mental activity.

³⁹⁸ According to Soothill and Hodous, dharma dust (*fachen* 法塵) is “[a] mental object, any direct mental perception, not dependent on the sense organs.” See Soothill and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 269.

³⁹⁹ The precaution of leakage from the sense organs is also again a reiteration of the importance of self-control that the adept should have accomplished during the stage of “refining the self.”

⁴⁰⁰ This is the account found in virtually every modern book on inner alchemy or *qigong*. It seems best to differentiate between the idea of pressing the tongue against the palate during meditation and the idea of the “magpie bridge” as a temporary connection between two channels. Some texts connect these ideas and some, such as Wu Shouyang’s writings, do not.

⁴⁰¹ The cowherd and weaver girl were separated on either side of the Milky Way after they were banished there. The story is celebrated each year on the seventh day of the seventh month during the Qixi Festival (*qixi jie* 七夕節).

⁴⁰² The *Ruyaojing* 入藥經 (*Mirror for Compounding the Medicine*) is attributed to Cui Xifan 崔希范 (ca. 880 – 940).

⁴⁰³ The coccyx is described as “blocked” (*sai* 塞) with “marrow” (*sui* 髓) and thus “solid” (*shi* 實) while the orifice of the anus is “empty” (*xu* 虛). As a result, the *qi* tends to take the “usual route” (*shulu* 熟路) through the anus and escape from the body.

“in the form of a steamed bun” (*zhuangru manshou* 狀如饅首) and “covered with a cotton-padding from selected soft [cotton]” (*fumian qunan* 覆棉取軟). The idea is that this seat “pushes against” (*dizhu* 抵住) the anus, thus closing off this route. The method of interior firming is described as “slightly” (*weimei* 微微) and “gently” (*qing* 輕) “clenching” (*cuo* 撮) the anus to “close it up” (*jin* 禁). Wu points out that this method does not necessarily have to be used when the wooden stool is used. Closing of this route, the adept has formed a temporary bridge for the *qi* to go directly to the coccyx, or the Weilü Barrier (*weilü guan* 尾閭關).

Wu’s description of the upper magpie bridge associates it with the sense of smell facilitated by the “root of the nose.” When the *qi* has ascended through the spine and crossed the top of the head, it first arrives at the “hall of seals” (*yintang* 印堂) at the top of the nose between the eyebrows. From here, the *qi* needs to go to the throat to descend through the trachea and arrive in the heart region. But since the hall of seals is blocked with marrow and the nostrils are empty, the *qi* is expected to take the usual pathway of the breath and “leak” from the nostrils.⁴⁰⁴ Thus, the adept needs to close off the route through the nostrils and force the *qi* to pass through the hall of seals, thereby unblocking this route. To accomplish this, the adept makes use of another tool called the “wooden peg” (*mujia* 木夾) to “firmly seal” (*laofeng* 牢封) the “nostrils” (*biquiao* 鼻竅). By thus closing of the route through the nostrils, the adept forms a temporary bridge for the *qi* to go directly through the hall of seals to the throat.

The Weilü Area

The beginning of the route of *qi* through the body is in the lower elixir field and from there the *qi* first flows through a network of conduits referred to by Wu as the Weilü Area (*weilü jiedi* 尾閭界地). This intersection of conduits represents several possible routes that the *qi* can take. There are two passages in Wu’s texts where this area is described in detail and each of these passages describes the intersection in a slightly different way. This difference seems to conform with the situation before and after the first stage of cultivation, when certain routes are supposed to be closed. Let us briefly look at both descriptions. The first passage describes the Weilü Area as a “junction of four paths” (*sidao qilu* 四道歧路):

Above it connects with the heart location, in the front it connects with the Yang Gate, in the back it connects with the Weilü [Barrier], and below it connects with the anus.

上通心位，前通陽關，後通尾閭，下通穀道。⁴⁰⁵

From the cavity of *qi* in the lower elixir field, the *qi* can go upward to the heart. It can also go downward and to the front to the Yang Gate (*yangguan* 陽關) located in the male organ. Instead of to the front, it can also go in the direction of the back and downwards to the anus. Finally, it can go to the Weilü Barrier located in the openings of the vertebra of the coccyx. In the second passage, the same area is described as a trifurcation (*sancha zhilu* 三岔之路):

...above it connects with the elixir field, below and in the front it connects with the orifice in the outer kidneys, and below in the back it connects with the Weilü [Barrier]. At one time, when teacher Cao had first seated himself on the meditation cushion and obtained the great medicine, he applied the work of seven days (of gathering the medicine). Within five days, it suddenly felt like a pearl of fire in the elixir field. It directly sped upwards to the heart then returned downwards to the side of the outer kidneys where there was no orifice it could exit, then it revolved and sped towards the Weilü and dashed against the barrier. All of this is the mysterious function of the true *qi* itself and it is not caused by human effort. But when it reaches the side of the barrier, you have to use the orally transmitted celestial mechanism before you can cross the barrier.

上通丹田，下之前通外腎竅，下之後通尾閭。昔曹老師先上蒲團，先得大藥，用七日之工。到五日之間，忽丹田如火珠，直馳上心，即回下馳向外腎邊，無竅可出，即轉馳向尾閭沖關。此皆真炁自家妙用，非由人力所致。但到關邊，必用口授天機，方才過得關去。⁴⁰⁶

Despite the difference in formulation, both passages essentially describe the same network of routes. The

⁴⁰⁴ Similar to the situation at the location of the lower magpie bridge, the Hall of Seals is described as “blocked” (*sai* 塞) with “marrow” (*sui* 髓) and “solid” (*shi* 實) while the nostrils are “empty” (*xu* 虛). Thus, the *qi* and breath tend to pass through (*tong* 通) the usual “pathway” (*jinglu* 徑路) of the respiration.

⁴⁰⁵ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.30a, 7635.

⁴⁰⁶ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.17b-18a, 7605.

cavity of *qi* in the lower elixir field is connected upwards with the heart. Going downwards and to the front, it connects with the male organ, specifically the Yang Gate or the “orifice in the outer kidneys” (*waishen qiao* 外腎竅). Normally this location would be one of the locations where the *qi* would leak from the body as semen. After the successful practice of the first stage, however, this orifice is supposed to be closed and the *qi* cannot leave the body. Further below and to the back are the anus and the Weilü Barrier.

Five Dragons Bearing Aloft the Saint

When the adept has taken precautions to prevent leakage by closing the senses and using the Wooden Seat and the Wooden Peg, he is ready to transport the medicine through the three barriers. The technique to accomplish this is called “five dragons bearing aloft the saint” (*wulong pengsheng* 五龍捧聖). According to Wu’s own explanation, this metaphor alludes to a story of the Dark Emperor (Xuandi 玄帝), who “sacrificed his body and attained the Dao 捨身得道.”⁴⁰⁷ The number five is associated with the Earth Phase and therefore also with the true intention. The dragon refers to the original spirit (the *yuanshen*). The spirit is the substance (*ti* 體) of the true intention and the true intention is the function (*yong* 用) of the spirit. Thus, the combination “five dragons” suggests the coordinated application of substance and function, spirit and true intention. The “saint” refers to the “great medicine” and the “bearing aloft of the saint” suggests the upward movement of the medicine through the spine. As a whole, the metaphor of “five dragons bearing aloft the saint” refers to applying the true intention of the spirit to direct the great medicine through the three barriers in the spine.

What does this mean in practice? The key of this skill seems to consist in finding the right balance between making an effort to intentionally guide the *qi* and letting the *qi* move on its own accord while avoiding to disturb this spontaneous movement of the *qi* with one’s intentional efforts. Wu differentiates between the common technique of “guiding and pulling” (*daoyin* 導引) and what he describes as the “correct skill of competent guiding” (*shanyin zhi zhengong* 善引之正功). This means that the adept should know when to intentionally guide and when to let things happen on their own accord. When an adept would try to “guide” the medicine when it ought to move by itself, he would “loose the mechanism of singing and following” (*shi changsui zhi ji* 失唱隨之機).⁴⁰⁸ If on the other hand the adept neglects to intentionally guide the *qi* when it is necessary, he will be unable to cross through the three barriers.

How does one know when to guide and when to let things happen? Each time the medicine hits upon an impenetrable barrier, the adept first awaits the spontaneous movement of the *qi*. In Wu’s words, the medicine should “[first] move and then be guided” (*dong erhou yin* 動而後引) and the adept “should not guide it and thus make it move” (*buke yin er shidong* 不可引而使動). He should not let one intention arise (*yiyi busheng* 一意不生), concentrate the spirit without letting it move (*ningshen budong* 凝神不動), and await the movement (*dai qi dong* 待其動) of the medicine. When the *qi* suddenly starts to move by itself, it will “dash against the barrier” (*chongguan* 沖關). Then, the adept should “follow its momentum of movement” (*sui qi dongji* 隨其動機), “gently guiding upwards” (*qingqing yinshang* 輕輕引上), until the *qi* will “by itself go through” (*ziran duguo* 自然度過) the barrier. All the while, whether intentionally guiding or just letting things happen, there should be a “subtle intention of the two who are aware of each other” (*liang xiangzhi zhi wei yi* 兩相知之微意). If I understand this phrase correctly, Wu suggests that the spirit and *qi* are continuously connected and the spirit (and thus the adept) is continuously aware of the *qi*, even when it is not making a conscious effort to guide it.⁴⁰⁹

Crossing the Barriers

In this way, the adept crosses each of the three barriers in the spine going upwards to the head. When the adept obtains the signs that the medicine has been generated, the yang *qi* is sufficiently accumulated in the cavity of *qi*. According to Wu, it moves within this location until it starts to “flow vigorously” (*liudong huopo* 流動活潑). Of its own accord, the accumulation of yang *qi* will first flow to the heart where it is not “stored”

⁴⁰⁷ On this story, also see Esposito, “The Longmen School,” 658–59.

⁴⁰⁸ Singing and following alludes to the saying “the husband sings and the wife follows 夫唱婦隨,” evidently describing a pair that operates in harmony with one taking the lead and the other going along.

⁴⁰⁹ *Xianfo bezong yulu, biji*, 1.69b, 7437. Wu says, “acquaintances, means that the spirit knows the *qi* and they unite as one and follow each other; that is precisely concentrating the spirit and letting it return and enter the cavity of *qi* 相知者，神知炁合一而隨之，即凝神歸入炁穴。”

(*zhu* 貯). Then it turns around to flow to the male organ, where it will find no exit. Then it will flow in the direction of the anus, which is also closed through the use of the Wooden Seat and the clenching. Then, it will dash against the impenetrable Weilü Barrier. Now the adept awaits the spontaneous movement of the *qi* and, when this movement occurs, he follows this momentum and gently tries to guide the *qi* through the barrier, thus displacing the marrow and unblocking the barrier.

After crossing the Weilü Barrier, the *qi* will flow to the Jiaji Barrier (*jiaji guan* 夾脊關) and from there to the Yuzhen Barrier (*yuzhen guan* 玉枕關) where the same technique is applied.⁴¹⁰ At this point, the *qi* has crossed the three barriers. Then, the *qi* will flow from the Yuzhen Barrier in the neck directly through the top of the head (*zhiguan dingmen* 直貫頂門) and from there it is guided to the front end downwards (*xiangqian yinxia* 向前引下) to the Hall of Seals at the top of the nose between the eyebrows. Although not literally described as a “barrier,” the situation at the Hall of Seals is described in the same way as the three barriers, especially the first barrier. The adept has closed off the exit of the nostrils with the Wooden Peg and has thus formed a Magpie Bridge from the Hall of Seals to the throat. The adept waits for the spontaneous movement of the *qi*, follows its momentum and guides it through the Hall of Seals. From here, the *qi* enters the throat and is “ingested” in the middle elixir field.

8. The Work of Ingesting

The “ingesting” (*fushi* 服食) of the great medicine is presented as a separate oral instruction describing the task that follows the crossing of the barriers. When we examine the explanations of this task, it involves no more than the *qi* descending through the throat to enter the middle elixir field. The throat is referred to as the “twelve-storied pavilion” (*shi'er chonglou* 十二重樓), as a clear image of the rings of cartilage of the trachea. Not explained in any further detail, the *qi* supposedly moves from the location between the eyebrows to this trachea and from there to the middle elixir field in the heart region. As an obvious allusion to the ingestion of a medicine that is swallowed through the throat, the movement of *qi* through the trachea is referred to as ingesting the great medicine.⁴¹¹

Uniting the Lower and Middle Elixir Field

Not as a separate task but apparently simply as a result of the practice, after the medicine enters the middle elixir field it unites with the lower elixir field.⁴¹² Wu mentions that the two fields “transform” (*huacheng* 化成) into “one empty realm” (*yi xukong jingjie* 一虛空境界). This empty realm is the “center” (*zhong* 中) that the adept should maintain in the next task of “maintaining the center” (*shouzhong* 守中). The spirit resides (*ju* 居) in the middle elixir field, but it “silently illuminates” (*jizhao* 寂照) both the middle and lower elixir field, meaning that the adept “does not attach the intention to the two fields nor does he relax the intention from the two fields.”⁴¹³ As a result, the spirit completely fuses with them (*xiangyu hunrong* 相與渾融) and together they form the empty realm. During the next task of maintaining the center, the breath and yang *qi* will circulate through the body uniting with the yin spirit in the heart to create the yang spirit. Metaphorically, the creation of the yang spirit is the “conception of the embryo” (*jietai* 結胎). Wu explains in one passage to a confused student that the conception of the embryo can be said to take place in the yellow court (*huangting* 黃庭) in the middle elixir field, which is the usual explanation, but also in the cavity of *qi* in the lower elixir field, because these fields actually form one realm by now.

9. The Principle of Maintaining the Center

The last oral instruction of the second stage, the “principle of maintaining the center” (*shouzhong li* 守中理),

⁴¹⁰ Wu describes the Weilü Barrier as the lowest point on the spine, the Yuzhen Barrier as the highest point on the spine, and the Jiaji Barrier as the intersection of the waist (腰) and the spine.

⁴¹¹ We may note here that an actual medicine would be ingested through the esophagus behind the trachea (the windpipe), rather than through the trachea.

⁴¹² Talking about the great medicine, Wu says, “It enters within the chamber of the spirit in the middle elixir field, transforming the yin spirit performing the intercourse of Qian and Kun. Because it connects the middle and lower two fields, they unite as one.

... 而入於中丹田神室之中。點化陰神，為乾坤交媾。蓋通中下二田合而為一者也。” See *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.31b-32a, 7636.

⁴¹³ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.33a, 7637: 不著意於二田，亦不縱意於二田，即所謂元神寂照二田。

describes the main task of this stage during which all *qi* is used to transform the yin spirit into a yang spirit. Several other terms are used to describe the same task and each of these terms emphasizes a different aspect of this task. As a matter of fact, even though “maintaining the center” is used as the name of the oral instruction, it appears to be one of the least used terms to describe this task.⁴¹⁴ More common descriptions are the ten months of “nourishing” or “carrying” the embryo or the practice of the Greater Celestial Orbit.

Maintaining the Center

Wu explains that the center refers to the “void” (*xukong* 虛空) that is formed when the middle and lower elixir field have united. To “maintain,” Wu explains, means to “bring about [this] emptiness (*zhixu* 致虛).⁴¹⁵ Maintaining the center is done by continuously keeping the intention in a detached manner focused on the middle and lower elixir fields, taking care not to focus too rigidly nor relaxing the intention. This is described as the “silent illumination” (*jizhao* 寂照) of the original spirit and by performing this, the center becomes and remains empty.⁴¹⁶ Thus, we may conclude that the term maintaining the center as a description of the main task of the second stage emphasizes the role of the spirit and tells the adept to continuously keep his spirit in the middle elixir field while it applies its attention to the middle and lower elixir field.

Nourishing the Embryo

The second stage of the cultivation process as a whole is also referred to as the “ten months of nourishing the embryo” (*shiyue yangtai* 十月養胎). The “embryo” is a metaphor for the spirit and the process of “yangification” of this spirit during the second stage is imagined as the “nourishing of the embryo.” Analogous to a real pregnancy, the second stage is imagined to take around ten lunar months. The technique to nourish the embryo is referred to as “embryonic respiration” (*taixi* 胎息) and, being another metaphor describing the interaction between spirit and *qi*, “embryonic respiration” is supposed to describe how the *qi* that is circulated through the body, the respiration, feeds the spirit and how the spirit is not just the benefiter of this process but also the regulator.

Embryonic Respiration

The notion of “embryonic respiration” developed in the early medieval period and has engendered its own genre of texts.⁴¹⁷ The main concepts used by Wu in this respect are the “embryo” (*tai* 胎), regular “embryonic respiration” (*taixi* 胎息), and “true embryonic respiration” (*zhen taixi* 真胎息).⁴¹⁸ The term *tai* 胎 is almost universally taken to refer to an “embryo” and Wu himself indeed defines the term in one

⁴¹⁴ The term does not even appear once in the *Daoyuan qianshuo*, which includes an account of the whole cultivation process.

⁴¹⁵ Wu explicitly states, “Regarding the ‘center,’ it is not the middle that is called the ‘center,’ but it is emptiness that is called ‘center.’ Regarding ‘maintaining,’ it is not ‘sticking to’ that is called ‘maintaining,’ but it is ‘causing to be empty’ that is called ‘maintaining.’ 中也者，非中間之謂中，乃虛空之謂中也。守也者，非拘守之謂守，乃致虛之謂守也。” See *Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.33a, 7637.

⁴¹⁶ The notion of “tranquil illumination” (*jizhao* 寂照) is of Buddhist origin. Soothill and Hodous translate it as “*nirvāṇa*-illumination; ultimate reality shining forth.” See Soothill and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 348. In the PDB, the similar Chan expression “quiescent, yet constantly illumining” (*ji er changzhao* 寂而常照) is explained as follows: “[an] expression that can be interpreted both ontologically and soteriologically. Ontologically, *ji er changzhao* describes the nature of the mind as imperturbable in its essence but as always dynamically responsive to external objects in its functioning. Soteriologically, *ji er changzhao* refers to the meditative technique wherein one trains the mind to be focused and tranquil with regard to all things that arise in the mind, while nevertheless remaining simultaneously vigilant and observant of them. This expression typically appears in a parallel couplet along with “illumining, yet always quiescent.” PDB, 386.

⁴¹⁷ I translate as “embryonic respiration” rather than “embryonic breathing” because I differentiate between “breathing” as the act of inhalation and exhalation and “respiration” as the broader concept including ventilation but also the circulation of *qi* through the body.

⁴¹⁸ In the following brief dialogue between Wu and the Prince of Ji, Wu explains the notions of “embryo,” “embryonic respiration,” and “true embryonic respiration.” “Question: In the *Zhilun* you speak of the “embryo,” “embryonic respiration,” and you speak of “true embryonic respiration.” Could you please explain them one by one? Answer: During the pass of ten months, there is the silent illumination of the original spirit that controls the two *qi* (breath and *qi*) and therefore [the spirit] is called embryo. There is [also] the circulation of the two *qi* that forms the supplementary nourishment of the original spirit and therefore we say “embryonic respiration.” When you forget the traces of the circulation of the two *qi* that nourish, the embryonic spirit finally returns to great samadhi, therefore we speak of “true embryonic respiration. 問曰：《直論》中言胎，又言胎息，又言真胎息，請一一言之？答曰：十月之關，有元神之寂照，以為二炁之主持，故云胎。有二炁之運行，以為元神之助養，故云胎息。忘二炁運行助養之跡，而胎神終歸大定，故云真胎息也。” (*Dandao jinpian, biji*, 6.33b, 7637.) The prince’s reference to the *Zhilun* is probably to the chapter on “embryonic respiration,” in which Wu explains this concept in most detail.

passage as referring to a human person between conception and birth. But if we closely look at the relevant passages, it turns out that *tai* is sometimes indeed used to refer to an embryo and sometimes to the womb and the texts do not clearly differentiate between these usages of the singular character *tai*.⁴¹⁹ Thus, we are sometimes faced with a puzzle whether to translate *tai* as womb or as embryo and, furthermore, perhaps “embryonic respiration” should be understood as “womb respiration.” In any case, what is referred to here is the situation of the embryo in the womb and its manner of respiration that relies on the mother’s respiration and connects with the embryo through the umbilical cord at the navel.

The idea of embryonic respiration and its variations is not just based on the image of a real pregnancy but on the process of embryogenesis. A frequently repeated phrase from the *Scripture of Embryonic Respiration* says, “The embryo is formed from within the subdued breath and the *qi* is respired from within the womb.”⁴²⁰ In the description of embryogenesis we can identify three stages. First, within the empty womb of the mother, two *qi*, one from each parent, unite as one *qi*. This one *qi* is the zygote, there is no embryo yet and no respiration. Next, an embryo develops as a result of the respiration of the mother and, because there is an embryo, it develops its own respiration. This is the logic of the paradoxical phrase from the *Scripture of Embryonic Respiration* that the development of an embryo (and/or womb) is caused by the respiration and the development of respiration is caused by the existence of the embryo (and/or womb). The embryo relies on its mother’s respiration until birth and receives its breath through their interconnected navels (*qi* 臍) instead of through its own mouth and nose. Then, after birth, the connection between the mother and baby is severed and the respiration temporarily stops until the baby starts up its own respiration through the mouth and nose. The mechanism of breathing is said to be the same as in the womb except for its use of different orifices, that is, the mouth and nose instead of the navel.

The logic of cultivation follows this process in reverse order. Beginning with ordinary respiration through the mouth and nose, the adept is supposed to return to the circumstances in the womb, by letting his breath return to the lower elixir field near the navel, thus attaining “embryonic respiration.” Then, reversing the process of gestation, the adept is to return to the situation before the embryo developed respiration and before the embryo itself developed when there was only *qi* in the mother’s womb, attaining “true embryonic respiration.” In more detail, this is thought to proceed as follows. When the *qi* is activated (and thus turns into pre-heaven essence) it should be united with the spirit and with the breathing, thus “uniting the three treasures” (*sanbao huihe* 三寶會合). This describes the actions of the first stage and the adept refines the “great medicine,” that is, the accumulation of yang *qi* in the lower elixir field. Then, during the second stage, this medicine is “returned” to the middle elixir field, now referred to as the yellow court, the location where the embryo is conceived. This “conception” (*jietai* 結胎) initiates the process of embryonic respiration. This embryonic respiration, referring to the circulation of breath and *qi* through the body, “nourishes the embryonic spirit” (*yang taishen* 養胎神). At this time, it is said to feel like there is merely some breathing in the navel wheel (*qilun* 臍輪; S. *nirmana-cakra*).⁴²¹

This process of embryonic respiration continuous for ten months while the embryo is gradually gestated in the yellow court. That is to say, the two *qi* are gradually transferred from the lower elixir field to the middle elixir field to transform the yin spirit into a yang spirit. Towards the end of this process, all *qi* has gradually disappeared while the yang spirit is about to be completed. When there is no more *qi*, no breath and no *qi*, the respiration stops and the adept attains “true embryonic respiration.” In the next table, we can see the associations between the normal development of an embryo and the inverted development of an adept.

⁴¹⁹ The following is a good example of a passage in which *tai* 胎 appears to signify the womb rather than the embryo: “when the spirit enters samadhi, this is metaphorically called conceiving a child in the womb; when [the spirit] acquires samadhi-power and can exit, this is metaphorically called the child that has left the womb and whose power is little. 神入定，喻懷兒於胎；得定力矣而可出，喻出胎之兒力小也。” (*Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 2.45a, 7487.) Also see Eskildsen’s discussion of embryonic respiration in Eskildsen, *Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity*. Catherine Despeux discusses the ambiguity of *tai* 胎 in Despeux, “Symbolic Pregnancy and the Sexual Identity of Taoist Adepts,” where she mentions the chapter on embryonic respiration in Wu’s *Tianxian zhengli zhibun*, saying “the concept is unequivocally taken to mean the breathing of the embryo inside its mother’s womb alone.” Ibid., 165. As we can see from the passages here, this is not accurate.

⁴²⁰ “The embryo is formed from within the subdued breath and the *qi* is respired from within the womb 胎從伏氣中結炁從有胎中息.” See *Scripture of Embryonic Respiration* (*Taixijing* 胎息經; DZ 14).

⁴²¹ *Tianxian zhengli zhibun*, *biji*, 4.76a-b, 7586.

Table 7: Correspondence of embryogenesis and cultivation

embryo	adept
↓empty womb	↑emptiness
↓one <i>qi</i>	↑one spirit
↓embryo and embryonic respiration	↑embryo and embryonic respiration
↓normal respiration through mouth and nose	↑normal respiration through mouth and nose

The Greater Celestial Orbit

The first stage and the second stage of the cultivation process display a certain amount of structural analogy in the sense that, although the actual events are different, the structure of the process is explained in similar metaphors. During the first stage, the adept waits for the generation of the medicine to gather it, returns the medicine to the tripod in the lower elixir field, starts the fire, and performs the fire phasing of the Lesser Celestial Orbit to create the great medicine. During the second stage, the adept gathers the medicine to cause it to be generated in the tripod and performs the fire phasing of the Greater Celestial Orbit to return the medicine to the tripod in the middle elixir field to create the golden elixir. In the first stage, the main task of transforming essence into *qi* is realized through the Lesser Celestial Orbit and during the second stage the main task of transforming *qi* into spirit is realized through the Greater Celestial Orbit.⁴²²

The Greater Celestial Orbit (*da zhou tian* 大周天) moves through the route described above along the back and front of the body. Wu clarifies that after the work of the three barriers and the ingestion of the medicine—that is, the first time the adept moves an accumulation of yang *qi* through the conduits along the spine and torso to unblock the hindrances of marrow in the bone structures—this route is now cleared and the breath and *qi* (the two *qi*) can move through it without any problem.⁴²³ The two *qi* now “circulate continuously” and “spontaneously,” rising and descending through the “proper route” while the *qi* (breath and *qi*) are ingested in the empty center to “nurture” the spirit.⁴²⁴ At this point, the adept does not need to use his intention anymore to guide the *qi* or the fire. During the process of unblocking, the adept was instructed to find the proper balance between letting the *qi* move on its own and guiding the *qi* by following its momentum and directing it by projecting his intention. Now, it is advised not to use the intention at all since that would only result in “obstructing” (*zhi ai* 滯礙) the samadhi. The spirit should remain in samadhi, “silently illuminating” the empty center of the lower and middle elixir fields. This causes the circulation of the *qi*.⁴²⁵

In the same way as during the Lesser Celestial Orbit, the “fire phasing” refers to the regulation of the respiration, including the breath and the movement of *qi* through the body. During the Lesser Celestial Orbit, the active regulation of the respiration produces the “appearance of fire” (*huo xiang* 火相). During the Greater Celestial Orbit, there is said to be no “appearance of fire” and the fire is said to be “not existing and not non-existing” (*bu you bu wu* 不有不無). This is called the “civil fire” (*wen huo* 文火).⁴²⁶

Wu explains the difference between the Orbits as follows. The Lesser Celestial Orbit has “interruptions,” “hours,” and “numbers.” With interruptions (*jian* 間) is meant that the practice of the Orbit is only done during a time of practice. In between practice times, the Orbit is not practiced. The “hours” refer to the twelve double hours that provide the temporal structure, the segments of time that divide the practice as well as the spatial structure by indicating the locations in the body where the *qi* circulates. The numbers refer to the number of inhalations and exhalations as the adept counts his breath. The Greater Celestial Orbit, on the contrary, has none of these. It has no interruptions, no hours, and no numbers. Having no interruptions, the practice continues night and day. The circulation through the body is not divided into segments since there are no “hours.” Finally, there are no numbers and hence the adept does not count his breathing but breathes naturally (*tian ran* 天然). Some of the metaphors to describe this continuous,

⁴²² Wu explains that this difference concerns the application: “His Highness Taihe the Prince of Ji asked: ‘Why are there the different names of Greater and Lesser Celestial Orbit?’ Chongxu said: ‘Heaven is definitely one but the work that is applied has the the difference of ‘greater’ and ‘lesser.’ 吉王殿下太和問曰：何為有大小周天之異名？冲虛曰：天固一也，而所用之工，有大小之異也。” (*Tianxian zhenli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.20b, 7606.)

⁴²³ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.33b, 7637.

⁴²⁴ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.33b, 7637.

⁴²⁵ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.34a, 7637. The original spirit continues to “silently illuminate” the two elixir fields, causing the two *qi* to be “diligently produced” (*qin qin fasheng* 勤勤發生), continuously revolving and nourishing (*yun yang bu jue* 運養不絕).

⁴²⁶ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.33b-34a, 7637.

spontaneous, structureless practice include “blowing the hole-less flute” (*chui wukong di* 吹無孔笛) or “plucking the string-less zither” (*gu meixian qin* 鼓沒弦琴). The idea is that, during the ten months, the circulation of the Orbit becomes ever more gradual.⁴²⁷

Bathing

During the Lesser Celestial Orbit, when the adept counts his breaths and transports the *qi*, there are two hours of rest in the middle of the yang and yin hours. During these hours of “bathing” at the hours of *mao* and *you*, the fire is stopped temporarily (*xibuo* 息火) and thus these “hours” have no “numbers.” During the Greater Celestial Orbit, the idea appears to be the same in this sense that the hours of bathing represent moments in the cycle when the adept should rest and let the *qi* be motionless. First, the adept should “wash the mind and cleans the worries” (*xixin dili* 洗心滌慮). Then, he should let “the two *qi* be motionless” (*erqi budong* 二炁不動) and let “the true *qi* steam” (*zhenqi xunzhang* 真炁薰蒸).⁴²⁸ To support this, Wu uses a somewhat complex system associating the five phases with the twelve Earthly Branches and with the so-called “twelve longevities” (*shier changsheng* 十二長生).⁴²⁹ In a table, these associations look as follows:

Table 8: Bathing; five phases, Earthly Branches, and twelve longevities

	子 <i>zi</i>	丑 <i>chou</i>	寅 <i>yin</i>	卯 <i>mao</i>	辰 <i>chen</i>	巳 <i>si</i>	午 <i>wu</i>	未 <i>wei</i>	申 <i>shen</i>	酉 <i>you</i>	戌 <i>xu</i>	亥 <i>hai</i>
火 fire	胎 embryo	養 nourish	長生 longevity	沐浴 bathing	冠帶 crowning	臨官 office	帝旺 prosperity	衰 decline	病 disease	死 death	墓 grave	絕 extinct
水 water	帝旺 prosperity	衰 decline	病 disease	死 death	墓 grave	絕 extinct	胎 embryo	養 nourish	長生 longevity	沐浴 bathing	冠帶 crowning	臨官 office
土 earth	帝旺 prosperity	衰 decline	病 disease	死 death	墓 grave	絕 extinct	胎 embryo	養 nourish	長生 longevity	沐浴 bathing	冠帶 crowning	臨官 office
金 metal	死 death	墓 grave	絕 extinct	胎 embryo	養 nourish	長生 longevity	沐浴 bathing	冠帶 crowning	臨官 office	帝旺 prosperity	衰 decline	病 disease
木 wood	沐浴 bathing	冠帶 crowning	臨官 office	帝旺 prosperity	衰 decline	病 disease	死 death	墓 grave	絕 extinct	胎 embryo	養 nourish	長生 longevity

The first column lists the five phases. The first row from above lists the twelve Earthly Branches, representing the twelve hours. The columns and rows in between display the twelve longevities. Most important are the four columns with the four hours of, respectively, *zi* 子, *mao* 卯, *wu* 午, and *you* 酉. As we can see, these hours are associated with “bathing” and with “death.” This suggests, according to Wu, that these are the times when there should be no movement of *qi*. The same schema also appears to apply to the bathing of the first stage, but Wu only mentions it explicitly in the context of the second stage.

Signs of Confirmation

During the ten-month process of performing the Greater Celestial Orbit, yangifying the spirit, and nourishing the embryo by practicing embryonic respiration, the adept transforms himself and experiences

⁴²⁷ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo, biji*, 5.21a, 7607: “In the beginning, one instant of one respiration forms one orbit. Then, half an hour becomes one instant of one respiration of one orbit. Then, one hour becomes one instant of one respiration of one orbit. Then, one day, ten days, one month, ten months become one instant of one respiration of one orbit. 初時一瞬息為周一天，至一刻為一瞬息周一天，至一時為一瞬息周一天，至一日、十日、一月、十月為一瞬息周一天。”

⁴²⁸ I translate *xunzhang* 薰蒸 as “steaming.” *Xun* 薰 means “smoke” and *zhang* 蒸 means “steam” or “evaporate.” The term *xunzhang* is sometimes translated as “fumigation” but while this term may literally be a correct translation it appears to me to have become primarily associated with a method of disinfection. The Chinese term signifies the combination of Fire and Water leading to steaming and vaporization. The Water refers to the *qi* and the Fire refers here to the Fire of the spirit as well as the Fire of ordinary breathing. Hence, Steaming through combining Fire and Water means “evaporating” the *qi* through concentration and respiration. Steaming is often contrasted with Refining (*penglian* 烹煉); applying fire to smelt and transform a substance. The Lesser Celestial Orbit is said to consist of Steaming and Refining and both serve to replenish (*bu* 補) the *qi*.

⁴²⁹ The “twelve longevities” (*shier changsheng* 十二長生) is a somewhat obscure system of the occult arts. This system is based on a sequence of twelve concepts that describe the stages in a person’s life: (1) “longevity” (*changsheng* 長生); (2) “bathing” (*myu* 沐浴); (3) “crowning” (*guandai* 冠帶); (4) “about to become an official” (*lin’guan* 臨官; abbreviated to “office” in the table); (5) “prosperous as an emperor” (*diwang* 帝旺; abbreviated to “prosperity” in the table); (6) “decline” (*shuai* 衰); (7) “disease” (*bing* 病); (8) “death” (*si* 死); (9) “grave” (*mu* 墓); (10) “extinction” (*jue* 絕); (11) “embryo” (*tai* 胎); (12) “nourish” (*yang* 養).

various signs of the effectiveness of this process of transformation. Wu mentions a sequence of five “signs of verification” (*jingyan* 景驗):

1. after approximately 3 months, the “mechanism of activity” (*dongji* 動機) of the breath and *qi* becomes very subtle (*wei* 微) and there is only movement at the “navel wheel” (*qilun* 臍輪) in the “empty area”
2. between the 4th and 5th month, because of the “silent illumination” of the original spirit, the breath and *qi* are totally “ingested” and they “both return to samadhi and are annihilated” (*jie guidingmie* 皆歸定滅). The original spirit, because of the “nurturing” (*peiyu* 培育) of the original *qi*, attains “yang clarity without darkness” (*yangming bumei* 陽明不昧) and verifies (*zheng* 證) “true emptiness” (*zhenkong* 真空). Breath and *qi* are both stable (*ding* 定), and the habit of eating (*shixing* 食性) comes to an end (*jue* 絕). There only remains one independent original spirit that “tranquilly illuminates” and that is the “master” (*zhu* 主) of the “embryonic immortal” (*taixian* 胎仙)
3. between the 6th and 7th month, the mind (*xin* 心) has no more “production-and-cessation” (*shengmie* 生滅; i.e., thought processes) and there is “absolutely no more slumber or sleep” (*hunshui quanwu* 昏睡全無)
4. between the 8th and 9th month, all the “hundred channels” (*baimai* 百脈) come to a halt (*zhu* 住)
5. approaching 10 months, “there has been enough [fire] phasing [to attain a] pure yang (spirit)” (*houzu chunyang* 候足純陽) and “the spirit has returned to great samadhi” (*shen gui dading* 神歸大定)

These five stages are the results of the two kinds of *qi* being gradually transformed into yang spirit. While the two *qi* gradually disappear, the spirit becomes gradually more yang. As a result of the *qi* disappearing, the movement of *qi* in the elixir field first becomes gradually weaker. Then, the two *qi* are said to become “stable.” Finally, the “hundred channels,” the conduits of breath and *qi* in the body, come to a halt. At the same time, the spirit is nurtured by the *qi* and becomes yang and clear without confusion. The spirit realizes “true emptiness.”⁴³⁰ Then, as the spirit is becoming gradually more stable and yang, the thought processes come to an end and the adept can totally forego on sleep. Finally, the spirit is pure yang—completely yang without any trace of yin—and attains great samadhi.

The Four Dhyana

Wu equates the Daoist concept of “embryonic respiration” with the Buddhist concept of “entering samadhi.” As seen above, while the adept practices embryonic respiration he is supposed to successively attain a number of signs that verify his practice. Similarly, the process of entering samadhi and gradually training to attain great samadhi is verified through the attainment of the “four dhyana” (*sichan* 四禪). Wu cites the *Flower Garland Sutra* but actually presents a new interpretation of this concept.⁴³¹ The first dhyana is described as the “halting of thought” (*nianzhu* 念住), meaning that the spirit becomes motionless and does not spread outside through the sense faculties to contact with the outside realm. Especially not with the “realm of desire” or objects that arouse sexual passions. The second dhyana is described as the “halting of respiration” (*xizhu* 息住), meaning that the respiration stops. The third dhyana is described as the “halting of the pulses” (*maizhu* 脈住), meaning that the pulses that can normally be felt in the wrists also stop as if one is momentarily death. The fourth and last dhyana is described as “the samadhi of complete extinction” (*miejin ding* 滅盡定) and means that one is permanently without embryonic respiration because all *qi* has been transformed into spirit. Since there is no more *qi* or breath, there is also no more respiration. The embryo is now completed. That means that the spirit is completely united with the yang *qi* and has become a yang spirit. One is now said to have attained “great samadhi.”

⁴³⁰ “True emptiness” (*zhenkong* 真空) is emptiness that is empty (*kong* 空) as well as not empty (*bu kong* 不空).

⁴³¹ As has been noted by Stephen Eskildsen, Wu cites the *Flower Garland Sutra* (*Avatamsaka Sutra*) but these terms do not actually appear in this scripture; Eskildsen, “Wu Shouyang,” 131. Perhaps Wu read some unknown commentary to this scripture, perhaps he simply fabricated this quote, or perhaps he was simply intending to paraphrase this sutra and was not actually literally quoting at all. In any case, this explanation of the four dhyana does not seem to appear in any Buddhist scripture at all. It was however not Wu’s invention. As a matter of fact, it can be found in a letter attributed to Wu’s patriarch Qiu Chuji, titled the *Changchun Qiu zhenren ji Xizhou daoyou shu* 長春邱真人寄西州道友書 (Letter send by the perfected man Qiu Changchun to a Daoist friend from the Western Provinces), which is found in the *Zhenxian zhiyishi yulu* 真仙直指語錄 (attr. Xuanquanzi 玄全子, hao Haitian qiuyue daoren 海天秋月道人, a disciple of Ma Danyang; DZ 1256). This text has Qiu Chuji quoting a saying, “The ancients said: ‘First, the thought halts. Second, the respiration halts. Third, the pulses halt. Fourth, there is complete extinction. Entering great samadhi, do not interact with things, as a seven hundred years old antique.’ 古人曰：初念住，二息住，三脈住，四滅盡，入乎大定，與物不交，七百年老古錫也。”

The Six Powers of the Spirit

At the end of the first stage of cultivation, the adept acquires the first “power of the spirit” (*shentong* 神通), called the “power of terminated outflow” (*loujin tong* 漏盡通).⁴³² This notion of “powers of the spirit” is an adaptation of the Buddhist concept of the *abhijna*, which are commonly listed in groups of three, five, six, or ten.⁴³³ The power of terminated outflow had a completely different meaning in its Buddhist context.⁴³⁴ For Wu, it signifies the end of all leakage of essence through ejaculation and thus the termination of the outflow of *qi*. It is the power acquired by ending the outflow of yang *qi* from the body. The other five powers are obtained at the end of the second stage, when this yang *qi* has been successfully used to yangify the spirit. At that time, the spirit has attained great samadhi and Wu says that this samadhi generates “wisdom” (*hui* 慧).⁴³⁵ The generation of wisdom is attested (*yan* 驗) by the fact that the adept spontaneously acquires the remaining five powers, now six powers in total.⁴³⁶

1. Power of celestial eyes (*tianyan tong* 天眼通)
2. Power of celestial ears (*tianer tong* 天耳通)
3. Power of past lives (*suming tong* 宿命通)
4. Power of the minds of others (*taxin tong* 他心通)
5. Power of the conditions of spirit (*shenjing tong* 神境通)
6. Power of terminated outflow (*loujin tong* 漏盡通)

The power of celestial eyes is explained as being able to see things in the heavens.⁴³⁷ The power of celestial ears enables one to hear what is said in the heavens.⁴³⁸ The power of past lives allows one to have insight in the karmic causes one has acquired from past lives.⁴³⁹ The power of the minds of others makes it possible to know the things that are yet to come.⁴⁴⁰ The power of the conditions of spirit is explained as the only power that refers to the “conscious spirit” (*shishen* 識神) instead of the original spirit (*yuanshen* 元神).⁴⁴¹ Wu says that when you are unable to “support the lord of the heart” (*baofu xinjun* 保扶心君), that is, the mind itself, then it will turn into (*zhuan* 轉) the conscious spirit. If that happens, you will start to delight in the fact that you are able to cultivate and that your cultivation has results.⁴⁴² This is a sign that the “demon of joy” (*huanxi mo* 歡喜魔) has already entered the heart. As a result, delighting in these new-found powers, you will enjoy talking about the fortune and disaster of people or about confidential affairs yet to come. Then, misfortune will arrive instantaneously.⁴⁴³ As the saying goes, “The Dao is one foot but demons are ten feet tall.”⁴⁴⁴

⁴³² This is the first power acquired by the adept in the sequence of the cultivation process, at the end of the first stage, but it is usually listed as the sixth of the six powers.

⁴³³ Soothill and Hodous refer to “spirit power” (*shentong* 神通; S. *abhijna*) as “supernatural powers;” see Soothill and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*. The PDB translates as “superknowledges” and adds “specifically referring to a set of supranormal powers that are by-products of meditation.” See PDB, 8–9. Some authors translate more literally as “spiritual penetration.” These powers are very similar to the idea of *siddhis* in Yoga.

⁴³⁴ It has been described as “the supernatural insight into the ending of the stream of transmigration.” See Soothill and Hodous, *A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, 425. It has also been translated as “knowledge of the extinction of the contaminants;” See PDB, 8. In Buddhism, the sixth power is also considered different from the first five. The first five are, as in Wu’s theory, achieved through dhyana. The last, very different than in Wu’s understanding, was achieved through *vipasyana*, the cultivation of insight into the nature of reality.

⁴³⁵ “Wisdom” translates *hui* 慧, which was used to translate the Sanskrit *prajna* which, in Buddhist texts just as in Wu’s description, is presented as the result of samadhi.

⁴³⁶ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.34a, 7637.

⁴³⁷ *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.34b, 7637.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴¹ The concept of the “conscious spirit” (*shishen* 識神) was introduced in the Chinese vocabulary after the introduction of Buddhist texts when it was used to translate the Sanskrit term *vinjana*. While *vinjana* denoted one of the factors that constitute a person, in early Chinese Buddhism it acquired the meaning of the aspect of a human being that continuous through rebirth. See Yuet Keung Lo, “The destiny of the *shen* (soul) and the genesis of early medieval Confucian metaphysics (221–587 A.D.),” 102–103 and further.

⁴⁴² *Dandao jinpian*, *biji*, 6.34b, 7637.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁴ [道高一尺魔高一丈] This saying originates from a verse in chapter fifty of the *Journey to the West*. The translation is taken from Anthony C. Yu, *The Journey to the West*.

Wu counsels his readers to “have this wisdom but not use it” (*hui er buyong* 慧而不用). The idea is that, as a result of the spirit attaining great samadhi, you will generate insight and this insight is evidenced by attaining the six specific powers of the spirit which enable you to have knowledge of all kinds of events. But when you use these powers and start to enjoy your knowledge, you will come under the influence of the demon of joy and eventually this will lead to misfortune. If you obtain this insight and are wise enough not to use it, you will not fall into this trap and you will be able to “turn consciousness into wisdom” (*zhuanshi chengzhi* 轉識成智).⁴⁴⁵

The Upper Pass

The main task of the third stage involves “refining the spirit and returning it to emptiness” (*lianshen huanxu* 煉神還虛). This is the “upper pass” (*shangguan* 上關), the last of the three stages, leading to celestial immortality. In terms of the periods, it involves the “three years of nursing” (*sannian rubu* 三年乳哺) and the “nine years of facing a wall” (*jiunian mianbi* 九年面壁), also called the “nine years of great samadhi” (*jiunian dading* 九年大定). In the terminology of the Zhong-Lü texts, this is the “great accomplishment” (*dacheng* 大成), although the first phase could be said to belong to the “intermediate accomplishment” (*zhongcheng* 中成) because it is still concerned with spirit immortality. It includes three oral instructions: (1) the sign to let the spirit exit (*chushen jing* 出神景); (2) the method to let the spirit exit and to collect the spirit (*chushen shoushen fa* 出神收神法); and (3) the principle of refining the spirit and returning it to emptiness (*lianshen huanxu li* 煉神還虛理).

Before the actual work of the third stage can begin, the second relocation needs to take place. With the first relocation, during the second stage, the location of action was relocated from the lower elixir field to the middle elixir field. Now, the location of action needs to be relocated from the middle elixir field to the upper elixir field in the head. This means that the yang spirit needs to be relocated from the heart to the head. When this is accomplished, the three years of nursing begins. This means that the adept will “nurse” (*rubu* 乳哺) the “infant” (*ying'er* 嬰兒), a metaphor for the yang spirit that has been created during the equally metaphorical “ten months of nourishing the fetus.”

This task of nursing is divided in two sub-stages. First, the adept “preserves and nourishes” (*cunyang* 存養) the infant by constantly focussing his intention on the upper elixir field until the yang spirit blends with the elixir field to form a great empty area, just like it first did with the lower and middle elixir fields. This continues until the adept experiences the “sign to exit the spirit,” a visual sensation described as a spectacle of snowflakes or flowers fluttering through the sky. This is supposed to happen spontaneously and it signifies that the spirit is at the peak of samadhi and should be allowed to exit the body through the top of the head. Now, the second task of the three years of nursing begins. The adept should train his yang spirit to be able to exit and enter the body and travel over gradually increasing distances and time periods.⁴⁴⁶ This is explained under the rubric of the next oral instruction, the “method to let the spirit exit and to collect the spirit.” The “infant” has matured when the yang spirit is able to travel to the Great Void. This is finally followed by the last period of “nine years of facing a wall” or “nine years of great samadhi.” The main task is expressed in the last oral instruction of the “principle of refining the spirit and returning it to emptiness.” This final task is described as an indefinite extension of great samadhi until the yang spirit leaves the body for good to attain a fundamentally ineffable state of unity with emptiness. This final task coincides with the

⁴⁴⁵ In this context of the highest levels of dhyana and the attainment of special types of knowledge, we encounter a variety of terms to denote different aspects of the mind or spirit. In Buddhist texts, both *zhi* 智 and *hui* 慧 are used to translate *prajñā* (which is also transcribed as *banruo/bore* 般若), which is usually translated as “wisdom” but more specifically refers to “understanding of reality that transcends ordinary comprehension” (PDB, 655). *Prajñā* is important to overcome ignorance and doubt and is one of the three basic modes of training: *śīla*, *prajñā*, and samadhi. The term *zhi* 智 by itself also translates the concept *jñāna*, or “knowledge,” which plays a specific role in the process of cognition; *jñāna* is preceded by “perception” (*samjñā*). To “turn consciousness into wisdom” (*zhuanshi chengzhi* 轉識成智) is a concept sometimes associated with Chan but originating in Yogacara. Also given as “conversion of consciousness to get wisdom” (*zhuanshi dezhì* 轉識得智), it signifies the objective to transform *vijñāna*, the consciousness associated with the perception, into *jñāna*, the understanding of an enlightened being. Yogacara identifies several types of *vijñāna* which are transformed in several specific types of *jñāna*.

⁴⁴⁶ Every time the spirit is collected again in the head, the adept “preserves and nourishes” it there. Hence, although “preserving and nourishing” is said to be the first task of the three years of nursing, it continues as the adept starts to practice the method to exit the spirit.

physical death of the adept. Let us review each of these tasks in more detail.

10. The Sign to Let the Spirit Exit

The Second Relocation

When the yang spirit has been completed it should first be relocated to another site to continue the practice. The yang spirit is created in the empty area formed by the lower and middle elixir field. Now, it should be relocated to the upper elixir field in the head. This location is also known as the Mud Pellet Palace (*nivan gong* 泥丸宮) and it is described as the spirit's "native palace" (*bengong* 本宮) where it "returns in subjugation" (*guifu* 歸伏). We are not told how exactly the spirit is supposed to be relocated to the upper elixir field. It appears that by simply turning the attention, or intention, to this location the spirit would move there.

Preserving and Nourishing

After the relocation of the spirit, the adept can start preparing it to return to emptiness. This preparation is called the "three years of nursing." Wu divides the three years of nursing in a first stage of "preserving and nourishing" and a stage of training the spirit to exit and re-enter the body. The first stage of preserving and nourishing continues until the adept experiences the sign to emit the spirit. After the yang spirit has been relocated to the upper field, presumably by simply changing the location of the intention, the adept is supposed to keep his intention, in a detached manner, focussed on the upper field. This should not be forced but neither should the adept let his attention slip away. This is the "silent illumination" of the yang spirit.⁴⁴⁷ It should be remembered that it is the spirit here—the subjective "self" of the adept—that is performing cultivation on itself; specifically, it is here the spirit that is "silently illuminating" the elixir field. At some point, the spirit will then somehow merge with its location of the upper field until they form a big empty space. This is not explained in any further detail and one wonders what the merging of the spirit and its location exactly means. In any case, the logic seems to be the same as during the second stage when the spirit merges with the empty area of the lower and middle field. Whatever it exactly means, the merging must be a temporary thing. After the second stage, the spirit leaves the empty area of the lower and middle field to move to the upper field and during the third stage the spirit will also leave this empty area to exit the body. The task of preserving and nourishing continues until the adept experiences the sign to exit the body.

The Sign to Let the Spirit Exit

At some point during the preserving and nourishing, the adept should expect to experience the sign to emit the spirit.⁴⁴⁸ This "sign" is described as a visual experience. Wu suggests that the work of preserving and nourishing is an aspect of samadhi. While you are in samadhi, you continuously focus the attention in a detached manner on the upper field until you suddenly and spontaneously experience the sign. The sign signals that the spirit can exit the body. The sign itself is described as a visual sensation. What you will see is described as a spectacle of snowflakes (*liuchu fenfen* 六出紛紛). Literally, the six edges (*liuchu* 六出) refer to the hexagonal structure of a snowflake. What I translate here as "a spectacle" (*fenfen* 紛紛) has the connotations of "many" and "disorderly." It suggests the visual sensation of heavy snowfall or snowflakes fluttering about.⁴⁴⁹ Another image for the same phenomenon which appears to originate from the Zhong-Lü texts is called "flowers cascading from the sky" (*tianhua luanzhui* 天花亂墜).⁴⁵⁰

The sign signals that the spirit *can* exit the body, but it also means that the spirit *should* exit the body. If you do not start to practice the exit of the spirit at this point, you will miss the opportunity to further the

⁴⁴⁷ The language can become confusing here because the spirit is both an object of cultivation as well as the subject performing the cultivation. In other words, the "self" of the adept *is* the spirit performing cultivation on itself.

⁴⁴⁸ At this point the translation becomes a bit tricky as we have to ask *who* is doing the "exiting"? Is the spirit leaving the body, or is the spirit let out of the body? The last translation would suggest that there is another "you" that does something to the spirit as an object.

⁴⁴⁹ The idea that the shape of snowflakes is hexagonal appears to originate in the Han dynasty text *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, attributed to Han Ying 韓嬰 (fl. 150 BCE), which says, "All herbs, trees, and flowers have five corners but only snowflakes (i.e., snowflakes) have six corners 凡草木花多五出雪花獨六出." A more common form of this idiom is *liuchu fenfei* 六出紛飛 and it is also found as *xuepian fenfei* 雪片紛飛.

⁴⁵⁰ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.103b, 7454.

cultivation process and to eventually return the spirit to emptiness and enter holiness. If an adept does not train the spirit to exit and enter the body, it will never be able to leave the body and the body will become an obstacle. Wu refers a couple of times to this principle and calls those who stay in the body “foolish men who can live as long as heaven and earth 壽同天地之愚夫.”⁴⁵¹ To return to emptiness means that the spirit must separate from its “bodily shell,” so that it may be without obstruction and can give free rein to its powers.⁴⁵²

11. The Method to Exit and Collect the Spirit

The Principles of Exit and Collection

The three years of nursing begin when the spirit is relocated to the upper elixir field and the adept “preserves and nourishes” it by practising samadhi. As soon as the adept experiences the sign to exit the spirit, he can initiate the practice associated with the next oral instruction, the “method to exit and collect the spirit.” This is the method to prepare the spirit to leave the body and return to emptiness. This is also the main task of the three years of nursing.

Wu describes the principles of this task. The spirit’s basic location is in the upper elixir field in the head, in the Mud Pellet Palace. It leaves the body through the Celestial Gate (*tianmen* 天門), the fontanel, and enters again through the same orifice. When the spirit leaves the body, its ultimate objective is to reach the Great Void (*taixu* 太虛). The key is to avoid impatience and train the spirit during a gradual process, without skipping steps. Thus, in the beginning one should practice exit not too often, only for short periods, and over short distances. Gradually, step for step and then mile for mile, the distance and duration of exiting the spirit can be increased.⁴⁵³

But how does one actually let the spirit exit the body? The technique appears to boil down to projecting the mind to wherever the spirit should be. When you want the spirit to exit the body, you need to move your thoughts from the upper field to a location outside the body where you want the spirit to go. Presumably, the spirit simply follows your thoughts. Or perhaps we should say that by definition the spirit is wherever your thoughts are. When you want the spirit to return inside your body, collect your thoughts in your head again and the spirit will return to its native location in the upper elixir field.⁴⁵⁴

The Risks of the Spirit

Wu also explains *why* the yang spirit should be carefully and gradually nursed and trained to travel distances outside of the body. The process is not without risks. The immature spirit can get lost outside of the body or demons can come to confuse the adept’s mind. Wu mentions three different potential risks during this stage of the cultivation process. First, when the spirit exits the body and is not practiced yet in traveling outside the body it could lose its way and be unable to return to the body. Second, during practice celestial demons could come to put the adept to the test by confusing his mind, presumably with illusions. Third, the adept’s own mind, the conscious spirit, can generate confusing illusions by itself. Thus, once again Wu reiterates the fundamental importance of the “refining of the self” that the adept should undertake before starting the first stage of cultivation. During the whole cultivation process the adept should remain under control, “empty,” and focused on his tasks without being distracted by sensations, entering the senses or arising in his own mind.⁴⁵⁵

Intensifying Samadhi

The Buddhist equivalent of the three years of nursing, says Wu, is the practice of “empowerment” (*jiachi* 加持; S. *adhiṣṭhāna*). In mainstream Buddhism, “empowerment” refers to the determination to extend the duration of samadhi as well as to the power of a buddha to project “mind-made bodies” (*yisheng shen* 意生身; S. *manomayakāya*) outside. At the end of the second stage, the adept attains “great samadhi” (*dading* 大定). This means that spirit and *qi* have already attained samadhi or stability and during the following three

⁴⁵¹ *Xianfo hezhong yulu*, *biji*, 2.44b, 7486.

⁴⁵² *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.26b-27a, 7609–10.

⁴⁵³ *Dandao jiu pian*, *biji*, 6.36a, 7638.

⁴⁵⁴ *Tianxian zhengli qianshuo*, *biji*, 5.27a-b, 7610.

⁴⁵⁵ *Dandao jiu pian*, *biji*, 6.36a-b, 7638.

years, the adept intensifies this samadhi (*jiading* 加定) until he can be in constant samadhi (*changding* 常定).

12. Principle of Refining the Spirit and Returning it to Emptiness

The twelfth and last oral instruction is called the “principle of refining the spirit and returning it to emptiness” (*lianshen huanxu li* 煉神還虛理). When an adept chooses to leave his own body and the ordinary world for good, he practices this principle. Wu calls it the Supreme Vehicle (*zuishang shangsheng* 最上上乘; or *shang shangsheng* 上上乘) that leads to buddhahood. The descriptions of this stage in inner alchemy texts are usually the shortest and Wu is no exception in this regard. Wu himself remarks on this fact, stating that there is simply not that much to say about the cultivation at this stage.⁴⁵⁶ That is because it only involves the effortless practice of samadhi and not any pro-active type of meditation as in the earlier stages. There is no systematic method or procedure that needs to be explained. Therefore, there is not much that can be said about the practice of the final stage.

Postponing the Return to Emptiness

At this point in the process, when the adept has attained the state of a fully mature spirit immortal, he is presented with a choice to stay in the world or to cultivate the last stage which leads to celestial immortality in the realm of utmost emptiness. The spirit immortal can choose to stay in the world or it can leave the world and return to the void as a celestial immortal. In the world, such a spirit immortal would be able to use his spiritual powers to help others. This notion of helping others appears continuously throughout Wu’s writings, in passages discussing compassion (*cibei* 慈悲), saving the world (*jiushi* 救世), or universal salvation (*pudu* 普度). The idea that divine beings can protect people was closely associated with the notion of immortality from the very beginning. In Wu’s texts these associations are clearly also inspired by the idea of the bodhisattva. This Mahayana ideal of bodhisattva-hood is commonly understood to mean that a bodhisattva rejects or postpones nirvana and vows to dedicate its life here in this world to help all other sentient beings achieve salvation. In his theoretical model of the different degrees of immortality, Wu explicitly equates the state of spirit immortality with bodhisattva-hood. In the biographical narratives of Wu himself and his lineage of teachers we can also recognize this motif of the choice of postponing celestial immortality in order to first dedicate one’s life to helping others. About Li Xu’an we are told that he aimed to “save the world” from the very beginning. After cultivating the way of immortality, as taught by Zhang, he attained great spiritual powers which he indeed used to “save the world and relieve the people” (*jiushi jiumin* 濟世救民). He is said to have performed a rainmaking ritual to relieve a drought. We are told that people actually revered him as an “incarnated bodhisattva” (*roushen pusa* 肉身菩薩). Only in the last stage of his life, he apparently chose to “return to emptiness.” About Cao Huanyang, we are also told that in the last phase of his life he went to the Western Hills to “emit his yang spirit” by “facing a wall and returning to emptiness.” This event marks the moment when he left this world. Wu’s autobiography and the biography written by his cousin similarly tell us how Wu postponed his own final cultivation practice primarily to take care of his mother. After his mother passed away, Wu finally felt free to “enter the mountains and finish the great affair of his own body.” All these passages convey the idea that a spirit immortal postpones the cultivation of celestial immortality until his earthly business is finished and he chooses to leave the world.

The Subitist Method of Effortless Practice

The practice of the last stage is described in several ways. First, the practice is described in positive terms (cataphatic) as “constant samadhi” (*changding* 常定). Sometimes suggesting a technique, samadhi is a mental state of concentrative absorption. Thus, we might say that the adept is understood to constantly maintain this state of samadhi. Other terms that are used to describe the last stage could be characterized as negative descriptions (apophatic) of this constant samadhi. It is described as not being “practice” (*lian* 煉) and as effortless (*wuwei* 無為) instead of requiring effort (*gongfu* 工夫). During the first stage, the practice is said to evolve from no effort to effort (*cong wu ru you* 從無入有), during the second stage from effort to no effort (*cong you ru wu* 從有入無), and during the third stage there is simply no effort anymore. The last stage is also described as a subitist method (*dunfa* 頓法) and is contrasted with the gradual approach (*jianfa* 漸法) during

⁴⁵⁶ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 1.114b, 7459 and further.

the preceding stages. This suggests again that the adept is not taking a step-by-step approach but attains the final state in an instant. It also means that the practice is uninterrupted.

Constant Samadhi

In the final state, the adept's main practice is samadhi and he extends this state to "constant samadhi" (*changding* 常定).⁴⁵⁷ Wu uses the term *ding* 定 with its Buddhist connotations of samadhi as well as with other connotations. The term *ding* itself, literally suggesting something like "stability," can be applied to the spirit as well as to the two *qi* (i.e., *qi* and breath).⁴⁵⁸ During the second stage, the adept gradually attains the four dhyana as defined by Wu, ending with the "samadhi of complete extinction" (*miejinding* 滅盡定). This, it seems, is also when the adept first attains "great samadhi" (*dading* 大定). Both terms are described as a state in which the "mind has no production-and-cessation" (*xin wu shengmie* 心無生滅) and the "respiration has no exit-and-entrance" (*xi wu churu* 息無出入). In other words, there is no mental activity, no arising and disappearing thoughts, and no noticeable breathing.⁴⁵⁹

During the third stage, the adept aims to maintain this state of dhyana, this "samadhi of complete extinction," or "great samadhi." Hence, with continued practice, with "empowerment" (*jiachi* 加持) or training of the embryo, the great samadhi turns into constant samadhi or eternal samadhi (*yongding* 永定). This is also described as the intensification of samadhi (*jiading* 加定) or as the development of the power of samadhi (*dingli* 定力; S. *samadhi-bala*). In contrast with the second stage, this is not a gradual process. It is subitist, Wu explains, because one samadhi turns into one continuous samadhi. The continued practice is deemed crucial because otherwise one can still retrogress. When the adept practices the exit of the yang spirit, he must still develop his power of samadhi. Therefore, Wu says, "the beginning of exiting samadhi is the start of entering samadhi."⁴⁶⁰ In practice, it appears that the adept at some point goes to a secluded location, enters samadhi and, at some point, leaves the body. Obtaining great samadhi, Wu suggests, is equivalent to obtaining "nirvana without remainder" (*wuyu niepan* 無餘涅槃). The idea here is that the

⁴⁵⁷ This term, just like "great samadhi" (*dading* 大定), another term frequently employed by Wu, appears in Buddhist and Daoist scriptures but is rarely discussed in studies or in reference works. The term "great samadhi" (*dading* 大定), or *maha-samadhi*, can be found in studies on Yoga. According to Sushila Blackman, *maha-samadhi* signified the departure from this life of a master in the Hindu and Yogic traditions. She describes several cases of masters from these traditions who enter *maha-samadhi* at the end of their lives with themselves and their near ones aware of the fact that they are about to make a graceful exit. See Blackman, *Graceful Exits: How Great Beings Die*.

⁴⁵⁸ The character *ding* 定 combines a "roof" (*mian* 宀) with "right" (*zheng* 正) and its basic gloss is "quiet" (*an* 安) and also "stop" (*zhi* 止). As a term referring to meditation, it was used to translate Buddhist "samadhi" which can also be transcribed as *sanmei* 三昧. The term *channa* 禪那, abbreviated to *chan* 禪, is used to transcribe Sanskrit dhyana. Dhyana is often described as a state that is the result of samadhi; however, both samadhi and dhyana are sometimes discussed as practices and sometimes as the resulting states. The term *chanding* 禪定 is a combination of these two terms, half transcription and half translation. Not actually translating a Sanskrit term for a specific aspect of meditation, it can be used as a translation for a variety of terms. Hence, scholars trying to translate *chanding* 禪定 to English appear to have struggled with its exact meaning, whereby we should also note that such translators (as I have done in the present work) are in the habit of re-translating Chinese terms to their theoretical Sanskrit or Pali originals in order to bring them closer to the reader (e.g., when we see *ding* 定 in a Chinese text, we might translate it to Sanskrit "samadhi" or to English "concentration"). As a result, translations include "dhyana," "samadhi," and various combination of these terms or of various English translations. The usual model of dhyana distinguishes two categories: "dhyana of the realm of form" (*sejieding* 色界定; S. *rūpāvacara-dhyāna*) and "dhyana of the realm of the formless" (*wusejieding* 無色界定; S. *arūpāvacara-dhyāna*). There are four types of dhyana within each of these broader categories. Above these eight states is the "dhyana of complete extinction" (*miejinding* 滅盡定; S. *nirodha-samāpatti*). The first four are also simply called "four dhyana" (*sichan* 四禪) and the second four the "four formless dhyana" (*si wuseding* 四無色定). Together, they are known as the "four dhyana and eight samadhi" (*sichan bading* 四禪八定) and including the ninth level they are known as the "nine successive dhyana/samadhi" (*jiu cidi ding* 九次第定). Wu Shouyang has a different model which he attributes to the *Avatamsaka Sutra* but which does not appear in this scripture. It does appear in a text attributed to Qiu Chuji (see earlier footnote). This model he calls the four dhyana (*si chanding* 四禪定): "first dhyana of halting thought" (*chuchan nianzhu* 初禪念住); "second dhyana of halting respiration" (*erchan xizhu* 二禪息住); "third dhyana of halting pulses" (*sanchan maizhu* 三禪脈住); and "fourth dhyana of the concentration of complete extinction" (*sichan miejinding* 四禪滅盡定). Wu describes these successive states as the method to leave the realm of forms (*chu sejie* 出色界). It involves gradually calming down (*ding* 定) of the mind (*xin* 心) and the respiration (*xi* 息).

⁴⁵⁹ The "dhyana of complete extinction" (*miejinding* 滅盡定; S. *nirodha-samāpatti*), also translated as "equipoise of cessation," is described as "a state of suspended animation" during which "the meditator remains alive, but all physical and mental activities cease for a fixed, but temporary, period of time." PDB, 588. The entry in the PDB mentions that there is a lot of discussion in the scriptures about this state, especially about how the meditator is supposed to return to a normal state of consciousness.

⁴⁶⁰ *Xianfo bezong yulu*, *biji*, 2.46a-b, 7487: "出定之初即為入定之始."

Buddha first achieved “nirvana with remainder” (*yonyu niepan* 有餘涅槃) under the bodhi tree and nirvana without remainder at death, when he eradicated mind and body and hence all causes for rebirth. In Wu’s terms, as long as there is still mental activity and respiration, it is only “nirvana with remainder.”