



The Way of Becoming-Imperceptible: Daoism, Deleuze, and Inner Transformation

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ABSTRACT

This essay brings together the discourses of Daoism and Deleuze and Guattari to elucidate the convergence among them on a fundamental metaphysical level that can open, for the receptive mind, a deeper intuitive insight and understanding of what a person is capable of doing and becoming, and how such a person can enter into a different relation with spacetime beyond the conventional understanding of it. After examining how vital energy (*qi* 氣) is transformed in internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹), the focus turns to a consideration of the possible relation between Daoist “immortality” and Deleuzo-Guattarian “becoming-imperceptible.”*

KEYWORDS

Daoism; *Qi*; *Neidan*; Deleuze; Becoming

The spirit is where knowledge gathers; when the spirit is clear, knowledge is illumined.
Knowledge is the seat of the heart; when knowledge is objective, the heart is even.

—Wenzi 文子 (*Book of Master Wen*)

Since the time of its earliest developmental stages and continuing over the millennia, part of Daoism has embraced so-called magical or sorcerous practices, many of which seem utterly fantastic and unbelievable to the rational mind, which has tended either to ignore or reject them.¹ Yet such orientation has not been lost on contemporary philosophy, as witnessed in the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. It is not within the purview of this essay, however, to take up questions regarding either the efficacy or soundness of such viewpoints; rather, the focus will be on Daoist internal alchemical

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*This essay is the result of decades of bodily practices beginning with *gongfu* 功夫 (*Sanhedao* 三和道 style) followed by *taijiquan* 太極拳 (Wu 吳 family style) and eventually *qigong* 氣功, which informed considerably my later philosophical reflections. Parts of this paper have been presented previously at the Comparative and Continental Philosophy Circle, National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan, March 25, 2016; the Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy, Western Sydney University, Australia, November 23, 2018, the Comparative and Continental Philosophy Circle, University of Leiden, Netherlands, May 24, 2019; and the Pacific Association for the Continental Tradition, University of Hawai'i at Hilo, September 9, 2021. I am grateful for the opportunity to present my work at these societies and for the important critical feedback I received from their memberships. I also want to thank especially Meilin Chinn and Elisabet Yanagisawa for their many hours of conversation with me about my work on this topic.

¹Meilin Chinn accurately points out that “because the relationship between philosophy and alchemy has been severed by philosophers, the explanatory—and practical—resources of *neidan* remain dormant. While it is generally accepted that the *Laozi* [老子] and *Zhuangzi* 莊子 provided many of the concepts and vocabulary for later Daoist alchemy, most of the scholarship on philosophical Daoism ignores this influence (notably, scholars and practitioners of Daoist alchemy embrace these origins). In the interest of producing texts acceptable and comprehensible to contemporary audiences, philosophers leave aside the arcane” (Chinn 2021, 47).

(*neidan* 内丹) ways of cultivating and harmonizing life energy, not by addressing the specific mechanics of these practices, but by offering a brief and partial description of some of them. These practices or techniques can be considered as “magical” and resistant to the evidence demanded by purely rational intellection insofar as they aim not only to improve bodily health and longevity but also to promote spiritual advancement. A somewhat tricky term, *spiritual* here refers to the development of the person, which is to say, to the development of the unity of body, mind, and spirit. The foundation of transformational development is the mind, which is neither opposed to nor ontologically distinct from the body. Only when the mind and body are brought into a harmonious unity does spirit emerge in its fullest sense.

For the purposes here, when referring to the Daoist alchemical adept, the term *mage* will be used since it carries with it the aspect of sagacity. For their part, Deleuze and Guattari employ the term *sorcerer* in their writing. Although obviously different in meaning on several registers, these terms will also be used interchangeably at times, in deference to some literature that refers to Daoist magic or sorcery. Bringing together the distinctive discourses of Daoism and Deleuze and Guattari, the aim is to demonstrate that there is a convergence among them on a fundamental metaphysical level that can open, for the receptive mind, a deeper intuitive insight and understanding of what a person is capable of doing and becoming, and how such a person—the mage-sorcerer—can enter into another relation with spacetime beyond the conventional, ordinary understanding of it.

The physical and spiritual development of the person, or soul, to use Deleuze’s term, is dependent on the cultivation of *qi* 氣, “the pulsation of the cosmos itself” (Kaptchuk 2000, 43), through various bodily and mental practices associated with Daoist meditation, traditional Chinese medicine, and several martial art forms. In the *Wenzi*, allegedly composed by the titular disciple of the great Daoist sage Laozi 老子, it is written, “The body is the house of life, energy is the basis of life, spirit is the controller of life: if one loses its position, all three are injured” (Wen-tzu 1992, 43).² Daoist mages relax and control the body and breath, the rhythms of *yin* 陰 (contractive, passive, dark, watery, soft, still, female) and *yang* 陽 (expansive, active, light, fiery, hard, moving, male), by visualizing and feeling their rootedness to the Great Earth, which then manifests as affect, feeling, and sensation. This allows the mage to remain stabilized in the present moment and maintain both physical and mental balance in order to think personal thoughts and feel personal perceptions without losing balance. This is why meditation practice is crucial. Not only does it pacify the mind’s incessant activity, it also enables the mage-sorcerer to concentrate on a specific goal. By doing so, the subconscious mind is able to expand and the unconscious becomes visible.

This becoming-visible to the sorcerer occurs in direct correlation with “becoming-imperceptible” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 252). Érik Bordeleau observes that “what is most delightfully striking perhaps in the unfolding of the idea of becoming-imperceptible is to see just how embedded in the Far East it appears to be in the first place. For a

²In the body of this text, all romanized Chinese names, places, terms, and titles have been converted to *Hanyu Pinyin* spelling; all Chinese, Japanese, and Korean proper names will follow the East Asian convention of listing the surname first, unless the authors themselves have used the Western order. Bibliographical citations and references will not be altered. All diacritical marks have been omitted unless they were included in textual citations and the bibliography.

close reading of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* reveals something that has remained relatively unnoticed among [their] readers: the progressive emergence of the concept of becoming-imperceptible in that book is intimately intertwined with references to China, the main one referring to the figure of the Chinese traditional painter-poet" (Bordeleau 2014, 500).³ The emergence of the concept of becoming-imperceptible serves as a prime example of the practice of philosophy, which is precisely the creation of concepts (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, especially 8, 40–41). Jennifer Liu points out, "For Deleuze [and Guattari] it is a matter of constructing new modes of thought that bring forth the unground. Thought itself remains unthinkable. It is unthinkable because it is not a being but a becoming—the image of thought can be thought only if the image repeats difference" (Liu 2021, 106). It is important to bear in mind here that "to become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination, even when the imagination reaches the highest cosmic or dynamic level" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 238). In an interview, Deleuze states that "a system's a set of concepts. And it's an open system when the concepts relate to circumstances rather than essences" (Deleuze 1995, 32). It is precisely these "circumstances" that are the focus of the sorcerer. The sorcerer's power consists in bringing one in contact with "feelings of an unknown nature" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 240), with what Spinoza knows as *affects*. This involves a turning within, a closing, a contraction of energy in order to become open to transformation.

The development of the self or soul is an *involution*. "Becoming is involutionary; involution is creative" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 238). Involution here means not only the processes of involving and complicating; it also carries with it the mathematical sense of a function or inverse that is equal to itself and thereby self-identifying. The sorcerer makes active the world of becoming through the practice of cultivating and directing *qi*, the molecular cosmic and psychophysical energy that circulates continuously and without beginning or end in the universe. Philosophy apprehends—not comprehends—this only *after* practice. The *concept* of *dao* 道 is fundamentally ineffable and elusive. The practice and mastery of *dao*, that is, the *self*-cultivation, extension, and application of *qi*, on the other hand, is a different matter altogether. This self-cultivation is *de* 德, which is often translated as "virtue," but more appropriately in this context as "power" or "excellence" or "flourishing" in the Aristotelian sense of *aretē*.

Qi and Internal Alchemy

The cosmos lies in your hands; the ten thousand transformations are born from yourself.
—Huangdi Yinfu jing 黃帝陰符經 (*Yellow Emperor's Book of the Hidden Agreement*)

The concept of *qi* is the result of a long historical development, which has given rise to various interpretations of its meaning and application. The most ancient character for *qi* appeared in the oracle bones of the Shang 商 or Yin 殷代 (as it was known historically) dynasty (c. 1600–1046 BCE). It also appeared on the bronzes made during the Zhou 周 dynasty (c. 1046–256 BCE). This ideographic character appeared simply as three

³The first character in "the Chinese word for becoming, 變成 *biancheng* . . . expresses the idea of change, variation, and transformation. . . . As for 成 *cheng*, it suggests a process, a completion, the final step in becoming, its entry into effect, or the end of its unfolding" (Bordeleau 2013, 5).

horizontal lines (三) and was used until the Western Zhou 西周 dynasty (c. 1046–771 BCE). It originally depicted “a mist that rises from the earth to the clouds” (Zhang and Rose 2002). It also indicated heat rising from the surface of the earth and later on was used to describe the vapor from breath exuded from the body during cold weather. But the movement of *qi* is two-way: According to the *Huang Di nei jing su wen* 黄帝内經素問 (*Yellow Emperor’s Inner Classic, Basic Questions*), “The *qi* of the earth rises and turns into clouds and fog. The *qi* of heaven descends and turns into rain and clouds. When the *qi* of the earth fails to rise, then the *qi* of heaven does not descend” (*Huang Di nei jing su wen* 2011, 51n40). Another way of interpreting the ideogram 三 is representing *yinyang* 陰陽. The top horizontal line signifies *yang* and the bottom line signifies *yin*. The middle line represents the interconnection between *yang* and *yin*. A later but still primitive graphic variant for *qi* 炁 combined the characters for “none” (无) and “fire” (火, simplified from 火 when used as a bottom radical). Here *qi* means literally “no fire.” Yet another character for *qi* 气 can be translated as “air in nature.” The modern and more familiar character for *qi* 氣, according to Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾, is often interpreted as meaning originally the water vapor that rises from a pot of boiling rice, but now signifying principally air, breath, or gas (Nan 1984, 33).

Returning to the term *fire*, this does not refer to fire in the conventional elemental sense as, for example, what happens when one burns a piece of wood. Nan writes that this fire refers to sexual desire as well as to wandering and reckless thoughts. Therefore, the character 炁 can be interpreted to mean no lust or no uncontrolled libidinal desire. This is an important interpretation because of its connection with *jing* 精 (essence), which, according to traditional Chinese medicine, is something of which the human being is born with a finite amount. As will be discussed in greater detail later, it is the commingling of *qi* and *jing* that produces *shen* 神 (spirit). In traditional Chinese medicine, which can be rightly considered as a parallel outgrowth of Daoist magical practice, two types of fire are distinguished: A secondary fire, which is characterized by restless, undisciplined action, both physical and mental; and a primary or ruling fire, which is characterized by disciplined control of mind and body (Nan 1984, 9). *Qi* cultivation is predicated on the prevalence of this primary fire, which harmonizes or balances the cosmic and the bodily *qi*.

Qi pervades everything in the universe, according to Chinese thinking, yet it is not a singular phenomenon. *Qi* is derived from several different sources: there is the external cosmic *qi* that pervades the cosmos and the internal *qi* that is generated within the body. With regard to bodily *qi*, there are three forms: *Yuan* 圓 (original or prenatal) *qi*, with which we are born and which is derived from *jing*; *gu* 谷 (grain or food) *qi*, which is taken in through food and drink; and *kong* 空 (natural air) *qi*, which is acquired through breathing. These forms amalgamate in the person to generate the *qi* that is circulated in the microcosmic orbit, or the “minor divine-sky circulation” (*xiao zhou tian* 小周天). *Gu qi* and *kong qi* combine to form *zong* 宗 (central or gathering) *qi*, which nourishes the heart and lungs. When acted upon by *yuan qi*, the result is *zhen* 真 (true or normal) *qi*, which circulates in the meridians and replenishes the organs. *Zhen qi* takes on two different modalities: *ying* 營 (nutritive) *qi* and *wei* 衛 (protective) *qi*. *Ying qi* is the dimension that nourishes the internal organs and the entire body and is closely related with blood and its flow; it is acquired mostly through diet. *Wei qi* is

primarily associated with the external skin and muscles to help protect from exogenous pathogens and is controlled by the lungs. *Ying qi* is the *yin* aspect in the blood vessels and meridians whereas *wei qi* is the *yang* side. Through their circulation in the body, together they produce immunity. Illness arises when there is disharmony between *ying qi* and *wei qi*. Among other classic works, Zhang Zhongjing's 張仲景 (150–219 CE) *Shang Han Lun* 傷寒論 (*On Cold Damage*) 1999, especially the *Tai Yang* 太陽 (Great Yang) chapter, notably discusses this topic. The generation of these various forms of *qi* produces at least five functions in the body: movement; protection; harmonious transformation; maintenance of stability and retention; and warming. Moreover, there are numerous types of *qi* that correspond with different parts of functions of the body.⁴

The cultivation of *qi* derives from various internal medicinal, meditation, and martial arts practices such as *qigong* 氣功, *taijiquan* 太極拳, *daoyin* 導引, *gongfu* 功夫, *bagua-zhang* 八卦掌, and especially, for the purposes here, *neidan*.⁵ All these practices focus on cultivating *qi* first of all through breath circulation techniques. The earliest mention of such techniques is found in the anonymously authored short mid-fourth-century BCE text *Neiye* 內業 (*Inward Training*), which is chapter 49 of the legalist philosopher-statesperson Guan Zhong's 管仲 (720–645 BCE) compilation the *Guanzi* 管子, one of the longest early philosophical texts.⁶ The *Neiye* is the first work to reference the energy matrix of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*, which forms the basis for *neidan*. The *neidan* adept brings to *qi* cultivation the power of visualization, which is fundamental and necessary in order for physical-spiritual transformation to occur, in other words, to gain mastery over *yinyang* and thus effect elemental change itself. The directed movement of *qi* through the microcosmic orbit of the body and, in developed mages, from the body to the external world, is impossible without this visualization. Furthermore, “it is virtually impossible,” writes Fabrizio Pregadio, “to distinguish the Daoist understanding of the body from its understanding of the human being, and this point constitutes on its own a central aspect of the Daoist way of seeing” (Pregadio 2021, 99). It is important to stress that this imaginative visualization practice is neither merely psychological nor metaphorical; rather, it is fully integrated in the immanent physical transformation of the unified body–mind.

There are numerous examples of so-called magic in Daoism, of which there are two main practices or types: The first is *external* alchemy (*waidan* 外丹), first documented in the second century BCE, which focuses on the transformation of physical objects and compounding elixirs. The second is *internal* alchemy (*neidan*), the earliest reference of which is found in Wei Boyang's 魏伯陽 mid-second century CE text *Zhouyi cantong qi* 周易參同契 (*Seal of the Unity of the Three in the Zhouyi* [or *Yijing*]), which is “not the first *Neidan* text, but the first text of *Neidan*” (Wei 2011, xi).⁷ (Here the use of the term *alchemy* is somewhat misleading; in the context of *neidan*, alchemy needs to be understood metaphorically.) Concerned with the transformation of the human being, *neidan*

⁴For a partial overview of these forms and types, see Kaptchuk 2000, 47–50.

⁵For an encyclopedic historical overview of *neidan*, see Pregadio and Skar 2005, 464–497.

⁶A translation of the *Neiye* along with analysis and commentary is found in Roth 1999.

⁷Pregadio says that the best English translation is not his own but rather *The Secret of Everlasting Life* 2011. “Unfortunately, however, this book does not offer the tools that are necessary to comprehend the extremely difficult imagery and terminology of the text” (Pregadio 2009, 6n8).

promotes the basic Daoist aim of developing health, power, longevity, and even immortality (although, according to some interpreters, immortality really signifies longevity).

Laozi is attributed with being the author of a several *neidan* works (Pregadio 2018, 272). This is supported in the preface to Zhang Boduan's 張伯端 (c. 987–1082 CE) foundational text *Wuzhen pian* 悟真篇 (*Awakening to Reality*),⁸ which credits both Laozi and the Buddha with the origins of *neidan* (Pregadio 2018, 274). According to Wang Mu 王沐,

Laozi and the Buddha used the learning of *xing* [性] (inner nature) and *ming* [命] (destiny, existence) to open the gates of expedient methods (*fangbian* [方便]), and taught people to cultivate the seed in order to escape [the cycles of] birth and death. For the Buddha, the source lies in emptiness and silence. . . . For Laozi, the truth lies in refining and nourishing oneself. If one obtains what is crucial and essential, one immediately rises to the rank of a saint; but as long as one's fundamental nature is not comprehended, one is tied to the illusory body. (Wang 1990, 1; cited in Pregadio 2018, 274)

Elsewhere, Wang writes, “With regard to the alchemical practice, *Awakening to Reality* maintains that the cultivation of *Ming* (Life [命]) should precede the cultivation of *Xing* (Nature [性]), and that “doing” (*youwei* [有爲]) should precede “non-doing” (*wuwei* [無爲]). . . . Each stage of the practice gives emphasis to one or the other aspect, but neither should be cultivated on its own” (Wang 2011, 4). Moreover, “like Huangdi 黃帝, the Yellow Emperor, did before him, Laozi practiced [internal] alchemy, and this granted him his status. Among those who hold this view is the southern Quanzhen 全真 master, Chen Zhixu 陳致虛 (1290–c. 1368 [CE]),” according to whom “*neidan* is in the first place a doctrine, and not simply a technique, because its roots are found in the *Daode jing*” (Pregadio 2018, 273). Additionally, several scholars wrote commentaries on both the *Laozi* and *neidan* texts, but “they do not read the *Daode jing* in light of *neidan* . . . [rather], it is *neidan* that should be understood in light of the *Daode jing*” (Pregadio 2018, 278).

In the *Laozi* it is written, “The events of the world arise from the determinate (*you* [有]), and the determinate arises from the indeterminate (*wu* [無])” (Laozi 2003, 139).⁹ And in Book 12 (*Tiandi* 天地 “Heaven and Earth”) of the *Zhuangzi* are found similar words: “At the ultimate origin [*taichu* 泰初] of all things, there was nothing that could be named. From this emerged the One, the first existence without form. Then different things were produced. . . .” (Zhuangzi 2007, 150). *Neidan* is the physical-spiritual practice of reconnecting with the ultimate origin of all things, namely, *Wuji* 無極 (the Limitless Unchanging Stillness, or the Unlimited), which, together with *Taiji* 太極 (the Great Ultimate), forms the Uncreated Absolute. “That which creates creation is not created, that which evolves evolution does not evolve” (Wentzu 1992, 37). During the period of the Five Dynasties 五代十國 (907–960 CE), in the *Huashu* 化書 (*The Book of Transformations*),¹⁰ Tan Xiao 譚峭 states that all fundamental changes in the human being lie in the transformational interaction between *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*. The components in this matrix are known as the three treasures (*sanbao* 三寶).

⁸“The work titled *Awakening to Reality* (*Wuzhen pian*), written by Zhang Boduan around 1075 [CE], has been included in the Taoist Canon, in the Buddhist Canon, and in several collections compiled by Confucian scholars under imperial decree” (Wang 2011, 3). For a translation of *Wuzhen pian*, see Chang 1987. For an overview of Zhang's thinking and the importance of his work for Daoist *neidan*, see Pregadio 2009, especially 1–6.

⁹Interestingly, both traditional (無) and simplified (无) forms of *wu* are found in early sources.

¹⁰Unfortunately, like many classical Daoist works, this text is currently not translated into English but only referenced in various anthologies, encyclopedias, with some translated portions appearing in PhD dissertations and master's theses. (Compare with Anderson 2008, 517–518; Didier 1998, 99–151).

Referencing Chen Zhixu's classic *Jindan dayao* 金丹大要 (*Great Essentials of the Golden Elixir*, 2019), Wang notes that “when the alchemical texts speak of refining the Elixir, they actually mean refining the Three Treasures” (Wang 2011, 15). Only when the fire of *qi* becomes the fire of *shen* is the transformation into *Wuji* actualized. Pregadio describes the essence of *neidan*:

... internal alchemy begins with the basic constituents of the cosmos and the human being in order to revert them to their original, perfect state. . . . In their precosmic aspects, Spirit [*shen*], Breath [*qi*], and Essence [*jing*] (in this order) represent three consecutive stages in the process of self-manifestation of Dao, from the initial state of non-being [*wu* 無] and emptiness [*xu* 虛] to the coagulation of the Essence that finally generates the “ten thousand things [*wanwu* 萬物].” In the manifested world, the three components take on different aspects. With regard to the human being, Spirit emerges as the mind, i.e., the “cognitive spirit” or “thinking spirit” (*shishen* 識神 *sishen* 思神); Breath appears as respiration; and the main materializations of Essence are—in addition to other liquid components of the body, such as saliva and tears—semen in males and menstrual blood in females. . . . With their focus on transcending the limitations of the cosmic domain, practitioners of internal alchemy strive to restore the ordinary essence, breath, and spirit to the “original” aspects, and to reintegrate each of them into the previous one. This leads to the attainment of the state prior to the generation of the cosmos, which is achieved through the “inversion” of the three-stage process mentioned above and constitutes, of its own, the elixir. (Pregadio 2021, 115–116)

According to Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734–1821 CE), the “Golden Elixir [*jindan* 金丹] is another name for one’s inchoate (*huncheng* [混成]) fundamental nature (*xing* 性). There is no other Golden Elixir outside one’s fundamental nature. Every human being has this Golden Elixir complete in himself: it is entirely achieved in everybody. It is neither more in a sage, nor less in an ordinary person. It is the seed of Immortals and Buddhas, and the root of worthies and sages.”¹¹ This statement needs to be qualified: While the Elixir resides within everyone, it arises more in the person who self-cultivates it. This is what distinguishes the mage from ordinary people. Where does one locate the elixir of immortality? “Produced by the union of generative force, vitality and spirit,” Lu Kuanyu 陸寬昱 says that it is a “radiant circle manifesting in the cavity of spirit between and behind the eyes. It stands for the supreme ultimate (*t'ai chi* [taiji 太極]) and the original awareness (*yuan cheuh* [yuanzhue 圓覺])” (Lu 1973, 182, 186). The Golden Elixir pervades the various bodily organs, which store different kinds of elemental *qi*. Through the practices of meditation, martial arts, and internal alchemy, in other words, through self-cultivation, a balanced lifestyle and inner exercises, the *qi* in organs can be increased, or lessened, and subsequently channeled to accomplish various extraordinary (some would say, supernatural or magical) effects.

The completion of the bodily microcosmic orbit is the basis of physical-spiritual transformation, brought about by conjoining visualization and breathing with internal alchemical practice. The importance of proper breathing cannot be overstated. Breath is not just bodily respiration. According to the *Taiyi Jinhua Zongzhi* 太乙金華宗旨 (*The Secret of the Golden Flower*), the authorship of which is attributed to Lu Dongbin 呂洞賓 (c. 796–1016 CE): “Breath is one’s own mind; one’s own mind is the breath’s

¹¹Liu Yiming, *Wuzhen zhizhi*, 悟真直指 (*Straightforward Directions on the Awakening to Reality* [Wuzhen pian]), ch. 1, poem 3; cited in Zhang 2009, 77.

original spirit, original energy, and original vitality: rising and descending, parting and joining, all arise from mind; being and nonbeing, emptiness and fullness, are all in the thoughts” (*The Secret of the Golden Flower* 1991, 50). This is not about adopting or developing any special breathing techniques; rather, it is a matter of invoking *shen*, or spirit, in the body. It is important to remember the general East Asian tendency not to draw strict distinctions between philosophy and religion, immanence and transcendence, and internal and external in order to avoid merely intellectualizing this invocation. So, while *neidan* is properly considered a magical practice, it is also equally “seen by its adepts as a science that applies the doctrines [or rather, wisdom] of the *Daode jing* to the microcosmic domain” (Pregadio 2018, 271).

Cultivating Qi in Body and Mind

When the mind is clean, that is elixir; when mind is empty, that is medicine.
—*Taiyi Jinhua Zongzhi* (*The Secret of the Golden Flower*)

It is an understatement to say that a firm distinction is not drawn in Daoism between body and mind. There are three main terms in the premodern Chinese view of the body: (1) *ti* 體, or the corporeal “body” of skin, flesh, bones, and so forth; (2) *xing* 形, or “form,” the embodied feature of an entity that both distinguishes it from and relates it to all other beings; and (3) *shen* 身, sometimes translated as “person,” which denotes both the physical and nonphysical dimensions of the body (Pregadio 2021, 100–101). “Rather than *ti* (the physical body), the Daoist discourse and practices focus on *xing* (the ‘form’) and *shen* (the whole person). Thus, Daoist texts talk of ‘refining the form’ (*lianxing* 煉形) and not of ‘refining the body’; and they talk of ‘governing one’s person’ (or ‘oneself,’ *zhishen* 治身) and not of ‘governing the body’” (Pregadio 2021, 101). The body is finite and always changing. What matters ultimately is the transformation of bodily or material *qi* and *jing* into the molecular energy of *shen*, of which there are three types, forming what is called the *sanhun* 三魂 (three spiritual energies). These energies correspond to the three treasures (*sanbao*) accordingly: *mingshen* 明神 (bright spirit) corresponds to *qi*; *xinshen* 心神 (heart-mind spirit) to *jing*; and *lingshen* 靈神 (immortal spirit) to *shen* (see *The Jade Emperor’s Mind Seal Classic* 1992, 51). “So the physical body may pass away, but the spirit does not change. Use the unchanging to respond to changes, and there will never be any limit. What changes returns to formlessness, while what does not change lives together with the universe” (Wen-tzu 1992, 44).

Daoism also incorporates into its thinking the notion of chakras, in addition to its theories of the three *dantian* 丹田 and three *qi* routes. In esoteric forms of Buddhism such as Tibetan and Bhutanese Vajrayāna (or Tantric), there is the theory of *chakras*, or energy centers. The number varies, from seven in the Yogic systems to between three and six in the Tantric systems. The three *dantian* are located between the eyebrows (*shang* [upper] *dantian* 上丹田), between the breasts (*zhong* [middle] *dantian* 中丹田), and just below the navel (*xia* [lower] *dantian* 下丹田). The three primary *qi* routes are found in the torso, and are part of the *qi jing ba mai* 奇經八脈 (eight extraordinary meridians), which are the deepest pathways of energy: in the front (*renmai* 任脈; conception or directing vessel; “sea of *yin*”), the back (*dumai* 督脈; governing vessel; “sea of *yang*”),

and the middle (*chongmai* 衝脈; penetrating vessel; “sea of blood”).¹² Though different, the chakras and *dantian* are similar in functions and effects (Nan 1984, 11), and in *neidan* there is a correspondence between them.

The *Huangdi Bashiyi Nan jing* 黃帝八十一難經 (*Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Eighty-One Difficult Issues*), often referred to simply as the *Nan jing*, was compiled in the late Han 漢 dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE) as a supplement to explicate more clearly the eighty-one chapters that comprise what is regarded as the earliest foundational text in Chinese medicine, the *Huangdi Nei jing* 黃帝內經 (*Yellow Emperor’s Book of Internal Medicine*), which is generally dated by contemporary scholars to the second century BCE.¹³ The *Nan jing* describes the twenty-seven main meridians or vessels used in acupuncture. There are over four-hundred meridians (*jingluo* 經絡) in the human body, the majority of which move along the twelve primary meridians (*jingmai* 經脈). These twelve are divided equally between *yin* and *yang* meridians and flow in a cycle according to the time of the day. The other fifteen main meridians are considered to be network or collateral (*luomai* 絡脈). These vessels or channels move *qi* and blood throughout the body in an uninterrupted flow. These are in addition to the abovementioned eight extraordinary vessels (*qi jing ba mai*), which are not considered to be influenced by the twenty-seven primary and collateral vessels, even though their principal function is to connect the twelve primary meridians (see *Nan Jing* 2016, 272–285). When the *qi* becomes full in the twenty-seven vessels, it overflows into the eight extraordinary vessels. The three *qi* routes described above are part of these extraordinary vessels. The cultivation of *qi* flow in the torso is stimulated by physical and spiritual exercises such as *qigong*.

There are three primary ways to energize and direct the body’s energy fields. These consist of the following exercises: (1) projecting or externalizing *qi*; (2) absorbing or internalizing *qi*; and (3) circulating or vibrating *qi*. Briefly stated, the first—projecting or externalizing *qi*—is a *yang* exercise performed in order to cleanse or purify the energy field of both the physical and mental space a person is within. The *neidan* mage visualizes the radiating energy from their *taiji* 太極 pole (the center core, located in the area of the upper *dantian*, also referred to as the third eye). The energy radiated is *shen* (神), a polysemic term originally signifying spirit or the gods but later taking on such definitions as mind, light, consciousness, and the ability to know and direct the magical or supernatural, among other more mundane meanings. *Shen* is the cosmic or divine light present in the adept or mage that can only be consciously directed through its proper cultivation.

The second way—absorbing or internalizing *qi*—is a *yin* exercise. It absorbs energy from the order of the natural environment that surrounds us. Indeed, “the highest sages emulate natural law” (Wen-tzu 1992, 39). The body does this naturally through eating, drinking, and sleeping; but the mage intensifies the process and replenishes the *taiji* pole, which is then circulated throughout the body along the microcosmic orbit.

¹²For a thorough explanation, see Dom 2013.

¹³The *Huangdi Nei jing* is actually comprised of two texts, the *Huang Di nei jing su wen* 黃帝內經素問 (or *Su wen* 素問; *Basic Questions*) and the later companion volume *Huang Di nei jing ling shu* 黃帝內經靈樞 (or *Ling shu* 靈樞; *Spiritual Pivot*), which is concerned primarily with acupuncture. For an excellent bibliographical history of the *Su wen*, see Paul Unschuld’s section on the topic in his earlier translation of the text (*Huang Di nei jing su wen* 2001; 1–7). Also see Sivin 1993, 196–215.

The movement of these two *qi* currents is then brought together in the third way of cultivating the body's energies, namely, circulating or vibrating *qi*.

Whereas the first two exercises utilize primarily the power of imaginative visualization, the third exercise (circulating or vibrating *qi*) while also employing that power, focuses more on *affect*, that is, on feeling the connection between cosmic and bodily *qi* fields. This is the unification of *yinyang*. This happens when a person self-cultivates by invoking the power of *shen* in the body. When this occurs, there is also illumination or enlightenment; in other words, seeing things not only as they actually are but also as *how they can be*. "The transmutations of spiritual illumination are all guided by mind" (*The Secret of the Golden Flower* 1991, 11). Nothing is fixed; everything is flow, in process. Magic is founded on this realization and it is from this that the mage-sorcerer confronts the differences between positive and negative ways of being. In this exercise, through the concentration of pure meditation, the *neidan* adept circulates the internal *qi*, which is the mixture of the cosmic *qi* with *jing*, through the various meridians (especially the *renmai*, *dumai*, and *chongmai*) and gates of the microcosmic orbit, generating *shen* at the end of the movement (which is now the new beginning of the movement), thereby connecting with the primordial cosmic unity of *Wuji*. Yet this energy also circulates in the body in other ways, namely, as the orbital movements in the upper, middle, and lower *dantian*. This more "horizontal" circulation (as opposed to the "vertical" movement of the microcosmic orbit) is then visualized as pure light and felt physically as an energy flow that is not separate from the other phenomena comprising the being of the mage.

Liu Yiming proffers a fundamental distinction between the "true" and "false" body and mind in his discussion of internal alchemy that provides some insight into what was discussed above. The translator of Liu's *Xiuzhen houbian* 修真後辨 (*Further Discriminations in Cultivating Reality*) summarizes his views:

The illusory body is "the body of flesh" and "the illusory mind" is the mind that produces the ordinary psychological phenomena; their authentic counterparts are the "dharma-body" and the "celestial mind" ([Liu 2013,] 40). The dharma-body (*fashen* 法身), a term that in Buddhism means the true but unmanifested body of the Buddha, free from both birth and death, is the foundation of one's Existence (*ming* 命), one's embodiment as an individual being. The celestial mind (*tianxin* 天心) is the foundation of one's Nature (*xing* 性), which in certain alchemical traditions, analogously to Chan Buddhism, is deemed to be innately awakened.

According to Liu Yiming, the awareness of the "true" body and mind is lost in the ordinary state of being: "... the dharma-body is buried and the illusory body takes charge, the celestial mind retires from its position and the human mind takes power" (id., 41). In his view, the function of internal alchemy consists in making it possible to attain "the utmost of quiescence," which is a property of the celestial mind, and to deliver the dharma-body (id., 62). (Pregadio 2021, 123–124)

Qi is the "transformation of original mind [*xin* 心; heart-mind]." ¹⁴ This original mind is the celestial mind, or what in Chan/Zen is termed the Buddha-mind. It "refers to the mind as it is in its pristine state unaffected by temporal conditioning" (*The Secret of the Golden Flower* 1991, 109n8). The task is one of *returning* to that pristine state.

¹⁴*The Secret of the Golden Flower*; cited in Yuasa 1993, 89.

This is accomplished by clearing the mind. But how does one do this? Reminiscent of the ninth-century Tang 唐 dynasty (618–907 CE) Chan master Linji Yixuan's 臨濟義玄 well-known admonition to kill the Buddha if one sees him on the road (Linji 2012, 59), in *The Secret of the Golden Flower* it is written:

The life of the spirit comes from the prior death of the mind. If people can kill the mind, the original comes alive. Killing the mind does not mean quietism, it means undivided concentration. [The] Buddha said, "Place the mind on one point, and everything can be done." (1991, 26)

"Commonly practiced by Buddhists, Taoists, and neo-Confucians" (Yuasa 1993, 90n11), this one point is the "calm stability" affirmed by quiet sitting and intense concentration, according to the Mongol Yuan 元 dynasty (1279–1368 CE) Daoist master Li Daoqun 李道純 in the *Zhong he ji* 中和集 (*The Book of Balance and Harmony*, 2003), who declares: "When the human mind is calm and stable, unaffected by things, it is merged in the celestial design" (Yuasa 1993, 90n11), which is to say, in the cosmic *xin*.

More Memories of a Sorcerer

We sorcerers know quite well that the contradictions are real but that real contradictions are not just for laughs.

—Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

In *neidan* there is no separation, much less elevation, of mind over body, of the spiritual over the physical. All energies are equally real; perceptions, feelings, emotions, and memories are as real as ideas, concepts, and molecules. According to Deleuze, there can only be real difference with *univocity*. A term first found in John Duns Scotus, who uses it to express, among other things, the affirmation of all senses in one voice, Deleuze inflects the meaning of univocity to signify differences that are multiple and each fully actual (see Deleuze 1994, 39).¹⁵ Univocity has nothing to do with a metaphysics of the One; indeed, Scotus never employed the term to address the actual existence of God, only the conditions by which language can express the Absolute.

Keeping this in mind, the movement of *qi* can be described analogously as a cascade of vibrating multiple rings flowing from the head to the feet, which infuses the transformed body, mind, and spirit with power and vitality, generating the inorganic force of *shen*. This is the embodiment of the univocity of actual differences, which is not to say multiplicity.

Now, the sorcerer contests the power of becoming-animal, the dark turbulence of the outside. Deleuze and Guattari write, "we do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity." The sorcerer protects against "the effectuation of a power of the pack that throws the self into upheaval and makes it reel" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 239–240). The destabilizing "power of the pack" is the multiplicity of the negative and violent impulses that are confronted and converted by the sorcerer. But what is the source or object of this fascination? Is it a "fascination for the outside? Or is the multiplicity that fascinates us already related to a multiplicity dwelling within us?" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 240). There is an ambiguity at operation here, a necessary and perhaps unavoidable unpredictability that can only incline or swerve one toward the

¹⁵For an overview of this concept, see Smith 2012, 27–42.

magical. Drawing on Lucretius, Deleuze names this inclination or swerving the *clinamen*, which “is a kind of *conatus*” (Deleuze 1990, 269), that is, a Spinozist conception of both ontological and metaphysical desire. The sorcerer does not function solely on the plane of rational order and finality (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 250), which is not to say, however, that magic is either irrational or without aim and function. The conversion or transformation of multiplicities *contracts* the self and causes all bodily organs, nerves, blood, and fluids, indeed, the entire cellular machinery, to pulsate and generate the circulatory *qi* field, or what Henri Bergson terms the *élan vital*, or “vital impulse” (Bergson 1913, 50–51 and following pages), a concept Deleuze takes up and develops (Deleuze 1988, 91–113). This contracted self is the “body without organs” (Deleuze and Guattari 1983, 50; also 9–16 and following pages; also see Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 149–166). At this stage of personal development, one becomes the energy able both to connect with and vibrate outside the body and affect the impersonal or transindividual realities that all bodies are interconnected with. Without this vibration there are no becomings-other. Although capable of being realized intellectually, it can only be actualized “magically” via practices; stated otherwise, it is the movement from concept to affect, from thought to practice, from the virtual to the actuality.

These practices are dependent on an openness to the metaphysical, which is to say, the spiritual. Moreover, they necessitate an acceptance that there exists pure exteriority and pure interiority. These terms are neither absolutely opposed nor do they exist independently; rather, they exist in the manner that Daoism understands the fundamental inter-relatedness of *yinyang*. There is no actual development, either physical or metaphysical, that does not occur through the interplay of these primordial energies. Sorcerers understand this fully, which is why they operate within what appears to be contradiction, although *paradox* is a more useful term since it better grasps the nature of *dao* as the complementary unity of opposites.

In *A Thousand Plateaus* (Plateau 10: “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible . . .”), the figure of the sorcerer is invoked as one who knows what it means to become-other. *Sorcery is all about becoming*, which is “perfectly real” and not simply imagined, even in the form of becoming-animal.

Becoming produces nothing other than itself. . . . What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through that which becomes passes. . . . This is the point to clarify: that a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; but also that it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block with the first. . . . Finally, becoming is not an evolution. . . . It concerns alliance. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 238; emphasis added)

In other words, the person who undergoes such a transformation does not become something other than what they already are in a fundamental sense. This is similar to the mathematical meaning of involution as an inverse as equal to itself and thereby self-identifying. *And yet*, in another sense, the transformed person has become different.

Becoming does not occur in isolation; it necessitates an alliance with that which exceeds the parameters of the normally visible, an alliance with the cosmic energies. In its positive, creative modes, becoming-other is an awareness of and active engagement with what is described in *The Logic of Sense* as the “Aion” (Deleuze 1990, especially 62–64, 77, 162–168). But its negative and violent forms, such as becoming-animal,

evolve out of an “openness” to the outside, which “comes from the Outside, not the other way around” (Negarestani 2008, 197 and following pages). The sorcerer resists the contagion of the multiplicitous outside, “these dark assemblages, which stir what is deepest within us” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 242), and cultivates internally by contraction—that is, the microcosmic orbit—the light of spirit, or what in *neidan* is referred to as *shen*. Bordeleau notes the centrality of

the question of the soul and its *contractive power*, or what Deleuze [and Guattari], in the conclusion of *What is Philosophy?* calls “the mystery of passive creation, sensation.” Deleuze’s cosmic vitalism indeed requires a conception of creation that is not simply a matter of how to actively access God or the Truly Creative. . . . It always involves an intimate and complex relation to an outside felt as necessity and imposing its corporeal constraints. (Bordeleau 2014, 498–499)¹⁶

In a way that pure rational thinking can never be, magic is the practice of this complex intimacy. It involves absolute vulnerability because it is a total exposure to the outside, which though potentially transformational is also dangerous, because the energies of the outside are negative and destructive, even as they are necessary for creative development. There is no development of the soul without affirming what is counter to spirit as necessary for movement and growth. But to place oneself knowingly in relation to this cosmic interplay means already to stand outside the commonly known and accepted—at the border or edge.

Although there are surely more, Deleuze and Guattari identify several aspects of transformation. The sorcerer always develops in relationship to something. Without rehearsing them in detail here, the first concerns the sorcerer’s opposition to becoming-animal, the far-side or lowest level of human development. Exhibited mythologically throughout the world, becoming-animal is represented in the earliest stages of representational and social-cultural development, as witness for instance Neolithic cave paintings, ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and iconography, and later Minoan pottery. “A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity. We sorcerers have always known that” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 239). Moreover, becoming-animal involves “pack and contagion, the contagion of the pack. . . . But a second principle seems to tell us the opposite: wherever there is multiplicity, you will also find an exceptional individual, and it is with this individual that an alliance must be made in order to become-animal” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 243). This “exceptional individual” is not the sorcerer. But because there exists so-called white and black magic, both the sorcerer and this “Outsider” occupy the space that can be called the *anomalous* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 243–246), which is admittedly a real contradiction between the multiplicity of the pack and the singularity of the individual. The anomalous, however, refers to neither term of the contradiction.

The anomalous is neither an individual nor a species; it has only affects, it has neither familiar nor subjectified feelings, nor specific or significant characteristics. . . . It is a phenomenon, but a phenomenon of bordering. . . . Sorcerers have always held the anomalous position. . . . They haunt the fringes. . . . The relation with the anomalous is one of alliance. The sorcerer has a relation of alliance with the demon as the power of the anomalous. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 244–246)

¹⁶The quotation is from Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 212; emphasis added.

This demonic is another way of saying the negative or the outside. The alliance is not complicity with the outside; rather, it is a necessary engagement that makes possible higher forms of transformation such becoming-woman, becoming-child—and for the very few, *becoming-imperceptible*. All transformations require an engagement between the internal and the external, between spirit and the outside.

The “memories” or dimensions of a sorcerer occupy a “median region.” One cannot fully separate becoming-animal from the events of becoming-woman or of becoming-child. “Although all becomings are molecular, including becoming-woman, it must be said that all becomings begin with and pass through becoming-woman. It is the key to all other becomings” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 277). In fact, “sorcery proceeds by this way of becoming-woman” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 248). This is not of course some absurd misogynist claim that women are naturally witches, or that all sin, all contagion, as later Christian thinking sometimes claimed, enters the world through women via Eve (or Lilith, according to some accounts). Rather, it is resonant with Daoist conceptions of the female energy.

Becoming-woman and becoming-child is “on the near side,” that is, it refers to the development of the body, of the physical dimension of existence, of what belongs to strata, to the spacetime of Chronos. “On the far side, we find becomings-elementary, -cellular, -molecular, and even becomings-imperceptible” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 248). It is this “far side” aspect that is the primary concern here. This correlates with the spatio-temporal dimension of the Aion. This is a radical opening to becoming-other. For the sorcerer, this opening proceeds paradoxically only by an equally radical capacity for closing and contracting. Bordeleau incisively observes that

many Deleuzians are spontaneously reluctant to emphasize the moment of closing, in order to preserve their availability to open-ended processes. . . . In the question of closure are at play the ideas of becoming and the precipitation of the event by reducing oneself to an abstract line that escapes death. As Deleuze puts it, “the event, once willed, is actualized on its most contracted point, on the cutting edge of an operation. . . . It is at this mobile and precise point, where all events gather together in one that transmutation happens: this is the point at which death turns against death; where dying is the negation of death. . . .” (Bordeleau 2013, 4–5)¹⁷

In Daoism, closing and contracting is the way of internal alchemy. We will return to this thought and consider Deleuze’s thinking about the event and death later.

It is important to note that while there is “no performed logical order to becomings and multiplicities, there are *criteria*. . . not [to] be used after the fact, [but rather] applied in the course of events . . . to guide us through the dangers” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 251). The sorcerer operates within these criteria and moves toward the light. But depending on their compass, anyone can move either toward the light or the dark. The difference between these two orientations is that the way of illumination realizes the necessity of engagement with the dark outside whereas the opposite is not the case. So, “far from reducing the multiplicities’ number of dimensions to two,” the sorcerer knows that “the *plane of consistency* cuts across them all. . . . Therefore, all becomings are written like sorcerers’ drawings on this plane of consistency, which is the ultimate Door providing a way out for them. This is the only criterion to prevent

¹⁷The quotation is from Deleuze 1990, 149, 153.

them from bogging down, veering into the void” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 251). The door or threshold is the *self*, “a becoming between two multiplicities” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 249). The void is the relative nothingness of nonbeing; it is not the absolute. It is the external or outside, which is not transcendence but rather the other aspect of space-time that makes multiplicities and difference possible.

It is important to note that this void is not the same as the Daoist conception of *Wuji* (which is sometimes translated as “void”), that is, the infinite space that encompasses the physical, energetic, and spiritual dimensions of existence, which the sorcerer-mage encounters through the cultivation of *qi*. The Door that Deleuze and Guattari write about is both immanent and internal, which is why it leads ultimately to becoming-imperceptible. Stated otherwise, the Door leads to what the *neidan* mage knows as *shen*, which encompasses both the human and the divine spirit.¹⁸

Immortality and Becoming-Imperceptible

In remote antiquity, there were immortals (*zhenren* 真人) who could master the laws of heaven and earth and control the forces of *yinyang*.

—*Huangdi Nei jing*

The cultivation of *qi* enables one to be completely present in the moment, in the here-and-now. The transformation of *qi* into *shen* empowers the internal alchemical practitioner to connect fully within *Wuji*, thus attaining immortality. But “the cultivation of immortality does not go beyond spirit and vitality,” writes Lu Kuanyu. “Spirit leads to the realization of (essential) nature and vitality to (eternal) life. . . . All Taoist scriptures, in spite of the diversity of teaching, do not go beyond (essential) nature and (eternal) life” (Lu 1973, 115). This cultivation is analogous to becoming-imperceptible. Modern theories about Daoist immortality tend toward the more reasonable interpretation of meaning simply longevity. In his discussion about internal alchemy, Deng Ming-Dao writes: “We can only taste immortality, but the practices can never be interrupted. Never neglect your body. If you train your mind but ignore your body, it will atrophy. If you neglect your mind and train your body, you’ll never advance. The secret is that mind and body are united and that one can combine their energy to transcend this mortal plane” (Deng 1983, 166). According to Livia Kohn,

Healing, longevity, and immortality can be seen as three different stages along the same continuum of the human body. The body consists of *qi*, which is only one but comes in two forms: a basic primordial or prenatal *qi* that connects to the cosmos and Dao in general; and a secondary, earthly or postnatal *qi*. . . . To attain [immortality], people have to transform all their *qi* into primordial *qi* and proceed to refine it to ever subtler levels. This finer *qi* will eventually turn into pure spirit. . . . The practice that leads there involves intensive meditation and trance training as well as more radical forms of diet and other longevity practices. Immortality implies the overcoming of the natural tendencies of the body and its transformation into a different kind of energy constellation. The result is a bypassing of death (the end of the body has no impact on the continuation of the spirit-person), the attainment of magical powers. . . . (Kohn 2001, 53)

¹⁸For an analysis of *shen* and the difficulty in translating its meaning, see Simonis 1998, especially 83–94.

The Daoist word generally used for an immortal being is *xianren* 仙人, which can also be translated as alchemist, magician, and celestial being. But there is another term, first employed in the *Zhuangzi*, that is sometimes also used, namely, *zhenren* 真人.¹⁹ Comprised of two common words, *zhen* 真 and *ren* 人, it is translated variously as a person who is either perfected, authentic, true, pure, genuine, realized, or spiritual, among other renderings. The term *zhen* is first used, however, in the *Laozi* (chapters 21, 41, 54). Some later religious Daoist texts elevated *zhenren* above *xianren* in designating immortals, although the terms were often used interchangeably. *Zhuangzi* distinguishes the *zhenren* from other types of advanced human beings: the *shenren* 神人 (spirit-like or spiritual person), *zhiren* 聖人 (complete or perfected person), and *shengren* 聖人 (sage or wise person).²⁰

Kohn writes that Daoist immortality should be understood as “a form of spirit or *qi* transformation, a spiritual endeavor with a strong physical base” that does not avoid the reality of physical death for all beings, but which is not a state of “complete transcendence either since this would imply a Western worldview of utter otherness and a transition to a completely different dimension, which is not the case in China.” Although not completely adequate because of its technical application in other aspects of Daoist practice, the term “‘transformation’ probably comes closest” in meaning (Kohn 2001, 57).

Alchemical transformation is the practice of a continuous inversion or reversion (*fan* 反).²¹ According to Liu Mu,

Taoist thought is idealistic, but its spirit is positive: it resides in an attempt to regulate the cosmos and control nature. The saying, “inverting the course generates an Immortal” (*nixing chengxian* 逆行成仙) does not only apply to one’s own practice, but to the whole view of the cosmos: “inverting the course” means reversing the ordinary patterns, so that all things return under the command of the alchemical master. (Wang 2011, 8; emphasis added)

“The ultimate task of a *neidan* alchemist is literally to turn upside down (*diandao* 顛倒) the normal processes of the cosmos” (Pregadio and Skar 2005, 485). But in its most radical application, is “reversing the ordinary patterns” a matter of inverting the very relation between birthing and dying? The answer is no, and that is because in each and every moment there is simultaneously the dying of the living and the living of the dying. This is the interaction between what Deleuze identifies as Chronos and Aion, which are two constantly occurring modalities of spacetime that do not coincide conceptually into a monism but rather move as an isomorphic plethora. While thought can apprehend this nondual movement as a skating together of two separate temporal planes, in the lived experience this movement is blended so as to seem either a natural oneness or, conversely, a nonexistent actuality. (This is precisely the point at which awakening, enlightenment, or illumination is often confused with fantasy.)

In the *Laozi* (ch. 25), what is identified as great (*da* 大) is returning, inversion, or reversal (*fan* 反), which is the very movement of *dao* (ch. 40). Resonating with this, in

¹⁹Zhuangzi 2007: Books 6 (大宗師 *Da Zongshi*; The Great and Honoured Teacher), 13 (天道 *Tiandao*; The Way of Heaven), 14 (天運 *Tianyun*; The Revolution of Heaven), 15 (刻意 *Keyi*; Ingrained Ideas), 21 (田子方 *Tian Zifang*), 24 (徐无鬼 *Xu Wugui*), 32 (列御寇 *Lie Yukou*), 33 (天下 *Tianxia*; Under the Heaven).

²⁰“The complete man [*zhiren*] has no thought of self; the spirit-like man [*shenren*], none of merit; the sage [*shengren*], none of fame” (Zhuangzi 2007, 85).

²¹For an overview of this fundamental concept, see Robinet 2008, 401–402.

The Logic of Sense, Deleuze describes the two senses of spacetime, Chronos and Aion, with respect to the attributes of contraction and cyclical return:

Sometimes it will be said that only the present exists; that it absorbs or contracts in itself the past and the future, and that, from contraction to contraction, with even greater depth, it reaches the limits of the entire Universe and becomes a living cosmic present [Chronos]. . . Thus the time of the present is always a limited but infinite time; infinite because cyclical, animating a physical return as the return of the Same, and a moral wisdom as the wisdom of the Cause. *Sometimes, on the other hand*, it will be said that only the past and future subsist, that they subdivide each present, ad infinitum, however small it may be, stretching it out over their empty line [Aion]. The complementarity of past and future appears then clearly: each present is divided into past and future, ad infinitum. (Deleuze 1990, 61–62)

In this account, time is fundamentally relative; there is no absolute dimension to time in the sense of either being able to freeze the moment (eternity) or to locate an absolute beginning. The movement of time is *an-archic*. Referencing the *Laozi*, Lee Hyo-Dong 이효동 writes: “The return of all thing-events to the Way is ‘arche-ological’ in the sense that the origin (*archē*) to which they return is ‘not there’ or ‘only seems as if it were there’ (4.13). Given this absence of graspable and definable origin, one could call the Way’s movement of reversal ‘an-archic’ (*an-archē*). . . . The anarchic movement of the Way is what the famous Daoist notion of ‘being so of itself’ (*ziran* 自然) captures (25.58)” (Lee 2014, 49). Because time occurs simultaneously, though not identically, on two different planes, namely, Chronos and Aion, what is the present on one plane may be either the past or future on another plane. But because these planes are inseparably intertwined, the spacetime movement of one plane directly affects the movement of the other.

In a remarkably parallel vein, the Japanese Kyoto School philosopher Nishitani Keiji 西谷啓治 states:

On the field of emptiness, all time enters into each moment of time passing from one moment to the next. . . . in the *absolute relativity* of time on the field of *śūnyatā*, the whole of time is phantom-like, and the whole of the being of things in time is no less phantom-like. . . . In fact, past and present can be simultaneous without “destroying” the temporal sequence of before and after. . . . The *Avatamsaka Sūtra* speaks of the same idea not only in connection with time but also with place: “The magician, staying in one place, produces all kinds of magical effects of magical places; but he does not thereby destroy his original place. . . . He does not destroy this one world by the fact that those worlds are many, nor are those many worlds destroyed by the fact that this world is one.” (Nishitani 1982, 161)

To be human is to be connected to both Aion and Chronos, even if from the ordinary perspective it appears as though human existence is only bound to Chronos. The sorcerer is distinguished in part by the knowledge that one is situated *in-between* and therefore moves always at the edge and border of both. This bordering, which is the anomalous itself, assumes for the ordinary consciousness a sense of not being actual, or at least of not being fully real, and therefore phantom-like.

Extending his discussion of the relation between Aion and Chronos with respect to the concept of *return*, Deleuze writes:

Upon this straight line of the Aion, there is also an eternal return . . . one very different from the circular or monocentered return of Chronos: an eternal return which is no longer that of

individuals, persons, and worlds, but only of pure events which the instant, displaced over the line, goes on dividing into already past and yet to come. Nothing other than the Event subsists, the Event alone, *Eventum tantum* for all contraries, which communicates with itself through its own distance and resonates across all its disjuncts. (Deleuze 1990, 176)

But what exactly is the Event?²² It is the becoming or development of the person, or soul. Elisabet Yanagisawa notes,

Deleuze states that the soul is an effect of this process: “The soul results from the world that God has chosen.” In what way has the world chosen the monad? The world or God has chosen each monad because it is the right time (*kairos*) for God’s life to exist through it. The monad is a gate between the *spatium* and the power of the *spatium*, that is, the virtual. Thus, the monad is a sensuous entity that perceives and expresses the development of the world. “The world must be placed in the subject in order that the subject can be for the world.” (2018, 148)²³

This being for the world is contingent on the “condition of closure,” which “holds for the infinite opening of the finite. . . [and] gives the world the possibility of beginning over and again in each monad” (Deleuze 1993, 28).

The continual renewal of the world is the continual re-energizing of the monad. Although Deleuze’s language about God and monads may appear to be far removed from the *neidan* teaching of Daoism, *becoming-closed* wholly is the same as the completion of the microcosmic orbit: the simultaneous *opening* of the gate of life and three locks in the orbit²⁴ and the *closing* of the seven body/psychic centers (chakras) in the *ling qi* 靈氣 (spiritual aura) meditation²⁵ against the dark negativity of the outside. In a somewhat surprising move, Deleuze and Guattari identify *dao* with “an intensive body without organs. . . a field of immanence in which desire lacks nothing and therefore cannot be linked to any external or transcendent criterion” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 157). Alchemical mastery only works within the field of immanence. This opening/closing is what enables the fire of *qi* to transform into the light spirit energy of *shen*, which makes possible the reconnection with *Wuji*, the limitless infinite, and allows the merging with it through the circulation of *shen* throughout the body.

The inversion of alchemical transformation means that the soul is no longer simply individual but rather is absorbed or unified with *Wuji*. During the Song 宋 dynasty (960–1279 CE), *Wuji* came to signify the primordial universe that metaphysically precedes *Taiji*, which is both logically and ontological prior to the formation of *qi*, even though it is dependent on the latter for its actual physical manifestation and dynamism (Lee 2014, 37). But according to the Korean Neo-Confucian thinker Yi I 李珥 (1536–1584 CE), “the Great Ultimate’ is also merely a forced name. Its substance is called Change (易 *yeok/yi*); its pattern is called the Way (道 *do/dao*); and its function is called Spirit (火 *sin/shen*)” (Lee 2014, 199). In short, *Wuji* is the state or condition of absolute unchanging stillness in which there are no differences or polarities. It is the original uncreated, indeterminate condition of the universe, which gives rise to the determinate supreme or ultimate *Taiji*, from which *yinyang*, the five elements (*wuxing*

²²For an analysis of the Event in Deleuze, see Kirkeby 2004, 290–308.

²³The quotations by Deleuze are found in Deleuze 1993, 28.

²⁴For a diagram of the microcosmic orbit, see Deng 1983, 169.

²⁵A diagram and explanation of *ling qi* meditation can be found in Deng 1983, 180–183.

五行), and all things (*wanwu* 萬物) are generated. *Wuji* is *dao*-in-stillness; *Taiji* is *dao*-in-motion. Although not a discriminative polarity, *Wuji* and *Taiji* are inseparable; together they are the original unity.

In chapter 22 (知北遊 *Zhi beiyou*; Knowledge Wanders in the North) of the *Zhuangzi* it is written: “Birth follows death and death precedes birth. Who can know their path? Human life begins when *qi* comes together. When *qi* comes together there is birth; when *qi* disperses there is death. Throughout the world there is one *qi*; the sage values this unity” (Zhuangzi 2007, 220; translation modified). This notion of the unity of *qi* finds later expression in the thinking of the Northern Song 北宋 dynasty Daoist Zhang Zai 張載 (1020–1077 CE), who argued for the monism of *qi* and the position that the Great Void (*Taixu* 太虛) is the original essence of the cosmos and, moreover, is the one psychophysical energy (*yiqi* 一氣) (Lee 2014, 148).

According to Deleuze, “The event is that no one ever dies, but has always just died or is always going to die, in the empty present of the Aion, that is, in eternity” (Deleuze 1990, 63). Here his thinking coincides with certain Daoist views on immortality—and also with Zen master Eihei Dogen’s 永平道元 (1200–1253 CE) views on birth and death (*shoji* 生死) (Dogen 2010, 15, 450, 884–885, 878).²⁶ What is fundamental and common to these perspectives on birthing and dying is the concept of unity, which is never a stasis but rather the dynamic *wuwei* of *dao*, the univocity that signifies the multiplicity and actuality of differences.

Becoming-imperceptible, the sorcerer masters *dao*, and therein reconnects in a vital way with the uncreated, unchanging origin of all events, of all beings and things—visible and invisible, perceptible and imperceptible. In the *Neiye* it is written, “There is a numinous (mind [or spirit; *shen* 神]) naturally residing within [the person]” (有神自在身 *You shen zizai shen*) (Roth 1999, 70). “We become the elixir ourselves,” writes Meilin Chinn, “through regeneration and self-healing, or to use the imagistic language of *neidan*, through generating an internal embryo of ‘immortality’” (Chinn 2021, 51). Perhaps the Deleuzian-Guattarian sorcerer, who becomes-imperceptible by actualizing the eternal return, thereby embodying the indissoluble unity of Aion and Chronos, is another name for the Daoist mage, who, after actualizing the *neidan* microcosmic orbit, unites cosmic and bodily *qi* to vitalize *jing*, transforming it into *shen* and joining with *Wuji*, becomes a celestial or divine master (*tianxian* 天仙) and eventually attains “immortality.”

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Notes on Contributor

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²⁶On the relation between Dogen and Deleuze regarding this, see Schroeder 2019, 247–252, 257–260.

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