

Series Editors' Preface

Embryonic Breathing, astral projection, internal alchemy—these are among the fascinating meditative practices over which Daoists of the tenth to eighteenth centuries claimed mastery. And yet, at the same time and usually in the same texts, these writers advocated the constant maintenance of serenity—a calm, emotionless state of detachment—and the absence of purposive action, even nonaction (or nothingness). These two injunctions would seem to be contradictory. In this accessible and well-organized work by established scholar of Quanzhen Daoism and internal alchemy Stephen Eskildsen, we learn how Daoist masters themselves reconciled these apparently incongruous aspects of their practice.

Eskildsen has organized his book in six chapters, each of which identifies and treats one of the main characteristics of Daoist internal alchemy since the Song dynasty. We learn that the language internal alchemists developed for their practice was based on their ideas of the fundamental unity of the Three Teachings (Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) and how their critiques of other meditation practices can be traced to their understanding of the early alchemical classic the *Zhouyi cantong qi*. Chapters focus on claims regarding the importance of serenity and the effects of correct practice on the mind and body and reveal what travelers advised about the wondrous powers and lurking hazards they encountered through the sustained cultivation of serenity. Five of the texts discussed in the chapter are translated in full in an appendix. The final chapter presents accounts of extreme self-cultivation

methods that send the yang spirit out of the body, stilling respiration and circulation to a state of “quasi-death” hibernation, and other meditative trance states. Notably, this chapter deals with internal alchemic discourse about after-death experiences and visions, a ubiquitous narrative tradition of late imperial-period internal alchemic writings that has not heretofore received due attention. Along the way, Eskildsen has much new to offer on the importance of Buddhist somatology and metaphysics on the constructions of inner alchemists.

Scholars and practitioners alike will welcome this lucid and well-researched account of the teachings of major inner alchemic masters. Eskildsen maps out the persistent and prominent features of internal alchemy, highlighting such features as syncretism, or unity of the Three Teachings, the insistence on maintaining serenity, and the wondrous psychosomatic powers that serenity might engender at the advanced stages of inner alchemic self-cultivation.

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