

HANDBOOKS FOR DAOIST PRACTICE

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**SCRIPTURE ON CLARITY AND STILLNESS**

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**TRANSLATED BY LOUIS KOMJATHY**

## INTRODUCTION

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## SCRIPTURE ON CLARITY AND STILLNESS

The *Taishang laojun shuo chang qingjing miaojing* 太上老君說常清靜妙經 (Wondrous Scripture on Constant Clarity and Stillness as Spoken by the Great High Lord Lao; DZ 620), abbreviated as *Qingjing jing* 清靜經 (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness), was a central scripture of the early Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) movement and continues to be chanted to this day as part of the Complete Perfection monastic liturgy.

This scripture is part of a group of Tang-dynasty (618-907) works that could be labeled “Clarity-and-Stillness literature.” In addition to the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness*, these include the following: *Qingjing xinjing* 清靜心經 (Heart Scripture on Clarity and Stillness; DZ 1169), *Wuchu jing* 五廚經 (Scripture on the Five Pantries; DZ 763), *Liaoxin jing* 了心經 (Scripture on Realizing the Heart-Mind; DZ 643), *Xuwu benqi jing* 虛無本起經 (Scripture on the Origin and Arisal of Emptiness and Non-being; DZ 1438), and *Xuanzhu xinjing zhu* 玄珠心鏡注 (Annotations to the Mysterious Pearl and Mind Mirror; DZ 574, 575). The Clarity-and-Stillness family of texts also relates to other Tang-dynasty works focusing on meditative practice and attaining the Dao such as the *Neiguan jing* 內觀經 (Scripture on Inner Observation; DZ 641; trl. Kohn 1989), *Zuowang lun* 坐忘論 (Discourse on Sitting-in-Forgetfulness; DZ 1036; trl. Kohn 1987b; Cleary 2000), *Dingguan jing* 定觀經 (Scripture on Concentration and Observation; DZ 400; trl. Kohn 1987b), *Cunshen lianqi ming* 存神鍊氣銘 (Inscription on Preserving Spirit and Refining Qi; DZ 834; trl. 1987b), and *Tianyinzi* 天隱子 (Book of Master Celestial Seclusion; DZ 1026; trl. Kohn 1987a; 1987b).

The *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* is a Daoist text of unknown authorship,<sup>1</sup> but was probably composed in the eighth century C.E. Like its less well known counterparts, the seventh-century *Shengxuan huming jing* 昇玄護命經 (Scripture on Protecting Life and Ascending to the Mysterious; DZ 19) and the eighth-century *Qingjing xinjing* 清靜心經 (Heart Scripture on Clarity and Stillness),<sup>2</sup> the scripture emerged under the influence of Buddhist insight meditation (*vipāśyanā*) and expresses a form of wisdom (*zhi* 慧) based on the practice of observation (*guan* 觀). Composed of verses in four and five character combinations (391 characters in total), the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* combines the worldview of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power)<sup>3</sup> with the structure (as well as some content) of the Buddhist *Panruo xinjing* 般若心經 (Heart Sutra of Perfect Wisdom; T. 250-57). The latter is a condensed

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<sup>1</sup> Although a postface attributes the text to Ge Xuan 葛玄 (fl. 200 C.E.), famous alchemist, grand-uncle of Ge Hong 葛洪 (283-343), and supposed transmitter of Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure) scriptures, its reliance on Buddhist ideas suggests a date no earlier than the Tang dynasty.

<sup>2</sup> Like the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness*, the *Shengxuan huming jing* is contained in the *Xuanmen risong zaowan gongke jing* 玄門日誦早晚功課經 (Liturgical Scriptures of the Mysterious Gate for Daily Morning and Evening Recitation) and is thus recited as part of contemporary Quanzhen liturgy.

<sup>3</sup> The terms *qing* 清 (“clarity”) and *jing* 靜 (“stillness”), sometimes rendered as “purity” and “tranquility,” appear frequently in the *Daodejing* and in the “Neiye” 內業 (Inward Training) chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子 (Book of Master Guan), both dating from the Warring States period (480-222 B.C.E.). For example, in chapter sixteen of the *Daodejing* we find the following passage: “Returning to the Source is called stillness (*jing* 靜); this means returning to life-destiny (*ming* 命). Returning to life-destiny is called constancy (*chang* 常); knowing constancy is called illumination (*ming* 明).” The principle of “clarity and stillness” is also found in the *Xiang'er* 想爾 commentary to the *Daodejing* and makes up one of the so-called “Nine Practices.”

version of the “perfection of wisdom” (*prajñā-paramita*) sutras that was probably composed in China in the early seventh century.

The *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* became highly influential shortly after its composition. The earliest commentary on this text is attributed to the famous Daoist master Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850-933; DZ 759). The scripture soon rose to prominence in the Song dynasty (960-1279), when it was used by the so-called Nanzong 南宗 (Southern Lineage) of internal alchemy (*neidan* 内丹). In particular, Bai Yuchan 白玉蟾 (fl. 1209-1224) and his disciples Li Daochun 李道純 (fl. 1288-1290) and Wang Jie 王玠 (fl. 1310?), experts in both internal alchemy and thunder magic (*leifa* 雷法), wrote commentaries on the text, interpreting it symbolically and in an alchemical context (DZ 755; 757; 760). In addition, references to the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* appear throughout the writings of Wang Zhe 王嘉 (Chongyang 重陽 [Twofold Yang]; 1113-1170), the founder of Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) Daoism, and those of the early Complete Perfection adepts. The text continued to occupy a central place in the worldview and practice of Complete Perfection in later periods as well. For instance, Wang Yuanhui 王元暉, Hou Shanyuan 侯善淵, and Liu Tongwei 劉通微 all wrote commentaries on it (DZ 757; 758; 974). The scripture is still chanted in contemporary Complete Perfection monastic liturgy, as found in the *Xuanmen risong zaowan gongke jing* 玄門曰誦早晚功課至 (Liturgical Scriptures of the Mysterious Gate for Daily Morning and Evening Recitation). In addition, when I conducted fieldwork on contemporary Daoist monasticism (2005-2006), Quanzhen Daoist monks frequently recommended the text as foundational and it was also inscribed in a

variety of temples and temple compounds (e.g., Yuquan yuan 玉泉院 [Temple of the Jade Spring; Huashan]).

In terms of Daoist practice, the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* gives short verses that emphasize the need to eliminate ordinary, habituated perception and to develop clarity and stillness - the foundation for “realizing the Dao” (*dedao* 得道). The text first describes aspects or manifestations of the Dao as divisible into yin and yang, turbidity and clarity, as well as stillness and movement. Emphasis is also placed on the tendency of the heart-mind (*xin* 心) to generate desires, attachments, and entanglements. The condition of being in desire and attachment is described in terms of poison, for this leads to dissipation of qi, confusion of heart-mind (the seat of intellectual and emotional activity), and instability of spirit. The scripture in turn recommends the practice of observation as foundational: the adept must observe both internal and external worlds, including the self and heart-mind. This meditative observation results in the realization that everything is empty of self-identity. Completing this, one practices the observation of emptiness (*guankong* 觀空), culminating in a state of complete clarity and stillness or oneness with the Dao. This is the ontological condition of “constant clarity” (*changqing* 常清) and “constant stillness” (*changjing* 常靜). One enters the Dao (*rudao* 入道), awakening to the reality that this is one's original nature (*benxing* 本性), one's original suchness (*ziran* 自然). The latter part of the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* reverses direction and outlines the decline from pure spirit to turbidity and lostness. Confusion of heart-mind leads to disruption and destabilization of spirit. This results in attachment to and desire for external phenomena. Attachment and desire generate vexation and



delusion, ending in grief and suffering. One becomes lost to the perfect Dao. Finally, the scripture concludes with an admonition for further practice, for attentive and sustained cultivation: “As for the Dao of perfect constancy,/One who awakens to it will naturally realize it./Realizing and awakening to the Dao,/You will have constancy in clarity and stillness.”

The scripture also contains a few technical terms that deserve mention. First, clarity (*qing* 清) and stillness (*jing* 靜) are often used as paired cultivation terminology. Through the cultivation of stillness, clarity increases; through the cultivation of clarity, stillness increases. The two are inseparable. In terms of Daoist alchemy, this dual cultivation is symbolized by the trigrams Gen-mountain 艮, representing stillness, and Li-fire 離, representing clarity or illumination.<sup>4</sup> Like a remote mountain summit, the Daoist adept develops emptiness that can contain all things, stillness that can encompass every sound. Like a brilliant fire, the Daoist adept develops insight that can illuminate all things, clarity that can permeate every direction. Moreover, the Daoist practitioner is often urged to develop three specific qualities: relaxation (*song* 鬆), stillness (*jing* 靜), and stability (*ding* 定). Moving through a process of relaxation, stillness occurs. As one becomes more relaxed, stillness deepens and expands. The deepening and expansion of stillness eventually becomes stabilized. This stabilization or concentration is the unshakable root of practice. Stillness and stability emerge through continual dedication to realization and awakening, through constant practice of observation

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<sup>4</sup> These two trigrams are paired in hexagram 22, Bi-energetic 賁, and hexagram 56, Lü-wandering 旅.

(guan 觀). The *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* suggests that the practice of observation and the development of clarity and stillness allow one to abide in suchness (*ziran* 自然). In this ontological condition, the “Six Desires” do not arise and the “Three Poisons” are dispersed. The Six Desires (*liuyu* 六欲) are those originating from the six sense-organs (*liugen* 六根: eyes (sight), ears (sound), nose (smell), mouth (taste), body (touch), and mind (thought)). The Three Poisons (*sandu* 三毒) are greed (*tan* 貪), anger (*chen* 嗔), and ignorance (*chi* 痴).<sup>5</sup> By freeing oneself from the Six Desires and Three Poisons, by developing clarity and stillness, one awakens to innate nature (*xing* 性). The character *xing* 性 consists of two parts: *xin* 心 (“heart-mind”) on the left side and *sheng* 生 (“to be born”) on the right side. Thus, innate nature is the heart-mind with which one is born. It is the personal half of the talisman — one's original connection to and attunement with the Dao. To cultivate clarity and stillness is to realize innate nature. This is nourishing the root; this is returning to the Dao.

Alternative translations of the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* may be found in issue four of *The Dragon's Mouth: The Newsletter of the British Taoist Association*, in the second volume of James Legge's *The Texts of Taoism*, in Livia Kohn's *The Taoist Experience*, and in Eva Wong's *Cultivating Stillness*. The latter includes a Daoist commentary that interprets the text in terms of internal alchemy. Additional information on the *Scripture on Clarity and Stillness* may

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<sup>5</sup> The character used here for “ignorance” is interesting, as it consists of the “disease” radical (*chuang* 疒) and the meaning-carrier “knowing” (*zhi* 知). That is, ignorance is a dis-ease of knowing.

be found in Livia Kohn's *God of the Dao* and in the *Daoism Handbook*.

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TRANSLATION

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**WONDRIOUS SCRIPTURE ON CONSTANT CLARITY  
AND STILLNESS AS SPOKEN BY THE  
GREAT HIGH LORD LAO**

Lord Lao spoke:

The great Dao is without form.  
It brings forth and nurtures heaven and earth.  
The great Dao is without feelings.  
It regulates the course of the sun and moon.

The great Dao is without name.  
It raises and nourishes the ten thousand beings.  
I do not know its name;  
Forced to name it, I call it Dao.

Within the Dao, there is clarity and turbidity.  
Within the Dao, there is movement and stillness.

Heaven is clarity and earth is turbidity.  
Heaven is movement and earth is stillness.

The male is clarity and the female is turbidity.  
The male is movement and the female is stillness.

Descending from the beginning,  
Flowing toward the end,  
The ten thousand beings are born.

Clarity is the source of turbidity.  
Movement is the root of stillness.

If you can be constantly clear and still,



Heaven and earth completely return.

The human spirit is fond of clarity,  
But the heart-mind disturbs it.  
The human heart-mind is fond of stillness,  
But desires meddle with it.

If you can constantly banish desires,  
Then the heart-mind will become still naturally.  
If you can constantly settle the heart-mind,  
Then the spirit will become clear naturally.

Abiding in suchness, the Six Desires do not arise,  
The Three Poisons are dispersed and destroyed.  
Whoever cannot accomplish this  
Has not yet settled the heart-mind;  
Desires have not yet been banished.

If you can abolish desires,  
Internally gazing into the heart-mind,  
You see that in actuality there is no heart-mind.

Externally gazing into form,  
You see that in actuality there is no form.

Remotely gazing into things,  
You see that in actuality there are no things.

When you awaken to these three,  
Only then do you gain a glimpse into emptiness.

Using emptiness to observe emptiness,  
You see that emptiness is not empty.  
When even emptiness does not exist,  
You see that no-thingness is indeed no-thing.

Without even the nonexistence of no-thingness,  
There is only clear and constant silence.

When silence is no longer silence,  
How can desires come forth?  
When desires do not come forth,  
Then this is perfect stillness.

Perfect stillness resonates with things.  
Perfect constancy realizes innate nature.  
Constantly resonating, constantly still,  
There is constant clarity, constant stillness.

When clarity and stillness are like this,  
You gradually enter the perfect Dao,  
When you enter the perfect Dao,  
This is called “realizing the Dao.”

Although we call this “realizing the Dao,”  
In truth there is nothing to attain.  
Having the ability to transform all life,  
This is called “realizing the Dao.”

As for one who can awaken to this,  
That one is able to transmit the sacred Dao.

Lord Lao spoke:

The superior adept does not compete;  
The inferior adept is fond of competing.  
The highest inner power is not inner power;  
The lowest inner power clings to inner power.

All clinging and attachments  
Have nothing to do with the Dao and inner power.

People do not realize the perfect Dao  
Because they have deviant heart-minds.  
When the heart-mind is deviant,  
Then the spirit becomes startled.

When the spirit is startled,  
There is attachment to the ten thousand beings.  
When there is attachment to the various beings,  
Then coveting and searching are born.

When coveting and searching are born,  
Then there are troubles and vexations.  
Troubles, vexations, deviations, and illusions  
Cause grief and suffering for body and heart-mind.

Then you meet with turbidity and defilements,  
Currents and waves, life and death.  
Continually drowning in the ocean of suffering,  
You are perpetually lost to the perfect Dao.

As for the Dao of perfect constancy,  
One who awakens to it will naturally realize it.

Realizing and awakening to the Dao,  
You will have constancy in clarity and stillness.

**CHINESE TEXT**

中

文

## 太上老君說常清靜妙經

老君曰：大道無形，生育天地；大道無情，運行日月；大道無名，長養萬物。吾不知其名，強名曰道。夫道者，有清有濁，有動有靜。天清地濁，天動地靜，男清女濁，男動女靜。降本流末，而生萬物。清者濁之源，靜者動之基。人能常清靜，天地悉皆歸。夫人神好清而心擾之，人心好靜而慾牽之。常能遣其欲而心自靜，澄其心而神自清，自然六欲不生，三毒消滅。所以不能者，爲心夫澄、慾夫遣也。能遣之者，內觀於心，心無其心；外觀於形，形無其形；遠觀於物，物無其物。三者既悟，唯見於空。觀空亦空，空無所空，所空既無，無無亦無，無無既無，湛然常寂。寂無所寂，慾豈能生？慾既不生，即是真靜。真靜應物，真常得性。常應常靜，常清靜矣。如此清靜，漸入真道。既入真道，名爲得道。雖然得道，實無所得。爲化眾生，名爲得道。能悟之者，可傳聖道。

老君曰：上士無爭，下士好爭；上德不德，下德執德。執著之者，不名道德。眾生所以不得真道者，爲有妄心。既有妄心，即驚其神。既驚其神，即著萬物。既著萬物，即生貪求。既生貪求，即是煩惱。煩惱妄想，憂苦身心，便遭濁辱，流浪生死，常沉苦海，永失真道。真常之道，悟者自得。得悟道者，常清靜矣。