

HANDBOOKS FOR DAOIST PRACTICE

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SCRIPTURE ON THE HIDDEN TALISMAN

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TRANSLATED BY LOUIS KOMJATHY

INTRODUCTION

書 序

SCRIPTURE ON THE HIDDEN TALISMAN

The *Huangdi yinfu jing* 黃帝陰符經 (Yellow Thearch's Scripture on the Hidden Talisman; DZ 31), abbreviated as *Yinfu jing* 陰符經 (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman), was a central scripture in early internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) traditions and in the early Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) movement. It continues to be held in high esteem within the contemporary monastic order, especially in the Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) branch of Complete Perfection.

The *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* is a Daoist text of unknown authorship, but probably was composed in the late sixth century C.E. It is composed primarily in four and five character combinations, and there are two extant versions. The shorter version consists of approximately 300 characters (323 in total), while the longer version contains approximately 400 characters (437 in total). Some believe that the shorter text is the older edition. If one drops the final/additional 113 characters, the versions are almost identical.

The contents of this scripture are often abstract and open to a wide range of interpretations. Because of this, the historical context and determining influences of its composition remain unknown. Some have suggested its emergence from a Chinese military context, while others see it as being of Daoist provenance. The proposed “militaristic” origination and interpretation comes from the fact that an early commentary, the *Huangdi yinfu jing shu* 黃帝陰符經疏 (Commentary on the Yellow Thearch's Scripture on the Hidden Talisman; DZ 110), is ascribed to Li Quan 李筌 (fl. 8th c.), a moderately successful official and military expert under the Tang

dynasty (618-906). This interpretation is also based in conjecture on earlier military uses of *yinfu* 陰符 as a designation for “hidden contracts,” or a tally used for military strategizing. Such a reading seems both historically questionable and philosophically unsatisfying. What is clear is that the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* has exerted a major influence on the Daoist tradition.

As an assumed revelation from Huangdi 黃帝, the Yellow Thearch,¹ an ancient mythological emperor and Daoist deity, who was also recognized as the ancestor of the Song dynasty (Northern: 960-1126; Southern: 1127-1279), the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* became canonical in bibliographies from the Song dynasty onwards. Along with other shorter works, this scripture came to occupy a central position in internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹) traditions during the eleventh century.

In particular, the practitioners of early Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) Daoism emphasized its importance as a guide for Daoist training. Wang Chongyang 王重陽 (1113-1170), the founder of Complete Perfection, frequently cites the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman*. For example, in the *Chongyang lijiao shiwu lun* 重陽立教十五論 (Chongyang's Fifteen Discourses for Establishing the Teachings; DZ 1233), Wang comments, “Innate nature (*xing* 性) is

¹ A thearch (thē/ər̩k) is a divine ruler. Like theophany (divine manifestation) and theology (study of divinity), thearch is derived from the Greek *théos*, meaning “god” and relating to divinity more generally. I have translated Di 帝 as “Thearch” to indicate the divine connotation of the term; “cosmocrat” might be a more liberal equivalent.

spirit (*shen* 神); life-destiny (*ming* 命) is subtle breath (*qi* 氣). Innate nature meeting subtle breath is like a wild bird obtaining the wind....Thus, the *Yinfu jing* says: ‘The regulation of all beings comes from qi.’ This is exactly it’ (DZ 1233, 4b). Similarly, in the *Chongyang quanzhen ji* 重陽全真集 (Chongyang's Anthology of Complete Perfection; DZ 1153), Wang explains, “[To practice spiritual refinement] you must fully understand the three hundred characters of the *Yinfu jing* and read up on the five thousand words of the *Daode jing*” (13.7b-8a). Liu Chuxuan 劉處玄 (Changsheng 長生 [Perpetual Life]; 1147-1203), one of the so-called Seven Perfected (*qizhen* 七真), also wrote a commentary on the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman*; this is the *Huangdi yinfu jing zhu* 黃帝陰符經注 (Commentary on the Yellow Thearch's Scripture on the Hidden Talisman; DZ 122).

The importance of this text in the larger Daoist tradition is testified by the existence of twenty commentaries contained in the Ming-dynasty (1368-1644) Daoist Canon. Even the famous Neo-Confucian Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200) wrote one. The *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* has also maintained its position in contemporary Complete Perfection Daoism, especially in its Longmen 龍門 (Dragon Gate) branch. Liu Yiming 劉一明 (1734-1821), an eleventh generation patriarch of Dragon Gate, wrote a commentary that is contained in his *Daoshu shier zhong* 道書十二種 (Twelve Daoist Books); this is the *Yinfu jing zhu* 陰符經注 (Commentary on the Scripture on the Hidden Talisman; ZW 255). The scripture remains a part of contemporary Complete Perfection, being venerated as a concise guide to Daoist practice. In addition, during my travels in China during 1997-1998, I met Li Zhongyu (born circa 1908), a Buddho-Daoist teacher and Chinese

medical practitioner in Pengxian, near Chengdu (Sichuan). Well-known for his treatment of cases involving psychological/spiritual disorders, specifically “ghost possessions,” Dr. Li is also a respected teacher of Qigong and a meditation practice known as the Blue Character Method (*bizi fa* 碧字法). During one of our visits, Dr. Li emphasized the significance of the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* as an essential text for Daoist cultivation.

The text has also been inscribed at a variety of Daoist sacred sites, including Baiyun guan 白雲觀 (White Cloud Monastery; Beijing) and Shangqing gong 上清宮 (Palace of Highest Clarity) at Qingcheng shan 青城山 (Green Wall Mountain; Guanxian, Sichuan). In this respect, it is also noteworthy that Ren Farong 任法融 (b. 1936), current President of the Chinese Daoist Association (Zhongguo daojiao xiehui 中國道教協會; Beijing), has written a commentary on the text entitled the *Huangdi yinfu jing shiyi* 黃帝陰符經釋義 (Explaining the Meaning of the *Huangdi yinfu jing*).

In terms of Daoist cultivation, the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* gives short verses that emphasize self-transformation, a movement from limited human consciousness to a more cosmologically oriented way of being. The Daoist practitioner must become aware of the cyclical patterns of nature, specifically the alteration of yin and yang, and the underlying mysteries of the universe. In this context, Daoist training involves becoming aware of the heart-mind (*xin* 心): “The human heart-mind is the pivot” (1a). Purification of the heart-mind, stilling excess intellectual and emotional activity, and elimination of desires allow one to return to one's original connection (*tong* 通) with

the Dao. This requires dedication to cultivation and refinement (*xiulian* 修鍊).

The scripture also contains a few technical terms that deserve mention. Many of these are open to and have received a wide range of interpretations. First, “hidden talisman” (*yinfu* 陰符) has been translated as follows: “secret tally,” “hidden contract,” “unconscious unification,” and “joining with obscurity.” In my reading, “hidden talisman” invokes the reality that each individual has an innate connection with the Dao. This resembles a talisman in two separate pieces, which when rejoined reveal the original unity. “When heaven and humanity join and manifest,/The ten thousand transformations have a stable base” (1a). This is the “pivot” (*ji* 機) and the “extraordinary vessel” (*qiqi* 奇器) mentioned in the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman*. In this respect, the phrase *yinfu* also reminds one of the title of chapter five of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang) “Dechong fu” 德充符 (Talisman of Inner Power Complete).

The scripture also explains that the Five Thieves (*wuzei* 五賊) disrupt the human heart-mind. Under one interpretation, the Five Thieves are excitement (*xi* 希), excessive joy (*le* 樂), grief (*ai* 哀), desire (*yu* 欲), and anger (*nu* 怒). Dissipating spirit and qi, the Five Thieves destabilize the heart-mind. The scripture also explains that “The aberrations of the Nine Cavities are in the Three Essentials” (1a). The Nine Cavities (*jiuqiao* 九竅) refer to the nine openings in the body, including eyes, ears, nose, mouth, anus, and urethra. The Three Essentials (*sanyao* 三要) refer to the three orifices through which qi is most easily lost: the eyes (*mu* 目), ears (*er* 耳), and mouth (*kou* 口).

Here the emphasis is on sealing the senses to prevent dissipation and distraction. This recalls the end of chapter seven of the *Zhuangzi*:

The emperor of the southern ocean was called Brevity (Shu 儵). The emperor of the northern ocean was called Suddenness (Hu 忽). The emperor of the Center was called Primordial Chaos (Hundun 混沌). Brevity and Suddenness often met in the land of Primordial Chaos, and Primordial Chaos treated them very generously. Brevity and Suddenness discussed how they could repay the inner power of Primordial Chaos. They said, ‘All people have the Seven Cavities (*qiqiao* 七竅) so that they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. Primordial Chaos alone does not have them. Let’s try boring some.’ Each day they bored another hole. On the seventh day Primordial Chaos died”

Like the disruption caused to Hundun's primordial unity through increasing differentiation, the sense organs may confuse and destabilize the adept's innate nature. Differentiated and conditioned modes of being separate one from one's original context of interrelationship.

Another technical term in the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* is the Three Powers (*sancai* 三才; lb). The Three Powers refer to heaven (*tian* 天), earth (*di* 地), and humanity (*ren* 人). “Mobilizing the army” (*yongshi* 用師; lb) may be interpreted as relating to Daoist practices of ritual invocation, where the priest calls upon “celestial troops” (*tianbing* 天兵) to intervene on his or her behalf. Here the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* suggests that self-reliance is more efficacious

than spirit intervention and that the adept's practice is so purified that such invocation becomes unnecessary.

Finally, the Three Reversals (*sanfan* 三返) refers to the practice of the “three natures returning to unity” (*sanxing guiyi* 三性歸一). This involves “reversing” the outward orientation of seeing, hearing, and thinking. These aspects of the self are turned inward, so that the Daoist adept peers into, listens to, and sinks the mind into the lower elixir field (*dantian* 丹田; lower abdomen). In sum, according to the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman*, the Daoist practitioner must decrease desires and sensual engagement in order to still and stabilize the heart-mind.

As a final set of technical details, the reader should note three things. First, the text of the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* as found in the Daoist Canon (DZ 31) has the line “Heaven gives life; heaven takes life away—/This is the principle as the Dao” at the end of the first section. In the present translation, I leave this line in the first section of the Chinese text, but place it at the beginning of the second section of the translation. This follows the text of Liu Yiming. In addition, some character additions, also found in the text of Liu Yiming, have been considered and incorporated into my English translation. Finally, many Daoists emphasize the 300-character version of the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* as primary. As mentioned, this version is the same as the 400-character version when the final 113 characters are subtracted. In the present translation, the 300-character version would end with the line “I consider the patterns and principles of the seasons and things wisdom” (2a).

The *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* has been translated previously in James Legge's *The Texts of Taoism: The T'ai Shang Tractate, The Writings of Chuang Tzu*. A translation of the text with Liu Yiming's commentary appears in Thomas Cleary's *Vitality, Energy, Spirit*. A translation and discussion of the *Scripture on the Hidden Talisman* in terms Chinese military thought may be found in Christopher Rand's "Li Ch'uan and Chinese Military Thought." Florian Reiter's "The 'Scripture on the Hidden Contracts' (Yin-fu ching): A Short Survey on Facts and Findings" discusses authorship, possible dates of composition, and its place in the history of Daoism. Finally, "Mutual Stealing among the Three Powers' in the *Scripture of Unconsciousness Unification*" by Zhang Jiyu and Li Yuanguo is a discussion of the text in terms of ecology.

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TRANSLATION

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YELLOW THEARCH'S SCRIPTURE ON THE HIDDEN TALISMAN

Upper Section: Extensive Way of Spirit Immortality and Embracing the One

Observe the way of heaven,
Attend to the activities of heaven,
And that is all.

Heaven has Five Thieves;
One who perceives this prospers.

The Five Thieves are in the heart-mind.
They extend to and even affect heaven.

The canopy of space and time is in your hands.
Ten thousand transformations arise from your body.

The innate nature of heaven is humanity.
The human heart-mind is the pivot.

Establishing the way of heaven
Enables the settling of humanity.

When heaven manifests killing power,
It moves the stars and shifts the constellations.
When earth manifests killing power.
Dragons and snakes continually emerge.
When humans manifest killing power,
Heaven and earth are overturned.
When heaven and humanity join and manifest,
The ten thousand transformations have a stable base.

There are ingenious and awkward natures—
They can be subdued and concealed.

The aberrations of the Nine Cavities
Are in the Three Essentials;
They can be aroused or stilled.

When fire arises from wood,
Calamity manifests with certain destruction.
When treachery arises in the country,
Time moves with certain destruction.
Those who know this practice cultivation and refinement;
We call such people sages.

Middle Section: Extensive Method for Enriching the Country and Pacifying the People

Heaven gives life; heaven takes life away—
This is the principle of the Dao.

Heaven and earth steal from the ten thousand beings;
The ten thousand beings steal from humanity;
Humanity steals from the ten thousand beings.
When the Three Bandits are correctly ordered,
The Three Powers are then at peace.

Therefore it is said,
 Eat at the appropriate times,
 And the hundred bones will be regulated.
 Move in accordance with the pivot,
 And the ten thousand transformations will be at peace.

People know the spiritual as spiritual.
But they do not know the non-spiritual as spiritual.

The sun and moon have calculations;
Large and small have limitations.
The efficacy of sages is born there;
Spiritual illumination emerges there.

If you steal the pivot [of the universe],
Nothing under heaven can see you, no one can know you.
When superior people attain this,
They are able to endure impoverishment.
When inferior people attain this,
They are irreverent towards life-destiny.

Lower Section: Extensive Technique for Strengthening the Troops and Preparing for Battle

The blind are adept at hearing;
The deaf are adept at seeing.

Sever your ties to the single source of greed—
This is ten times better than mobilizing the army.

Practice the Three Reversals day and night—
This is ten thousand times better than mobilizing the army.

The heart-mind is born from things;
The heart-mind dies from things.
The pivot [of the heart-mind] is in the eyes.

Heaven is without kindness.
But from this great kindness is born.
With swift thunder and strong wind,
All beings become active.

The nature of utmost joy is to be in balance;
The nature of utmost stillness is to be pure.

Heaven is fundamentally private,
But its application is ultimately open to all.
The regulation of all beings comes from qi.

Birth is the root of death;
Death is the root of birth.
Benefit is born from harm;
Harm is born from benefit.

Ignor-ant people consider the patterns and principles
of heaven and earth sacred;
I consider the patterns and principles
of the seasons and beings wisdom.

People assume that being ignor-ant is sagely;
I assume that not being ignor-ant is sagely.
People believe that being strange is sagely;
I believe that not being strange is sagely.

Thus, sinking in water and entering fire
Bring destruction on oneself.

The Dao abides in suchness and stillness;
Thus, heaven, earth, and the ten thousand beings are born.
The way of heaven and earth enfolds;
Thus, yin and yang prevail.
Yin and yang form a reciprocal oscillation,
And transformations are in complete accord.

Thus, sages know that the Dao in its suchness
Cannot be avoided or abandoned.
Following it, they completely grasp it.

The Dao in utmost stillness
Cannot be recorded by laws or calculations.
Because of this, the sage has an extraordinary vessel.

This gives birth to the ten thousand forms,
The eight trigrams, the stems and branches,
The movement of spirits, and the concealment of ghosts.

The mystery of the mutual alteration of yin and yang
Clearly progresses beyond form.

CHINESE TEXT

中

文

黃帝陰符經

神仙抱一演道章上

觀天之道，執天之行，盡矣。天有五賊，見之者昌。五賊在心，施行於天。宇宙在乎手，萬化生乎身。天性，人也。人心，機也，立天之道，以定人也。天發殺機，移星易宿。地發殺機，龍蛇起陸。人發殺機，天地反覆。天人合發，萬變定基。性有巧拙，可以伏藏。九竅之邪，在乎三要，可以動靜。火生於木，禍發必剋。竈生於國，時動勿潰。知之修鍊，謂之聖人。天生天殺，道之理也。

富國安民演法章中

天地，萬物之盜；萬物，人之盜；人，萬物之盜。三盜既宜，三才既安。故曰：食其時，百骸理。動其機，萬化安。人知其神而神，不知不神而所以神也。日月有數，大小有定。聖功生焉，神明出焉。其盜機也，天下莫能見，莫能知。君子得之固躬，小人得之輕命。

強兵戰勝演術章下

瞽者善聽，聾者善視。絕利一源，用師十倍；三反晝夜，用師萬倍。心生於物，[心]死於物，[心]機在目。天之無恩而大恩生。迅雷烈風，莫不蠢然。至樂性餘，至靜性廉。天之至私，用之至公。禽之制在氣。生者，死之根；死者，生之根。恩生於害，害生於恩。愚人以天地文理聖，我以時物文理哲。人以虞愚，我以不愚聖，人以奇期其聖，我以不期[奇]其聖。故以沉水入火，自取滅亡。自然之道靜，故天地萬物生。天地之道寢，故陰陽勝。陰陽相推而變化順矣。是枚聖人知自然之道不可違，因而制之。至靜之道，律曆所不能契。爰有奇器，是生萬象。八卦甲子，神機鬼藏。陰陽相勝之術，昭昭乎進乎象矣。