

# Ecology, Aesthetics and Daoist Body Cultivation

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## Abstract

The Daoist religious tradition offers a wide repertoire of body cultivation practices that focus on generating a phenomenological sensitivity to the inner body and its location within the world. These practices can be understood from the contemporary Western theoretical perspectives developed by Merleau-Ponty and Richard Shusterman. Merleau-Ponty proposed that the body constitutes the basis for phenomenological experience but did not develop the idea of the experience of the inner body that is so vital to Indian and Chinese body cultivation traditions. Richard Shusterman proposed the concept of “somaesthetics” or methods of training the body's experience of the world, but did not consider the value of this from an ecophenomenological point of view. Extending these theoretical perspectives to interpret Daoist cultivation methods reveals that Daoists aim to dissolve the experiential boundary between the body and the world and create an experience of the mutual interpenetration of the body and the world. Such an experience can form the aesthetic basis for cultivating ecological sensitivity.

## 1. Introduction

Despite the best efforts of Habermas and others, the project of modernity, grounded in the values of the European Enlightenment has been undergoing severe internal and external challenges. The source of those criticisms lies in the way that the project of modernity grasped the disembodied concept of autonomous reason formulated in the Enlightenment period in such a way that it

became the sole source of authority and value in the social and cultural sphere. The Korean-American philosopher Hwa Jol Jung wrote:

European modernity is set to prejudge truth-claims by the criterion of Enlightenment. While privileging and valorizing the authority and autonomy of reason for allegedly human (material) progress and emancipation, it marginalizes, disenfranchises, and denigrates the (reason's) Other whether it be (1) body, (2) woman, (3) nature, or (4) non-West which happen to be four central postmodern landmarks and subversive possibilities. While its protagonists insist on modernity as an unfinished project, its postmodern antagonists consider it as a failure and are determined to unpack and audit it.<sup>1</sup>

The most interesting and useful approach of late modern intellectuals to this problem has been the attempt to rethink the foundational dualism which underpins this whole project, namely the Cartesian dualism between the disembodied mind, the *res cogitans*, and the *res extensa*, the body that occupies space and time and houses our mental functioning. In my view, the most profound problem engendered by this way of thinking about thinking is that it divorces reasoning from the biological and evolutionary matrix that has made it possible. If reason can be reinscribed within the body and, ultimately, within the fifteen billion years of cosmic evolution, then this will go a long way to bridging the divide between humanity and nature. The body, then, should be the site *par excellence* for environmentalism as a social movement. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the failure of the environmental movement can be attributed largely to the way it perpetuates the type of dichotomous reasoning that precipitated humankind's divorce from nature in the first place. So long as environmentalists urge others to respect, heal, or value nature

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<sup>1</sup> Hwa-Jol Jung, "Enlightenment and the Question of the Other: A Postmodern Audition" *Human Studies* 25 (2002): 298

as an object beyond the hermetically-sealed walls of their bodies, they subtly and unconsciously reinforce the absolute separation of the mind from the world.

To rewrite environmentalism thus requires rewriting the discourse so as no longer to perpetuate the false reification of nature as a thing outside the body, and the false reification of the mind as a wholly abstract and non-material central processing unit within human bodies. This is by no means unheard of in the West. The French philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard, developed a theoretical understanding of the way that the human imagination is implicated in the materiality of human experience. Merleau-Ponty's concept of "limbed experience" also drew attention to the somatic character of experience. Contemporary neuroscience is also beginning to understand the mind as a function of the whole body, not just the brain. Despite this, the Western tradition is not particularly known for its deep insight into the notion of "bodily experience" and in many ways lags behind the insights generated in Indian and Chinese cultures and religions. Hindu, Buddhist and Daoist traditions, for instance, have focussed for centuries on systematically cultivating an experience of the inner body and on understanding this experience in terms of broader cosmological concepts. In so doing they connect the lived experience of the body with the broader contexts of space, time and the fabric of the natural world. While contemporary environmentalists may not live in the same metaphysical world as these religious practitioners, they do inhabit the same bodies. The premise of this essay derives from this principle: rather than focussing on worldview and cosmology as a point of contact between religion and ecology, it would be better to focus on somatic experiences as a way to overcome the dichotomy between body and world. What follows thus focusses on Chinese somatic traditions, specifically Daoist body cultivation, as non-discursive techniques for reinscribing the body within the world and the world within the body.

## 2. Bachelard

The French philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962), developed a theory of the “material imagination,” which drew on the earliest foundations of Western science, namely, the four elements known to Greek natural philosophy: earth, air, fire and water. According to Bachelard the human imagination invests these elements with a poetic quality that elicits a “passionate liaison” between humans and their objects.<sup>2</sup> These affective bonds evoke what he termed the “intimate beauty of materials; their mass of hidden attraction, all that affective space concentrated inside things.”<sup>3</sup> Bachelard’s concept of the “material imagination” thus signifies the way in which human imagination is grounded in the very materiality of nature: the imagination engages the material character of the world; and it does so not in intellectual or disembodied way but through the affective, poetic character. He writes:

It is not knowledge of the real which makes us passionately love it. It is rather feeling which is the fundamental value. One starts by loving nature without knowing it, by seeing it well, while actualizing in things a love which is grounded elsewhere. Then, one seeks in it detail because one loves it on the whole, without knowing why.<sup>4</sup>

For Bachelard, then, the foundation for the connection between the mind and the world lies in the affect, the feelings and sensations that the natural world evokes in us. This affective bond precedes epistemology and ontology, and it has the power to shape our imagination and our

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<sup>2</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, (Paris: PUF/Collection ‘Quadrige’, 7e édition, 1998 [1957]), 33; quoted in Jeremy F. Lane, “Towards a Poetics of Consumerism: Gaston Bachelard's ‘Material Imagination’ and Narratives of Post-War Modernisation” *French Cultural Studies* 17.1 (2006): 21.

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté* (Paris: José Corti, 1948), 9; quoted in Lane, “Poetics,” 20.

<sup>4</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, (Paris: Corti 1942), 155; quoted in Edward K. Kaplan, “Gaston Bachelard's Philosophy of Imagination: An Introduction,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 33.1 (1972), 4.

creativity. It is because humans do not simply perceive nature but imbue it with value (even “over-rating” it) that we have the capacity to engage in the creative transformation of the world.<sup>5</sup>

The seductive power of the material imagination was viewed by Bachelard as the initial foundation for the human understanding of nature, a phenomenon that could give rise to science, but which science in its objectivity had to overcome. In fact science, to Bachelard, seemed increasingly incapable of understanding the natural phenomena that were most evocative for the human imagination. Take for example his discussion of fire:

Contemporary science has almost completely neglected the truly primordial problem that the phenomena of fire pose for the untutored mind. In the course of time the chapters on fire in chemistry textbooks have become shorter and shorter. There are, indeed, a good many modern books on chemistry in which it is impossible to find any mention of flame or fire. *Fire is no longer a reality for science.*<sup>6</sup>

Bachelard’s analysis suggests to me that science’s objectivity impels it to overlook the psychic affect of natural processes with the result that societies become increasingly blind to affective dimension of material experience. The process of modernization, therefore, entails a loss of the “affective space” that mediates between humans subjects and their lived environments. Though firmly committed to the principles of materialism and science, Bachelard was one of the first modern scientists to recognize and understand the precise nature of this loss. He laments, for instance, the loss of phenomenological depth that occurred in the transition from oil lamps to electric lighting turned on with the flick of a switch.<sup>7</sup> Electric light does not have the nearly as much capacity to evoke the material imagination as a flickering flame. The

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<sup>5</sup> Kaplan, “Gaston Bachelard,” 5.

<sup>6</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, trans. Alan C. M. Ross, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Lane, “Poetics,” 23

“administrative light” of an electric bulb, bound up in processes of bureaucracy and mechanization was typical of the modern condition. The spaces inhabited by humans thus become increasingly abstracted spaces, homogenized, geometrized and quantified.

This theme is picked up by later French thinkers. Baudrillard, for instance, noted how bodily engagement with labour and tools in traditional societies became replaced by mere “gestures of control.”<sup>8</sup> Heating houses becomes no longer an effort of collecting wood and lighting fires but regulating the thermostat in the hallway.<sup>9</sup> The post-modern condition, moreover, is characterized by technological forms that aim to simulate (and stimulate) the affective bonds that were lost in the transition to modernity. Thus, we have electric fires that look like real log fires, and online social networks that compensate for the loss of community in the abstract space of modernity. Such simulations and virtualizations are testament to the deep-seated poetic power of the material imagination, rooted in millennia of physical engagement of human bodies in their physical contexts. The psychological power of such phenomena cannot be underestimated.

If we are to take Bachelard seriously, then poetry is as important as physics for understanding the human experience of the world. Indeed, this is the reason why in his *Psychoanalysis of Fire*, Bachelard undertakes a survey of the poetic rather than the physical ways in which fire has sparked the human imagination. The consequence of this way thinking about experience and imagination is of particular importance for environmentalists. It suggests that human imagination is driven at a fundamental level by aesthetics. Those who are concerned about the human relationship with the natural world should be concerned with discourse about the aesthetic experience of nature, as much as moral and legal issues, or indeed scientific issues.

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<sup>8</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Le Système des objets*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 77.

<sup>9</sup> Lane, “Poetics,” 28

If Bachelard is right, then *aesthesis*, or feelings about nature underlie, our imagination and perception of the world. So long as the enlightenment mentality and the processes of modernization overlook the aesthetic realm as foundational for the human engagement with the natural world, then they will be incapable of addressing the ecological crisis in any seriously meaningful way.

### 3. Merleau-Ponty

If Bachelard is right about the primordial psychic power of material phenomena, then this should lead us to develop a philosophical account of the nature of lived experience as a psychosomatic unity rather than the Cartesian account of a *res cogitans* and a *res extensa*. Indeed this has been the major project of Merleau-Ponty and other philosophers who were convinced that the Heideggerian emphasis on lived experience should point us in the direction of the body not simply as the container for experience but as the generative matrix of those experiences. Indeed, it is not simply that the body functionally generates an “experience” of an external “world” but rather that the body provides the spatial location that is necessary for the perception of a phenomenological world. Without a body there could be no experience of the world as it is given to us, and without a world there could be no body. He writes:

My body is not an object, but a means, an organization. In perception I organize with my body an association with the world. With my body and through my body, I inhabit the world. The body is the field in which perceptions localize themselves.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Husserl et la Notion de Nature (Notes Prises au Cours de Maurice Merleau-Ponty)” *Revue de Metaphysique et de Morale* 70 (1965): 261; quoted in Hwa-Jol Jung, “Merleau-Ponty's Transversal Geophilosophy,” in *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy: Dwelling on the Landscapes of Thought*, ed. Sue Cataldi and William Hamrick, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 241.

The emphasis here on the carnal unity of the body and the world is particularly significant for ecological discourse. Of particular note is the famous statement that the body as

flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a general thing, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. The flesh is in this sense an element of Being.<sup>11</sup>

Merleau-Ponty regards the body akin to Bachelard’s elements, that is to say, as the fundamental building block of our lived experience of the world.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty develops his understanding of perception with the notion of reversibility, that when perception is understood as being constituted in the flesh, then to perceive the world is also to be perceived by the world: one cannot touch without being touched; one cannot see without simultaneously presenting oneself to be seen by the world. In contrast to Descartes’s *cogito*, we can say *tango et tangor* (I touch and I am touched). Whatever we touch, perceive and even think, we do so from within a world, not from outside it.

This approach to phenomenology has been instrumental in generating what has been termed the “enactive approach” of embodied cognitive science.<sup>12</sup> According to Colombetti and Thompson, this “dynamical systems approach has challenged the idea that cognition is the manipulation of abstract representations according to syntactic rules, and has proposed instead

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<sup>11</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et L’Invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 139–140; quoted in Jung, “Transversal,” 242–243.

<sup>12</sup> See Varela et al., *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997).

that cognition emerges from the coupled interactions of the brain, body, and environment.”<sup>13</sup>

This approach is, moreover, challenging the dominant tradition of cognitive science that draws on Cartesian understandings of the mind/body dualism. Colombetti and Thompson summarize this field as follows:

In summary, according to the enactive approach, the human mind is embodied in our entire organism and embedded in the world, and hence is not reducible to structures inside the head. Meaning and experience are created by, or enacted through, the continuous reciprocal interaction of the brain, the body, and the world.<sup>14</sup>

But Merleau-Ponty’s work has been significant not simply for rethinking the process of embodied cognition, but also on the other side of the coin, for thinking about the lived world that is generated through the process of cognition. Indeed his work has been instrumental for a new line of ecological phenomenology that seeks to explore the value of phenomenology for contributing to a holistic, ecological, systemic view of the relationship between the body and the world. One of chief protagonists of this movement is David Abram. In an early essay, published in 1988, Abram first alludes to the ecological possibilities of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. He writes:

His work suggests a rigorous way to approach and to speak of the myriad ecosystems without positing our immediate selves outside of them. Unlike the language of information processing and cybernetics, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the flesh provides a way to describe and disclose the living fields of integration from our

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<sup>13</sup> Giovanna Colombetti and Evan Thompson, “The feeling body: Towards an enactive approach to emotion,” in *Developmental Perspectives on Embodiment and Consciousness* ed. Willis F. Overton, et al., (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: 2007), 46.

<sup>14</sup> Colombetti and Thompson, “Feeling body,” 56.

experienced place within them. The convergence of Merleau-Ponty's aims with those of a genuine philosophical ecology cannot be too greatly stressed.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the work that has been undertaken in Western philosophy to recuperate the body as the foundation for the human experience of the world, such work remains remarkably abstract given that its focus is on the body. Two criticisms are readily apparent. The first is that made by the American pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman who criticizes Merleau-Ponty for emphasizing the way in which somatic perception operates spontaneously. Most of us most of the time do not need to think about or reflect upon how precisely we are constructing our bodily experiences of the lived world. The great marvel of perception is that we do not have to consciously think about how to navigate a crowded party without bumping into a waiter carrying a trayful of cocktails: we just do it. But Shusterman wants more than simply being able to be successful in ordinary pursuits. He advocates what he calls "somaesthetics" that is training the body's perceptual engagement with the world so as to achieve greater pragmatic benefits. He writes:

While I share Merleau-Ponty's appreciation of our inexplicit, unreflective somatic perception, I think we should also recognize that it is often painfully inaccurate and dysfunctional. I may think I am keeping my head down when swinging a golf club, though an observer will easily see I do not. Disciplines of somatic education deploy exercises of representational awareness to treat such problems of mis-perception and misuse of our bodies in the spontaneous and habitual behavior that Merleau-Ponty identifies as primal and celebrates as miraculously flawless in normal performance.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> David Abram, "Merleau Ponty and the Voice of the Earth," *Environmental Ethics* 10.2 (1988), 119.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Shusterman, "Body Consciousness and Performance: Somaesthetics East and West," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67.2 (2009): 139.

The problem, as Shusterman sees it, is that if perception is somatic, then it can and should be trained somatically so as to create pragmatically better representations of our place in the world. The value of such representations, however, may extend beyond purely physical activities such as tennis and golf. Theoretically at least it should be possible to engage in training so as to overcome the false reification of self and world so as to arrive at a perception of the self within the world and not outside of it. In short why not use somaesthetic disciplines—the training of the habits of bodily perceptions—so as to bring about an ecological sensitivity?

I mentioned earlier that two major criticisms have emerged of Merleau-Ponty's abstract discussion of the phenomenology of the body. The first was Shusterman's criticism that Merleau-Ponty emphasized the spontaneous nature of perception and neglected to consider the way perception and experiences can be shaped through somatic disciplines. The second criticism focuses on Merleau-Ponty's reluctance to speak about the depth of the inner body. While his philosophy makes it perfectly clear that perception depends upon a depth of field for experience, he does not consider that this depth, or experience of dimensionality, can also be applied to the perception of the inner body. The Indian philosopher Sundar Sarukkai commented on this in a 2002 essay published in *Philosophy East & West*. Discussing Merleau-Ponty and his interpreters he writes:

But nowhere in these discussions do we find any detailed attempt to explicate the idea of the 'inner' body. The lack of such a discussion suggests that these writers view the body as a homogeneous entity, because of which there is little possibility of articulating a phenomenology of the inner body. I believe that the most important reason for this continued ambiguity regarding the notion of inner with respect to the body is to be found in the absence of a tradition of lived experience of the inner body in the West, one that could have been used by Merleau-Ponty in a manner similar to the case histories of

Schneider.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, the phenomenological experiences of yoga strongly suggest the possibility of a lived experience of the inner body.<sup>18</sup>

Before discussing yoga, Sarukkai gives the example of eating in order to argue for the phenomenological experience of dimensionality or depth within the inner body. He writes:

The body experience of eating is equivalent to the phenomenological experience of dimensionality and thus is intertwined with the notion of ‘inside.’ The process of eating is never visible to us. Further actions related to eating, such as mashing the food, swallowing, and so on, are all events in the ‘dark side’ of the body. We can never ‘see’ ourselves eating, but we experience it all the time. We experience swallowing the food; we experience its passage through the food pipe into the region of the stomach. These experiences all constitute an experience of dimensionality, an expression of the ‘inside’ of the body. We are usually unaware of these processes except in times of pain and distress of the inner body. But practices like yoga allow us a continuous, conscious grasp of the inner body.<sup>19</sup>

Sarukkai’s approach is instructive in that it opens up a new dimension to the question of embodied experience, one that embodied traditions such as Yoga, Tantra or Daoist body cultivation can function as interlocutors, and not mere as data to be studied. In the second half of this paper I analyze the depiction of the inner body that emerges in Daoist body cultivation, and I suggest that this depiction can be instructive not simply for Shusterman’s project of understanding somaesthetic disciplines, but also for Abram’s project of eco-phenomenology.

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<sup>17</sup> Schneider suffered head injuries and consequently many mental disorders. Merleau-Ponty used his case notes as evidence to refute empiricist and intellectualist theories of perception.

<sup>18</sup> Sundar Sarukkai, “Inside/Outside: Merleau-Ponty/Yoga,” *Philosophy East and West* 52.4 (2002): 462

<sup>19</sup> Sarukkai, “Inside/Outside,” 466.

#### 4. Somatic Disciplines

The argument, put briefly, is that the traditions of Daoist body cultivation can be understood as non-discursive somatic disciplines that inscribe the body within the world and the world within the body. As such they may be fruitfully illuminated by Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the reversibility of phenomenal perception. Secondly, I wish to advance the hypothesis that training in these somatic disciplines can overcome the experience of the world as other, and can provide the aesthetic or sensory foundation for ecologically responsible patterns of behavior. In short, the visual and sensual experience of the body inside the world and the world inside the body can constitute the proper aesthetic grounds for ecologically sensitivity praxis.

To those who are familiar with early Daoist philosophy, such a project might seem rather surprising. In comparison to the deep attention paid to the body's inner workings in Yoga, early Daoist texts emphasize spontaneity and unreflective skill when it comes to the body's engagement with the world.<sup>20</sup> In describing the meditation technique known as "sitting and forgetting" (*zuowang*), the *Zhuangzi* ch. 6 puts the following words in the mouth of Confucius's favourite student Yan Hui:

墮肢體，黜聰明，離形去知，同於大通，此謂坐忘

I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything.<sup>21</sup>

At first glance it might seem that this passage advocates an understanding of perception that goes against Merleau-Ponty's limbed and lived experience of the world. "Do away with

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<sup>20</sup> Shusterman, "Body," 136.

<sup>21</sup> Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, (New York: Columbia, 1964), 87.

limbs and body” says Yan Hui. The key to understanding such a passage, however, is to recognize that *zuo wang* or “sitting and forgetting” is actually somatic discipline the aim of which is to “forget” or discard conventional phenomenal perception in order to arrive at a state of equivalence (*tong*) with the Way. The foundation of this method of somatic discipline lies in paying attention to the limbed experience of reality, even if the ultimate goal is somehow to move beyond such an experience. But as Merleau-Ponty would surely agree, the only way to there is from here. The foundation for many Daoist practice lies first of all in becoming sensitive to the way that our body conditions our experience of the world, that is to say, paying attention first of all to the “here” rather than the “there.” If the Daoist is to attain some kind of all-pervading unity with the Way, this cannot be done except from within the bodily experience of the world.

It would be a mistake, therefore, to spiritualize one’s interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* in the manner of perennial philosophy. Making oneself identical with the “Great Thoroughfare” should not be interpreted as a kind of neo-Platonic mystical intellection of Being-Itself. At least, that is not how the Daoist tradition came to understand unity with the Way. We know this because the Daoist tradition developed an extraordinary repertoire of physical cultivation practices that focus, like Yoga, upon the inner body. Daoists, however, tend to express the goal of cultivation slightly differently from Yoga: the aim is not so much liberation from the world, that is, the realm of phenomenal experience; but rather dissolving the boundaries between the lived body and its lived environment. To put it more bluntly, the goal is not transcendence, but translucence, that is to say the body thoroughly pervading and being pervaded by the world. Before I go on to explain this idea of pervasion 通 more fully, it is worth while focusing briefly on some of the methods by which Daoists have cultivated their bodies.

## 5. The Way of Highest Clarity

The Way of Highest Clarity (上情道) which existed as a distinct tradition for about 1,000 years from the 4th century onwards. This tradition advocated and refined a tradition of internal visual meditation, in which the body was perceived as a rich and splendid cosmos inhabited by gods.

This meditative practice was generally known as *cun* 存 which is normally translated in textbooks as “visualization” since the goal of such a practice was to bring about a vision of a god inside the body. The term 存 however has a rich web of meanings that deserves careful explication. In modern Chinese it is combined with 在 to form the binome 存在, commonly translated as “existence.” More accurately, however, this binome might be translated as “to persist in a particular location” for it refers not to an abstract concept—existence as such—but to the haecceity or “this-ness” of some discrete particular. The metaphysical presupposition is that to exist means to assume a particular temporal and spatial condition. To exist temporally means to have the quality of persistence that occupies a temporal duration that has a beginning and an end. To exist spatially means to occupy a particular finite space. Such a view coheres with the Heideggerian insight into the givenness of *Dasein*: existence is irreducibly locative.

In his analysis of the term *cun* the Sinologist Edward Schafer notes:

Here *ts'un* is used as a transitive verb, taking the divine being whose appearance is desired as its object. It would be inadequate to translate this word as ‘visualize’: the

adept's efforts produce more than a mental picture. The word means 'to make sensibly present,' 'to give existence to'—almost 'to materialize.'<sup>22</sup>

In Highest Clarity cultivation, therefore, adepts are seeking to materialize the perception of cosmic powers within the inner space of their bodies.

A typical example is as follows:

以正月本命日甲子甲戌日平旦帝，君太一五神壹共混合，變為一大神，在心之內。號曰天精君，字飛生上英，貌如嬰兒始生之狀。是其日平旦，當入室接手於兩膝上，閉氣冥目，內視存天精君坐在心中，號曰大神，使大神口出紫氣，鬱然以繞我心外九重氣，上銜泥丸中，內外如一。

In the first month, on your fate day, the jiazi day, and the jiaxu day at dawn the Five Spirits, the Imperial Lord and Supreme Unity merge together into one great spirit which rests in your heart. His title is the Lord of Celestial Essence, his courtesy title Highest Hero of Soaring Birth, and his appearance is like an infant immediately after birth. On this day at dawn, enter your chamber, clasp your hands together on your knees, keep your breath enclosed and shut your eyes. Look inside and visualize the Lord of Celestial Essence sitting in your heart. He is called a great spirit. Make him spew forth purple qi to coil thickly around one's heart in nine layers, and let it rush up into the niwan. Inner and outer [dimensions] are as one.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Schafer, "The Jade Woman of Greatest Mystery," *History of Religions* 17:3/4 (1978): 387–398.

<sup>23</sup> Central Scripture of the Nine Perfected (*Jiu zhen zhong jing* 九真中經) trans. adapted from James Miller, *The Way of Highest Clarity: Nature, Vision and Revelation in Medieval China* (Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2008), 173.

As this brief but highly typical passage makes clear, Highest Clarity meditation is characterized by generating rich perceptual experiences in the inner body, described in terms of gods spewing forth energy which floods the various organs of the adept. The cryptic statement at the end indicates the overall goal: 內外如一 the inside and the outside are the same. I interpret this statement as an experience of the translucence of the body. Whereas Merleau-Ponty focused on the way the phenomenon of depth constructs an experience of the world as existing as a horizon surrounding the body of the individual, the goal of Daoist cultivation seems to be to attempt to dissolve the boundary between the body and its environment so that the inner and outer dimensions are perceptively and sensually experienced as a unity.

The metaphor of translucence is even thematized in certain Daoist hagiographies as a quality that applies to the body of the adept. In the Esoteric Biography of Perfected Purple Yang 紫陽真人內傳 the protagonist, Zhou Ziyang 周紫陽 concocts a recipe for conquering the three death-bringing worms that were thought to inhabit the mortal body. The result of ingesting the herbal concoction for five years was that Zhou's body "produced a glossy sheen so that it was possible to see right through to his five organs 身生光澤，徹視內見五臟".<sup>24</sup> In this case the theme of translucence is even applied to the materiality of the Daoist's body.

Adepts who attained this level of translucence were also thought to be able to travel great distances in an instant, hear what was taking place far away, and make themselves visible and

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<sup>24</sup> Miller, *The Way of Highest Clarity*, 123.

invisible at will.<sup>25</sup> It is intriguing that these “magical” powers are all concerned at some level with perception. They suggest that the perceptual world of the successful Daoist practitioner is bounded by a much further horizon than that of the ordinary human. Whereas ordinary people have limited vision and hearing, the empirical sensitivity of the Daoist adept is much greater.

I am not arguing here that such Daoist practices were undertaken for purposes that could be considered remotely akin to today’s environmentalism. What I am saying is that Daoist tradition exhibits a range of practices that depend upon what we can anachronistically refer to as an ecological sense of self, a sense of the body and its envioning context being inextricably embedded in each other. Such practices are of interest to the project of rewriting environmentalism because they suggest that non-discursive modes of somatic discipline can bring about an experiential awareness of the body in the world and the world in the body.

The Daoist tradition contains various famous images of the body as a landscape, the most widely known of which is the 內經圖 or Diagram of the Internal Pathways, a late nineteenth-century stone stele housed at the White Cloud Monastery in Beijing. The stele depicts the human body as a landscape of streams, mountains, stars, human figures and deities. Broadly speaking these represent the energetic pathways, the meridians of qi which flow through the body, and also specific energy points within the body. As Louis Komjathy writes:

The Neijing tu is an illustration not only of the meridians of qi running through the body, but also of the Daoist body as terrestrial and cosmological landscape and as the dwelling-place of inner luminosities or effulgences. From a Daoist perspective, the human body corresponds to, embodies, various “external” presences—mountains, altars, colors, rivers, constellations, temples, spirits, forests, and so forth. The Neijing tu maps

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<sup>25</sup> Miller, *The Way of Highest Clarity*, 65.

the landscape which is the human self. ... The Neijing tu may be understood as the  
“Internal Landscape Map.”<sup>26</sup>

In his analysis of the *Neijing tu*, Komjathy is clear that its purpose is to depict the internal landscape of the body as revealed through the traditions of body cultivation practiced within the Dragon Gate (*Longmen* 龍門) lineage of the Way of Complete Perfection (*Quanzhen dao* 全真道), the major sect of monastic Daoism that exists in present-day China. The map in fact draws on a long tradition of representing the “internal” body using images from the “external” world. Such imagery at its heart transgresses the intuitive psychology that is based on strict categories of inside and outside. As we saw earlier, the Daoist tradition has an interest in breaking this default conception of the way the body is related to the world, and in positing a psychosomatic unity of the “internal body” and the “external world.”

It is my contention that the transgressive emphasis on the unity of inner and outer experience can be used as the basis for developing an aesthetic sensitivity to environmental concerns. Consider for instance, the problem of moral proximity, that moral reasoning does not easily extend to situations that are beyond the perceptual horizon of the moral agent. For instance, it is easier to kill an enemy soldier by pressing a button on a computer and launching a missile across the world than it is to walk up to someone and strangle them to death. Similarly it is easy to be offended by someone dumping litter on the street in your hometown than by the environmental and social effects of waste being transported across the world to be dumped into landfills or picked over by child laborers in desperate poverty. Equally, it is difficult for some

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<sup>26</sup> Louis Komjathy, “Mapping the Daoist Body Part One: The *Neijing tu* in History,” *Journal of Daoist Studies* 1 (2008): 82–83.

people to be concerned by the rapid extinction of species in distant places. The issue here is that because of the limits to our senses, and the limited range of our aesthetic powers, we are unable to formulate the necessary moral vigor to bring about a change in behavior. What we put beyond the horizon of our perception, we condemn to aesthetic and moral irrelevance.

If we are serious about cultivating an environmental ethic that can pay attention to the globalized nature of environmental issues, then we also need a method of cultivating the aesthetic sensitivity to ecological devastation that seems to be beyond the horizon of our ordinary experience. Paradoxically, the Daoist tradition seems to work on expanding the horizon of experience not by encouraging people to travel across the world or by “expanding their minds” but by developing disciplines for experiencing the depth of the lived world within the depth of the living body. This is an extremely valuable insight for developing an eco-aesthetic sensitivity. I am not suggesting that this is what Daoists have historically done, but I am suggesting that this is what the tradition is capable of.

## **6. Qi Cultivation**

The Neo-Confucian tradition of course pursued such insights with a great deal of philosophical force, focused on understanding the relationship between vital force (*qi* 氣) and principle (*li* 理) in shaping the dynamics of the cosmos. While I have a great deal of respect for the metaphysical speculations of Confucian philosophy, I would contend that eco-aesthetic sensitivity is generated in the realm of practice rather than theory. I would like to conclude by giving one example of how this can take place. This example is found in an autoethnographic study written by Denver Nixon of the effects of practicing Qigong, a type of moving meditation, under the instruction of a Daoist master in China. In his account of this practice, Nixon compares

his own experience of practicing Qigong with accounts of how those suffering from chronic illnesses can develop an internal dialogue with their own bodies. He writes:

Kathy Charmaz (1991) describes the manner in which those suffering from chronic illness tend to develop a dialectic self, comprised of the physical self and the monitoring self. By going through the ordeal of illness, people develop a heightened sense of awareness of their own bodies, and can thus respond to their body's needs. This monitoring self, once created, usually remains after the illness has subsided. Regarding her ill body, Sara Shaw explained, "I got to know it; I got to understand it. ... I got to respect it. ... [I got to know] how my body was doing, how my body was feeling" (Charmaz 1991: 70-72). In the case of illness, the process of sensitive self-monitoring typically requires a level of self-objectification or personification; "dialogue" with one's sick kidney, for example, may demonstrate this type of "split".<sup>27</sup>

Nixon goes on to use this as a comparison for explaining how the practice of qigong affected his own perceptual sensitivity:

During my research, it seemed that qigong also cultivated sensitivity and awareness, but in a way that did not objectify and thereby bifurcate experience along an inward/outward fracture. That is, the awareness generated through the practice of qigong does not stop at the skin, but rather "knows" the body as whole and part of its environment.<sup>28</sup>

Nixon seems to be suggesting, therefore, that even basic Qi movement practices can have the effect of reshaping the mode of awareness of our bodies within their lived environments. He concludes that this practice may even be considered an alternative epistemology, one that complements normative approaches that privilege discursive knowing over practical knowing.

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<sup>27</sup> Denver Vale Nixon, "The Environmental Resonance of Daoist Moving Meditations," *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion* 10.3 (2006): 389-90.

<sup>28</sup> Nixon, "Environmental," 390.

Nixon's interest in this approach is similar to my own, that is to say, attempting to assess the extent to which somatic disciplines can not merely improve your golf swing, but contribute to your ecological sensitivity. According to Nixon:

Substituting or complementing normative epistemic approaches with those less privileged may facilitate different, if not more comprehensive, environmental understandings. It appears that *qigong*, by breaking the discursive mediation and bifurcation of reality and improving present, perceptive depth, sensitizes the practitioner to the emerging context within which they are increasingly undifferentiated, and thus allows them to engage with it "harmoniously."<sup>29</sup>

In Nixon's experience, therefore, Qigong led to an increased sensitivity to the emerging context of his lived world, and overcame the conventional bifurcation of reality into subject and object. It did so by improving "perceptive depth," which we may interpret as reshaping the mode of bodily perception and engagement with the lived environment. This sense of the unity of the body with the emergent phenomena of the world is termed "pervasion" 通 in the Daoist tradition.

## 7. Pervasion (*tong* 通) and Eco-Aesthetics

Pervasion may be understood as the somatic experience of the mutual constitution of the lived body and its lived environment. The term appears in the quotation from Zhuangzi, cited above, in which the Yan Hui wishes to make himself "identical with the Great Thoroughfare" or Great Pervasiveness (*tong yu da tong* 同於大通). This experience is thematized in the Daoist

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<sup>29</sup> Nixon, "Environmental," 395.

with the metaphor of “translucence,” with depictions of the inner landscape of the body, and through the experience of qi as the psychophysical stuff that constitutes the vitality of the lived body and the lived world. While Confucian philosophy reflected deeply on the harmonious unity of nature and humanity (*tian ren he yi* 天人合一), it was the Daoist tradition that sought to enact such a unity through non-discursive somatic practices.

If the approach of embodied cognition is correct, then it would seem that the unity of the world and the lived body is predicated on the body as the system that enacts experience. The problem faced by environmentalists, however, is that this process of cognition takes place unconsciously so that our minds generate a perception of a world that is external to our bodies and a perception of our bodies as an invisible interior, fundamentally disconnected from the world that envelops them. Though embodied cognitive science and embodied religious traditions may perceive that this dualism is constructed as part of the process of cognition and not intrinsic to the reality of things, this does not accord with the ordinary experience of ordinary people. Only theoreticians in laboratories, philosophers in libraries, and monks in monasteries come close to understanding the ways that our bodies enact the world that we experience. Overcoming this fundamental dualism of self and other, body and world, is simply counterintuitive to conventional perceptions. And yet it is necessary for generating an aesthetic awareness that can be the foundation for ecologically responsible action.

I would like to conclude this essay by repeating the point that I made at the beginning of this: So long as people urge others to respect, heal, or value nature as an object beyond the hermetically-sealed walls of their bodies, they subtly and unconsciously reinforce the absolute separation of the mind from the world. Such an approach to environmentalism is doomed to

failure. Embodied traditions such as Daoist cultivation could play an important role in teaching people how to overcome this dualism, and how to create alternative experiences of the world not as external to body, but within the body. The Daoist experience of pervasion is predicated on the possibility of the world flooding into the body and the body flooding into the world. Such transgressive experiences may serve to break down the ordinary perception of a world disconnected from the body of the individual. In their place such experiences could generate an ecological aesthesis, a psychosomatic sensitivity to the mutual implication of the lived body and the lived world. Such a sensitivity could serve as a much-needed complement to discursive modes of environmental action, such as earth charters, policies, ethics and legislation.

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