

**The History and Practice of Nüdan:  
Exploring Taoist Women's Internal Alchemy**

A Classical Chinese Medicine thesis written by  
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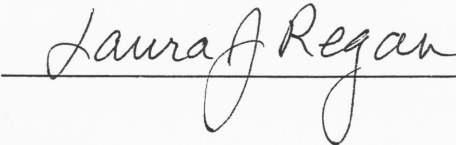
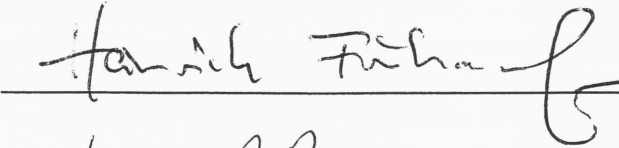
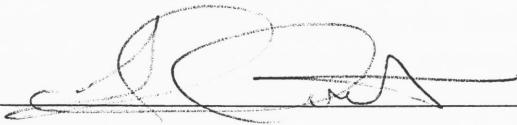
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Exploring Taoist Women's Internal Alchemy**  
By Mary Thimmesch

*A thesis submitted to the faculty of the National College of  
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# ABSTRACT

## The History and Practice of Nüdan: Exploring Taoist Women's Internal Alchemy

By

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The National College of Naturopathic Medicine, 2005-2006  
Under the Supervision of Dr. Tamara Staudt

This thesis explores the history and practice of Taoist Women's Internal Alchemy as recorded in historical texts and documents dating from the Tang Dynasty to present. Roots of Nüdan theory and method can be found in earlier centuries, primarily the former and later Han Dynasties in mythologies, legends and early Taoist treatises. Of particular importance are female deities and immortals who served as teachers, guides and guarded sources of alchemical information, including the high Taoist goddess Queen Mother of the West, the exalted Song Dynasty Taoist saint, Sun Buer and mythological female immortal Magu. Principles and foundational beliefs concerning the physical body, proper cultivation of spirit and attainment of transcendence are discussed based on classical texts, written instructional precepts and other forms of lineage transmission. Topics include the feminine qualities of the Tao, the inner landscape of the Taoist female body, principles and methodology of the "Slaying the Dragon" technique, the alchemy of the "Immortal Embryo" and finally, methods of transcendence from earthly to celestial realms and the gaining of immortal status. The somewhat controversial nature of the technique of reverting menstruation is explored through cross-cultural comparisons and in its seeming contradiction to the Tao's exaltation of the mother. Lives of Taoist women and their motivations for entering religious institutions are discussed, as are the implications, advantages and challenges of such a decision in regards to family, social status and personal, spiritual and intellectual freedoms.

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***Queen Mother of the West Riding a Phoenix.***

The Queen Mother descends from heaven on a multi-colored phoenix, carrying the sacred peaches of immortality. One of twelve panels celebrating longevity.

*Anonymous, Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368-1644)*

## Introduction

“In ancient times the Yellow Emperor ascended Mount Wangwu and received the Book of the Elixirs: he climbed Mount Kong Tong and questioned Guangcheng Zi: to search for the *dao* and the doctrines of the nourishment of life he listened to the teachings of the Mysterious Woman and the Pure Woman... Thus he obtained a thorough knowledge of the *dao* and the Veritable, and a deep discernment of the Mysterious and Secret. Then he sublimated and fixed the Elixir in Nine Cycles (*jiuzhuan*) at the foot of Mount Jing, and transmuted the Liquid Pearl (*liuzhu*) on Lake Ding.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a passage from the *Book of the Nine Elixirs*, one of several important texts belonging to the early Taoist alchemical corpus. It describes the transmission of this text from the high Taoist goddess, Queen Mother of the West, to The Yellow Emperor via her disciples, the Mysterious Woman and the Pure Woman. Before its revelation to the Yellow Emperor, the *Book of the Nine Elixirs* was known as *Superior Book of the Nine Methods of the Noble Lady of the Primordial Dao*. The text testifies to, among many things, the importance of early medieval Taoists' quests for an elixir of immortality as well as the important role of women as holders of alchemical knowledge and transmitters of sacred information. Since its beginning, Taoist alchemical history is epically rich, involving years of male and female endeavors. Written accounts of male practice abound and it is the male-centered method most transmitted to the world at large in modern day practice.

The specialized practice of women's internal alchemy, or Nüdan, emerged as its own complete system within organized Taoist institutions around the twelfth century. However, historical writings of female pursuits and the special techniques developed for the feminine body are uncommon relative to male

perspectives, despite the fact that it is often to the Taoist female deities that one turns as a source of alchemical secrets. This is due to a number of truths. First, Taoism idealizes the unknown sage. Their contributions to a community are often attributed to the natural course of things. As quietude is a classically honored female trait, perhaps naturally the female sage of old chose to whisper through life with her abilities and gifts. Many references to the invisibility of the true sage to the ordinary eye can be found in Taoism and Buddhism. As Thomas Cleary points out in his book *Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women*, this truth is proclaimed in the Chan Buddhist phrases “A skilled artisan leaves no traces,” and “She enters the water without making a ripple.” Another reason for the lack of female representation that is worthy of discussion lies in state politics. The national version of Confucianism adopted by China’s government in the Han Dynasty was one of great masculine authoritarianism, determined to keep power in the hands of the elite male. During these times, feminine conquests outside of the domestic sphere were shunned and therefore ill-represented historically. So we are challenged, particularly in the West, to find the extraordinary endeavors of women throughout Chinese history. They certainly do exist and very much so in the histories of higher-knowledge traditions and religions of China, even if in the shadows. As for internal alchemists, their lives as seekers of transcendence are colorful, intriguing and accomplished.

Early Taoist alchemical endeavors recorded in the third and fourth centuries follow the method of Waidan, or “outer” alchemy. Taoist adepts ingested

alchemical material, compounds of plants and minerals prepared with meticulous method and astrological observation, and employed breathing and meditation techniques to potentize their elixirs. During the Tang Dynasty, the focus shifted and Neidan, or “inner” alchemy became the dominant way. Neidan’s emphasis shifted from the outer world to the inner body. The internal alchemist believed that instead of needing to seek out the likes of precious fungi, herbs and earthen minerals in order to create an elixir, all the necessary ingredients existed within the human body and could be properly cultivated in the body’s own alchemical cauldron. By uniting yin and yang through internal visualizations, breathing techniques and postures, the adept would return from a state of polarity to a state of oneness, and in accordance with the Tao, reunite the material and spiritual worlds and achieve eternal life.

This process involved the invocation of gods and goddesses, the use of specialized symbolic visualization and the development of an intimate relationship with the inner energetics of one’s body. Men and women of medieval China sought spiritual inspiration as monks and nuns in separation from one another, employing different ceremony and often, different symbolism. For this reason and because of the natural anatomical and physiological differences between the sexes, two separate methods for attaining transcendence came to be.

Women’s Internal alchemy has its very own bodily focus and center and specific precepts ordered from Taoist goddesses and immortals. Instructive literature for transcendence and descriptions of women’s monastic lives first



appeared in the Ming and Qing dynasties, many in the form of poetry or prose. While one can guess that the knowledge used in the practice of Nüdan has its roots reaching back to the shamanka traditions of ancient matriarchal China (exact centuries unknown), the bulk of surviving specialized texts were produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In them one finds allusions to and invocations of marvelous females deities, radiant immortals and risen adepts from whom divine inspiration and detailed instruction is received for practice, as well as explicit descriptions of the inner landscape of the female body and methodology for creating eternal life in the form of the immortal embryo and ascending into the celestial realm. It is the purpose of this paper to bring into light each of these three subtopics, drawing from both ancient mythologies and the most modern versions of internal alchemy source texts.

## **NÜDAN MYTHOLOGY AND LEGENDS**

In order to study women's internal alchemy as it emerged as a mature practice, we must first look at the rich mythological landscape, the female deities and legends integral to its symbology. Let us begin with the symbolic heavenly universe as created by Han dynasty visionaries within the Taoist monastic community. During this period and through the following Tang dynasties, women were actively engaged in all aspects of religious life as teachers, priests and devoted practitioners. In the heavenly realm they held a strong presence as transmitting deities and celestial teachers.

Self-cultivation in the Han dynasty emerged with its greatest strength and magnetism in the fourth century with the rise of the Highest Clarity School in southern China near Mount Mao. The Highest Clarity School created for its followers a vast celestial universe of three layers: first, the original creative force of the Tao, an undifferentiated sphere and place from which all is birthed, second, the material world created by this force as experienced on earth, and finally, a layer in-between, a celestial layer, where a hierarchy of divine spirits reigned, including pure deities directly emanating the Tao, immortals who had ascended from earth, demon kings, spirits rising through the ranks and ancestors who had recently entered the celestial realm upon death. This world existed both in the far stretches of the earth and in the stellar constellations, such as the Big Dipper and Pole Stars. Upon two heavenly mountains, Mt. Kunlun to the west and Mt. Penglai to the east, celestial communities dwelled. Individuals practicing Highest Clarity Taoism strove to rise in rank through this divine bureaucracy, ultimately dwelling with the perfected in the heaven of Highest Clarity.<sup>2</sup>

### **Queen Mother of the West**

One of the most important figures in Highest Clarity Taoism and in all of Taoist history, and certainly the most central figure in female alchemical instruction, is the Queen Mother of the West or Hsiwangmu. She resides on Mt. Kunlun as the Primordial Supreme, Ruler of the West and Metal Mother. She is the governess of all death and controls access to immortality. The Queen

Mother is arguably the divine source of all Taoist sacred texts on attainment and alchemy. As Tang dynasty Taoist master Du Guangting writes in his famous biography of the goddess, she is the teacher who transmitted the *Daode jing* to Lao Tsu. She has several celestial women disciples, including the Pure Woman and the Mysterious Woman, both of whom serve as important transmitters of the goddess' sacred knowledge. The Queen Mother is also teacher to the Yellow Emperor, China's legendary first leader. She sends envoys, including the Mysterious Woman to grant him knowledge, including that contained in the famous *Book of the Nine Elixirs*, and bestows upon him magical talismans to guide him in governmental, military and cultural endeavors.<sup>3</sup>

One of the goddess' earliest literary appearances is in *The Classic of Mountains and Seas*, a text dating back to the third century B.C. In this text she resides on Mount Jade and is much more animalistic in nature than in later accounts, yet equal in stature:

“Three hundred and fifty leagues further west (from Mount Hornetmother) is a mountain called Mount Jade. This is where the Queen Mother of the West lives. In appearance, Queen Mother of the West looks like a human, but she has a leopard's tail and the fang's of a tigress, and she is good at whistling. She wears a victory crown in her tangled hair. She presides over the Catastrophies of the Sky and the Five Destructive Forces... To her south there are the three green birds, which gather food for Queen Mother of the West... She lives in a cave. This mountain possesses all the myriad creatures that there are on earth.”<sup>4</sup>

As years go by and China's mythologies move from wild shamanic depictions of god and humankind to that which is civilized, lavish and imperial, the Queen Mother takes on a much different appearance, as seen by

the following excerpt from Tang dynasty record keeper Kuangting's biography. This excerpt is from a scene in which the Queen Mother is paying a visit to Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty at his imperial palace where she proceeds to lavish gifts upon the emperor including peaches of immortality, texts, instructions and esoteric arts:

“The Queen Mother was riding an imperial carriage of purple clouds, harnessed with nine-colored dappled Ch'i-lin. Tied around her waist, she wore the whip of Celestial Realized Ones; as a belt pendant she had a diamond numinous seal. She wore clothing of multicolored damask with a yellow background. The patterns and variegated colors were bright and fresh. The radiance of metal made a shimmering gleam. At her waist was a double-bladed sword for dividing phosphors. Knotted flying clouds made a great cord. On top of her head was a great floriate chignon. She wore the crown of the Grand Realized Ones with daybreak hanging beaded strings. She stepped forth on squared, phoenix-patterned shoe soles of rose-gem. Her age might have been about twenty. Her celestial appearance eclipsed and put in the shade (all others). Her complexion was unique in the world. Truly, she was a Realized Numinous Being.”<sup>5</sup>

This passage emphasizes her beauty and power. Her whip, seal and sword are all symbols of a high Taoist deity. Her sword is used for dividing phosphors, suggesting her mastery of alchemical practice. Many other images are associated with this goddess, including the Turquoise Pond, a magical cool metal pond on Mt. Kunlun at which the privileged can meet with the goddess. Blue birds serve as her messengers. The phoenix is often a motif on her attire, signifying her empress-like stature as well as her transformative powers. She is often seen transported by her alter ego, the white tiger of the west, the fierce, beastly aspect of the great yin force. The Queen Mother of the West is also the keeper of the peaches of immortality. The peaches represent the breast and vulva as well as the bottom of a young baby. They are an elixir of immortality

that ripens only once in one thousand years and are reserved only for the most worthy of individuals on the path to transcendence. The peach represents the positive, life-giving aspects of this goddess of ultimate yin.

The Queen Mother of the West is attended by celestial “Jade Women,” to whom she grants minor goddess status. These women are accomplished musicians and graceful performers, able to enact sacred song and dance, entertaining guests at transcendent feasts. At these feasts the Jade Women serve the Queen’s peaches of immortality. They guard the sacred texts and teachings of Hsiwangmu, transmitting them to worthy humans only upon request from the goddess. Some Jade Women have mastered the arts of the bedchamber and of war. Others hold secrets of immortality and can instruct earthly adepts. They serve as models for two groups of women in Chinese society who have ventured outside the realm of domestic duty: prostitutes interested in mastering the arts of pleasure and Taoist priestesses and adepts, hoping to achieve enlightenment.<sup>6</sup>

Tang dynasty poet Wei Yingwu describes these women in his poem “Jade Girl’s Song.”

“Flocks of transcendents wing up to the Queen Mother;  
With feathered canopies they arise, following the clouds,  
Above, they wander to the mysterious extremes of the  
obscure stygian realms;  
Below, they view the Eastern Sea as a single cup of  
water.  
By the banks of the sea, how many times has she  
Planted peach trees:  
Every thousand years they open their flowers, every  
Thousand years they form seeds.  
Jade complexions so subtle and otherworldly, where  
Can they be found:

While in this world, without limit, people automatically Die.”<sup>7</sup>

As the Jade Women served as otherworldly role models in cultivation, The Queen Mother herself was the overseer of women’s entry into the Taoist convent. When a woman decided for whatever reason to leave their traditional role in society and take religious vows, it was the Queen Mother who was the official witness, granting the woman rites of entry into a life following The Way. The Queen Mother of the West legitimized an alternative path for women of that day, a way to self-actualize and realize spiritual and intellectual dreams. The following poem by Tai Shulun depicts an elderly woman who has decided to take the vows of a novice nun, leaving behind her husband, the emperor, for the pursuit of transcendence:

“She leaves aside her combing thicket of sidelocks,  
washes off her red make-up;  
On her head she wears a lotus blossom as she emerges  
from the Never Ending Palace.  
As their disciples fetch and take the verses and  
repetitives she sang,  
Other palace women separate and distribute her  
dancing cloaks and chemises.  
Enquiring of the master, first she obtains a graph from  
the classics,  
Entering quietude, she still burns incense from inside  
the palace interior.  
She professes a vow to have an audience at P’eng-lai  
with the Queen Mother,  
Then return to the human world and bestow  
transcendent recipes.”<sup>8</sup>

For many women, entering the Taoist monastic life was the ultimate liberation. They were not only able to pursue spiritual cultivation, but also were guaranteed a level of education that would otherwise be impossible to

achieve within the institution of marriage in patriarchal China. However, separation from family and loved ones was often difficult, for both parties. The following is a poem written by Li Shangyin attesting to the regrets of one husband, Mr. Han, upon losing his wife:

“The star emissary is dispatched and returns – not of his own accord,  
Paired lads hold it up with both hands: her green and Rose-gem chariot.  
Beneath a nine-branched lamp, she attends court at the Metal Basilica;  
Amidst clouds of the Three Simplicities, she serves at the Jade Storied Building.  
With Phoenix Girl, wild and unrestrained, she completes a long-term separation;  
With the moon goddess, widowed and alone, she wants to wander together.  
At that time it seemed she loved the Worthy Han;  
Buried bones may become ash, but regrets will never Cease.”<sup>9</sup>

So women willingly, both in mystical poetry and in historical time, devoted their lives to The Queen Mother, turning to her for inspiration in the arts, meditation, prayer, healing, elixirs and immortality. She was the ultimate guide of the yin sex. She stands an immovable force in the Taoist pantheon, unchallenged in wisdom, beauty, and universal power. Most importantly for this study, she is the source for internal alchemical instruction. Real women in real time diligently follow her precepts in past and present day China in order to attain high levels of inner alchemical transformation. Before looking more closely at the Queen Mother’s precepts, we will discuss two other important women: Sun Buer and Magu.

## Sun Buer

Sun Buer finds her place in China's history as a twelfth century woman who succeeded in becoming a key leader in the Taoist School of Complete Perfection, a school that still exists as a dominant Taoist organization in modern China. Sun Buer is one of the so-called Seven Perfected of this school and founder of one of its branches, Qingjing Pai (Clarity and Tranquility branch).<sup>10</sup> She is considered a Taoist saint and in her spiritual and literary accomplishments has become of central importance in the practice of Nüdan.

Sun Buer was born by the name of Sun Yuanzhen in January of 1119. There are many differing biographical accounts of her life. Modern Taoist scholars Livia Kohn and Catherine Despeux present one such account in their collaborative book, *Women in Daoism*. According to this story, Sun Buer's mother conceived of her by way of the miraculous. It is described that on the day of her conception, seven cranes appeared in her mother's courtyard and flew circles in the sky. In time, the cranes all flew away except one, which entered her breast. Upon learning that she was expecting, the mother intuited that she was pregnant with a divine child, as cranes serve to transport immortals through the celestial realm and are a symbol of longevity.

Sun Buer lived up to her mother's expectations and grew to be a child of high intelligence and a saintly nature. Her father was a famous scholar and therefore Sun received a well-rounded education in the literary arts, calligraphy and chanting, all of which she mastered at a fairly young age. She married Ma Danyang at the age of twenty and had three children. They built a quiet life



together in the village of Shandong. When Sun Buer was forty-eight years old, Wang Chongyang, the founder of the school of Complete Perfection, moved to Shandong to set up a hermitage. He did so and after a one hundred day retreat was inspired to set up his school of Complete Perfection there. Sun Buer's husband Ma Danyang was one of the first of Wang's students. This upset Sun Buer as she felt his new occupation was disrupting the harmony of their home and threatening their social standing. After a while, Sun Buer decided that the best solution was for her own self to take up studies as well. Wang Chongyang accepted Sun Buer as a student but soon demanded a separation of husband and wife, as marriage and monastic life were incompatible. This severance from family life was very difficult for Sun Buer. She had much resistance to practicing the way of the Tao in the beginning but managed to overcome her hesitation and eventually thrive in her religious devotion.<sup>11</sup>

Sun Buer was a master of meditation and ritual, an accomplished inner alchemist and author of Nüdan texts and poetry. Sun Buer was the first to bring serious attention to the differences between male and female internal alchemy. Her most famous poetry defines the process of women's internal alchemy in fourteen steps, each elucidated by a poem. These have been translated into English by Thomas Cleary. The fourteen poems serve as an image-rich instruction manual for women on the path of spiritual cultivation, the ultimate objective of which is to create an elixir of immortality in the womb. They speak of the entire alchemical process beginning with the connection of one's own qi with the cosmic energies, continuing with meditations and breathing

practices aimed at achieving wholeness, next reversing the circulation of qi and ceasing menstruation, and finally creating an immortal elixir within the womb and ascending to the heavens. The following two poems do not belong to the fourteen, but are exemplary of Sun Buer's perceptions and insights. The first speaks of becoming a lotus, a powerful symbol of the Tao and ultimate unity:

### **Cut Brambles Long Enough**

“Cut brambles long enough,  
Sprout after sprout,  
And the lotus will bloom  
Of its own accord:  
Already waiting in the clearing,  
The single image of light.  
The day you see this,  
That day you will become it.”<sup>12</sup>

Another poem talks of the universe, the mind, the moon and the limitless:

### **The Beginning of the Sustenance of Life**

“The beginning of the sustenance of life  
Is all in yin and yang  
The limitless can open up  
The light of the great limit.  
Diligently polished, the mirror of the mind  
Is bright as the moon;  
The universe in a grain  
May rise, or it may hide.”<sup>13</sup>

Other poems written by Sun Buer will be examined in our discussion of Nüdan methodology. Along with this sacred poetry, Sun Buer transmitted three texts supposedly revealed to her while in a trance state. The first is titled “Unexcelled True Scripture of Inner Experiences of Jadelike Purity.” Sun Buer received the text from the “Celestial Mother of Violet Light.” The second is “True Scripture on Inner Nourishment of the Embryonic Basis of Jade-like

Purity.” This text was given by the “Real Leader of the Original Terrace of the Jeweled Spirit.” Jade Purity refers to the highest of “three purity” realms where enlightened sages, human beings and immortal spirits reside but are too exalted to communicate directly with human beings. The final text is entitled “Mind Mirror of the Mystic Pearl.” This text was revealed to Sun Buer by a seemingly more earthly figure, “Realized One of Mount Heng.” Mt. Heng is the most southerly of China’s five holy mountains. The texts transmit psychological meditation methods of the Taoist “Science of Essence,” as well as health and healing meditative methods of the Taoist “Science of Life.”<sup>14</sup>

This legend has been recorded concerning Sun Buer’s death in 1182:

“When the Immortal Lady Sun Buer passed away in a sitting posture, the perfume wind and auspicious air didn’t disappear all day. At that time Ma Yu (her husband), who was practicing Dao in Ninghai, looked up and saw the Immortal Lady flying past on colorful clouds. The Immortal Lady lowered her head and said to Ma Yu, “Now I’ll first go to the Penglai Island of Immortals.” At these words, Ma Yu was so happy that he began to dance.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Magu, or The Hemp Lady**

About eleven hundred years before the time of Sun Buer, we find another fascinating female figure whose cultic following remained strong until the thirteenth century and who is linked with various lineages of women’s inner alchemy. Her name is Magu, The Hemp Lady. She is perhaps the most notable female immortal in Ge Hong’s hagiography, the *Shenxian zhuan*, or *Traditions of Divine Transcendents*. Magu has a very wild appearance in early writings and is associated with shamanic traditions. She is often seen with long, unruly hair or even a furry body. It is suggested in some cultic accounts of Magu that

before she metamorphosed into a human she was a serpent goddess. The following is one such anomalous account told by Robert Campany in his commentary to Ge Hong's text. It hints at her existence as a snake-headed deity before evolving in the legends into a human being and finally a transcendent:

“Having caught a creature with features of both sea turtle and serpent, she and her companion, one Hua Ben, prepare it – after its complete transformation into a turtle – and eat it. She soon grows ill, and something blocks her throat; when she opens her mouth toward Hua Ben, he is terrified to see a snake opening its mouth and flickering its tongue toward him from inside Maid Ma's throat. Later, when Maid Ma catches sight of the stripped skin of a snake caught inside Hua's home and prepared as a meal (a sample of which Maid Ma had already eaten and found delicious), she vomits blood and dies – seemingly because the snake is a relative of the creature now living inside her.”<sup>16</sup>

In Ge Hong's hagiography, he writes of a more evolved, divine, transcendent Magu. Yet, remnants of her wild nature remain, including her love of meat, usually uncooked and her slightly disheveled hair, as well as long, claw-like fingernails. Ge Hong describes Magu's rendezvous with her lover Wang Yuan, a high-ranking official on Mt. Kunlun responsible for celestial registers of life and death. They meet on the auspicious day of the seventh day of the seventh month at immortal Cai Jing's home. The two reunite after a five hundred year separation. The following passage describes Magu's arrival to the courtyard:

“She appeared to be a handsome woman of eighteen or nineteen; her hair was done up, and several loose strands hung down to her waist. Her gown had a pattern of colors, but it was not woven; it shimmered, dazzling the eyes, and was indescribable – it was not of this world. She approached and bowed to Wang, who bade her rise. When they were both seated, she called for the traveling canteen.

The servings were piled up on gold platters and in jade cups without limit. There were rare delicacies, many of them made from flowers and fruits, and their fragrance permeated the air inside and out. When the meat was sliced and served, it resembled *mo*, and was announced as *kirin* meat.”<sup>17</sup>

The seventh day of the seventh month is a festival day in which two astral lovers, Weaver Girl and Herder Boy meet after a long separation. The Milky Way, or Celestial River normally separates them in the heavens. On this night, according to the third century *Record of Local Customs* written by Zhou Chu, people swept their courtyards and set out offerings of meat, fruit preserved and wine and prayed to the two constellations, the Weaver Girl and Herder Boy, hoping to have wishes granted.<sup>18</sup> Although there are no clear historical explanations for Magu’s second name, Hemp Girl, it is interesting to consider the allegorical association here to Weaver Girl, as hemp was an important material for weaving in ancient China.

Magu and Wang Yuan’s meeting is rather eventless. However, the account gives us insight into Magu’s rather radical mannerism. We witness Magu’s magic in her encounter with Cai Jing’s sister-in-law and her child:

“As soon as Maid Ma saw the young woman, she said, ‘Whew! Stop there for a moment and don’t come any closer!’ Then she asked that a small amount of uncooked rice be brought to her. When she got the rice, she threw it on the floor, saying that she did so to dispel the unclean influences. When everyone looked down, the rice grains had all changed to pearls.”<sup>19</sup>

When Magu departs, she leaves the family a divine talisman meant to expel demons, extend life and heal disease. Throughout, her story sounds of shamanism and exorcistic elements. Both Wang Yuan and Magu arrive at Cai Jing’s home to the music of fifes and drums, instruments traditionally

associated with exorcism. The wild, shamanic nature of Magu is celebrated in her cults. Cultic records can be traced back to the Tang dynasty when a sacred mountain was named after her, Mount Magu, in Wu prefecture. It is recorded that a cavern named “Cinnabar Cloud Cave” exists on that mountain and it was in this cave that Cai Jing attained the Tao. There is a temple upon the mountain in her name with a stele inscription (engraving in an upright stone or pillar) dating to 771 A.D.<sup>20</sup> Highest Clarity adept Yan Zhenqing recorded the words of this inscription in *Wuzhou Nancheng Xian Magushan Xian Tanji* (Record of the Immortal Altar on Mount Magu, located in Noncheng District in Wu Province). The inscription tells the story of Hemp Lady as it appears in later accounts such as Gehong’s *Shenxian Zhuan*.<sup>21</sup>

Magu appears to several Taoist adepts over time. The earliest recorded visitations date to the eighth century and continue through the Song dynasty, bringing great honor to Magu, so that she was associated with female immortals such as Hsiwangmu and Wei Huacun. The following is an example of one encounter had by Deng Ziyang, a Taoist of the Hall of Great Unity, in 739 A.D.:

“In 739 he had a vision of a celestial chariot drawn by dragons and tigers, in which two divinities were riding. As it was coming close, he recognized the immortal (Magu) and realized that he was going to die soon. He promptly formalized his wish to be buried on Mount Magu, near her shrine, which resulted in the construction of a monastery there. In 746, a yellow dragon was spotted in the vicinity, another indication of the immortal lady’s blessing.”<sup>22</sup>

In complete perfection Taoism, Magu serves as a model for what women can achieve in their cultivation practice. Sun Buer’s husband, Ma Danyang wrote

of Magu as a woman of great inspiration for female students of the Complete Perfection school in *The Collection of Gradual Awakening*.<sup>23</sup> She is an important model of a successful woman who attained enlightenment and embodies both a spirit of high refinement as well as one of the wild animalistic shamanka of days gone by.

## THE TAOIST INNER LANDSCAPE

As we shift our attention from the celestial deities and accomplished female adepts to the inner landscape of the female body, we find physiological descriptions comparably rich in symbolic language and imagery. Many different visions of the Taoist body have been created and honored through the ages, including the body as an administrative system, replete with officials of all imaginable rank, the body as a microcosm of the natural world and the body as a celestial landscape and residence of immortals. The latter two are most relevant to women's internal alchemy and therefore it is to these allegories we will turn our attention.

While in later texts written specifically as instructive manuals for female internal alchemy, the feminine body is given detailed symbolic attention, early descriptions of the body speak in a genderless fashion to both men and women alike, laying foundational allegorical imagery from which both male-centered and female-centered visions can spring. It is important to look at these early writings. In them we can see the early anatomical perceptions of earthly yin and heavenly yang in the body and important ideas about organs central to

feminine alchemy such as the womb and the heart as well as references to authorities such as Queen Mother of the West.

The oldest description of the human body as a cosmology, with head entering the heavens and square-shaped feet patterning the earth, comes from the *Huainanzu*, written in the first century B.C. It is followed by a more elaborate description of the same concepts written in the *Chunchufanlu* by Tung Chungshu of the second century B.C. The following lines are extracted from a lengthy passage:

“The human body matches heaven and earth. It has 360 joints, which match the number of heaven (days of the year). The body with its bones and flesh matches the thickness of earth. The ears and eyes above, with their keen sense of hearing and seeing, resemble the sun and moon....

The body has orifices and veins resembling rivers and valleys. The heart has feelings of sorrow, joy, pleasure and anger, which are analogous to the spiritual feelings (of heaven). As we look at the human body, how much superior is it to that of other creatures and how similar to heaven!...

...The abdomen and womb, now full and now empty, resemble the myriad things. The myriad things are next to earth. Therefore the portion of the body below the waist corresponds to earth...”<sup>24</sup>

Thus we establish the earthly feminine regions and the heavenly yang regions in general anatomical locations. We get a sense for the womb as a representation of the creative potential, the primordial source of the myriad things, essentially, the Tao. The language is similar to Laozi’s allusions to the motherhood as a way of accessing the Tao in his writings:

“The valley spirit never dies;  
It is the woman, primal mother.  
Her gateway is the root of heaven and earth.



It is like a veil barely seen.  
Use it; it will never fail.”<sup>25</sup>

As we move through historical writings, the celestial realm of deities and immortals finds its way easily into the Taoist body to accompany the natural, especially in meditation scriptures of the early centuries. Now we find the eyes are not only the sun and moon but also the celestial residences of The Queen Mother of the West and her King, Father of the East. Resounding within inner orifices are heavenly drums, chimes and lutes. The dance of yin and yang occurs within a myriad of palaces, inner and outer courtyards. A sacred landscape of mountains, valleys, rivers and ponds expands in the four directions and into the center. Elements of fire, wood, water, earth and metal and their corresponding organs are brought to life through heavenly and earthly aspects. Three alchemical chambers, upper, middle and lower are identified, each with its own deity presence. Though the middle chamber of the heart serves as a beginning focus in female meditation and inner alchemy, in these more general body descriptions, more attention is given to the lower dan tian, the abdominal Cinnabar Field because it is here that the immortal embryo becomes itself.

One of the most authentic descriptions of the inner landscape as physiological mythology is contained in a second century A.D. text entitled *Book of the Center*. It is also known as the *Jade Calendar*. It is one of the more politically unaltered texts and contains instructions for inward spiritual focus and communion with the gods and goddesses of the body. It abounds in vivid descriptions of spiritual anatomy. The text begins by directing individuals to

look inward into the body through the pupils, with half-closed eyes, allowing light from without to merge with inner light. The right eye holds the moon and is the place of Original Yin where Queen Mother of the West resides:

“The human being also possesses her (Queen Mother). She stays in the right eye. Her family name is Great Yin, her personal name, Jade Maiden of Obscure Brilliance.”<sup>26</sup>

The left eye, then, holds the sun and is inhabited by the Father of the East, the yang energy of the spring season. The light of the sun and moon, from within and from without, is drawn through the eyes toward the Pole Star, which resides between the eyes and acts as a mirror to reflect the yin and yang energy and send it deeper within.

According to this text, the landscape of the head consists of a series of mountains surrounding a lake. In the center of the lake there rises a palace. Within this palace there are eight rooms surrounding a central room. This center space is called Mingtang or the Hall of Light. In front of this grand palace and the lake there is a valley, the nose. Two towers, the ears, guard the nose. Inside each tower is housed an instrument of sound, a bell in one and a stone chime in the other. The bell produces the sound of heaven. The stone chime produces the sound of earth. The sun and moon of the chest are the breasts. The lungs are clouds obscuring the Big Dipper. The heart is the Scarlet Palace, the spleen the Yellow Court, the gallbladder, the Purple Chamber, the stomach, a granary, the liver a forest and finally the large and small intestines, altars of the God of the Earth and God of the Harvest respectively.

The lower region of the body is described as a watery, oceanic region from which Mt. Kunlun rises at the navel. In the ocean there swims a large turtle. Both the turtle and the ocean are images associated with the Queen Mother, in this case in her role as the Goddess of the Ocean. She can be seen in certain mythologies sailing the back of a large turtle whose shell is imprinted with a map of the world. So, we find the goddess all over the bodily landscape, permanently reigning as the Jade Maiden of Obscure Brilliance, Queen Mother of the West, Goddess of the Ocean and Mother of the Tao.

In this lower region we once again find the sun and moon. Here they are found in the kidneys, as kidney yin and kidney yang. The text describes the Cinnabar Field located here below the navel as the most prominent. The *Book of the Center* gives a vivid description:

“The Cinnabar Field is the root of the human being. This is the place where vital power is kept. The five energies (of the Five Phases) have their origin here. It is the embryo’s home. Here men keep their semen and women keep their essence. Meant for the procreation of children, it houses the gate of harmonious union of yin and yang. Three inches under the navel, adjacent to the spine, (the Cinnabar Field) lies at the base of the kidneys. It is scarlet inside, green on the left, yellow on the right, white on top, and black on the bottom...The Cinnabar Field is located in the region of clear water, in the village of the High Hill: it is also called the Palace-that-keeps-the-Essence.”<sup>27</sup>

According to this text, there are three Cinnabar Fields, upper, middle and lower, located in the brain, the heart and the abdomen. All three are essential places in the body with important spiritual and alchemical functions. The Great One, the Lord of the Tao, inhabits the upper Cinnabar Field. The middle

Cinnabar Field, that of the heart, is occupied by the King of the East. The Queen Mother of the West occupies the lower Cinnabar Field.

This vision of the body in the *Book of the Center* corresponds to that of a person lying on their back, the meditative position most popular in very early Chinese history. In this case, Mt. Kunlun, the sacred inverted mountain, raises its hollow peak, the navel, as the high point and center of the body. Everything is organized around this point. This is clearly different than the high point of a body in sitting meditation. As sitting became the posture of choice, the high point of the holy mountain became the top of the skull, or the acupuncture point, Bai Hui and subsequent pictorial and verbal descriptions of the body changed accordingly.

The text goes on to further explain the presence of The Father of the East and the Mother of the West in the body, as the producing couple of the “Essential Being”, the “true self.” If properly nourished, the infant of the Tao achieves immortality and the work of cultivation is complete:

“The Father is called “Non-action” the Mother, “Nature.” She reigns over Mount K’un-lun. She is still called Reclining Jade or the Jade Maiden of Obscure Brilliance. Dressed in five-colored garments, she stands nine-tenths of an inch, or even three inches tall. The couple is found most often in the Yellow Court and in the Purple Chamber. From them was born a child, the True Person Cinnabar of the North, that is to say, fire of water, *yang* of *yin*. Essential being, this child is “my true self.”<sup>28</sup>

According to the *Book of the Center* the “self” is present in the body not only as this embryo in the Cinnabar Field but also as a “child” in the Yellow Court, or spleen, and as the “True Person” or Lord of the Tao in the head, between the

eyebrows. In all cases this “true self” is also the “One” or the “Original Energy.”<sup>29</sup>

## CONFLICTS REGARDING THE FEMININE IN TAOIST TEACHINGS

In studying Taoist visions of the body, we get a sense that in order to become the Tao, to achieve the true harmonization of yin and yang, the human being must truly be in touch with the feminine aspect of body and spirit. The ultimate realization of the self is in the creation of a child, for both male and female practitioners. This transformation occurs in the womb-like chamber of the lower Dantian. The adoption of female virtues as an essential means in finding the Way and achieving cultivation is strongly alluded to by Laozi in the Daodejing. Chapter 28 says:

“Know the male,  
yet keep to the female:  
receive the world in your arms.  
If you receive the world,  
the Tao will never leave you  
and you will be like a little child.”<sup>30</sup>

Chapter 10 speaks of the necessity of female virtues such as a nourishing nature, intuitive wisdom, compassion and softness. He asks all to master the feminine opening and closing of heavenly and earthly gates:

“In nourishing the soul and embracing the One – can you do it  
without letting them leave?  
In concentrating your breath and making it soft – can you make  
it like that of a child?  
In cultivating and cleaning your profound mirror – can you do it  
So that it has no blemish?  
In loving people and giving life to the state – can you do it  
without using knowledge?  
In opening and closing the gates of Heaven – can you play the  
part of the female?”

In understanding all within four reaches – can you do it  
without using knowledge?

Give birth to them and nourish them.  
Give birth to them but don't try to own them;  
Help them to grow but don't rule them.  
This is called Profound Virtue.”<sup>31</sup>

In understanding the profound yin, the mysterious, receptive, soft, watery, dark primordial gateway, the profound yin child spirit will emerge and then transform into a pure yang light spirit able to leave the body through the heavenly gate. In this process, yin becomes yang, harmony is realized and one knows the Tao, reaching the highest state of clarity in Taoist practice. It seems then, that women should have a relatively easy time moving through this process, as it would be one of achieving transcendence through the deeper knowing and celebration of their reproductive body and feminine spirit. In essence this is true, and in many ways, Taoism as an institution greatly supports this process. Most certainly a religious life inside a Taoist institution allows women's existence to be free from dictates of outside relationships as wife, daughter-in-law, or concubine. A life devoted to the Tao gives women an opportunity to look inward and focus on their relationship to the universe within their body, mind and heart. Exercises in spiritual cultivation bring them intimately close to their yin nature, its cycle and mysteries. At the same time however, Taoist religious instruction, in terms of female alchemical practice, asks them to depart in a way from the natural feminine course. Nüdan is a practice that yes, celebrates and cultivates the female emotional virtues, but

arguably denies the feminine physiology, asking the woman practitioner to control and reverse her reproductive cycle.

Women are instructed to purify their hearts and hold fast a peaceful, quiet receptive, intuitive state of mind. The heart is perhaps the most important energy center in the practice of Nüdan. They also engage in ecstatic visions, journey to the heavenly realm through their meditations, become ordained and gain magical powers, and possibly saintly or immortal status. This is all very empowering. At the same time, women are told that the ideal pure physiological state is that of the pre-pubescent maiden. For the menstruating female, this means, through very demanding qigong techniques, ceasing menstruation and transforming menstrual blood from red yin fluid to pure white essence that is then directed to the lower Cinnabar Field. With the technique's completion, the mature female breasts should ideally shrink down in size, so that the chest is like that of a man's. This technique is called "Slaying the Red Dragon." For the menopausal woman this means, through an even more laborious process, first reviving menstrual flow and then arresting menstruation again, all by alchemical means. Very young, pre-menstrual females are at the greatest advantage as they can entirely skip this process and move forward on the path of spiritual purification.

While Taoist texts speak of menarche as one of life's greatest treasures, the literature teaches at the same time that menstrual blood must be cultivated in order to avoid its flow becoming an energy draining, life-taking process. So the menstrual cycle, in its natural course, is cast in an impure light rather than

considered a sign of healthy life and fertility. An attitude of doubt is generated regarding women's ability to attain high levels of purity and spiritual cultivation without ceasing menstruation. Upon whose observations and insights this cultivation process was first developed is unclear. Though female deities transmit sacred precepts that instruct women on the very process of reverting the menses, there is always a possibility of the altering of original texts over time for the good of a particular political or social agenda. Goddess, god and immortal authors escape accountability. As China indisputably has grown to become a nation that on many levels devalues the female sex, for a religious institution to deliberately attempt to keep the power of women at bay through the creation of a somewhat self-denying practice does not seem far-fetched. So how do we reconcile the technique of "Slaying the Dragon" with the Tao as a philosophical celebration of the female body and nature, the roots of which perhaps grow from matriarchal traditions that have no written history? And perhaps a more pressing question, is "Slaying the Dragon" an explicitly religious practice and not a health-giving one, or does it truly benefit female vitality? How exactly does such radical control of female nature bring harmony within? These questions go beyond the scope of this paper, but must be considered in the study of this fascinating history and in our application of female alchemical traditions in modern day healing and qi gong practice. It seems the best focus in studying Nüdan texts in the modern day is on the physiological and symbolic information given that can be applied in a much less radical and indisputably healthy way in meditation and energetic therapy.



Male internal alchemy, in contrast, seems to be free of controversy in its intention to strengthen health and spirit. The practice includes meditation and breathing practice as well as sexual conservancy. Once the male practitioner achieves a high level of qi cultivation and balance of yin and yang, he works on the mechanics of retaining and reverting seminal essence, nourishing the brain with the refined jing and then bringing the essence back to the lower dan tian. There is no cessation of ejaculatory function or permanent change in his reproductive abilities.

In sexual alchemy again we find an interesting dynamic regarding the sexes. Men are instructed to take in the female jing during intercourse while abstaining from ejaculation. He fortifies his own essence by absorbing the women's yin jing in all of its forms as it exudes from the body during sexual embrace. In texts such as *Dunü Sunyi*, or *The Dangers and Benefits of Intercourse with Women* and *Sunü Jing*, or *The Classic of Sunü*, men are instructed to have frequent intercourse with young, healthy women, following particular methods of bringing a woman to arousal and absorbing her secretions. If in fact this sort of intercourse is intended to bring mutual benefit to the sexes, instructional texts very rarely discuss the benefits for the female counterpart. As far as texts that directly instruct women in absorbing the non-ejaculating male's yang energy, they are not easily found, if they exist at all. It is very interesting to note that it is often female immortals who instruct men in sexual alchemy. In ancient history, women were keepers of this specialized

knowledge. But it appears that this knowledge, at least in its outward presentation, is in the end primarily serving the male sex.

## NÜDAN THEORY, TEACHINGS AND TEXT

Let us now turn our attention to the actual methodology of Nüdan, as it includes and goes beyond the technique of “Slaying the Dragon.” The alchemical tradition was transmitted through the ages via Taoist Goddesses and then written down, edited and further developed by Taoist monks and nuns, many of whom achieved Immortal status. Most of the surviving women’s alchemical texts were written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They are few in number, but rich in substance. In them we find very specific spiritual and physical instructions for achieving the highest states of clarity and alchemical transformation. The female inner anatomy is often treated in symbolic detail. Moral and social guidance is presented according to the times. Finally, some texts present instructions for much larger spiritual agendas such as promoting world peace by directing the spiritual power gained from an individual’s practice toward the well being of humankind.

### Queen Mother of the West’s Ten Precepts

The first text we will examine is called *Hsiwangmu nühsui chengdu shize*, or *Queen Mother of the West’s Ten Precepts on the True Path*. It is believed that Tang dynasty Immortal Lu Tungpin authored this text. Editorial contributions are made by Sun Buer. Annotations were made by Min Yide in

the early nineteenth century. Every passage begins with “It is said...” Min Yide explains that this is to honor it as a sacred oral transmission, the words of which were passed from the “golden lips” of the Queen Mother of the West.<sup>32</sup> The Queen Mother of the West lays down a code of discipline for women, talks symbolically of yin nature and then discusses in detail the arrival of menstruation, strategies for its cultivation, creating the immortal embryo, working with fetal breathing and other techniques used in culminating the Tao. Details of the female inner landscape are given throughout.

The text makes clear with the very first precept that in order for a woman to make herself worthy of receiving and maintaining the path of the Tao, nine disciplines must be followed with diligence:

“It is said that spiritual practice for women is subject to nine disciplines. The code of discipline states that, if maintained without fail, there will be great benefit. When the fruits of discipline are realized, one passes not through the tribulations of hell, but meets in life with the ‘ten virtuous friends.’ The text says: Be filial, respectful, yielding, and gentle; be cautious in speech and avoid jealousy; be chaste and restrained; shun all wanton ways and love all living things; be compassionate and refrain from killing; recite with decorum and be diligent and careful; abstain from meat and wine; dress simply and without ornamentation; regulate disposition; do not let yourself become troubled; do not go frequently to religious feasts; do not mistreat slaves and servants; do not conceal the virtues and expose the faults of others. One who is able to observe these nine disciplines is worthy to receive and uphold the true path.”<sup>33</sup>

The virtues of humility, gentleness and compassion are emphasized.

Moderation in lifestyle and diet is essential. It is noted in the histories that many Taoist women went so far as to eat only wild foods such as fruits, berries, wild vegetation, herbs and nuts, eliminating grains, steamed foods or “qi foods” and animal products entirely from their plates.

The second precept discusses the coming of the menses and the importance of knowing how to properly cultivate it in order to preserve life:

“It is said that this is the second precept in the true path of women’s practice. Its title is “One’s Own Life,” and it speaks of the *yin* nature of women and the moon as their symbol. At the age of thirteen, fourteen, or fifteen, her “original chi” complete and her “true blood” full. This is *yang* in the midst of *yin*, and the light of the moon becomes resplendent. At the moment the menses descends, her “original chi” is broken and her “true blood” leaks. Following marriage and the birth of children, the “original chi” gradually is weakened and the “true blood” destroyed. Although every month the menstrual flow regenerates, in reality, it every month is re-injured. Herein lies the difficulty in cultivating a woman’s life. If a woman desires to preserve her life and return to the original state, she must seek out the transmissions on self-cultivation...”<sup>34</sup>

The third precept speaks of the menses as an internal event provoked by childish ignorance, abandon and an unsteady mind, an event that could be avoided altogether with proper demeanor:

“It is said that this is the third precept in women’s practice. Its title is “The Source of Intrinsic Nature,” and it speaks of women’s nature as water and her substance as flowers. When she is young but aware of things, she must be reserved and neither playful nor wild. At this point, the first evidence of menses will appear within her “inner feminine,” like a star or a pearl. This is the prenatal treasure hidden above the K’un abdomen and located in the middle of the central yellow region. At this time, if the woman knows how to maintain the purity of her “intrinsic nature,” refrains from looking upon lewd play and from listening to lewd speech; she is retiring and tranquil in her daily routine, follows the rules for womanly behavior and is at ease in her stillness, then this one thing will remain close to its heavenly nature and revert to primal unity. It will not be converted into “red pearls” nor be transformed into menses. But unfortunately the common girl is ignorant, childish, and fond of action...Her spirit becomes confused and her “true *qi*” unstable. Thus, this starlike heavenly treasure wells up and melts. As hot as fire, it seizes the gate and descends, bursting through the door it emerges. The world now calls this “menses”...”<sup>35</sup>

With the second and third precepts, we are given the reasoning behind the Nüdan practice of reverting the menses. It all rests on the belief that each monthly menses further injures “true blood” and that childbirth injures “original chi,” and that both of these events take women away from primal unity. This perspective within Taoist female internal alchemy is one that is at odds with many universal views. It could be that this theory is wise and sophisticated beyond our usual human reasoning. Even when given the proper consideration, though, it still strikes at a very sacred territory of experience. For those who consider childbirth a spiritually empowering process that breathes just as much life back into the body as it takes from it, Nüdan’s principles are disputable. The act of giving birth is for many women worldwide a most supreme means of becoming one with primal nature.

As for the belief that the monthly menses injures “true blood” in the body, it is interesting to analyze this according to modern day physiological science, theories of which state that the menses is particularly cleansing to the uterus. Furthermore, if menstruating women are at such a disadvantage physiologically, how do we explain the fact that women have always had through the ages a longer average lifespan than men? While the Taoists proclaim that the purity and primal power of the female is lost through the menstrual cycle, most other cultures throughout history, especially pre-patriarchal societies, view menstruation as a sacred and powerful time when women tap into sources of creativity and intuition. This can be awe and fear inciting to the opposite sex. Certain cultures throughout history sought to

harness the power of the menses for the good of society at large: In Ancient Egypt pharaohs requested of their priests and priestesses to create a magical elixir with menstrual blood and wine to increase their spiritual powers.

Ancient Greeks would hold spring festivals in which a young girl's menstrual blood was mixed with corn and seeds and then spread over the earth to ensure the fertility of their farmlands.<sup>36</sup>

In Native American traditions, special lodges were erected for the menstruating female, so the woman could have a restful, peaceful retreat during her "moontime." Knowing of her heightened intuition and power during menses, they often asked her to pray for the sick or seek visions in her sleep during menstruation. It was a time in which the *yin* moon energy was truly her own. While the Taoists order young women to cease menstruation in order to gain spiritual insight and clarity, cultures such as the Native Americans celebrate menstruation as a powerful means to gain spiritual vision. Modern day Lakota Sioux elders teach young women:

"Follow your Grandmother Moon. Her illuminating cycles will transform your sprit."

"Begin with the Grandmother Moon at her brightest and most open. This is a time of outward activity and high energy. Sleep where the moonlight touches you. Feel joy and creativity. As the Grandmother begins to cover her face, begin to withdraw into a quieter, less social place. Move to that inward place that is more about "being" than "doing." In the dark of the moon, when bleeding, the veil between you and the Great Mystery is the thinnest. Be receptive to visions, insights, intuitions. Go to a quiet separate place such as a Moon Lodge. Later, come out of the dark, a woman with a cleansed body. As the moon returns, come back out into the world, carrying your vision."<sup>37</sup>

Controversy can not help but spring from the Taoist attitude toward menstruation and the way in which female power seems to be exalted on the one hand and extinguished on the other in Taoist practices. This discussion aside, we settle into the fact that the second and third precepts of *Hsiwangmu nühsiu chengdu shize* clearly present the theoretical foundation of the “Slaying the Dragon” technique. The technique itself as revealed in this text is both informative and intriguing on many levels.

The fourth precept instructs women how to begin the reversion:

“...The first step is to use the method of “microcosmic orbit.” At the two hours, *tzu* and *wu*, one “straddles the crane.” The 10,000 cares should be put aside. Knock the teeth together seventy-two times to open the two lung *shu* points. Next inhale and exhale softly through the nostrils thirty-six times to open all the blood vessels in the body. At this moment there is danger of the *chi* escaping from below, so one must be more diligent in “riding the crane” and not allow oneself to be lax. The two hands should be applied to either side of the area below the navel and above the “gate.” Now with the mind, send it to the rear and upward. Do this for about thirty-six breaths and then “push the sky” with the palms of the two hands. Now maintain the mind in the *wei-lu*. Following this, one may relax the hands, placing them on the sides of the waist, and elevating the shoulders in a shrugging gesture thirty-six times. One then will feel *chi* begin to stir and rise in the *chia-chi* “double passes” and the lung *shu* points. One will then feel the *yu-chen* open and the *ni-wan* open...”<sup>38</sup>

This exercise guides women in opening the blood vessels and the meridians of the back – particularly the Du Meridian or Governing Vessel - raising the qi up the spine to the back of the head (*yuzhen*) and top of the head (*niwan*). The passage goes on to describe the descent of qi down the front of the body as “dew,” entering the heart and then guided to either side of the waist, where it is revolved thirty-six times on each side. All the while, the practitioner must be

mindful in “straddling the crane.” This is a symbolic expression for sitting with legs one on top of the other, sealing the lower bodily gate, so that energy does not leak during the exercise. The mind then directs the dew to the navel:

“After this, direct it with the mind to the “navel wheel,” revolving it thirty-six times to the left and thirty-six times to the right. One will then feel that the whole belly is open and relaxed. At this point, the hands should be placed below the navel and above the “gate.” Use the mind to separately guide it to the left and right simultaneously. Raising them together thirty-six times, one will feel that there is a tiny bit entering the uterus. Now, neither consciously nor unconsciously, be aware of this for a brief moment. This is the general idea of “cultivating the menses”<sup>39</sup>

In the text’s annotations, Minyide says that when a woman feels “a tiny bit entering the uterus” this refers to warm refined qi. So, this exercise strengthens the woman’s control of the circulation of qi up and down the body and the fine-tuned directing of qi around the lower Dantian and into the uterus.

Minyide emphasizes that with this control and focus on the lower part of the body there comes a challenge in practice, for the resulting sensation of warmth may lead to “a longing for love and a feeling of voluptuousness.” Qi will most likely move from the uterus into the “sea of sensation,” or the vulva. The woman must immediately dismiss the moment’s desire and firmly secure her “gate” so that true qi does not escape. She will then need to wait until the “palace of children,” the uterus, is again calm before resuming the exercise. Once the qi enters the “sea of sensation” it is brought back to the “palace of children” and the body is again calm. This is called by Female Immortal Wei “the treasure reverts (from the South Sea) to the ‘North Sea’ where it rests securely.”<sup>40</sup> The South Sea is the “sea of sensation” or “sea of emotion.” The



North Sea is the “palace of children.” According to this text, the “Yellow Center” lies between the two.

Another name for Queen Mother of the West’s fourth precept is “Yellow Leaves.”<sup>41</sup> This image emphasizes the process of transformation as it completes itself within the earth center, or navel, where tranquility lies like fallen yellow leaves. We must understand that ‘yellow leaves’ is still connected to the earthly realm and is therefore a stillness that is material and somewhat illusory in nature. A more profound tranquility comes in the later stages of cultivation and is referred to as “true gold.” It can be inferred that this tranquility is that of refined yang spirit. It is within the state of “true gold” that the “Elixir of Immortality” is formed. One final thing to consider with the fourth precept, “Yellow Leaves,” is its correspondence to the Yi Jing hexagram two, K’un: The Receptive, Earth. Among the seasons, K’un is associated with late autumn, when the changed leaves have fallen and all forces of nature and life are still. One of its changing lines refers to “comprehending all truth from the yellow center” and can be contemplated in association with this phase in women’s cultivation.<sup>42</sup>

The fifth precept is specifically for women who have already gone through menopause or have reached old age and still have bleeding. They are to follow the first four precepts but instead of bringing the “dew” all the way down the front of the body with the first pass, they bring it to the breasts and then to the heart center. With their focus in the heart center, or “crimson palace”, the woman massages the “breast stream” thirty six times in each direction. When a

warm sensation is felt, she massages two more sets of thirty-six revolutions, first slowly and then rapidly. Next she massages two more sets of thirty-six revolutions, first gently and then forcefully. The woman should then feel refined qi rising like mist in the breasts. She then allows the qi to disperse from the heart center of its own accord:

“... there will be a cool liquid like a spring, which emerges from the “double passes” and, overflowing, reverts to the “south sea.” Calmly wait for it, but do not allow it to divide behind the heart and penetrate the two sides of the waist. Abandon all cares in the “central palace,” and without using deliberate effort to circulate it, simply allow it to disperse of its own. When you feel that your entire body has reached a state of perfect purity and harmony, maintain this for a whole day without interruption. Gradually the weak will grow strong and the feeble robust. The old will become young again. They will develop the complexion of flowers and their breasts will shrink to the size of a maiden’s, with the center gradually forming like walnuts. If carried out for 100 days, this is sufficient. After three days (three days thereafter), practice the internal exercises described in the fourth precept, neither adding nor changing the slightest detail. When one becomes aware of the sun and moon appearing as a pair of discs, then the true victory has been won.”<sup>43</sup>

Of intrigue is the last sentence. We may wonder exactly how the woman is becoming aware of the sun and moon’s appearance as discs. On what level is this awareness occurring? Are the discs appearing in the right and left breasts? Or perhaps the right and left kidneys? There is no further explanation in this text, but there is a note on the word “aware.” The text explains that this “aware” should be pronounced as the character “hsien,” not as “chien.” Then “aware” means, “manifesting a sign.” So, victory arrives when something becomes apparent to the woman and, upon receiving this sign, her mind silently intuits a particular truth.

The sixth precept is the step following precept four for women who are not menopausal or of old age. This precept explains how a woman alchemically transforms red blood into white essence. It focuses mainly on the breasts and the heart. From these upper centers, an energy is generated that then moves down into the uterus and is able to “boil” the red blood into essence that can be further refined into a highly pure qi. One point of emphasis is that, in transforming blood into white essence, the woman must avoid exhausting her blood supply. The woman is instructed at the beginning of the exercise to fortify her blood by transforming fluids congealed in the “double passes”:

“...For women, blood is the most basic element, and the key to this precept is refining the red so that it returns to white. However, fearing that the basic element become exhausted, one must first refine the fluids and transform them into blood. In transforming the fluids into blood, nothing is superior to maintaining the ‘dew’ in the ‘palace’ and focusing the mind on the ‘double passes.’ The long-accumulated congealed fluid in the ‘passes’ melts and reverts to the ‘stream sea.’ When the blood reverts it necessarily is in a flourishing state.”<sup>44</sup>

One very interesting piece of commentary on this precept describes the location and physiological significance of the “double passes.” The text states that these “passes” are located anterior and just above the midpoint of the spine, posterior to the heart. There are two points within the “passes” that hold the “congealed fluids” of the body. The left point is called gao and the right point is called huang. It is believed that the most powerful medicine cannot reach this region and the true qi cannot flow into it. When fluids congeal and get stuck here, damage to the whole body is inevitable. The congealed phlegm of the “double passes” is perhaps the most harmful yin presence in the body:

“The damage is greatest in the ‘double passes’ because, being inaccessible to the “true *chi*,” it accumulates here. This accumulation is like snow and ice on the shady side of the K’un-lun Mountains, which does not melt even after the summer solstice.”<sup>45</sup>

It is a flourishing spirit that ultimately guards against accumulations of yin here. Taoists are taught to “concentrate the spirit and heat the passage.” The heart and the earth qi assist in the protection by warming and transforming fluids. So in the Nüdan practice of fluid transformation, the female alchemist must as a starting point completely still the mind and call the spirit to the region of the “double passes” to warm it. When the exercises for focusing on the breast stream and massaging the breasts are added to the spirit’s concentration therein, the congealed fluids will melt, flow down to the lower “sea” and be refined as blood. The woman will then be sufficiently fortified to continue the “Slaying the Red Dragon” technique.

Next, the woman is instructed to massage the breasts 144 times, as in the fifth precept. She is clenching her teeth and stilling all mental activity. The qi accumulates in the breasts and when it becomes abundant, is guided down both sides of the waist:

“...Using the mind, withdraw it to the sides of the waist and then with the power of vision lead the *chi*, revolving it to the left and right a total of seventy-two breaths. In this way, the *chi* is heated as if by moxibustion. Now without counting, guide it with the mind to circle about the “wheel,” and there will be a sensation of boiling at the body’s lowest extremity. The red thus is transformed into white. The transformed *chi* passes through the *wei-lu* (tip of the spine) and ascends to the *chia-chi* (slightly above the middle of the spine); it traverses the *yu-chen* (back of the head) and penetrates the ‘valley.’ At this point, though the scene that appears to one’s inner vision is unrivaled by even the ‘three islands’ and ‘mysterious garden,’ one must quickly practice forgetfulness...”<sup>46</sup>

Here the female alchemist experiences a grand inner vision, surpassing that of the “three islands” and the “mysterious garden.” The “three islands” are the three sacred mountains of the immortals rising out of the sea. The “mysterious garden” refers to an immortal paradise located on Kunlun Mountain. She accepts for an instant her first golden moment on this spiritual path, but is warned that she must keep her composure and quickly “practice forgetfulness.”

Then:

“...If suddenly all becomes as dark as night, one must guard it in silence, and after a long time, one will surely be visited by a bolt of lightning and crash of thunder. The “dew” flows like a stream and the “flowery pool” is so full one can hardly keep from swallowing. Overflowing, it descends to the ‘palace’ and then reaches the navel. The whole body feels pure and harmonious. One must continue to observe this in a state of perfect composure. If maintained for a hundred days without interruption, those with mature breasts will become as flat as a young girl’s and those with empty breasts will become like walnuts. One first becomes like a maiden and then finally like a young girl. It is from the successful transformation into white that one regains the state of maidenhood. Not a few in our school have completed the work of transforming the red...”<sup>47</sup>

The woman has now succeeded in not only ceasing her menses but also in transforming the body back to prepubescent flesh and shape.

The seventh precept reiterates the teachings of forgetfulness and stillness. It reminds women that the accomplishment of “Slaying the Red Dragon” and birthing the “White Phoenix”, depends entirely on the ability to first still the mind and lose the temporal and material worlds, for only from the most profound stillness and forgetfulness does the most profound inner experience occur. Ts’ui O Hsien tzu, a Nüdan master describes her experience:

“...I was able to forget what day it was and what time. Suddenly heaven and earth also disappeared...Finally I forgot everything and

felt only something like heat or burning, and then in the back something like fat or oil. (The ‘back’ refers to the back of the ‘red dragon’ that has been transformed into the marrow of the ‘white phoenix.’) I experienced no limits and no boundaries, as if there was sound and as if there was silence; it splashed and spewed. Sometimes I felt suspended like a cascade, white as silk; sometimes I felt pure as a frozen lake. There was not one time nor one place. Vision was not confused nor spirit weary. Suddenly my perception and hearing became as if enchanted, but I warned myself saying, ‘Do not be seduced by appearances.’ Suddenly I had another revelation and said, ‘Time like a river passes by, never to return.’”<sup>48</sup>

There is an additional annotation to the text that explains the organs’ connection to the process, particularly the warm and cool aspects of the heart. It says that the liver is connected to the left breast and the lung corresponds to the right. The “breast stream” is related to the kidney, heart and spleen. It goes on to say that the heart is the “root of a woman’s life” and is signified by the reception of the middle line in the Yi Jing’s trigram Kun to form the trigram Li, concealing “true fire.” The “true fire” of the heart is revealed only when the fire of desire is controlled. Blood, however, is generated under cool conditions, and with ample blood, the spirit is strongest. So, while the heart’s fire governs a woman’s life, as it warms yin, cool serenity and the production of blood is an essential beginning in order to have a flourishing spirit. There must be an arrival to a state that is neither hot nor cold. It seems that in translation, both the words “cool” and “warm” are used to describe neutrality. The annotation emphasizes the importance for Nüdan practitioners to live according to the *Jingqing Jing* or *Classic of Purity and Stillness*.<sup>49</sup> A teaching from a different source addresses this issue with a slightly different perspective. This is a statement in the eighteenth century female alchemy text, *Master Li Niwan’s*

*Paofa:*

“...When the thoughts are stilled and the mind harmonized, one can then begin the work of massage. The prohibitions of this method are to avoid heat in favor of cold. For women, blood is the basic element. Their natures incline to the *yin*, and *yin* by nature loves cold. If one does not employ massage to subtly activate the *chi* function, then one easily falls into pure *yin*. *Yin* is cold and cold is ice-like. If one does not engage in exercise, this may produce phlegm congestion and blood obstructions, making it very difficult to carry out one's practice. One therefore must begin with stilling the thoughts and harmonizing the mind. Woman belongs to *K'un*, and *K'un* conceals 'true fire.' When the fire lies in wait, there is prosperity, but when it flares up, it can melt metal. If one engages in exercises without harmonizing the mind, then metal encounters the encroaching fire, and one experiences the phenomenon known as 'cock's crow rises to heaven.'”<sup>50</sup>

“Cock's crow rises to heaven” is from the Yi Jing, hexagram 61, Zhongfu, or “Inner Truth.” The explanations are usually along the lines of danger resulting from overstepping the limits of preparation, as the fowl's cry rises to heaven, but its body is still earthbound. The cock is associated with the trigram Sun, the image of which is wind and wood. The cock is wind energy, wanting to fly up to heaven, but unable. If we think of this causally in terms of the Five Element controlling cycle, unrestrained fire, in this case in the form of unrestrained thought or emotion, melts metal. Metal is then unable to control wood and wind is stirred. The wood and wind manifest symbolically as a cock's futile crow. The practitioner must restrain the mind and find calm and stillness once again before continuing her work.

Precept eight through ten move beyond the menstrual cessation technique to the most important aspect of cultivation: achieving true harmony within and in

doing so affecting harmonious change in the universe at large. Precept eight leads women in the exercise of Fetal Breathing. The woman alchemist, after mastering the cessation of her menses, through advanced breath work, enters an obscure and indistinct state and opens the mysterious “ancestral orifice.” It is implied that in this “returning to the void” an immortal embryo is birthed. There is no clear explanation in the text as to where the “ancestral orifice” lies or exactly what this orifice is. It is simply implied that it serves as a portal to a place of revelations. The time it takes to discover and open the “ancestral orifice” varies and the degree to which the alchemist experiences revelations varies as well. The teaching is simple but not easy, that of perfect stillness, inhaling and exhaling through the nose, uniting the breath and the nose in perfect harmony without thought or concern focused on the nose. The breathing gives rise to the six ranks of immortals: heavenly, watery, earthly, human, godly and ghostly. The woman is now transitioning from the earthly realm to the realm of divinity. Through this birthing of the “true child,” she is realizing the Tao and soon will be able to work powerfully through this realization.

The ninth precept instructs the Taoist woman on this path to embrace the role of Buddha or Bodhisattva. The Taoist word for this is nanwu. There is a vision described full of Buddhist imagery such as the body becoming a seven story pagoda sitting atop Mt. Potala, the highest center in the Tibetan spiritual landscape. The woman holds a “pure vase” in her hand into which is inserted a willow branch. She is to “Sit unshakably atop Mount Patola, practicing the



“Tara method” and placing the syllable *Om* in the realm of truth...Reciting *chia-lo-ta-to* all the cares of the world are relieved.”<sup>51</sup>

The tenth and final precept again elevates the practice from one that benefits the individual meditator to one that benefits the entire human race and furthers the evolution of the Tao itself. It inspires all human beings to cultivate on behalf of universal harmony. “As the body is harmonized the world is pacified.” This precept affirms the microcosm’s effect on the macrocosm. The magnitude of an individual’s effect depends on daily and nightly practice. The Queen Mother offers the following quotation as inspiration: “What others do once, I do a hundred times, and what they do ten times, I do a thousand.” The final annotation of this text iterates the Queen Mother of the West’s desire that these precepts be handed down as oral instruction for the “great Tao of world salvation.”<sup>52</sup>

Several other Nüdan texts written during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries similarly guide women on the Taoist journey of spiritual transformation. They include the *Nü Qintan Fayao* or *Essentials of the Golden Elixer Method for Women*, compiled by Qinyizu, the *Nü Kungcheng Fa* or *Correct Methods for Women’s Practice*, by Lingyang Taojun, and the already mentioned *Master Li Niwan’s Precious Raft of Women’s Dual Practice*. All are recurrent in the following essential teachings: the breasts as the source of original ching of the mother’s qi; the heart as the root of the woman’s life; the importance of stillness and harmonizing the mind in order to control fire, prevent congealing of cold yin and find the true breath; the concealing or

reversing the form of the female body through changing her red menstrual blood to white marrow; and finally the movement into a pure realm, and the creation of an immortal embryo within the profound emptiness of the “ancestral orifice.”

A final word should be given regarding the “ancestral orifice” as it was quite vague in the Queen Mother’s Precepts. In the text *Niwan Lizushi Nüsung Shuangsiu Paofa*, it is given the name “mysterious pass,” and is an orifice incomprehensible to the human mind, but that contains the Tao itself. This text writes that it is of utmost importance in the practice of Nüdan that the woman opens this orifice; otherwise all achievements in cultivation are nothing more than illusions. The following is a particularly illuminating passage:

“This orifice is so vast that nothing is beyond it and so small that nothing is within it. You cannot grasp it with the mind or open it by circulation. The method is simply to wait for the body to reach a state of emptiness and all cares are laid to rest. In the midst of the void, forget the void; in the midst of stillness, forget stillness. The spirit naturally enters the shell and the *chi* emerges from within. The *chi* mass, as amorphous as mist, is without head or tail. This is the first appearance of the ‘thing’ and the first sign of the body beyond the body. Without opening this orifice, even if one is able to ‘slay the dragon’ and become divine, it is no more than the illusion of ‘yellow leaves.’ How can this be called ‘forming the fetus’? How can this be called ‘entering the gate’? What has been described in preceding chapters still is merely ‘yellow leaves’ and not the ‘true gold.’”<sup>53</sup>

On this note, as it is one of abstraction, let us now transition to the study of Sun Buer’s Fourteen Poems, as they stand in contrast to the aforementioned precepts.

## Sun Buer's Fourteen Poems

After years of Nüdan practice in the school of Complete Perfection, Sun Buer transmitted her insights regarding the practice of women's internal alchemy in the form of fourteen poems, with human physiology dressed in symbolic language and truths held in abstract imagery. The poems inspire women through the entire cultivation process from beginning to end. For the sake of this paper, we will look at only those poems that illuminate ideas and principles yet undiscussed.

The first poem we will examine is the third of the fourteen:

### **“Carrying Out Practice**

(The first part is applicable  
to both men and women;  
the last part is for  
the use of women alone.)

Gather the breath into the point where the spirit is frozen,  
And living energy comes from the east.  
Don't get stuck on anything at all,  
And one's energy will come back to the terrace.  
The darkness should go down the front,  
The light induced up the back.  
After a shower, a peal of thunder  
Rumbles at the top of the mountain and the bottom of  
The sea.”<sup>54</sup>

The lines which bring forth new discussion in this poem are the last two:

“After a shower, a peal of thunder / Rumbles at the top of the mountain and the bottom of the sea.” Rain, or in this poem “a shower,” is yin energy. Thunder is yang energy. In Taoist theory, thunder is specifically a primal energy stored deep in the earthly aspect of the body, the power of which emerges at moments of return. In women's alchemy, this return is that of yang energy reverting

suddenly from the earthly region of the lower abdomen, back up to the breasts during focused Nüdan practice. When the yang thunder comes in the body, all the body's pores open; there is a sound of wind in the ears, a trembling in the occipital region of the head, and a flash of light in the eyes. All alchemical references to thunder come from the Yi Jing hexagram 16, Yu, "Enthusiasm," and its image which says "Thunder comes resounding out of the earth, returning." The image of the hexagram Yu is that of a thunderstorm at the beginning of summer resolving a prolonged state of tension. The image also speaks of this primal energy released as music and a sudden expression of rhythmic movement in the body.<sup>55</sup> This corresponds to the woman's experience of a rushing sound in the ears and drumming in the back of the head, her body feeling the divine musical rapture of renewal and creation as the yin shower and yang thunder both refresh her earthly nature and bring sudden, brilliant insight. The "top of the mountain" in the poem refers to the center of the brain, or the chamber of nirvana in Taoist thought.

The next poem is the seventh in the series, the midway point in Sun Buer's alchemical instruction:

### **Grafting the Medicine**

"With the mystic device half realized,  
The elixir pill forms like a dewdrop.  
Though now you can stabilize life,  
How can you refine the body?  
Gazing at the nose, one takes in pure positive energy;  
The spiritual lead is effective throughout the body  
Be careful in feeding;  
When completely fulfilled, you then leap into flight."<sup>56</sup>

At this point, the woman's work of spiritual evolution is half complete, because she has crystallized the elixir. As Chen Yingning explains, the "dewdrop" in the poem refers in alchemy to the phenomenon of "water" from the earthly regions of the body evaporating and dispersing upwards and then, in a time of cool spiritual tranquility, sticking to whatever is giving off warm qi most easily and condensing into a very pure elixir essence called "dew." The heat necessary for the condensing and formation of the "elixir pill" must come from the "true fire" which has been uncovered through the work of profound stillness and gradually strengthened since the very beginning of the woman's practice.

Chen Yingning goes on to say that the meaning behind the second line can be explained through the five classes of Immortals. "Though now you can stabilize life / How can you refine the body?" Once the elixir has crystallized, the spirit and vitality of the individual becomes stable and life can be naturally extended. At this stage, the woman is considered a human Immortal. Her body, however, has not yet been physically transformed. According to the ancients, there are five classes of Immortals: ghost Immortals, human Immortals, earth Immortals, spiritual Immortals and celestial Immortals. Ghost Immortals are ghosts that are able to communicate spiritually and exist for a very long time. Human Immortals remain bodily human but avoid escape aging, sickness and death. Earth Immortals live on earth but are not affected by the elements and require neither food nor drink. They are not able to project their spirits through space or time. Spiritual Immortals have supernatural powers and can leave

behind the physical bodies for an ethereal existence as they wish. Celestial Immortals go beyond the supernatural powers of the Spiritual Immortals in that they can go beyond the world we know to other worlds incomprehensible to the human mind. So the woman halfway through her practice must continue her work in order to move through the Immortal ranks and attain supernatural power.<sup>57</sup>

The remaining lines of the poem instruct the inner alchemist on how to transcend the ordinary and become a sage. Through taking in the pure positive energy of the sunrise in daily meditation, laying aside all thought and purifying the body, the substance of the body becomes like pure silver or “spiritual lead.” In a state of true emptiness, mundane energy dissolves away and the body is refined. There will be a time when the spiritual light grows strong enough that projection of the spirit can take place and the body can be left behind. But the poem warns against premature flight: “Be careful in feeding / When completely fulfilled, you then leap into flight.” This accumulation of refined light energy is a gradual process.

The eleventh poem departs from inner cultivation work to address the issue of diet:

**“Abstention From Grain**  
(The same for men and women.)

Once you can feed on the living energy,  
Your lungs will be in an extraordinary state of clear coolness.  
Forget the spirit, and there are no appearances to cling to;  
Merge with the ultimate, and existent emptiness is gone.  
For breakfast, look for wild taro roots;  
When hungry at night, pick wild wetland mushrooms.  
If you mix in smoke and fire,

Your body will not walk on the jewel pond.”<sup>58</sup>

“Abstention from Grain” means the elimination of cooked foods. A raw foods diet is clearly prescribed to women at this advanced stage in cultivation. She is ready for this when her “living energy” fills her body with such amplitude that it can take the place of physical sustenance. “Merge with the ultimate, and existent emptiness is gone.” At this stage of cultivation, spirit and energy come together and the body begins to stabilize enough so as to free itself from certain physiological habits and needs. The body is becoming very light and vital in spirit. When the body does feel hungry, those on the spiritual path are instructed to seek wild foods such as taro and mushrooms, food that, according to the classics of Immortalism, lighten the body and promote longevity. “If you mix in smoke and fire / Your body will not walk on the jewel pond.” Smoke and fire from the cooking process makes the body energy too heavy for transcendence. The “jewel pond” is a place of gathering for female Immortals. In legend, the palace of the Queen Mother of the West has a jewel pond on its premises.<sup>59</sup>

Sun Buer’s final poems speak of the woman practitioner’s transformation into a Spiritual Immortal, with the ability to move back and forth between material and ethereal existences, projecting the light spirit, independent of human needs for food, drink, clothing and shelter. She alludes to the movement into seclusion, the taking residence in a place removed from the company of others. We imagine this to be in a place such as a mountain cave, high above the human life she once knew, where she can continue to refine her spirit and

prepare for the highest level of attainment. Her final and fourteenth poem talks of ascension, the flight of the woman's spirit to the realm of the Celestial Immortals:

### **“Flying**

At the right time, just out of the valley,  
You rise lightly into the spiritual firmament.  
The jade girl rides a blue phoenix,  
The gold boy offers a scarlet peach.  
One strums a brocade lute amidst the flowers,  
One plays jewel pipes under the moon.  
One day immortal and mortal are separated,  
And you coolly cross the ocean.”<sup>60</sup>

So completes Sun Buer's fourteen poems on women's internal alchemy.

The spirit crosses the great ocean into the mysterious void alight the wings of a blue phoenix. This final poem contains some of the most important symbols of the feminine path: jade, phoenix, peach, flowers, moon, coolness, ocean. It is also a celebratory uniting of yin and yang, with both the “jade girl” and the “gold boy” engaged together in the divine, the feminine and masculine offering each other gifts and uniting in the harmonious sound of pipes and lute.

Clearly there has been an evolution in the practice of Nüdan from its beginnings through the times of Sun Buer and into the twenty-first century. The likelihood of women or men in the modern world achieving even human Immortal status is slim given the changes in our natural environment and social and religious structures. While inside modern Taoist nunneries, cultivation may still include precepts from the texts examined above, Nüdan instruction presented to the general public are lineage teachings much more humble in



their spiritual aspirations and certainly less demanding of mind and body discipline.

The following is one such teaching from a Taoist nun who, at the time of this transmission, in the late 1990's, was one hundred and thirty-one years old. Her name is Li Chun Yun. According to Li Chun Yun, this form (name unknown) comes from the Kun Ya Jing of the Taoist canon and was originally transmitted by the female Immortal He Xiangu. This information, presented here without grammatical editing, was received in unbound, unpublished form from the qi gong department of Five Branches Institute in Santa Cruz, California.

## **Women's Internal Alchemy form as taught by Li Chun Yun**

### **First Section**

(Sit in lotus position, if possible, with your hands, palms up, resting on your knees)

“Look in front of you at the reflection of the moon on a still body of water in front of you. See it clearly in front of you as you breathe in through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Allow the reflection of the moon on the water to shine on your face, to the upper *dan tian*, and allow it to increase the brightness in your eyes.

After you clearly see that shining light in the water, then take another inhalation and exhale, blowing the air out through your mouth, allowing the moon energy to expand in front of you, until you become one with it. Have an attitude of wonder and awe and wonder for that moon energy. This allows you to take it in. Show this in the expression on your face, opening your eyes wide and raising your eyebrows in awe and wonder, looking around, blowing out. Continue to look at the water and at the reflection of the moon on the water in front of you. As you breathe in, bring your arms upward, soaking in energy, and as you exhale spread you arms out in front, allowing the energy to expand out in front of you. As you breathe out on the

water, the moon energy expands in front of you, then as you breathe in, bring your hands in to your middle *dan tian* and soak it into your heart.

Then as you soak in the energy into your heart, rest your left hand on your right, palms facing up. Continue to use the expression on your face and the sound of your breath through your nostrils to increase the moon energy in your heart.

Sway your body gently and open your arms out to the sides, and then bring your hands back in front of your middle *dan tian* as you repeatedly take in the moon energy and allow it to expand and shine out of you. Repeatedly, soak in the moon energy and allow it to expand into every part of your body. Repeat this movement three times, or multiples of 3, 6, or 9. After you have done this, stop, meditate and receive.

Look inward, into your center, and allow the moonlight energy reflecting off the water in your heart center and become one with the moon energy reflecting off the water in front of you and in the whole universe. Become one with the universe. Breathe slowly and gently through your nostrils.”<sup>61</sup>

### Comments

In examining the first section of this women’s inner alchemy form as taught by Li Chun Yun in the modern day, we find many echoes of women’s cultivation techniques as found in their original forms in earlier century texts. The yin moon energy and the visualization of its reflection on water calls to mind the imagery of Sun Buer’s poems. The heart, or middle Dantian, is once again the beginning center of focus in this female practice. This reaffirms a heart-centered practice as one of the distinguishing characteristics of female internal alchemy. Male internal alchemy begins its work most often in the lower Dantian, focusing more on the kidneys. The gentle, soft breathing through the nostrils reminds us of the Fetal Breathing so important in women’s

## Second Section

“Open your hands to expand the moon energy then place them in front of your chest. Hold your hands horizontally in front of your chest, palms up, the tips of your middle fingers touching, your thumbs up and your little finger touching your chest center. Look inwardly; think that the center of your chest and breast become like the bright moon and stars. Gradually you will feel comfortably warmer. Swish and taste the saliva and the sweetness of it and swallow it down to bring energy down to your lower *dan tian*. Your head is like the brightness of the moon and your mind is clear. Your face and ears should gradually become warmer and warmer.

Start moving your hands in circles in front of your chest as you circulate the energy in the heart center with the soft *jou* (mantra) sound – “Ahhh.” This type of feeling is similar to the practice with the taiji bang, doing the massage on the back. Then stop and meditate and receive, holding your hands in front of your chest as before. And as you meditate, allow the bright moon energy in your heart to expand through the rest of your body. Focus your eyes inwardly to your middle *dan tian*.

Repeat this movement and, with your hands, gather the energy of the moon off the water. Bring it with your hands inward, back to your chest, then circulate the energy as you move your hands in small circular motions around your heart – up and outward, and then down and inward, using the *jou* sound “Ahhh.” You can do this repeatedly.

The next part is taking the energy down to the lower *dan tian*, back to the kidneys, up to the Du Mai along the spine, to the top of the head, to the brain, then down the two sides of the face, the ears, and the eyes. Then back down both sides of the chest and back to the lower *dan tian*.

Make three circles in front of the heart, down and outward, up and inward, to expand the energy and circulate it. Then make three circles in the opposite direction. Then swish and taste the sweet saliva and swallow it like a waterfall going to the lower *dan tian*. Allow the hands to slowly move down to the lower *dan tian*, palms facing down in front of you. Once the Qi is in the lower *dan tian*,

use soft sounds, breathing out through the nose in little puffs, to expand the energy in the *dan tian*. Not the loud “Huh, huh,” but just the exhale of the breath through the nose several times. The Qi then goes back to the kidneys and the fire from the moon brightness of the heart joins with the kidney water energy. There it becomes steam, steam of Qi, which goes up the Du Mai to the top of the head. Bend your head down and form a circle with your hands as if holding a qi ball in front of the lower *dan tian*.

To have better results with this women’s Inner Alchemy, it is better to first practice the Yellow Emperor’s Wind & Fire Qigong, where you learn to make and use the *jou* sounds to make the Qi circle down the front and up the back.

Bring the hands up to your face (without touching it) and lower them down to your chest. In this movement, the warmth of the steamy qi is coming down the head, both sides of the eyes, the face and back to the chest. Do the circular motions around the heart, then lower your hands down to the lower *dan tian* as you swallow saliva down like a waterfall, bringing that warmth down to the kidneys, where the fire energy can meet the water energy.

Then bring the hands back up in a circle above the head. Again make three circles at the upper *dan tian*. Next guide the qi down to the middle *dan tian* and circulate the qi there with three circles. Then guide the qi down to the lower *dan tian* and circulate the qi there.

You can do this with another person. One person receives the qi while the other circulates it, moving their hands in circles in the receiver’s upper *dan tian* area, bringing the qi down to the middle *dan tian* and circulating it there, and bringing the qi down to the lower *dan tian* and circulating it there.”<sup>62</sup>

## Comments

Indisputably, we see the technique of breast massage used in “Slaying the Red Dragon” here taught in a much milder manner with a different intention. This answers the question as to how the radical alchemy of days gone by can evolve to an appropriate objective level for women in modern society, practicing outside of Taoist institutions. Without aspirations of attaining

immortality, the technique is toned down both in number of repetitions, physical vigor and in inward intention. There is no mention of transforming blood to white marrow, no imagery of dragon or phoenix. In “Slaying the Red Dragon” the palms of the hands are used to massage the breasts and the woman must progress from light and slow massage to vigorous and rapid massage. In this form, only the little finger and thumb touch the chest. The number of circles made is simply some multiple of three, not the one hundred and forty-four prescribed in the Queen Mother’s precepts. The microcosmic orbit technique for circulating qi is again very similar in this teaching with the emphasis on strengthening the connection of Heart and Kidney, harmonizing fire and water to create warm vital steam qi. Again there is no intention to transform congealed fluid to blood or menstrual blood to white essence. Also notable is the use of the jou sound “Ahhh” for the middle Dantian heart center to potentize energetic cultivation in the female body. It seems we can assume that the jou sound “Ahhh” is generally more emphasized in female practice than the “Huh, huh” sound of the kidneys.

### **The Third Section**

“Bringing the moon energy down to the *dan tian* to fill the sea of qi”  
(Sit in lotus position with left hand on top of right, palms facing up)

“Look inside and visualize the moon energy from the lower *dan tian* transmitting to the rest of the body. When you see this clearly, allow the energy to expand and become like the bright, red sun that expands through your entire body. At this point the yin has become the yang as it always does. Think of your whole body as if it is immersed in hot spring water. The warmth and steamy qi comes out and your whole body becomes part of the larger universe, which is

like a giant hot spring as well. Expand your arms out to the sides, gently moving your upper body.

After this warm, steamy qi has risen up, you swish and swallow saliva and bring the water energy back down to the lower *dan tian*. Sit again with your hands on top of the other with palms facing up.

This entire cycle should be done several times to allow the moon energy from the chest to circulate and then to bring it down to the lower *dan tian*. Here the moon energy becomes the sun energy and the warmth allows the kidneys to become like hot springs, with steamy hot water qi, which is allowed to rise up and then you can swallow it down again.”<sup>63</sup>

### Comments

With this closing, the larger objective of all alchemy, regardless of the gender of the practitioner, is complete. Yin becomes yang. Water and fire have created warm qi energy. The sun and moon unite in the lower watery regions of the kidneys. The body becomes a part of the ever-expanding universe. The physical surrenders itself to the ethereal. Though we may not attain the flight of Spiritual Immortality, Li Chun Yun’s teaching elevates our spirit in a higher level of yin-yang harmony. This is an aim that practitioners of the modern day can accept wholeheartedly.

### CONCLUSION

The tradition of Taoist Female Inner Alchemy is vast, deep, illuminating and provocative. This paper has just touched the surface of lore, lineage knowledge and personal achievements contained in its history. Much gratitude must be given to western scholars such as Livia Kohn, Catherine Despeaux, Suzanne Cahill, and Thomas Cleary who have spent years researching,

translating and presenting this information to western audiences over the last few decades. We have several brilliant minds, both in China and outside of China working to rescue the history of Nüdan from the dust and shadows.

With more time devoted to studying the theory, techniques and symbology contained within Nüdan tradition, and the inner minds of its creators, many rifts of misunderstanding and controversy will most likely close. In this paper, controversy and resistance of principle specifically relates to the “Slaying the Dragon” technique. The basis of questioning lies in the fact that this particular approach to attaining immortality in women somehow seems a direct contradiction of the motherly aspect of the Tao. Further, when looking at known matriarchal histories in other parts of the world, nowhere can such a denial of the female menstrual cycle be found. Instead menstruation is honored as a time of powerful intuition and spiritual insight and is considered a cleansing ritual.

So how exactly did this belief evolve in Chinese Taoist practice? In Taoist thought, sexual energy is a powerful energy that serves as a form of qi in the process of bodily transformation. Jing, or sexual essence, is a highly valued substance in Taoist internal alchemy for both men and women. It should be conserved and refined through retention and inner circulation. For men jing is the semen. For women it is blood. But what about the essence released at a woman’s climax? Why is this not considered in the creation of the elixir?

It certainly must be acknowledged that some of the controversy on the Western end is simply a matter of perspective. Forms of personal spiritual

cultivation in Western philosophies and religions are taught in a way that speaks to very different sensibilities. Only by making the Taoist philosophy one's own in the deepest sense can one truly understand orders such as "Slaying the Dragon."

One final thing to consider is that, because most of China's written history has been authored by men, including most of Nüdan history, the degree to which the female internal alchemy literature and the precepts therein - especially those of more famous texts - would be different in essence had they stayed, pen and ink, in the hands of women throughout the ages is hard to say. Answers surely lie in the archaeology of the China's matriarchal period. How much has or could be interpreted through unearthed artifact is a question demanding additional study down new avenues.

Issues aside, the information presented in surviving Nüdan alchemy texts and histories is rich in bio-spiritual insight, symbolism and healing guidance. Many Taoist women find a new place of independence and advancement, both socially and spiritually by leaving behind their domestic lives and devoting themselves to the Tao. For Chinese Medicine practitioners who choose to work with patients through both a physical and spiritual heart focus, the Nüdan tradition has much to offer in terms of healing both the male and female mind and body through heart-centered imagery and cultivation techniques. Forms such as that taught by Li Chun Yun might prove a wonderful tool in working with conditions such as breast cancer or heart disease. Harnessing the energy of the moon in sitting meditation and working within stillness to harmonize



kidney water and sun/moon fire might be applied in Chinese medical practice to assist women with problems of infertility and menopause. It would be very helpful to consult a female qi gong lineage holder in making decisions concerning medical applications.

In addition to healing the individual, we might also consider the desire expressed in the Queen Mother of the West's precepts that heart-centered meditation and the teachings of stillness and tranquility be used in order to stabilize and bring peace into the world at large. For the essence of Taoist teachings comes down to this: harmonizing and uniting yin and yang in order to illuminate and enlighten both the inner world and the outer universe. As for the wisdom of yin, we must simply seek the quiet sage...she is inside each one of us.

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## Endnotes

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