

周
天

Mandala of Heaven 周天

**A Practical Introduction to
Taoist Inner Alchemy**

100 DAYS

周
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THIS IS AN INDEPENDENT STUDY COURSE presenting a compact, practice-and-theory introduction to Taoist inner alchemy, CENTERING ON THE MANDALA OF HEAVEN. The Mandala of Heaven is bifurcated into the Lesser Mandala of Heaven (popularized in the West as the "microcosmic orbit" inner alchemy exercise) and the Greater Mandala of Heaven.

Through this curated workbook, you will be presented with a systematic and powerfully-effective cultivation program, working from translations and annotations of primary source text on the Mandalas. You will achieve mastery of the Lesser Mandala in a way that noticeably improves your overall health and wellbeing, augments your own psychic or magical work, with heightened mental clarity, advanced into a stronger version of yourself. This is a practical immersion into Taoist inner alchemy to set you on your path to actualizing the Greater Mandala, and to fortify you with all the resources you need to do anything you want to do after this juncture point.

My objective is to give you the same essentials from the primary source texts that historical lineage masters had to work with, and then encourage you to seek out your own best practices for operationalizing those essentials. You are getting tried-and-true methodologies, steeped in centuries-old mystical traditions and history, that will empower a beneficent alignment and connection to what we call the Mandala of Heaven 周天.

The course begins with a direct, experiential exploration of a foundational practice central to Taoist inner alchemy. Part I explains the mechanics of that practice, focusing on the inner circulation of Light that begins to align with the macrocosmic orbit of Light. Then in Part II we start the introduction to alchemical principles and concepts that were the undercurrent of the Part I practice. We learn methods of energy refinement.

Note that this is not intended to be a full inner alchemy (neidan) curriculum, but it will authoritatively introduce you to Taoist cosmology and enable you to cultivate Mandala attunement (i.e., alignment with the cyclical processes per Taoist cosmology).

*Your Guide for the Next 100 Days,
benebell wen*

Your Learning Objectives

To help you navigate the course materials, here is a checklist of what you should be able to do after completion of study. In other words, you can use this checklist to test yourself. If you struggle with any of these listed items, pinpoint the resources from this course and review those specific topics until you're confident with all of the following checklist items:

✓ CORE COMPETENCIES: YOUR SKILL & KNOWLEDGE OUTCOMES

Define “alchemy” and list the core elements of alchemy.

Provide a comparative analysis of Inner Alchemy 內丹 and Outer Alchemy 外丹.

Explain the Triple Treasures: Jing 精, Qi 氣, and Shen 氣.

Explain the Three Dantian 丹田 (Lower, Middle, and Upper Realms, and how the inner parallels the cosmological outer).

Explain the directionality, path, yin-yang governance, and TCM healing principles associated with the Du督 and Ren任 Meridians.

Demonstrate the Lesser Mandala of Heaven 小周天 microcosmic orbit practice.

Integrate into your routine some extent of the Lesser Mandala breathwork exercise for your overall preventive health and spiritual care.

Provide guidance on safe practice of the Lesser Mandala (and safe engagement with esoterica in general).

Explain Wu Wei 無為, Taoist Non-Action.

Explain Ziran 自然, Taoist Path of Effortless Nature.

Explain why Wu Wei and Ziran are fundamental guiding principles in any Taoist cultivation practice, especially the Mandalas of Heaven work.

Note what the canonical source texts have said about the Greater Mandala of Heaven 大周天.

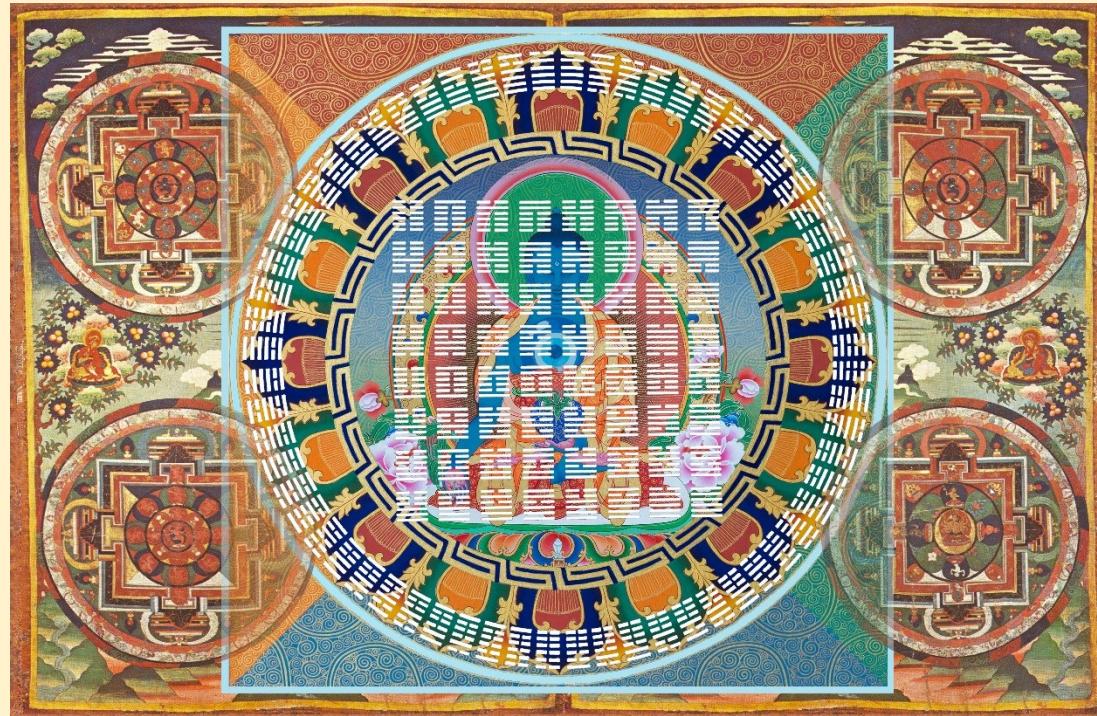
Write out a code of ethics that you, as a practitioner and medium between the spirit and human realms, should follow to build your own spiritual guardrails as you cultivate personal empowerments through the Greater Mandala of Heaven work.

Expand your understanding of the two main Meridians (Du督 and Ren任) to the Eight Meridians 奇經八脈.

Explain the Wu Xing 五行 five elemental phases and the Ba Gua 八卦 eight elemental trigrams that govern all Change.

Interpret, for yourself per your world view, the Six Omens.

Daily Mandala Meditation Practice



Cover design features four mandalas from the post-Geluk era (circa 17th c.) representing the canonical four Buddha families and generally symbolic of a four-fold cosmological system of protective guardians. The central seal that spreads across both the front and back covers is the Blue Medicine Buddha. The 64 hexagrams appear both as an 8x8 square diagram and as a full circle. In Taoist and various Eastern esoteric traditions, such a design would be called a form of Spirit Map (靈圖, líng tú) or magical painting (術畫, shù huà).

This curriculum also comes with a guided meditation, “Guided Mandala Meditation for Healing & Rejuvenation” structured around a layered system of Taoist *neidan* inner alchemy, Mahayana Buddhism, I Ching mysticism, and energy cultivation principles.

After you have watched both the Part I: Lesser Mandala video lecture and the Part II: Greater Mandala video lecture, my recommendation is to do the guided meditation (follow the video narration) at least once a day. You can take your time slowly working through this handbook while doing the daily guided meditations. Make a routine out of this dedicated practice, at least for the 100 days.

The objective you'll achieve from dedicated routine work with this specific guided meditation is strengthening that alignment and union between inner and outer (Lesser Mandala and Greater Mandala) specifically in a manner that empowers you with healing and rejuvenation capabilities, both as to yourself and as to the world around you.

The Medicine Buddha symbolizes divine active healing power and is subtly invoked as a spiritual guardrail, offering safety and protection through your deep work with the curriculum. The guided meditation also layers in musical recitations of the Heart Sutra. In Mahayana Buddhism, the Heart Sutra provides the ultimate spiritual medicine for cutting

through the three poisons (greed, hatred, and ignorance) and liberating one into the state of sacred wisdom. Diseases stem from the three poisons (greed, hatred, and ignorance). Whereas the Medicine Buddha represents the active healing force for curing those three poisons. The Medicine Buddha is the active force focused on treating the immediate suffering of the body, mind, and spirit.

Note: For those who find the layering of background recitation music distracting and prefer the voice narration only, the narration-only version, without the Heart Sutra, has also been provided as part of your course materials. Feel free to work from your preferred version.

Key also is activation of the Four Guardians and the Eight Powers, which represents forces of cosmic protection, coming to harness spiritual authority, and to support your mastery over energy cultivation.

We integrate principles from source text on the two Mandalas (a source text routed in a tradition of alchemical practice that syncretizes Taoism and Mahayana Buddhism) for a meditation program designed to help you expand your awareness of both yourself and the cosmos, which is then what gives you access to channeling healing wisdom.

I truly do believe this type of dedicated practice will open you to higher realms, here signified by the Golden Gate to the Ninth Heaven. The objective of the guided meditation video that has been provided is to walk you to the entry point, *not* to help you walk *through* the Gate.

While not the main focus of this curriculum, a key incidental attainment from routine work with this guided meditation is a strengthened attunement to the I Ching system. A practitioner can strengthen their ability to work with the I Ching through Mandala cultivation, as the I Ching is an energetic diagram of the Mandalas. In other words, the more you work with the Mandala, which the guided meditation video facilitates, the more accurate your I Ching divination readings will be, the stronger your bond will be to the Oracle, and the more effective and potent your hexagram-based talismans and sigils will be.

As part of your cultivation practice, try following the guided meditation once through and then immediately follow it with an I Ching divination. See what effects working with the guided meditation has on your divinatory readings. The divination method does not need to be limited to the I Ching; try it in combination with any divination tool of choice.

ILLUSTRATION ON SUBSEQUENT PAGE: Lady of the Nine Heavens (drawn by Benebell Wen)



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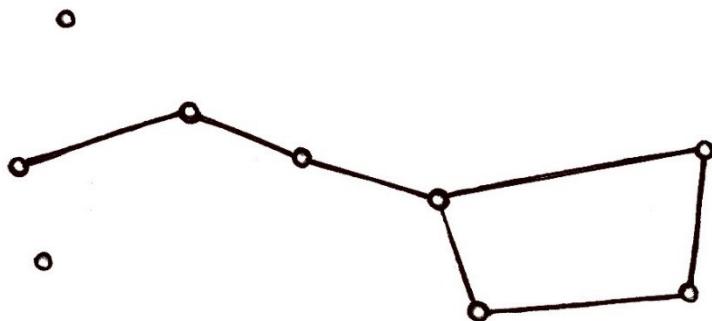
Mandala of Heaven: Zhou Tian 周天 The Celestial Circuit

The term “Zhōu Tiān 周天” is a term of art found in Taoist alchemy.

“Zhōu 周” means orbit, circuit, a cycle, and implicit to the term is the emblem of the wheel. “Zhōu 周” is also the same base word in “Zhōuyì 周易,” the I Ching Book of Changes.

“Tiān 天” means heaven, or celestial, natural, innate, the cosmos.

IN OUTER ALCHEMY, ZHŌU TIĀN 周天 REFERS TO THE UNIVERSE, and more specifically, astronomy, astrology, the seasonal and calendar cycles, and thus, per Taoist lore, governed by the Seven Big Dipper Gods. The Big Dipper is viewed as a celestial gateway connecting the physical world with the spiritual and divine realms.

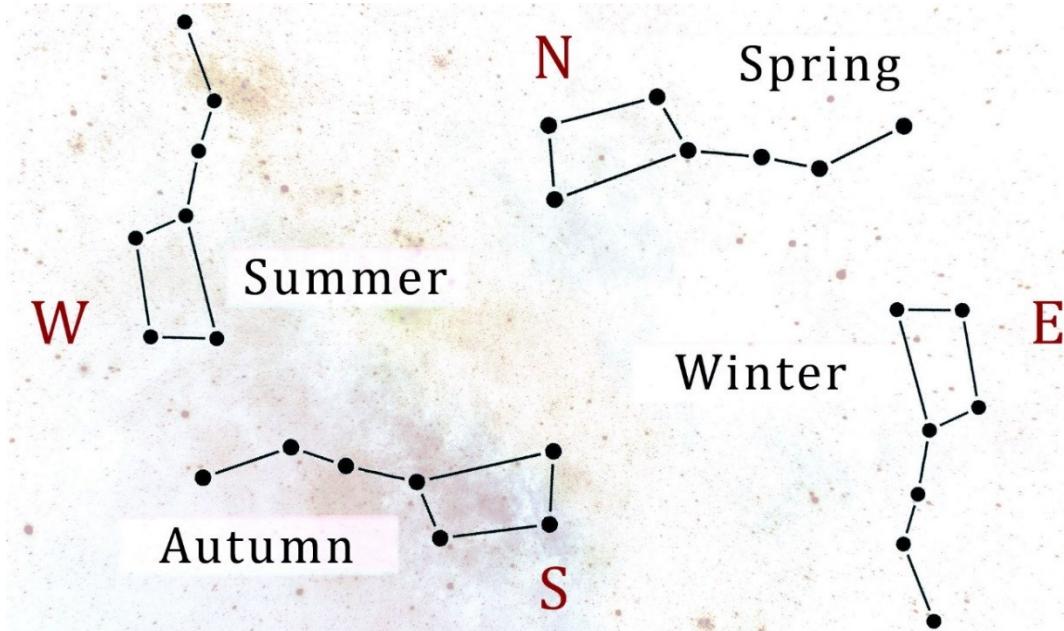


Observers of the night skies will note how the Big Dipper appears to rotate around the North Star throughout the year, its position cycling through the changing seasons, documenting for us the Earth's complete annual orbit around the Sun. In Chinese lore, the seven stars of Ursa Major are personified as seven divine beings, each with specific domains over life, death, fate, destiny, and the judgment of human actions. As the Big Dipper “spins” in its celestial cycle throughout the night, and throughout the year, it disperses celestial Qi down to the earthly realm, and therefore the Big Dipper gods are seen as the main guardians of cosmic energy.

In the course of a 24-hour day, the Big Dipper rotates counterclockwise around the North Star. In the course of a year, the Dipper changes position, higher in the northern skies in Spring, westward in the north when it's Summer, low in the north when it's Autumn, and northeast, ascending back up in Winter.

Thus, as it cycles through the hours of the day and the four seasons, it spirals, forming a circle from the square of four directions. It thus

becomes an emblem symbolic of Change itself, of the cycles of nature, time, space, and the seasons. The Big Dipper was believed to be a guide for the soul's journey, and the constellations of the Dipper a map for navigating the cosmos. The north, which is where you find the Big Dipper, is the gateway to the underworld, and also to heaven. The Big Dipper, True North, is a liminal gateway for journeying to other spirit realms.



Rotating Big Dipper through the Seasons (Northern Hemisphere)

IN INNER ALCHEMY, ZHŌU TIĀN 周天 REFERS TO THE NATURALLY CYCLING PATH OF ENERGY BODIES WITHIN, tracing a continuous circuit through microcosmic pathways in the human body. Our physical health, cognitive abilities, emotional regulation, and spiritual health are all governed by how energy bodies circulate in this internal orbit.

Part I on the Lesser Mandala of this curriculum is about getting you to feel, to be familiarized with, and attune to that inner Zhou Tian, or microcosmic orbit. Part II on the Greater Mandala is still considered inner alchemy, but what we'll be doing is fully expanding your consciousness of the Zhou Tian to integrate that inner orbit with the orbit of the cosmos. The 64 hexagrams, which are emblematic of the whole cosmos, as a mandala is one way to bridge the space between the inner orbit and outer orbit.

Somewhat similar to the seven principal chakras along the central vertical of the body that you find in Vedic and Tantric traditions (i.e., seven principal seats of consciousness), in Taoist traditions, there are three dantian 丹田 and four gates 關 along the spine and torso, totaling seven central nodes where energy naturally condenses and transforms. They're often referred to as inner gods or inner

lords. Then personified as such, the seven inner lords report to the seven Big Dipper gods. In other words, there's a direct correspondence between the seven stars in the celestial orbit and the seven inner nodes or chakras in the microcosmic orbit.

In both instances of outer and inner orbits, celestial and human, the cycle is an elliptical. Just as we observe the movement of planets in our solar system to be in an elliptical orbit, the movement of subtle energy bodies in us move in a similar elliptical. The moon orbits Earth in an elliptical; charged particles in a magnetic field spiral along an elliptical path.

Thus, while we understand the actual orbit to be elliptical, the spirit map or diagram of the orbit is the unit circle, a Wheel, because the circle is symbolic of Heaven.

The concept of *Zhōu Tiān* 周天 thus unites the macrocosm and microcosm, showing that cosmic order and human vitality are interconnected. In Taoist inner alchemy, mastery of the inner orbit, the Lesser Mandala of Heaven means harmonizing it with the celestial orbit. Once that is attained, the gates open to superhuman access to that Greater Mandala of Heaven.

It is the Will of the universe that moves physical matter as it does, a divine directive that sets the planets into orbit; it's that Will that brings forth the changing seasons and carves the land through wind and water.

That Will of nature appears imposing, domineering, and yet in Taoism, that Will is not characterized as forceful – it is *ziran*, meaning effortless and in accordance with its own nature.

That Will takes into account the “path of least resistance” within each of the bodies of physical matter it is directing. It does not *force* anything to go against its own nature or inclinations.

In that sense, the Will of the universe is not an intentional command nor is it controlling, but is an effortless unfolding. That, in turn, is how the Taoist practitioner exerts personal Will. Our Will, like the Will of the universe, is not to be forceful, but is to be *ziran* 自然.

Throughout the source texts considered canonical on the Lesser Mandala of Heaven and Greater Mandala of Heaven, there are recurring references to and emphasis on the principle of *ziran* 自然.

The Mandala of Heaven practices are about cultivating your awareness of *ziran*, meaning what exactly is the Will of nature, and how do you align your internal Will to that greater universal Will.

Way of Heaven: 天之道 Ethical Living Per the Tao Te Ching

The Way of Heaven (天之道, Tiān zhī Dào) is a Taoist doctrine sourced from the Tao Te Ching on how to achieve transcendence and become an Awakened One (聖人, shèng rén).

“聖人” (shèng rén), a recurring reference in the Tao Te Ching, is more commonly translated to “sage” or “sage emperor,” “philosopher king,” or “sage king.” This is also a recurring reference in the writings of Zhuangzi, Mencius, Xunzi, and Moist philosophy (an ancient Chinese school of thought that asserted morality and virtue as objective, Heaven-ordained, measurable, and has a fixed “right” vs. “wrong”; *compare*: Taoist thought, which espouses that everything, including morality and virtue, is relative...relative to its “True Nature”).

Shèng Rén 聖人 refers to someone of the highest caliber of morality and virtue, one who has achieved the highest state of wisdom. The term refers to the best among us, humanity that has become godly, and beyond that, specifically, after attaining that level of cultivation, now seeks to better humanity, be that through wise leadership or counsel and teachings.

But to be clear, the many different ancient schools of philosophical thought *debate* the meaning of “Shèng Rén 聖人.” And so we must take care not to generalize and assign a fixed meaning to this term.

I’ve opted to translate Shèng Rén 聖人 to “Awakened One” for reasons that I want to flesh out in its own standalone treatment, and for now, is outside the scope of this course work. To the extent applicable here, for the Mandalas of Heaven cultivation work, one aspires to attain the state of being an Awakened One through these Mandala practices. Or more precisely, the Mandala practices are tools and techniques for attaining the state of Awakening. Also, as applied to this Mandala work, we are going to define “Shèng Rén 聖人” or “Awakened One” within the context of the Tao Te Ching.

“All those who attain the state of Awakening follow the Way of Heaven,” is the core thesis from the Tao Te Ching *about* the Awakened Ones. And so the Way of Heaven is the code of ethics and virtuous living needed to become a “Shèng Rén 聖人.”

The Way of Heaven is what guides *how* you practice the Mandalas work.

Four verses from the Tao Te Ching are instructive on understanding the Way of Heaven, and is now considered canonical in Way of Heaven discourse (at least from a Taoist perspective):

1. Verse 9, Moderation is the Way of Heaven
2. Verse 73, The Net of Heaven
3. Verse 77, The One Whose Merits Go Unseen
4. Verse 81, Attaining Without Harm

The Mandalas of Heaven 周天 (Zhou Tian), are instruments or tools of the practitioner for embodying the Way of Heaven 天之道 (Tian zhi Dao).

Thus, guiding how you approach practice of both the Lesser Mandala of Heaven 小周天 and the Greater Mandala of Heaven 大周天 will be how you interpret and philosophically approach the Way of Heaven 天之道. Consider what these four verses from the Tao Te Ching (TTC) mean to you.

Verse 9: Moderation is the Way of Heaven

“Withdrawing upon completion is the Way of Heaven.”

That is the first time in the Mawangdui order of the TTC that the term “Way of Heaven” comes up.

Likewise, this line has become a popular, oft-quoted maxim reminding us to make our exits with grace. Once you’ve achieved what you’ve set out to achieve, take your bow and let others ascend to the stage. For artists and creatives, this maxim reminds us that after we’ve produced our Great Work, you put it out there for the world, and then you let it go. You have to let it just Be.

Another great line from this verse is:

“A house of gold and jade cannot be safely guarded. Wealth, grandeur, and vanity provoke one’s own misfortune.”

While Taoist philosophy stays quite open-ended and relative when it comes to defining virtue, it’s fairly unequivocal when it comes to excess materialism and greed. We start to see what is definitely *not* the “Way of Heaven” and excess materialism and greed is definitely *not* it.

持而盈之，不如其已；
揣而銳之，不可長保。

Chí ér yíng zhī, bù rú qí yǐ;
chuāi ér ruì zhī, bù kě cháng bǎo.

金玉滿堂，莫之能守；
富貴而驕，自遺其咎。

Jīn yù mǎn táng, mò zhī néng shǒu;
fù guì ér jiāo, zì yí qí jiù.

功遂身退天之道。

Gōng suì shēn tuì tiān zhī dào.

In its full context, Verse 9 translates as follows:

Clutching the overflowing vessel, though it will not flow endlessly;
Sharpening the iron, though it will not keep for long.

A house of gold and jade cannot be safely guarded.
Wealth, grandeur, and vanity provoke one's own misfortune.

Withdrawing upon completion is the Way of Heaven.

The first two lines speak to the futility of greed and unchecked ambition for power. The second two lines go even further, warning that these vices only invite harm to oneself.

For the purposes of you articulating your own code of ethics as part of the Pre-Work, that last line is imperative: “Withdrawing upon completion is the Way of Heaven.”

In other words: Power that refuses to yield will face collapse. That line of advice as applied to inner alchemy: Retention beyond the proper phase produces toxicity. Everything, in its time, must be released.

Take some time to reflect on how you interpret these lines from Verse 9, and how this is going to inform your own code of ethics that will govern your cultivation work.

Verse 73: The Net of Heaven

The most informative of the four verses, in my opinion, for guiding you, is here in Verse 73.

As we get into the conversation on ethical living and virtue, it's important to deconstruct any preconceived understanding of morality we are coming in with, and endeavor to embody the open, and in many ways mysterious explication of morality you find in Taoist cultivation.

勇於敢則殺，
勇於不敢則活。

Yǒng yú gǎn zé shā,
yǒng yú bù gǎn zé huó.

此兩者，
或利或害。

Cǐ liǎng zhě,
huò lì huò hài.

天之所惡，孰知其故？
是以聖人猶難之。

Tiān zhī suǒ è, shú zhī qí gù?
Shì yǐ shèng rén yóu nàn zhī.

天之道，
不爭而善勝，不言而善應，
不召而自來，繹然而善謀。
天網恢恢，疏而不失。

Tiān zhī dào, bù zhēng ér shàn shèng,
bù yán ér shàn yīng, bù zhào ér zì lái,
chǎn rán'ér shàn móu.
Tiān wǎng huī huī, shū ér bù shī.

Verse 73 translates as follows:

Those who dare, dare to bring slaughter,
those who dare not to dare, dare to preserve life.

Of these two, perhaps
one brings merit while the other brings detriment.

What Heaven disfavors, can one truly know?
And so the Awakened One must take care.

The Way of Heaven is—
to prevail without struggle,
to reach accord without discord,
to summon without summoning,
to radiate calm with noble ends

The Net of Heaven is vast and wide;
its mesh is coarse, yet nothing slips through.

The term “zilái 自來” in that passage expresses self-governance and self-regulation, one that comes without force or pretense; it’s part of the doctrine of zirán 自然. “Zilái 自來” means that you shouldn’t need to be told to be virtuous to be virtuous. There is something within you, an innate disposition, that is pure beneficence, someone who radiates with an aura of serenity and calm, who embodies integrity and sincerity, noted in the verse as “繹然” (chǎn rán).

Embodying virtue isn’t about following some socially-dictated code of moral conduct; it’s about digging deep to reveal and fully embody that inner “true self,” a self that is truly good. Thus, often Taoism is viewed as an idealistic school of philosophy—it presumes that humans are inherently good, and it is society that corrupts you. Taoist practice such as inner alchemy is about shedding away all that socially indoctrinated corruption to get to that pure core within you, and that is how you actualize the Tao.

The second very important point that I want to emphasize about Verse 73 is to carefully note how it doesn’t actually pass judgment on which is “good” and which is “bad” between “those who dare, dare to bring slaughter” and “those who dare not to dare, dare to preserve life.”

Socially you’re probably trained to assume one is the “right” way and the other is the “wrong” way, but the very next passage of this verse checks you, asserting: “Of these two, perhaps one brings merit while the other brings detriment. What Heaven disfavors, can one truly know? And so the Awakened One must take care.”

In other words, before you assume you know what is “right” vs. what is “wrong” in terms of morality, remind yourself: What Heaven disfavors, can one truly know? If you are to be an Awakened One, then you must take care not to judge too quickly.

Note how this verse concludes with a reiteration of that point: “The Net of Heaven is vast and wide; its mesh is coarse, yet nothing slips through.”

One popular and lay (or exoteric) interpretation of that line has been divine justice, that no matter what seems to happen here on earth, nothing gets past Heaven, and justice will be served, in its own time, and all evil deeds will inevitably get punished. No one can escape the “Net of Heaven” or divine justice.

That word “Net” (網, wǎng) can also imply a network or extensive, highly-organized, and integrated system. For a fun pop culture reference, later in the Terminator movie series, Skynet got translated

into Chinese as “天網, tiān wǎng,” or “Net of Heaven.” In present day usage, the term also refers to CCTV, or expansive video surveillance systems, especially where AI technologies and big data are integrated. The term “Net of Heaven (天網, tiān wǎng)” in popular usage today has also come to mean social justice, e.g., human rights organizations using that term in their mission statements and organization identity.

And so, taken altogether, the first two lines note different approaches to seeking earthly justice. The next few lines caution that we aren’t fully capable of knowing how earthly justice compares to divine justice, so don’t make presumptions on who is in the “right” and who is in the “wrong.” The concluding lines assure us to let Heaven ultimately resolve all matters, because even if someone appears to have escaped punishment per your observation, have faith that divine justice does come.

The Awakened Ones who follow the Way of Heaven (the Tao of Heaven) will understand this truth and conduct themselves accordingly.

Now let’s discuss the part of Verse 73 that gives the four key principles of the Way of Heaven, which is also synonymous to four key principles of the doctrine of ziran:

1. To prevail without struggle
2. To reach accord without discord
3. To summon without summoning
4. To radiate calm with noble ends

Throughout this cultivation Work, you really want to take time to develop your understanding of ziran and what it means to you, because ziran is *how* every aspect of this Mandala Work should be undertaken: without force or pretense.

Let’s recap:

- 不爭而善勝 | **To prevail without struggle.** You’re not competing with anyone; the Awakened One (one who follows the Way of Heaven, per Verse 73 of the TTC) attains success not by being in competition with or contention against any other.
 - ◆ “爭” (zhēng): The ideogram for this word is of two hands reaching for and fighting over a stone ploughshare. The word means to quarrel and engage in conflict over differing ideologies, to contend.
 - ◆ “善勝” (shàn shèng): Victories earned through merit; to be skilled and blessed at high achievement. One who prevails by way of *ziran*. Later in the Han

dynasty (202 – 195 BC), Emperor Gaozu of Han commissioned an imperial sword named Shàn Shèng 善勝.

- 不言而善應 | **To reach accord without discord.** It is unnecessary for you to argue with others about the Work, or explain what you're doing, or try to convince others of anything about anything, and there is no need to moralize or try to justify your perspective to others. To cite a cliché, let your actions speak louder than your words. This axiom is also saying to respond in a measured, refined minimum necessary way.
 - ◆ “言” (yán): Words, but here in context, means imposing your opinions and perspectives. Thus, in the negative, “不言” (bù yán) means to not have to use speech to assert your point of view; instead use conduct and model behavior to embody your point of view; discord, lacking agreement; disunity in relationships; differences of opinion.
 - ◆ “善應” (shàn yīng): A good omen in response to an inquiry; to cope with struggles with grace and equanimity; perseverance; “應” (yīng): Compliance, agreement, consensus; accord, a concurrence of opinions or wills.
- 不召而自來 | **To summon without summoning.** “Summon without summoning” is one of my personal favorite lines to live by from the TTC. This is the guidance to influence without commanding, to aspire to be present, and not aspire to be persuasive. Also, let outcomes happen in their own natural timing; don't force things to happen because you want it to happen.
 - ◆ “召” (zhào): Imperial decree; order or summons. Thus, “不召” (bù zhào) means to not have to mandate and force your will to be followed.
 - ◆ “自來” (zì lái): To have been the case all along; autonomous and self-governing, self-generated; existing and functioning independently. “自來” (zì lái) also means as it originated, of all time, i.e., this is how it's always been. See also Ziran 自然.
- 繹然而善謀 | **To radiate calm with noble ends.** At the risk of over-simplifying this fourth and final of the four prongs describing the Way of Heaven, this line is saying to be zen, but you still need to ensure you have the competency to do what you must do.

- ◆ Always have a plan, but this doesn't mean you should plot or be deceptive. Don't let emotions control your decision-making; make decisions in a state of calm.
- ◆ Instead of trying to control outcomes, *prepare* for any outcome with wisdom and prudence.
- ◆ “禪” (chǎn): To calm; soothe and provide comfort or relief. To be in a state of zen.
- ◆ “然” (rán): To shine; to inspire awe; burn brightly. Per the *Shuowen Jiezi*, it is the sound of a burning fire. To illuminate from within. See also Ziran 自然
- ◆ “善謀” (shàn móu): Virtuous intentions; altruistic design; to have a good strategy and careful planning; skillful and methodical preparation; thoughtful foresight; to be well-coordinated; beneficent and well-intentioned in one's strategies; without ulterior motives; “謀” (móu): To seek, to work for; strategy, plot; plan or scheme.

If no external laws, social norms or expectations, or reputational consequences existed, what ethical principles and values would still govern your conduct? Reflect on what these “*zì lái* 自來 (self-governing)” principles for you would be.

Reflect and identify areas of tension between socially-conditioned morality and your own personal intuitive sense of what aligns with the Way of Heaven. Meaning, where do you see diverge between your observation of how people interpret justice (earthly justice) and your intuitive knowing of what is divine justice? Note these areas of tension below, as this thought process helps you to start thinking about how to live by your own ethical code.

Per Verse 73, there are two kinds of people:

1. Those who dare, daring to bring slaughter
2. Those who dare not to dare, daring to preserve life

Both in their own right are facets of personal audacity. Which of the two that Heaven favors is not going to ever be clear to us humans. That is why Awakened Ones take care not to judge. Meanwhile, consider how you judge yourself:

Is it more difficult for you to act? Because you know that if you dare to act, then there will inevitably be collateral damage?

Or is it more difficult for you to stand back and do nothing? Because you know that if you take no action, then there will inevitably be those who get away with the injustice?

Either way, be ever self-discerning to realize you don't know which one of those Heaven favors, so tread with care.

Verse 77: The One Whose Merits Go Unseen

You may need to sit with Verse 77 a little longer, to really parse through what it means to you, and how you interpret its meaning.

In just these four verses, you can see that the TTC was very much designed to be an instructive text on political theory. It extensively discusses power, how to wield power, justice and law, who holds authority and legitimacy, and ideal rules for governance. Here, in this context, we're studying the TTC verses to examine how we are to rule and govern ourselves.

天之道，其猶張弓與？

Tiān zhī dào, qí yóu zhāng gōng yǔ?

高者抑之，下者舉之；
有餘者損之，不足者補之。

Gāo zhě yì zhī, xià zhě jǔ zhī;
Yǒu yú zhě sǔn zhī, bù zú zhě bǔ zhī.

天之道，損有餘而補不足。

Tiān zhī dào, sǔn yǒu yú ér bǔ bù zú.

人之道，則不然，

Rén zhī dào, zé bù rán,

損不足以奉有餘。

sǔn bù zú yǐ fèng yǒu yú.

孰能有餘以奉天下，唯有道者。

Shú néng yǒu yú yǐ fèng tiān xià, wéi yǒu dào zhě.

是以聖人為而不恃，

Shì yǐ shèng rén wéi ér bù shì,

功成而不處，其不欲見賢。

gōng chéng ér bù chù, qí bù yù jiàn xián.

Verse 77 translates as follows:

Is the Way of Heaven like drawing a bow?

That which is high subdues, that which is low elevates;
Cut where there is excess, fill where there is loss.

The Way of Heaven cuts excess to fill loss.
The Way of Humanity divides where there is no division,
cuts where there is loss to fill where there is excess.

Who is it that can offer one's excess to serve these realms?
It is one aligned with the Tao,
the Awakened One who need not be esteemed,
who attains without prestige, whose merits go unseen.

“Is the Way of Heaven like drawing a bow?” This is perhaps a rhetorical question. And yet the line is presented as a riddle for us to work through. *How* is the Way of Heaven like ‘drawing a bow’? Once we sort out our own answer to that question, we can start to understand our own interpretation and insight of the Way.

Drawing a bow to shoot an arrow at a target is both art and skill. Mastering this art – and skill – requires patience, practice, and dedication. With respect to your own spiritual journey, are you patient with yourself? Do you have a daily practice? What is your daily practice? As for dedication, that’s personal commitment, that’s ceremonial rites, and it’s consistency, focus, resilience, and passion.

The beginner’s starting point is one often overlooked, and that is making sure the equipment you begin practice with, as a beginner, meets you where you are, is the right fit, is well tailored to you and specifically you.

Likewise, with Taoist philosophy and mysticism, start with a practice that meets you where you are.

The Mandalas of Heaven is such a practice. Therefore, Part I (Lesser Mandala of Heaven) and Part II (Greater Mandala of Heaven) cultivation work is to be approached “like drawing a bow (and arrow).”

When we say the Way of Heaven is like drawing a bow 張弓, listen carefully to what is *not* said. It is *not* like shooting an arrow. Drawing a bow is the preparatory step in anticipation of the actual work ahead (the shooting, and the hitting of a target). Thus, the Way of Heaven is about taking those preparatory measures. The Mandalas of Heaven that we’re working through in this course *are*

such preparatory measures – that is one of the esoteric keys being revealed here.

In the era these lines from the TTC were written, the scholar-noble reading the text would have some skills and knowledge in archery, and thus the line is fully intended for the reader to reflect on those skills in archery and apply them to the philosophy of life.

To draw a bow, one end of the bow is raised, one end is lowered.

You apply force *gradually*, and it must be executed in such a way that achieves balance. That balance is achieved through an effortless uncontentious opposition.

A lot of focus is needed to ensure correct alignment before you release.

Too much tension, you'll break the instrument (your bow). Not enough tension, and you fail at the shot.

How do these technical aspects of drawing a bow inform how you are to approach spiritual cultivation?

As for what that line, “Is the Way of Heaven like drawing a bow?” tells us about Taoist virtue and ethics, it exemplifies the meaning of balance and equilibrium, which is to say in Taoist ethics, these concepts of virtue and justice are situational, a principle emphasized in Verse 73, Net of Heaven.

My final takeaway from that first line is: The spiritual cultivation work for aspiring Awakened Ones to engage in, in alignment with the Way of Heaven, is about applying just the right amount of tension to maintain balance and equilibrium, so that you have the precise focus you need for Attainment. Be ever mindful: no more, and no less. There can't be *no* tension; but also, too much forceful tension and you'll break.

Lines from Verse 77 to live by:

That which is high subdues, that which is low elevates;
Cut where there is excess, fill where there is loss.

If you think about it, that rule applies to your health and wellness, Qi Gong, tai chi, and martial arts practice, and also to how you approach inner alchemical cultivation, to every aspect of life.

There are also political undertones. After all, the Tao Te Ching's original intention was a book to guide kings in wise rulership.

Something that appears elite, which society will praise and exalt, can only achieve that height by oppressing and pushing down others, subduing *something*. And likewise, those who are low are the foundation whose backs are lifting up others, and in doing so, is earning good karma.

We then get a direct comparison and contrast between the Way of Heaven vs. the Way of Humanity:

The Way of Heaven cuts excess to fill loss. There is something unsentimental about how Heaven strives to restore balance.

The Way of Humanity divides where there is no division, cuts where there is loss to fill where there is excess. In other words, it's human to reinforce imbalance.

These lines, like what we saw in Verse 73, are again speaking to the difference between divine justice and human justice, and reminds the aspiring Awakened One to know how to discern between the two. Our perception of what is fair and unfair doesn't necessarily reflect the Way of Heaven, and that is an uncomfortable truth that we need to cultivate the wisdom to make sense of.

Reflect on the final section of this verse:

Who is it that can offer one's excess to serve these realms?
It is one aligned with the Tao,
the Awakened One who need not be esteemed,
who attains without prestige, whose merits go unseen.

In the line space provided, free-write your interpretation of and key takeaway from these four lines, and reflect on how these four lines will inform your approach to spiritual cultivation.

Verse 81: Attaining Without Harm

The final of the four verses presents the ethical signature of the Way of Heaven, juxtaposed with a line instructive on the Way of the Awakened Ones.

In the canonical ordering of the received text, this is the last verse (or chapter) in the book, and the final instruction on virtue, ethics, and governance (Te, 德). Which is to say that the very last and concluding lines of the TTC, closing the text, ends with a reiteration on the Way of Heaven.

信言不美，美言不信。	Xìn yán bù měi, měi yán bù xìn.
善者不辯，辯者不善。	Shàn zhě bù biàn, biàn zhě bù shàn.
知者不博，博者不知。	Zhì zhě bù bó, bó zhě bù zhī.
聖人不積，	Shèng rén bù jī,
既以為人己愈有，	jì yǐ wéi rén jǐ yù yǒu,
既以與人己愈多。	jì yǐ yǔ rén jǐ yù duō.
天之道，利而不害；	Tiān zhī dào, lì ér bù hài;
聖人之道，為而不爭。	shèng rén zhī dào, wéi ér bù zhēng.

Verse 81 translates as follows:

Truth does not flatter; what flatters is not the truth.
 That which is benevolent is not belligerent, that which is belligerent is not benevolent.
 That which is insightful need not appear profound; that which is profound need not appear insightful.

The Awakened Ones are not gatekeepers—
 the more they give, the more they maintain,
 the more they let, the more they gain.

The Way of Heaven is to attain without harm;
 The Way of the Awakened Ones is to be without contention.

I highly urge those interested in deep-diving into the Tao Te Ching to source multiple other translations of Verse 81. It's one of the most oft-quoted, oft talked about passages from the TTC.

That second line “善者不辯，辯者不善” is hard to fully translate, because every English translation captures only one facet of this multifaceted and beautiful line. Shàn “善” means benevolence, goodness, and compassion, and is one of the cornerstones of the

Way of Heaven. “辯” means to argue, to be contentious, even to split hairs with people, to create conflict.

Thus, it's saying that those who embody shàn 善 don't argue, compete or create conflict with others, don't debate just for the sake of debating, and don't feel the need to get contentious just to prove their point.

One who embodies shàn 善 won't be motivated by the need to prevail, and if you're driven by the need to win, then you are not shàn 善. And if you are not shàn 善, then you have diverged from the Way of Heaven and thus are no longer on the path of the Awakened Ones.

Now let's turn our attention to these lines:

The Awakened Ones are not gatekeepers—the more they give, the more they maintain, the more they let, the more they gain.

The Way of Heaven is to attain without harm;
The Way of the Awakened Ones is to be without contention.

Rewrite those lines into plainspeak. What do these lines from Verse 81 mean to you and how will they inform your spiritual Path?

In that line, “聖人不積” (shèng rén bù jī), I’m translating “積” (jī) to “gatekeeper” because the line text is in reference to one who hoards something so that others may not attain it, and therefore who blocks entry and access to a resource that others would benefit from. The gatekeeper is one who controls and thus discriminates who can have access; this is to be an arbiter of another’s legitimacy, to enforce oversight and monitoring on another’s Way. The word itself means to block, to cause blockage, to cause hindrance. It implies harboring and collecting for oneself only, hoarding, and not allowing equitable disbursement.

There is a distinction I'd like to point out here: Verse 81 is clear that Awakened Ones are not gatekeepers, but it's not saying there are *no* gatekeepers on the Way. So personally, I interpret this line has reminding me that I, in my aspirational path toward Awakening, should never be one who hoards or blocks. The one thing I can do is to make sure I am not in someone else's way.

Though that isn't to say this Path is for everyone. There *are* gatekeepers in this tradition; they're just not human.



The Way of Heaven (which is the overarching Tao – or teachings – of the Lesser and the Greater Mandalas) is a Taoist principle of cosmic regulation.

Functionally, it's saying there is a certain methodical and cyclical flow to the Tao. To be in alignment with it is the Way of Heaven; to not be in alignment and therefore in contention with that flow is the Way of Humanity. Awakened Ones are called upon to align themselves with the Way of Heaven.

While the Way of Heaven is about virtue, it does not frame virtue or ethics as commandments. It's about how to self-regulate, be non-coercive, how not to hoard, to not overstay your welcome, to not be deceived by pleasing appearances, to not use pleasing appearances to deceive, and to embody unforced integrity.

This Work is not about seeking fame or fortune.

No amount of power you accumulate can ward off impending misfortune when you pursue power for “wealth, grandeur, and vanity,” notes the TTC.

This is where we get the canonical warnings about the dangers of these types of cultivation practices, because the productive result *is* the accumulation of power. And if you don't have the guardrails in place to regulate how you wield that power, that power can and will corrupt. Having created cosmic imbalance, Heaven will rectify that imbalance. Thus, cultivate in alignment with the Way of Heaven, because cultivation in opposition to it doesn't end well.

Before we had gone any further, it was important for us to work through the Taoist doctrine of the Way of Heaven. Your understanding of the Way of Heaven and its guiding principles should inform how you approach the Pre-Work, and then combined, that code of ethics and virtue should regulate every aspect of how you practice the Mandalas.

Pre-Work and Preparations

Self-Assessment & Baseline Prep

Start by establishing the groundwork for your One Hundred Day journey, which will consist of the following:

- ◆ **Baseline Wellness Check.** Self-assess your current physical, emotional, and mental stability before beginning any cultivation practice.
- ◆ **Ethical Grounding.** Reflect on what “ethical living” means to you and how integrity, compassion, and restraint guide your actions.
- ◆ **Ritual Environment.** Prepare a personal ritual space to separate daily mundane life from intentional spiritual cultivation work. This form of boundary setting is a safeguard, and also helps you to stay grounded and focused with clarity.

VERSE 5: GUARD THE CENTER 守中, TAO TE CHING

天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；	Heaven and Earth are unsentimental, while the Myriad Beings are but pawns;
聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。	the awakened ones are unsentimental, while the numerous clans are but pawns.
天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？	This space between Heaven and Earth, is it like smelting ore for precious metal?
虛而不屈，動而愈出。	Hollow and yet not depleting, in movement and yet emerging.
多言數窮，不如守中。	Many words for blaming and disputing, but it is better to guard the center.

Guarding the Center 守中 Baseline Practice

In Taoist inner alchemy, “Guarding the Center” (守中, shǒu zhōng) is a beginner-level, layperson-friendly mindfulness practice for establishing a baseline of grounding and centering.

The term itself is a reference to a passage from Verse 5 of the Tao Te Ching: 不如守中, meaning to never lose your center of gravity and calmness, no matter the external stimulus. “守中” translates to “guard the center,” to defend and protect the central position so that nothing throws you off balance. The passage in the entirety is about maintaining emptiness and stillness in the center hollow of the self,

which means to expunge your biases and any sentiments or attachments that cause you to be biased or emotionally imbalanced.

In one of the 13th century source texts we'll be covering in this coursework that talks about the Mandala of Heaven practices, the text prefaces the section on the Lesser Mandala of Heaven by addressing laypersons with dull constitutions who want to engage with these cultivation practices: start by Guarding the Center, notes the text, using the term “守中” (shǒu zhōng) in the context of a mindfulness practice.

Alchemizing requires warmth, or the warming up of substances, and therefore the term “溫養” (wēn yǎng) is a key principle in Taoist alchemy, and is referenced in that noted passage. Wen 溫 means warming up, adding “Sun” and “Water” into a “Vessel” (the word’s etymology). [It’s also my family name, Wen 溫.] Yang 養 means to nourish, to cultivate, to raise, i.e., raising energy. Altogether, the term means the slow, steady, consistent application of effort, a continuous action that results in the “warming up” of a substance or energy form.

In other words, consistent, persistent mindfulness practices is a required prerequisite here, especially if your energy constitution is currently “cold.” Warmth corresponds with vitality; cold signifies stagnation, loss of movement, and diminishing life force. In the body, circulation moves because of warmth; digestion transforms because of warmth; reproduction, metabolism, it’s all because of “warmth,” according to Taoist alchemy and Traditional Chinese Medicine (though always remember: balance and temperance, because extreme heat is detrimental).

Whereas coldness in the body, be that a physiological descriptive or a figurative one, causes stagnation, pain, cramping, mental dullness, and weakness. Shen, or “spirit cannot rise” if the body constitution is too “cold.”

So, the preface notes that anyone who is currently more prone to a “cold” inner constitution needs to start with Guarding the Center before undertaking the Lesser Mandala of Heaven.

What does “feeling cold and dull” mean in contemporary terms? Well, for starters, literally feeling cold – if you tend to have cold hands and cold feet, get cold easily, or your skin and lips tend to look pale and dull, tend to have low blood pressure, then general, generic guidance is to do more to stay more. Don’t let your conditions get to the point where you’re feeling cold and listless.

You, more so than most, need to be proactive and preventive when it comes to staying warm, or “溫養” (wēn yǎng).

Also, figuratively, feelings of fear, grief, sorrow, depression, apathy, lethargy, or fatigue are also “cold.” Hence, before we start, you’ll be doing a baseline wellness self-check as part of the Pre-Work.

So if you intuit that your inner constitution is a bit more on the “cold” side innately or even just as of late due to recent events in your life, or your experiencing some feelings of depression or fatigue, the advice is to engage with Guarding the Center mindfulness practices first, as part of your Pre-Work, if you want the Mandalas of Heaven practices to be effective.

“Guarding the Center 守中” is a general umbrella term for many different modalities of mindfulness or meditation practices to help you, well, guard the center – to cultivate stillness. Most grounding and centering exercises are likely to be considered forms of Guarding the Center.

In *I Ching, The Oracle* (2023), Practicum 6.3 (appearing on page. 258), the “Guarding of the One Meditation 守一冥想” is one form of Guarding the Center mindfulness practice. The most basic form of this Meditation is to sit or lie down comfortably in a position that optimizes your state of calm, rest, and relaxation (however, you also don’t want to fall asleep, so not *too* comfortable either!). For me, I always do this in cross-legged meditation position with hands resting in bhairava mudra (placing one hand above the other, palms up, resting as if cradling your lower dantian. The *yang* Sun version is to rest the right hand on top of the left hand; the *yin* Moon version is to rest the left hand on top of the right).

Close your eyes, project a full body mirror image of yourself in front of you, facing this mirror image of you. Then visualize that reflection of you illuminating, one at a time, the colors corresponding to the Wu Xing five dynamic elemental phases:

1. Visualize that mirror image of you illuminating azure green, with an azure green aura, corresponding with Wood;
2. Then the azure green changes color to a vermillion red, for Fire;
3. Then the vermillion red shifts to an imperial yellow for Earth;
4. That yellow brightens to gold, lightens to white and silver for Metal;

5. The silvery-white radiance begins to darken to blue from a light blue all the way to a dark royal blue for Water;
6. The royal blue lightens into an azure green, returning the cycle back to Wood, and concluding with the phase Wood signals the body toward growth and rejuvenation;
7. Finally, restore the mirror reflection to you, neutral in color tones, though now radiating healthier, more vibrant, fuller with life. Visualize that reflection returning into your physical body, merging with you. Take several slow, deep, patient breaths here to let the union settle in.

This easy cyclical visualization of the Wu Xing colors in the Guarding of the One meditation is both powerful and easily accessible. By sequentially engaging with Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water, you're harmonizing your body's internal energies, focusing on each to clarify it, one by one, you're embodying a form of anchored and structured awareness that helps with emotional regulation and reducing stress. For those dealing with mild depressive or anxious states, this is a highly effective go-to self-regulating practice to restore calmness and centeredness.

Alternatively, if you're struggling to remember the exact sequence of colors corresponding to the Wu Xing, no worries – an easy and just as effective modification is to go with the rainbow, ROYGBIV. If cycling the seven colors of the rainbow in the sequence of ROYGBIV (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) is easier for you to focus on the exercise itself (rather than getting distracted trying to remember the exact Wu Xing sequence), then opt for the ROYGBIV.

Guidance for Safe Practice

The Lesser Mandala of Heaven practice is, at its very basic form, teaching you how to breathe deeply and slowly, which universally modern medicine now encourages.

It's considered pre-Kindergarten basics for anybody interested in strengthening your core, be that physical core strength, mental and emotional core, or spiritual core. Even more so than mindful meditation, yoga, or tai chi, the instructions here are so universally fundamental that it's secular.

And that is why this course work is for anybody from any background, any tradition, of any spiritual denomination or who is currently working with any esoteric system or mystery school.

Even for those not spiritual at all, who are just interested in being physically and mentally healthier, I highly recommend these practices. This course simply presents these universal practices through the specific cultural vocabulary of Taoism.

Because, no matter what it is you're trying to do – increase your baseline health metrics so you're stronger, sleep better, have more energy throughout the day, and don't fatigue as easily – or it's advanced forms of ceremonial ritual magic in pursuit of knowledge and conversation with sacred higher registers and you want to be able to have the baseline physical, mental, and spiritual capacity to *get* there – may I be so bold as to strongly encourage you to *start here*, with this coursework.

Which is to assure you, on my honor, that there is nothing spiritually or psychically dangerous about these practices or principles.

Yet they are like any form of disciplined training that involves your body and mind. The same safety concerns can be said about driving a car: billions of people do it every single day without incident, but that doesn't mean we hand over the keys to someone who has never been taught the basics. There are rules of the road, a need for steady focus, and some common-sense safety checks before you start the engine.

That is precisely what this section and the Pre-Work are for: to make sure you understand the fundamentals. Once you've got that grounding, you'll see that the Mandala of Heaven practices are not only perfectly safe, but one of the most effective ways you'll have ever encountered for harmonizing your inner energies and strengthening body, mind, and spirit.

Back to the driving analogy.

The Lesser Mandala practice involves “driving a car,” in a manner of speaking (at least that’s the analogy I like), steering the flow of your internal energies along the meridians, guiding in a specific, focused way. So if you enter in a state of agitation, you’re probably not properly controlling that “vehicle.” It’ll be harder to guide the flow properly, because your mind or body is too distracted.

If you’ve never practiced inner alchemy of any sort before, then yes, the first few times you put in a full effort doing the Lesser Mandala, you may experience mild dizziness, nausea, soreness around the chest area, or minor headaches, or even ringing ears. It’s not unlike weightlifting for the very first time, or right after a prolonged period of inactivity — you’re going to be sore the next day. But it’s a good

sore. Slowly as you build up your strength, the mild soreness goes away. I find ginger to be really healing here, or a topical application of a camphor oil or balm.

On the other hand, if you experience very strong emotional surges in a negative way, or sharp, significant physical or mental pain, stop immediately. Taoist teachers emphasize that such reactions may point to a deeper imbalance in the body. It might not hurt to also get a full medical eval just to rule out any issues you might not have been aware of, like abnormal growths or blockages.

It's not unlike hiking or running — they're healthy forms of exercise, but not if you're doing them on a broken leg. So if you are not within the range of ordinary health (physical, mental, and spiritual), then any form of intensive movements of subtle internal energy bodies can run a risk of possibly exacerbating currently open wounds.

As for the Greater Mandala of Heaven, let's start by talking about hallucinations or delusional interpretations. A hallucination is a perception that you experience as very real and occurring in an externalized space, but there was no external stimulus to induce that perception. It's not the same as an imagination or dream; it's a pathological hyperactivation or misfiring in the brain.

Generally, meditation practices and Qi gong or tai chi practices can have an influence on our hormones, typically for the better.

For example, studies have shown that meditation can lower baseline cortisol levels, which is just a fancy way of saying it helps you to reduce stress. Meditation practices can also increase serotonin availability, a neurotransmitter that helps regulate your mood, appetite, and sleep patterns. Breath-focused meditation has been linked to increasing endorphin releases, bringing a sense of calm. In general, routine meditation habits significantly increase brain plasticity.

While there is no current science to explain the lore held by Taoist practitioners about the risks of hallucinations incurred during these types of Mandala practices, here's my unverified hypothesis:

As I will cover in the Part II lecture, personifying abstract concepts (personifying facets of the Tao) and temporarily externalizing them so as to engage in dialogue or to strengthen bonds via invocations or mantra incantations is a powerful and highly effective method for reconciling inner and outer bodies. It's a process for advancing command of the inner Lesser Mandala toward command of the outer Greater Mandala.

Here's the rub: The grounded, well-centered practitioner remains crystal clear at distinguishing between virtual reality and physical reality, what is an avatar being presented, and what is the True Form.

When people talk about the dangers of hallucinations, they're referring to the same risk of people mistaking online virtual reality for actual, material truths.

Also, we've already established that focused, intense meditation-like practices can change our neurotransmitter and hormone levels, creating noticeable changes in our internal biochemical systems.

My best guess is that visualizations (the personifying of the Tao, so that the human mind can better grasp those abstract concepts) *plus* the changes to our biochemical systems that meditation and internal alchemy practices can induce leads to those visualizations feeling very, *very* real.

Again, it is not unlike the outlier minority of people who lose their grip on physical reality vs. online virtual reality. Fortunately, reality testing is a skill anybody can learn, and there are practical self-assessment tools you can use to keep yourself in check.

Thus, before you undertake this journey, let's run a baseline wellness self-check.



Baseline Wellness Self-Check

ASSES YOUR BASELINE METRICS. At the starting point of this 100 days, what is the condition of your physical, emotional and mental, and spiritual landscape? How is your sense of clarity, focus, your mood, and level of confidence? Summarize your baseline state of being.

BODY AWARENESS: Generally speaking, are you feeling at your typical level of physical strength and agility? Note any areas of the body that have experienced persistent, recurring pain, tightness, or is easily fatigued.

Even healthy, stable minds can experience blurred lines between imagination and reality when sleep-deprived or under extreme levels of stress.

ADEQUATE REST: Are you giving your own body enough time to rest and recover from strenuous activities or stress? If there has been sleep deprivation, an inordinate high amount of stress, sensory overload, or you're midstream of trauma processing, then you must first and foremost give your body and mind a proportionate amount of time to rest and recover. Reflect on whether you have been getting restorative sleep and are you being mindful of the recovery time your body needs. In the space below, log notes on your sleep health.

NUTRITION & HYDRATION: Are you eating whole, nutrient-dense foods? Are you staying hydrated and drinking enough water daily? After meals, you should feel ***nourished***, not stuffed. If your mouth feels dry or you're very thirsty, then you're already dehydrated. Try to be preventive and not get to that point of dehydration.

DETOXIFYING BOWEL MOVEMENT: You want to pay attention to your bowel movement. Are you eliminating on a regular basis, comfortably? Healthy urine should be a light straw yellow, clear, not cloudy, and minimal bubbles to indicate healthy kidney function. If it is too light, there may be too much yin and weakened yang; if it is too dark, there is too much internal heat and you're dehydrated. Stool should be within your ordinary ranges as well. Take note of your general bowel movements in the past month or so.

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS: How have you been feeling this past month? Self-assess the state of your personal Qi, or dynamic energy levels. In other words, are you able to self-regulate your emotions and energy capacity? Reflect on how you deal with sudden, surprise curveballs. Are you able to re-balance yourself and not get stuck in feelings of anger, sadness, or fear/anxiety? How energized do you feel about life, nature, and art?

SPIRITUAL HEALTH: What does your self-talk sound like? Are you critical and condescending toward yourself or are you hopeful, encouraging, and supportive of yourself? Do you feel a strong, clearly defined sense of purpose? Whether it's strong faith in yourself or faith that greater powers are present and protective of you, self-assess how much faith you have that everything is going to be all right.

ENVIRONMENTAL HARMONY: Before you get started on this cultivation immersion, take some time to tidy up your home and work space. Clear it of trash, dust, and debris. While I'm not the type of feng shui advisor who immediately calls all clutter bad, you *do* need to be objectively mindful of whether it's *healthy* clutter. Malignant clutter is scattered accumulation resulting from laziness and lethargy; healthy clutter is active brainstorming, or creativity in motion. Healthy clutter can still be good Qi; malignant clutter is almost always bad Qi. =) In the space below, log what your environment looked like before you started, and what you are doing to restore harmony and balance as part of your pre-work.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Baseline Holistic Health & Wellness Self-Check.
<input type="checkbox"/>	This entire study work hinges on your self-awareness. Know yourself well enough to determine whether you are currently experiencing significant physical or mental health crises, where your focus right now should be on healing that crisis rather than doing this coursework. Reflect on your answers to the prompts in this Pre-Work section and assess for yourself whether now is a good time to be undertaking this cultivation practice.

The Importance of Ethics

Virtue and ethical living isn't peripheral to Taoist alchemy – it is the very basis of alchemical cultivation. To be virtuous, per the Taoist tradition, is to be like water.

VERSE 8: BE LIKE WATER 上善若水, TAO TE CHING

上善若水。

水善利萬物而不爭，
處衆人之所惡，故幾於道。

居善地，

心善淵，

與善仁，

言善信，

正善治，

事善能，

動善時。

夫唯不爭，故無尤。

The greatest virtue is to be like water.

The virtue of water benefits the Myriad Beings without contention, dwelling among the castaways and where it is most foul, and thus it is the Tao.

Dwell benevolently upon the Earth,

Sense benevolently the dark abyss,

Grant benevolently agape love,

Speak benevolently the truest words,

Lead benevolently to cure and guide,

Till benevolently and with diligence,

Change benevolently with the seasons.

Feud not with the fool, and so fault not.

Verse 8 from the Tao Te Ching sets forth seven guiding principles for ethical living, seven facets of “shan 善,” or benevolence, which the text analogizes as being like water:

1. Live in harmony with nature and your environment.
2. Your heart should be pure and fearless when it encounters that which is unknown, that which you fear, or when confronting the shadow.
3. Embody the virtue of Rén 仁, or agape love, and always be humane.
4. Communicate in a way that is honest and with integrity.
5. All forms of governance and rulership should be toward curing what is ill and providing gentle guidance.
6. To till is to cultivate, to labor, to plow – do your work with kindness and with competence.
7. Do not resist changing with the times.

It cannot be emphasized enough that the most important and critical element of all of these practices as your personal guardrails is ethics. The one repeating note and common thread across all of these texts is the emphasis on ethical living.

Ethics and virtue must be your guardrails, and it is what keeps you from getting led astray by the dangers of mara that is one of the risks inherent in any esoteric tradition.

The happy news is the guidance is ludicrously basic:

- Be the kind of person who cares about yourself and cares about others.
- Your thoughts and intentions should always be in good faith.
- Have compassion. Not everybody is like you, and so don't expect them to be like you, or do what you would do.
- Be charitable. In the ways you are able to, give to those who are less lucky than you.
- Eat healthy. Eat clean. This is how you ensure the quality and potency of your Jing so that it can be refined into stronger, more powerful Qi.
- Eat in moderation. In general, avoid excess. If there is excess and extremes in your mundane life, it will be more difficult to achieve balance and harmony in your spiritual life.
- Make sure your living environment is healthy and clean.
- Treat your physical body as a temple and take care of it as you would a temple.
- Be mindful of your mental health and well-being.
- Care about other people's well-being, too.
- Avoid excessive activity that you know causes anxiety
- You also don't want to be inactive or lethargic
- Don't be the problem. First, do no harm.

The Tao Te Ching is one of the most if not the most seminal texts on Taoism, and its principles permeates through Taoism as a philosophy, as a religion, and as a practical system of alchemical transformation. The “Tao” in the title, you're probably familiar with already: “道” (Dào), meaning the Way, the Path, the Teachings. The

“Te” in Tao Te Ching is “德” (Dé), meaning virtuous conduct and living – ethics. Virtue is the basis of Taoist cultivation.

In your Pre-Work, complete the self-reflection and journaling prompts in the subsequent section to start thinking about the ethical code of conduct you’ve established or are establishing for yourself:

- What affirmative duties do you owe to yourself to care for your own wellbeing? Your body is a temple and it needs to be treated as such.
- What affirmative duties do you owe the people around you? How can you be the one who leads the people in your life to be more harmonious? Sometimes this means you have to be the calmer person, the one who takes a step back so the other has space to calm down. Sometimes this means you need to do the difficult thing and *not* fan the flames of conflict.
- What affirmative duties do you own the environment that is providing you with resources? How can you ensure you are living in harmony with the land, and with the nature spirits of the land you’re occupying?

Reflections on Ethical Living

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Ethical Living.
<input type="checkbox"/>	For this dedicated 100 days, commit to ethical living. This will have differing meanings to each individual, though the notes I provided are fairly universal: be the kind of person who values yourself and values others; be compassionate and charitable; be conscientious of your environment and surroundings, and strive to be in harmony with that environment.

AFFIRMATIVE DUTIES TO THE SELF. In what ways will you commit to honoring your body as a temple? Note your personal commitments to intentional, mindful self-care practices that honor and nourish your life-force.

AFFIRMATIVE DUTIES TO OTHERS. In Eastern traditions and cultures, the concept of affirmative duties to certain interpersonal relationships is the very heart of ethical living and a healthy, functional society. (This is not to ignore how it can dip into extremism and end up marginalizing certain social groups.) Here, for your purposes, keep your

considerations simple and general: What is the social responsibility you feel is reasonable for you to uphold to be a kind, thoughtful, and considerate person?

What are your social responsibilities to your family and closest loved ones? This can be as mundane as cooking healthy meals for them, providing for them, making sure you're attentive and listening when they need someone to hear them, to show that you see them when they need to be seen, etc.

What are your social responsibilities to your friends and colleagues? Think about the people you spend time with outside your family. What does it mean to be a good friend or colleague? This is about awareness, reciprocity, and presence. Are you reliable in your commitments? Do you make space to sincerely celebrate their successes? Are you supportive when they go through hardships? Write out how you are committed to uphold integrity in your social and work circles (e.g., avoiding gossip and divisive speech, encouraging mutual respect, etc.). What can you personally do to help sustain harmony and trust in your social circles?

What are your social responsibilities to your community and the societies you are part of? How can you contribute to your local community (supporting small businesses, volunteering, maintaining courtesy and civility in shared spaces, etc.)? How do you help to foster inclusivity, fairness, and compassion in your communities, both online and in-person? Are you thinking about the future after you're gone, i.e., acting in ways today to leave behind a healthier, more harmonious world for those who come after? Your affirmative duties to society and the environment are expressions of the same care you extend to your family and loved ones.

Three Taoist Virtues 三德

「三德：一曰正直，二曰剛克，三曰柔克。」

INTEGRITY ◆ FORTITUDE ◆ TENDERNESS

In Taoist cosmology, the Tao and nature are said to abide by three virtues: Integrity 正直, Fortitude 剛克, and Tenderness 柔克. Thus, beneficent government and politics must align with nature and also abide by these three virtues. In turn, each one of us should strive to abide by these three virtues so as to be in alignment with the cosmos.

That is one key distinction between Eastern philosophy and Western: Christian philosophy assumes human nature is inherently evil, and we must work hard to overcome that innate evil to be virtuous and good. Whereas here, Taoist philosophy describes nature itself as having integrity, fortitude, and tenderness, and to understand what these three virtues are, observe nature. The Tao inherently has these three qualities.

INTEGRITY 正直: **What does it mean, to you, to live with integrity?** Integrity is alignment between what you say are your values and what you do, how you behave, and how you treat others. In the 91 BC classical text *Records of the Grand Historian*, “In times of peace and well-being, Integrity is the fitting virtue.” Integrity is uprightness, justice, and rectitude in word and deed.

YOUR COMMITMENT OF INTEGRITY: In the subsequent space, state, for yourself, what your personal commitment is to living with and upholding integrity.

FORTITUDE 剛克: **What does Fortitude mean to you in practice?** How do you respond to adversity, uncertainty, and unexpected changes? Modern corporate speak has a direct equivalent to the classical Taoist virtue of Fortitude: these days, it's called Change Resilience. It is the ability to adapt well to adversity, setbacks, and stress. It's a growth mindset. It's also decisive strength. For those who tend to be recluse, introverted, withdrawn, or timid, Fortitude is the virtue you want to focus your cultivation on. Provide

PRE-WORK BEFORE STARTING THE 100 DAYS

a self-assessment on how well you are able to demonstrate resilience and courage. Be honest with yourself.

YOUR COMMITMENT OF FORTITUDE: In the subsequent space, state, for yourself, what your personal commitment is to practicing and embodying fortitude.

TENDERNESS 柔克: **What does embodying Tenderness mean to you?** Tenderness is the Taoist virtue of being humane, humble, and keeping your ego in check. It is adaptive compassion, and the soft conquering the hard. Reflect on how you practice kindness without weakness, modesty without self-erasure, and compassion without naivete. For those who tend to be exuberant, aggressive, loud, extroverted, or overly visible, Tenderness is the virtue you want to focus your cultivation on.

YOUR COMMITMENT OF TENDERNESS: In the subsequent space, state, for yourself, what your personal commitment is to embodying tenderness.

Personal Ritual Space

Do you *need* to set up an altar or personal ritual space to do this work? No. Is it encouraged? Yes. And here's why.

It's not so much that I think having dedicated personal ritual space is *required*, but rather, it comes highly recommended because it:

- ✓ Immediately puts you in the right state of mind
- ✓ Offers you a sanctuary for emotional regulation – when you are feeling anxious, fearful, uncertain, angry, or aggravated, retreating to your personal ritual space can provide immediate calming and grounding effects
- ✓ Is a powerful representation *to yourself* of how much you value your own spiritual health and want to make space for it in your life
- ✓ Serves as an energetic boundary between your everyday life and your spiritual practice, helping you to stay grounded and ensuring that your spiritual work enhances rather than overwhelms daily routines
- ✓ Creates a psychological cue and effective reminder to cultivate inner stillness and integrate that calm, centered spiritual state into your everyday interactions and engagements
- ✓ Is a personal ritual space or altar is also an important energetic containment: it's a contained locus for spiritual-temporal balance, similar to work-life balance
- ✓ Supports consistency and discipline, inviting you to regular spiritual practice and cultivation
- ✓ From a feng shui perspective, arranging a beautiful, calming sacred space in your home can become a mirror and an amplifier of those powerful, productive spiritual energies in your everyday life – tidying and tending to an altar in turns help your own psyche to mirror the positive state of that altar
- ✓ Encourages symbolic thinking – the objects and arrangements you choose for your altar or ritual space reinforces your relationship with the sacred

It doesn't have to be fancy, and it's not about impressing with the aesthetics (although do take care in the aesthetics to the extent it reflects your inner psyche and what best induces calm and centeredness for you).

Your personal ritual space just needs to be a space that facilitates calm, stillness, and contains symbolic representations of the divine *and* to you connecting with the divine.

Candles, incense, pictorial representations of Divinity that resonate deeply with you, prayer beads, sacred texts, a singing bowl or ritual bells for sacred sound are all generally conducive of that calming and centering effect.

To go beyond the above checklist and get a bit more mystical, your personal ritual space or altar serves as a nexus or bridge between the human, temporal realm and the divine, spiritual realm where guardian spirits, protector spirits, ancestors, or higher spiritual intelligences can pass through and provide you with protection, guidance, and blessings. The practice of burning incense and leaving offerings on the altar are ways we invite those powerful celestial or ancestral spirits to be present in our lives, so that they can protect, guide, and bless.

I also view it as a symbolic representation of my Higher Self. The altar's presence is a constant reminder to actualize that Higher Self. It's a symbolic representation of the Tao, like an avatar for identifying a certain presence. The altar manifests the Divine's presence in my immediate reality, and thus serves as a constant, invited reminder of the principles and way of living I strive to embody.

In setting up my personal ritual space, such as putting up an altar, I will want some representation of each of the following numerology:

1	Supreme Source: Taiyi 太一 / Tao 道	6	Six Transformations 六化 (Hexagram)
2	Yin Yang 陰陽: Taiji 太極	7	Seven Big Dipper Gods 北斗七星
3	Three Treasures 三寶; Three Realms 三才	8	Ba Gua 八卦
4	Four Faces (Images/Symbols) 四象, 四靈	9	Nine Palaces 九宮 (Lo Shu 離書)
5	Wu Xing 五行	10	Mysterious Gate 玄關

Here's the personalized creative part:

You can choose to have, well, ten different, separate fixtures in your personal ritual space to represent each of the ten, or even just each of the nine, with the ten implied...

...or it can be minimalistic with just a one single fixture representative of Divinity, or the Tao, which when you look at it, you immediately know represents 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... up to 9, to express the wholeness and transcendence of 10.

Culturally, for example, in historically practiced folk Taoism, you often see ornate, highly-detailed, decorative, colorful, and, well, let's be candid, "busy" and crowded altars with all manner of representations of divinity, different specifically-named and identified deities, and a wide array of ritual tools and instruments for invoking all aspects corresponding with the numerology of the Tao, and offerings corresponding with the numerology to honor the many names and faces of divinity.

Whereas with more Buddhist-centered Taoist practices or when integrating Taoist principles in a more secular way, personal altars might be quite minimalistic: an elegant prayer table, or even just table space cleared and set aside for providing a calming sanctuary,

and a meditation mat (or meditation cushion) for sitting cross-legged or seated meditation postures.

Which brings us to why I think reserving a quiet personal ritual space is useful: I recommend doing the dedicated Lesser Mandala of Heaven exercises in the seated cross-legged on a meditation cushion.

There are a wide range of functional health benefits for the meditative pose (such as the *Sukhasana* meditation position, or simply “criss-cross applesauce”). Especially as we age, it helps us to maintain hip mobility, knee and angle flexibility, and promote spinal alignment and better posture. Having to sit in meditation position engages your core muscles, supports balance and stability, and over time, helps improve your circulation and joint health. In short, routine use of the meditation pose that’s often used for the Mandala of Heaven practices helps your body and mind to stay more agile, and younger for longer.

Thus, adding the meditation pose component to the Mandala practices increases the many health benefits. And having a dedicated ritual space for this mind-body exercise amplifies those positive and beneficial effects.

However, not everybody will benefit from the seated meditation posture, and it is not suitable for everyone – and that’s perfectly fine.

Bodies vary, and so should our approach to practice. If sitting cross-legged causes discomfort or strain, you can and should adapt the posture. Perhaps it makes more sense for you to sit upright in a chair with both feet grounded, or even recline supported on a bed or couch as needed.

The key principle is alignment and ease – your body should feel stable yet relaxed, never forced. The goal of cultivation is not to conform to form, but to find the form that best and most naturally supports your cultivation.

LOG NOTES ABOUT THE PERSONAL RITUAL SPACE YOU SET UP DURING YOUR MANDALAS CULTIVATION PRACTICE:



Ritual Purification and Restraint in Taoism

Zhāijiè 齋戒 is one of the most fundamental and core principles of practice in Taoist cultivation. In fact, it is so fundamental that it often doesn't even get mentioned in Taoist grimoires and alchemical texts, unless that text is intended for a total novice. For any intermediate let alone advanced texts, practice of zhāijiè 齋戒 is presumed.

Zhāi 齋 means purification and consecration, and is often interpreted or applied in practice as a form of fasting. You'll find a reference to this term in Hexagram 15: Modesty of the I Ching Book of Change, in an implied reference to ritual purification prior to receiving powers or revelation at the temple. In common practice, zhāi 齋 is applied to mean eating clean food, which in many specific lineaged traditions requires some form of fasting, and through ritual fasting, you are able to also cleanse your mind and spirit. Repetitions of mantras for the purpose of consecration of a person or space is another form of zhāi 齋.

Jiè 戒 means restraint, or vow. It means to guard or ward against by making preparations in advance of unforeseen events. *Note:* The word “jiè 戒” appears in the line text of the I Ching four (4x) times: in Line 4 of Hexagram 11: Harmony, Hexagram 62: Pay Attention to Details, and Hexagram 64: After the Ending (what are the odds of *that*?!); and in the image text for Hexagram 45: Assembly.

Zhāijiè 齋戒 serves six core purposes:

1. **Purification of the Body:** It helps to “clear toxins” (in a manner of speaking) to clear the pathways of Qi flow during the Mandala practices.
2. **Clarification of the Mind:** Making sure the food you eat, the clothes you wear, your body, and the living space you occupy are all clean is believed to then help “clean” your mind as well, to balance your emotions, thoughts, cravings, desires, and to calibrate you into the optimal state for Taoist cultivation.
3. **Ethical Conduct:** This goes back to the importance of virtue as a functional technology. Again, the belief here is ritual purification and restraint naturally predisposes you to ethical, virtuous conduct, which in turn ensures healthy, productive spiritual cultivation.
4. **Spiritual Protection:** The most practical purpose for ritual purification and personal practices of restraint is spiritual protection. It prevents you from deviating onto self-

destructive paths, especially when you're engaging in deep, intense cultivation practices like the Mandalas. Thus, it's a form of safeguard and security to ensure your own stability.

5. **Spirit Contacts and Receiving Revelation:** Getting a bit into Taoist occult philosophy here, there's this notion that you can't force a spirit to be loyal to you; sure, just as you see in various Western occult traditions, there are methods for forcing a spirit to do a specific thing for you, but it is against their natural will and you do not earn their loyalty that way. *Zhāijiè* 齋戒 is taught as a method for establishing strong resonance with the spirit realm in a way that inspires them to be loyal to you out of their natural will.
6. **Purification and Clarification of the World:** The incidental benefit of true *zhāijiè* 齋戒 practices is that it makes you a good steward of the land, resources, and the world around you. And so you're contributing greatly to the improvement of the world, simply by adopting personal practices of *zhāijiè* 齋戒.

There is no one universal rule with respect to ritual fasting. In many southern Chinese and Taiwanese traditions, it means abstaining from beef; when there is strong Buddhist influence, then in addition to vegetarianism, you don't eat the five pungents (garlic, ginger, onions, leek, chives). There are also rules around not eating overly indulgent or rich foods, and maintaining a simple diet, with ingredients cooked lightly. Then, of course, there's *fasting* fasting, where you go certain periods of time without eating at all.

My practical advice here is this: Eat clean, by which I mean opt for whole foods, a lot of vegetables, nothing too salty, oily, or pungent, and abstaining from gluttony. Build your dietary restrictions from that point in a direction that makes the most sense for you.

Behavioral and social restraints are also part of ritual purification. Don't let yourself get overtaken by extreme forms of emotion. Be the one in control of your thoughts and feelings. As applicable to modern times, avoid consuming media that scatters your focus and attention. Avoid media that manipulates your behavior.

The third most important aspect of *zhāijiè* 齋戒 is ritual cleansing. This is ritual cleansing of yourself and of your living space. Most practitioners have dedicated ritual clothes, so they can keep that article of clothing clean and pristine. Burn incense daily, or at least routinely, to clear the energy around you, and to invite in helpful, beneficent spirits.

Is the Full 100 Days Required?

Yes.

I'm just kidding with you.

The full 100 days is *strongly recommended*, especially for us modern folk, because it forces you to slow down, and to cultivate patience for yourself.

Depth cannot be achieved overnight. Traditional Chinese and Taoist practices generally discourage pursuit of instant success, and attainment of power is premised on delayed gratification principles. Preventive care and laying strong foundations take time. Don't rush the process; the only person you cheat is yourself.

The Qing dynasty text *The Fundamentals of Taoist Alchemy* cites Cao Huanyang 曹還陽, a renowned and highly revered 16th century Taoist alchemist who taught the Mandalas of Heaven cultivation practices, which he (or the tradition/lineage inspired by his teachings) called the Secret Formula for Cultivating Body and Mind 性命雙修全決全法.

According to lore, Cao could teach his disciples Attainment of the Formula in just 30 days. So it's still within historical and cultural precedent to have achieved Attainment through these practices in 30 days. 😊

But here's me arguing my case to you for the 100 days:

When you dedicate yourself to a routine for 100 days, you've at that point created real structural changes to your brain (neuroplasticity).

You're more likely to extract and integrate life-long beneficial practices from this coursework after you've done it for 100 days than if you only try it for 30. After 100 days, you can say with great confidence – and authority – “This was all BS, none of it worked for me” or “Wow that was life-changing, I am permanently integrating parts of what I learned here into my forever routine, and I am going to be teaching this to everybody I know.”

But like I said – some dude from the 16th century claimed all his disciples mastered the Mandalas in just one moon cycle. So who am I to say you can't?

Role of the Master and Transmission

You will hear – and correctly so – that traditions of Taoist inner alchemy are transmitted down lineages, and require a master-student relationship for that transmission of esoteric knowledge to take place. I don't disagree with the counsel. It's good advice no matter how you look at it. Having a highly-skilled, highly-experienced teacher to guide you through your beginner fumbles will keep you from going astray. You'll learn faster, because someone is there to immediately correct your mistakes, clarify misinterpretations, and guide your practice. Inner alchemy is also said to have profound effects on your mind and body, and so there are going to be risks involved if you go at it alone.

And yet the very premise of this Mandalas cultivation approach I'm sharing is one where there is no master and there is no master-to-student transmission. I'm espousing the role of your own higher self, and therefore the emphasis on virtue and ethics, as your master teacher, and for the esoteric knowledge to pass by divine transmission. It is a divinity-to-devotee transmission.

This approach is not about being one more link in an unbroken chain of lineaged relationships. This approach is about receiving it straight from Source. Does this mean achievement is less likely? Yes. Does it mean the path is going to be harder? Absolutely yes. And likely less efficient. After all, you will need to sort out the right answer for yourself. And your only teacher is failure, so learn from those failures as quickly as possible.

In this approach I'm espousing, the gatekeeper isn't initiation into a lineage; it's competency. Either you have what it takes to do it, or you don't.

Lineage transmission has never been about how to convey power to you, the recipient, anyway; it has always been about safeguarding access. It protects the knowledge. Here, my philosophy is that only through your proven (to the gods) demonstration of virtue will the gods bestow you with the sacred knowledge.

That being said, I keep harping on ethics and virtue because I truly do believe that so long as you keep consistent to a code of virtuous conduct – with the Three Taoist Virtues being the best source of truth you can get for keeping that consistency – you prove to the heavens that you have what it takes; and the practice of virtue (to be differentiated from virtue signaling...) is how you cultivate what it takes.

But if you are in need for guidance, may I suggest the I Ching oracle. Ask the Divine to help you to see your own blind spots; divination can help you to track your progress. My book *I Ching, The Oracle* was designed and cast specifically to help such practitioners as yourself stay true to your Path and attain your Elixir.

Plus, even with master-student transmission, the understanding is it's the transmission of the tools you need to attain the Elixir. No master attains the Elixir *for* the student. At that last leg of the journey, even with a master to get you to that point, you're walking the final milestone on your own.

For many of us who do have a firsthand understanding of lineaged tradition, its attributes and its limitations, the uncomfortable truth is, when all is said and done, the reality is: there is no teacher; you have no master. And so all I'm doing is having all of us face that reality right upfront, from the get-go.

In Taoist lineage traditions, a master is a conduit 媒, a mirror 鏡, and most important of all, for the tradition, the gatekeeper 關. A master isn't the one who creates the Elixir for you, or transmits the Elixir itself *to* you. You progress from student to a master yourself only after *you* have created the Elixir for yourself, and received knowledge and understanding of it.

What I have endeavored to do here, with the way I have framed the Mandalas practice, is to carefully curate direction and guidance that does what a master would do: give you the canon, set up the guardrails, ask the spirits to protect you, and do what every master or teacher must ultimately do—trust that you have what it takes to find your way; have faith that I have done everything in my power to fully equip you for the task.

In short, I'm relying on ethics as the initiation rite. When I talk about virtue in the context of occult practice, I'm talking about it as a functional technology. Integrity, fortitude, and tenderness aren't nice-to-haves if you truly want to be successful – and attain the full potential of power that is possible here – it's functionally the gatekeeper.

And, if I may, this is actually how and why I think my approach prevails. Human teachers, no matter how masterful they may be, have faults, and worse yet, they can be wrong. Lineages can ossify, because they're not always agile. Texts, on their own, especially in Taoist traditions, can be too vague and obscure to be what illuminates. But the way the Mandala practices are set up for you, there is no human gatekeeper here; it is your own sincerity that determines whether you have convinced the Divine to give you access.



DIVINATORY CHECK-IN | Use your divination tool of choice. When working within the cultural framework of Taoist inner alchemy, I find I Ching to be the most insightful, but this might not be the case for everyone, so go with what works the best for you.

Present the following inquiry: **Illuminate my Path for me. Tell me what I most need to see.**

Date of Reading

.....

Divination Tool

.....

Optional: Time of Reading

.....

Optional: Astrological Notes

.....

PRE-WORK BEFORE STARTING THE 100 DAYS

Divinatory Reading Result:

Immediate Initial Impression of the Reading:

READING INTERPRETATION – What is this Oracle illuminating with respect to your Path? Consider the message in the context of the Pre-Work, your overarching philosophy and approach, virtue and ethics, or even what it is the Oracle is saying you need, perhaps with respect to ritual space or ritual purification.

Summary of Core Takeaway Message:

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.....