



12

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER OF BODILY PRACTICES BETWEEN CHINA AND INDIA IN THE MEDIAEVAL WORLD

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Abstract

The “family resemblance” between the Chinese therapeutic exercises known as *daoyin* (lit. “guiding and pulling”), and the Indian breathing and physical movement practices later known as *haṭhayoga* is marked, and would appear to be the result of the transfer of knowledge and culture, in parallel with merchandise, along the Silk Roads and sea routes. China possessed a rich tradition of *yangsheng* self-cultivation teachings on breathing, sexual techniques and therapeutic exercises from the 3rd century BCE onwards. The complexities of *haṭhayoga* were not, however, laid bare until the 11th century CE when it was described in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, the earliest extant *haṭhayoga* text. *Daoyin* reached its zenith during the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), while later on various esoteric doctrines known as *neidan* (“inner alchemy”) became prominent. These became the major source for those hoping to achieve longevity and immortality and they preceded *haṭhayoga* by about two centuries. *Neidan* may well have formed the link between the Chinese and Indian approaches, since they have much in common including advocating bodily inversion, specific non-sexual practices and breath control, as well as the use of the alchemical language.

KEYWORDS

Amṛtasiddhi, Bodily Practice, *Daoyin*, *Haṭhayoga*, *Neidan*, Physical Movement, Therapeutic Exercises, *Yangsheng*.

Introduction

India and China are each the home of great ancient civilisations, which have distinctive and diverse cultures, languages and customs. Cultural and economic exchange between them date back to ancient times. One of the earliest Chinese sources that refers to India can be found in *Shiji* (*Records of the Great Historian*), the first Chinese dynastic history, by Sima Qian (145–86 BCE).¹ From as early as the 1st century CE, Buddhist monks and traders travelled along the Silk Roads, bringing with them Buddhist scriptures, geographical knowledge, different technologies and other new ideas. Meditation practices were introduced through the translation of Buddhist texts into Chinese. Some of these practices, for example, *ānāpānasati*, a meditation technique focusing on breathing, thought to be first translated by An Shigao (fl. circa 148–180 CE) and later by Kumārajīva (334–413 CE), would have been familiar to certain practitioners in China who had already engaged in self-cultivation practices known as *yangsheng* (“nourishing life”).

By the 4th century CE, *yangsheng* would have referred to a variety of self-cultivation practices, including breathing exercises, *daoyin* (lit. “guiding and pulling”), diet, meditation and visualisation, sexual hygiene, and other preventative health practices (Yang 2018: 39–46). *Daoyin* are ancient Chinese therapeutic exercises involving stretching and contracting, self-massage, controlled breathing and focused attention, visualisation and so on.

While the interactions between India and China during the mediaeval period were dominated by the spread of Buddhism, certain distinctive bodily practices appeared in India which later became known as *haṭhayoga*. The aim of this chapter is to explore possible interactions between the two body-oriented traditions of *daoyin* and *haṭhayoga* and to attempt to discover whether *daoyin*, or more broadly *yangsheng*, in some way contributed to the genesis of *haṭhayoga*.

The paper begins with a survey of the state of the field, paying particular attention to the exchange of knowledge and practice between Chinese and Indian cultural domains in the mediaeval world. There follows a brief account of early and mediaeval Chinese therapeutic exercises, known as *daoyin*, between the 3rd century BCE and the 12th century CE. As both *daoyin* and *haṭhayoga* are vast topics in their own right, it is not possible in this short discussion to bring out the full complexity of the practices, interwoven as they are within their different historical and cultural contexts. Rather,

¹ *Shiji*, 116.56, 2995–6. In *Records of the Great Historian* the name *Shendu* is used to refer to India. Other names for India, such as *Tianzhu*, *Tiandu* and *Yindu*, can be found in later sources.

the aim will be to examine the emergence of *haṭhayoga* during the mediaeval period by analysing ideas found predominantly in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, one of the earliest extant *haṭhayoga* texts, dating from the 11th century CE. A comparative analysis in this chapter establishes a strong connection between the much earlier Chinese sources and the later bodily practices described in the first extant *haṭhayoga* texts.

The State of the Field

Joseph Needham was one of the first scholars to look into Chinese-Indian exchanges from the alchemical perspective. He asserts that a continual give and take between China and India took place from the 4th to the 14th centuries, with China contributing greatly with regard to religion, alchemy and physiology (1983: 282–283). Needham found a striking similarity between Chinese *neidan* (“inner alchemy”) and Indian *haṭhayoga*, concluding that “if yoga may be regarded as purely Indian, Tantrism can hardly be, and *haṭhayoga* even less so” (ibid.: 283).

Subbarayappa, a prolific Indian scholar of the history of science, argues that “alchemy was not indigenous to India. Its seminal ideas owed their origin to Chinese alchemy, its Yin-Yang postulates and other postulates concerned with what were designated as ‘holy immortals.’ These were assimilated *mutatis mutandis* into the Indian Tantric milieu in the early centuries of the Christian era” (2003: 331). Investigating Siddha traditions of Hindu alchemy and *haṭhayoga* in mediaeval India, David White refers to the golden age of Sino-Indian exchange, of religious ideas as well as material goods, via sea routes between the 3rd and 8th centuries CE, while overland trade along the Silk Roads had been flourishing since 110 BCE (1996: 61–62). White’s examples include the alchemist, Bogar, who lived some time between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE and who, according to Sittar tradition, i.e. the Siddha tradition in Tamil Nadu, was either a Chinese philosopher who came to India, or a south Indian Sittar who had spent time in China (ibid.). Another example is the Indian Buddhist monk, Nandi, who travelled to China by sea in 655 CE. White argues that it was during this period of maritime exchange that certain elements of Daoism were introduced into Indian religion and culture. He points out that nearly all the mercury used by Indian alchemists came from China, there being very few mercurial deposits on the Indian subcontinent. White also asserts that a yogic technique of Chinese origin, either the practice of urethral suction, or that of internally raising semen along the spinal column, first made its appearance in Indian Mahāyāna sources and later reappeared as an erotico-yogic technique of the Nāth Siddhas (ibid.: 63).

According to James Mallinson (2016), who has analysed the *Amṛtasiddhi*, it originated within the Buddhist Tantric tradition, a significant finding which upsets the long-held belief that *haṭhayoga* texts originated within the Śaivite traditions. The text describes the practice of impelling *bindu* (“semen”), by means of certain breathing techniques, to rise through the central channel to the brain, a technique White (1996: 63) refers to as Chinese.

Geoffrey Samuel, too, having investigated the origins of Indian sexual and alchemical practices, observes that Chinese bodily practices predate Indic versions by several centuries (2008). Illustrating various parallel physical practices from the Chinese, Indian and Tibetan traditions, Samuel recognises how they manifest as *daoyin* in the Chinese context, as *haṭhayoga* in the Śaiva context, and as *'phrul 'khor* in the context of the Tibetan Vajrayāna (ibid.: 279).

In her comparative study of the eight-limb yoga system associated with the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali (*Pātañjalayogaśāstra* c. 400 CE) and *daoyin*, Livia Kohn concludes that “given the enormous differences in historical origins, fundamental worldview, and applied techniques, it is safe to conclude that *yoga* and *daoyin* are indeed two radically different systems of body cultivation” (2006: 146). For Kohn, *daoyin*, with its aim of alleviating disease and physical discomfort, originated amongst the aristocracy and upper classes, whereas *yoga* grew out of the ascetic tradition of detaching oneself from worldly pursuits. Her conclusion has been challenged (Samuel 2008: 279 fn 13) and Kohn does acknowledge that some *haṭhayoga* texts, such as *Haṭhapradīpikā*, bear more resemblance to early *daoyin* texts than to the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali (2006: 141).

Daoyin

China possesses a rich collection of pre-modern sources relating to postural and breathing exercises. These *daoyin*-related sources can be found in numerous forms and genres, including official records, excavated manuscripts, philosophical and religious literature, and medical and *yangsheng* self-cultivation texts. *Daoyin* material represents a diverse tradition of bodily practices, which cannot be understood simply as “Daoist.” This common and widespread misconception in the West can be attributed to the Jesuits who, writing about *daoyin* in the 18th and 19th centuries, depicted it as “Daoist gymnastics” (Cibot 1779: 441–451; Dudgeon 1895).

The term *daoyin* first appears in a 3rd century BCE text, and is associated with Pengzu, a legendary figure who was reputed to have lived for eight hundred years as a result of his practice of *daoyin* and sexual cultivation (*Zhuangzi*, 6.15, 535). *Daoyin* exercises had

their roots in the ancient tradition of spirit mediums known as *wu* and became prevalent among the elite during the Warring States, Qin and Han dynasties (475 BCE–220 CE).² The *daoyin* texts of this period are part of the literature of the *fangshi* (*Masters of Esoterica*), who were connected with the cult of immortality and transcendence (*xian*) and were a diverse group of specialists with a broad range of skills in technical arts such as alchemy, astrology, calendrics, divination and medicine (Harper 1998; 1999). The aristocratic elite, who had the time and money to engage in the pursuit of longevity and immortality practices, were their patrons.

A drawing illustrating forty-four *daoyin*-style exercises, a breath cultivation text advocating a method of “abstaining from grain”³ and “ingesting *qi*” according to the season, and several texts on sexual hygiene were excavated from a Mawangdui Han tomb (closed 168 BCE). A text with the title *Yinshu* (*The Book of Pulling*) written on the back of the first of the bamboo slips, was excavated from another Han tomb at Zhangjiashan (closed 186 BCE). *Yinshu* is the earliest known, systematised description of physical exercises in China, and possibly anywhere in the world, offering a comprehensive step-by-step guide to bodily movement and a seasonal health regime for the Han nobility (Lo 1998; 2014). These excavated texts demonstrate the popularity of various bodily-oriented techniques among literate elites in the late Warring States and early imperial periods as a means of protecting themselves from illness and extending their life span.

During the period of Division (220–581 CE) various *xian* techniques, which had been previously engaged in by the *fangshi* and their patrons, were taken up by people from different strata of society (Yang 2018). Members of well-to-do families, who had fled south to an unfamiliar environment after the invasion of the north by non-Chinese nomads around the 4th century CE, recognised the importance of finding ways of keeping healthy. A variety of bodily practices had been adopted by several Daoist sects, as part of their cultivation regimes and healing methods, in order to achieve religious elevation and transcendence. Some Buddhists also began to engage in *yangsheng* practices. Two major proscription campaigns against Buddhism in the 5th and 6th centuries forced many monks and nuns to leave their dwelling places and seek refuge in the mountains. As food there was scarce, many of them began to practise techniques of “abstaining from grains” which often involved breathing and *daoyin* exercises.

² For origins of *daoyin*, see Despeux 1989: 237–240. For the development of *daoyin* during the Warring States, Qin and Han periods, see Harper 1998 and Lo 1998; 2007.

³ The term refers to a dietetic regimen that avoids ordinary foodstuffs, not just grains. They are often replaced by certain drugs and by breath cultivation. See Harper 1998: 305.

The development of *daoyin* reached its zenith during the period of the Sui (581–618 CE), the dynasty that unified China after nearly four centuries of political fragmentation, and during the reign of the second Sui emperor, Yangdi (r. 604–618 CE), it became the dominant medical practice of the court. A variety of practices, which had not previously been referred to as *daoyin*, were to go through a process of formalisation and standardisation and become part of a growing repertoire that was appropriated, under the *daoyin* rubric, into one of the Sui's official medical texts—*Zhubing yuanhou lun* (*Treatise on the Origins and Symptoms of Medical Disorders*, 610 CE, hereafter *Bingyuan*). The text recommends almost two hundred different *daoyin* exercises as treatments for various diseases, including exercises of *jishi* (“extreme posture,” i.e. extending the posture as much as possible), hanging upside down, the lotus position, or simply holding a date stone in the mouth (Yang 2018: 177).

Between the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties, various esoteric doctrines and practices, collectively known as *neidan* (“inner alchemy”), became increasingly prominent (Robinet 1989). They derived from a wide range of sources, including “classical Daoist texts, correlative cosmology, *Yijing* (Book of Changes) lore, meditational and physical discipline of *yangsheng* (nourishing life), cosmological traditions of *waidan* (external alchemy), medical theory, Buddhist soteriology and Confucian moral philosophy” (Pregadio and Skar 2000: 464).

Adopting many of the principles, procedures and terminology of “external alchemy” traditions, whose focus was on making miraculous drugs to secure immortality, practitioners of “inner alchemy” pursued the production of an inner elixir within their own bodies. Various *yangsheng* practices, of which *daoyin* was an important part, were adopted and adapted to the purposes of *neidan* and reinterpreted through alchemical emblems (ibid.: 487). For example, the practice of “returning the semen/essence to replenish the brain” (*huanjing bunao*), originally a sexual technique to preserve the semen, in *neidan* becomes the basis for the process of circulating one's essence (ibid.). Thus, instead of referring to sexual fluid, the same word *jing* in *neidan* becomes a coarser form of the vital breath (*qi*), which has to be refined by repeatedly making it ascend along the spine and then descend along the front of the body (Despeux 2008: 563). The notion of “inversion” (*diandao*), which became important in *neidan* practice, is also a fundamental concept advocated in early *haṭhayoga* texts. While *neidan* was establishing itself in China as the major, orthodox tradition for achieving longevity and immortality, *haṭhayoga* texts began to appear in India.

Haṭhayoga

For many people, particularly in the West, yoga is synonymous with a form of physical exercise comprising many different poses (*āsanas*) originating in India. However, this Indian system of bodily movements is a modern “reinvention of tradition” and has very little in common with the eight-limb yoga system expounded in *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (circa 400 CE), the text often cited as the source of, and authority for, modern yoga practice. According to White: “Nearly all of our popular assumptions about yoga theory date from the past 150 years, and very few modern-day practices date from before the twelfth century” (2011: 2). The “reinvention of tradition” expressed in modern postural yoga is not unique. The emergence in India during the 11th and 12th centuries of texts on practices involving bodily posture and breath control in order to make the semen/breath enter the central channel and rise upwards, could itself have also been a “reinvention of tradition,” a new phenomenon having no parallel in much earlier times.

The Vedas, the most ancient Hindu scriptures (circa 1500–1000 BCE), make no mention of physical exercise. Nor does it appear in the Upaniṣads, the later part of the Vedic scriptures composed between 800 and 200 BCE, apart from some references to techniques of *prāṇāyāma* (“breath control”). *Pātañjalayogaśāstra*, which describes *āsana* (“posture”) as the third limb of yoga, lists as many as twelve postures, all of them static, which are recommended for meditation (Hariharānanda 1983). It was not until the advent of *haṭhayoga* texts, most of which were written between the 11th and 19th centuries, that complex bodily practices such as *mahāmudrā* (“great seal”), *mahābandha* (“great locks”) and *mahāvedha* (“great piercing”) began to appear.

The Amṛtasiddhi

One of the earliest extant text expounding the principles and practice of *haṭhayoga* is the *Amṛtasiddhi*, composed in the 11th century in a Vajrayāna (Tantric) Buddhist milieu (Mallinson 2016). Mallinson, who, with Péter-Dániel Szántó (2021), has produced a critical edition and annotated translation of the text, notes the innovative teachings revealed in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, which were directly cited or incorporated into later *Haṭhayoga* texts. Although the word *haṭhayoga* is not mentioned in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, it seems to have been one of the first texts to codify *haṭhayoga* techniques. This had an enormous impact upon the teaching of *haṭhayoga* for many succeeding centuries.

The *Amṛtasiddhi*, meaning “the accomplishment of immortality,” is about methods of preserving *bindu* or *amṛta*, identified as “semen,” in order to achieve *jīvanmukti* (“liberation while living”). The text teaches that the moon, inside the brain, produces

and constantly drips *amṛta*, the “nectar of immortality,” which is consumed by the digestive fire of the sun in the stomach (Mallinson 2016: 4). According to the text: “The nectar of immortality in the moon goes downwards; as a result men die” (ibid.: 5). The aim is to reverse the downward course of the ever-dripping *bindu* through techniques such as *āsana* (“postures”), *prāṇāyāma* (“breath-control”) and *mudrā* (“yogic seals”), which will “force” it to rise up through the central channel along the spine and back into the brain.

The most prominent feature of *haṭhayoga* practice is the preservation of semen. Joseph Alter (2011: 130) asserts that: “[T]here would seem to be no question but that hatha yoga developed between the ninth and fourteenth centuries as a form of practice directly linked to the subtle hydraulics and symbolic significance of ritualized sex.”

Retaining semen and reversing its flow were fundamental practices in the traditions of sexual cultivation in China, described in bedchamber manuals (*fangzhong*) dating back to the Warring States, Qin and Han dynasties (475 BCE–220 CE). Several excavated manuscripts from the Mawangdui Han tombs give ample descriptions of sexual cultivation, exclusively from a male perspective, as a means to achieve longevity. In *Shiwen (Ten Questions)*, one of the Mawangdui manuscripts, the practice of restraining the impulse of ejaculation is described as “jade closure”:

At the first arrival without emission, ears and eyes are perceptive and bright; at the second arrival without emission, the voice’s vapor rises high; at the third arrival without emission, skin and hide glow; [...] at the seventh arrival without emission, your entire life is without calamity; at the eight arrival without emission, you can have a lengthy longevity; at the ninth arrival without emission, you penetrate spirit illumination (Harper 1998: 391).

He yin yang (Conjoining Yin and Yang) and *Tianxia zhi dao tan (Discussion of the Culminant Way in Under-Heaven)*, two other sexual cultivation texts from the Mawangdui tomb, describe ten sexual postures using animal imagery, such as “tiger roaming,” “cicada clinging” and “water deer butting,” a device that *daoyin* shares with the literature of the sexual arts, it being “easy to imagine how stretching and curling of the body can be adapted to sexual posture and movement” (Lo 2007: 412).

A sexual ritual, known as the “way of the yellow and red” (*huangchi zhidao*), was an integral part of the initiation process in the early Celestial Masters community of 2nd century CE, but was vehemently rejected and condemned by later Daoist movements,

such as the *Shangqing* (“Highest Clarity”) that emerged in the 4th and 5th centuries (Raz 2012: 177–209; Mollier 2016).⁴

Xiang'er's *Laozi xianger zhu* (*Commentary on Laozi*, circa 2nd century CE), the earliest extant text of the Celestial Masters, also condemns the practice of “returning the semen to replenish the brain” (*huanjing bunao*):

The Dao teaches people to congeal their essences and form spirits. Today, there are in the world false practitioners who craftily proclaim the Dao, teaching by means of texts attributed to the Yellow Thearch, the Dark Maiden, Gongzi, and Rongcheng. They say that during intercourse with a woman one should not release the semen, but through meditation return its essence to the brain to fortify it. Since their spirits and hearts are not unified, they lose that which they seek to preserve (Bokenkamp and Nickerson 1997: 87).

Writing in the early 4th century, Ge Hong (283–343 CE) a *fangshi* (*Master of Esoterica*) who was knowledgeable in the practices of longevity and immortality, summarises various sexual practices known to him, which he regards, as he does *daoyin*, as a minor art:

There are over ten schools of sexual techniques. Some seek to fill and save the damaged and depleted, some seek to heal all illnesses, some seek to absorb *yin* in order to replenish *yang*, and some seek to increase their years and prolong their lives. Their most essential point is returning the essence to nourish the brain. This method was transmitted by the Perfected by word of mouth and was not written down. Though one may ingest medicines, without knowledge of this essential point one will not gain longevity (Baopuzi, 8.199; Raz 2012: 183).

The Highest Clarity School fiercely rejected the sexual initiation rites of the Celestial Masters and reformulated them in two ways. Firstly, joint practices were turned into individual practices in which a male practitioner could refine his own essence within his own body and, secondly, the practice of “merging pneumas” became a marriage rite between male adepts and female deities (Raz 2012: 204). Thus, the transformation of a

⁴ The *Tianshi dao* (“Way of the Celestial Masters”) was a religious cult founded, reputedly, in 142 CE in modern Sichuan province by Zhang Daoling (34–156 CE). It later developed a more coherent identity as the formal establishment of the Daoist religion. The *Shangqing* (“Highest Clarity”) was a later religious movement, whose founder Tao Hongjing (456–536 CE) collated a corpus of scriptures revealed to a spirit medium Yang Xi (330–386 CE) and established a religious centre in Maoshan in southeastern China.

joint sexual practice into an individual meditation technique had already been realised within the Highest Clarity School around the 4th and 5th centuries CE. This bears some similarity to the context of the *Amṛtasiddhi*, which was essentially written for celibate Buddhists who had rejected Tantric sexual rituals.

Zhong-Lü chuandao ji (DZ⁵ 263, *Anthology of the Transmission of the Dao from Zhongli Quan to Lü Dongbin*), a major doctrinal treatise of *neidan*, dating from the 10th century CE, outlines various stages of a fundamental *neidan* practice:

Firstly, “copulate Yin and Yang,” then “gather and distribute water and fire.” Then “collect the medicine and add fire” and “add mercury and remove lead.” Thus the “small vehicle of the river” should move. Then, the “flying golden crystal behind the elbow” enters the brain; thus, the “great medicine of the yellow court” gradually comes into being. One hits the “three passes” and goes straight to the “inner courtyard.” Rise from the back and bring to a closure at the front. Nourish at the top and cultivate at the bottom. Thus the “great vehicle of the river” will be sure to move. One [practices] the “returning of the gold and jade liquors to the cinnabar fields,” and then cultivates the form (i.e. the body). Once the form is cultivated, cultivate the *qi*. Once the *qi* is cultivated, cultivate the spirit. Once the spirit is cultivated, it merges with the Dao. This is called the accomplishment of the Dao (*Zhong-Lü chuandao ji* in *Xiuzhen shishu*, 15.672; tr. by the author).

The alchemical language of this *neidan* practice, and indeed of many *neidan* texts, is mostly unintelligible for “non-initiates.” However, once the terminology is decoded, it is possible to see that the practice of “returning the semen/essence to nourish the brain” has been encrypted as the “flying golden crystal behind the elbow” (Despeux and Pettit 2019: 129–130). The “three passes” represent three “barriers” located along the spinal column, i.e. at the base of the spine, in the middle of the spinal column and at the level of the occipital bone. The “cinnabar fields” (*dantian*) are located in the regions of the abdomen, heart, and brain. Esposito (2008: 836) explains the vital relationship between the “three passes” and the three “cinnabar fields” within the three main stages of *neidan* practice:

⁵ DZ refers to the location of the text in the *Zhengtong daoze*, edited in 1445 CE, according to Schipper and Verellen’s classification 2004.

The first Pass is the locus of the sublimation of essence into pneuma (*qi*), and is connected to the lower Cinnabar Field. The second Pass is the place where pneuma is sublimated into spirit (*shen*); it plays the role of the Centre, and is the middle Cinnabar Field linked to the heart. This Pass is also related to the lower Cinnabar Field, however, as it represents the moment of transition from the lower to upper Fields. The third Pass is the place where the final sublimation of *shen* takes place with its return to Emptiness. In a general way, this designates the part of the upper Cinnabar Field where the spiritual embryo (*shengtai*) is realised at the end of the alchemical work.

An illustration entitled *Zhouhou feijinjing juetu* (“The Instructive Chart of the Flying Golden Crystal behind the Elbow”) can be found in *Xiuzhen taiji hunyuan zhixuan tu* (DZ150, *Diagrams Illustrating the Mystery of the Cultivation of Truth, of the Supreme Pole, and the Primordial Chaos*), a text belonging to the *Zhong-Lü* corpus dating from the Song and Yuan periods (960–1368 CE) (see Fig. 1 below).

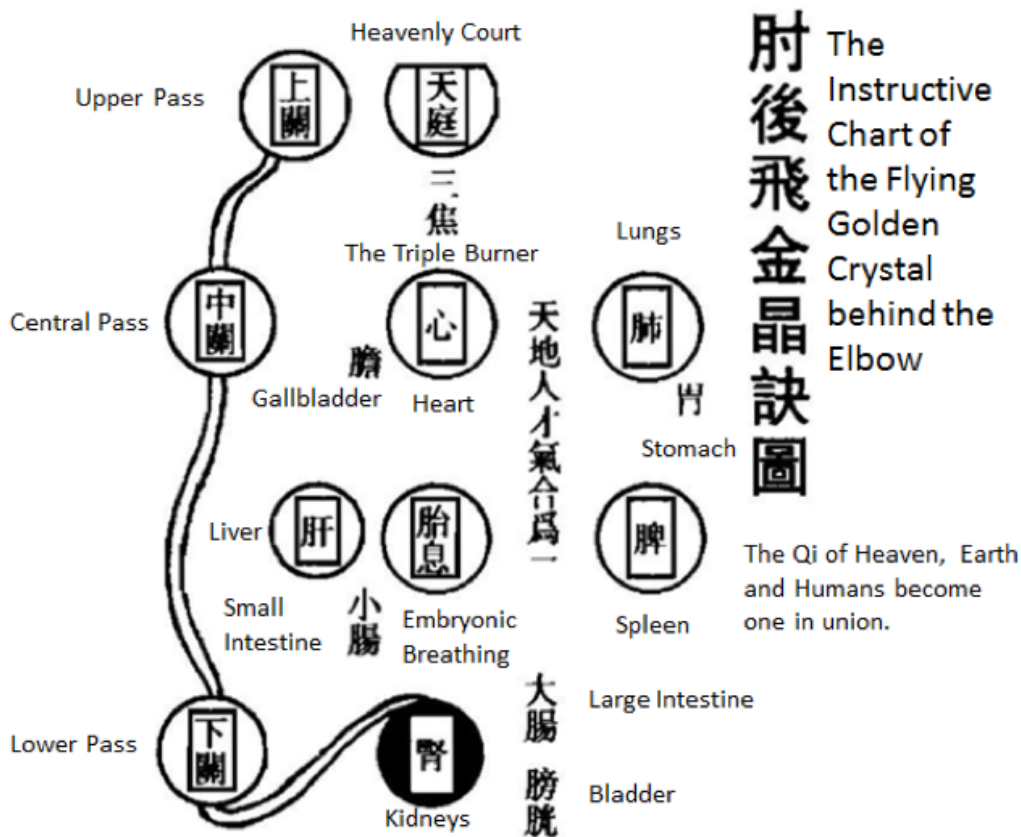


Figure 1: “The Instructive Chart of the Flying Golden Crystal behind the Elbow” (*Zhouhou feijinjing juetu*) with English translation added by the author.

The “three passes” along the spinal column, described in many *neidan* texts, can be likened to the three *granthis* or knots (Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Rudra) in the *Amṛtasiddhi* and other *haṭhayoga* texts:

As a result of the Piercing of Meru, Brahmā and the other gods are sure to die. At first this Piercing happens quickly in the knot of Brahmā; then having broken through the knot of Brahmā, it breaks through the knot of Viṣṇu. Then having broken through the knot of Viṣṇu, it breaks through the knot of Rudra. Then having broken the knot of Rudra and cut the creeper that is delusion, this Breath opens the very secret gateway of Brahmā (*Amṛtasiddhi* 13. 9–11, tr. by Mallinson and Szántó, 2021: 133).

Although the locations of the three *granthis* are not specified in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, they are points on the central channel through which the breath/*bindu* has to pass on its upward journey.

The idea that the sun and moon reside in the body forms an important part of the various visualisation practices recorded in many Daoist texts. In the *Amṛtasiddhi* (Chapters 3 and 4), the sun is primarily located in the stomach and moves through the right channel, while the moon is generally located in the brain and moves through the left channel. In Chinese sources their locations also vary, being the subject of movement and cyclical change. For example, a 3rd-century Daoist text devoted to practices of meditation on the inner gods, entitled *Laozi zhongjing* (*Central Scripture of Laozi*), describes how sun and moon move between the navel and stomach alternately:

During the day, the sun shines in the navel, illuminating the “cinnabar field” (i.e. the Lower Cinnabar Field which is about 1.3 inches below the navel), and the ten thousand gods receive their brightness. During the night, the sun is in the stomach, illuminating the chest above. The ten thousand gods roam and play, talking with one another, thus causing people to dream.

During the night, the moon is in the navel illuminating the thousand gods below. During the day, the moon is in the stomach illuminating the chest of the ten thousand gods above. They continue to move up and down ceaselessly (*Laozi zhongjing*, 20.147; tr. by the author).

The locations of the sun and moon became fixed for the practitioners of the Highest Clarity School. An example of a visualisation technique can be found in *Zhengao*

(*Declarations of the Perfected*, 499 CE), written by Tao Hongjing (456–536 CE), the first official patriarch of the Highest Clarity School:

Visualise the sun in the heart and the moon in the *niwan* (lit. “muddy pellet,” three inches behind the area between the eyebrows). Ingest the moonlight during the night, using the method for ingesting the sun. Visualise the hue of the moon as white, and shining in ten directions, entering the throat from the middle of the brain. Do not let the light come out of your teeth but return it to the stomach (*Zhengao*, 9. 544; tr. by the author).

Although this bodily practice is quite different from the one described in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, the two texts nevertheless share the concept of the moon primarily residing in the brain, and its connection to the stomach.

A 14th-century commentary on *Ruyao jing* (*Mirror for Compounding the Medicine*), originally written in the 10th century, explains the macrocosm within the body:

In one’s own body, nothing is different from Heaven and Earth, and from the sun and the moon. When you compound the elixir, you circulate the joint wheels of the sun and the moon, and cause *yin* and *yang* to converge in each breath. When the sun and the moon return to the Tripod, *yin* and *yang* conjoin their essences. When they are heated and refined, they coalesce and form the “Embryo of Sainthood” (*shengtai*) (*Cuigong Ruyaojing zhujie*, 882; Pregadio 2013: 11–12).

The paragraph continues with the observation that:

This is how the sun and the moon conjoin in my body. Liaozenzi says, “The *yin-yang* marrow drips constantly from the ‘jade pond.’ Continuously heat the essences of the sun and the moon in the ‘golden tripod.’” (*Cuigong Ruyaojing zhujie*, 882; tr. by the author).

The “jade pond” often refers to saliva. In this particular passage, instead of semen dripping down into the stomach, as described in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, it is the “*yin-yang* marrow,” i.e. saliva, dripping down from the mouth and into the “golden tripod” which, in this case, refers to the “yellow court” (*huangting*) in the navel (Robinet 2008: 362). Again, this is a different bodily practice from the one described in the *Amṛtasiddhi*; however, the depiction of sun and moon residing and moving dynamically in the body is

clearly articulated, with “yin-yang marrow” having an ambiguous connotation of sexual fluid.

Examples of Similar Bodily Practices

Several practices recorded in the *Amṛtasiddhi* and other, later, *haṭhayoga* texts resemble those relating to bodily movements found in earlier Chinese sources. Techniques such as *viparītakaraṇī* (“inverter”), *kumbhaka* (“breath retention”), *mūlabandha* (“root lock”) and *khecarīmudrā* (“tongue seal”) can all be identified, as well as two practices described in the *Amṛtasiddhi* as “useless”—“chewing stone” and “drinking air” (Szántó 2016: 4).

Viparītakaraṇī (“inverter”)

Viparītakaraṇī is a *haṭhayogic mudrā* in which the body is inverted in order to keep *bindu* in the head and prevent its fall. This technique might have been practised by Śramaṇa ascetics during the time of the Buddha around 500 BCE but only seems to have been codified for the first time in the *haṭhayoga* texts, such as the *circa* 13th-century *Dattātreya-yogaśāstra* and the *Vivekamārtaṇḍa* (Mallinson and Singleton 2017).

According to *Houhanshu* (*The Book of the Later Han*), composed around 445 CE, some *fangshi* (“Masters of Esoterica”) hung themselves upside down and also engaged in certain sexual cultivation practices:

Gan Shi, Yan Nian from the Eastern city wall, and Feng Junda were all *fangshi*. They practised the sexual techniques (lit. “arts of riding women”) of Rongcheng Gong, drinking urine, and hanging upside down. They were keen to preserve their seminal *qi* and did not exhaust themselves in looking and talking (*Houhanshu* 82.2749; tr. by the author).

This unusual bodily movement was appropriated into the 7th-century medical text *Bingyuan* as a cure for dizziness and madness induced by wind:

Hang upside down with both hands holding a well-pulley, your feet uppermost. This cures dizziness and madness induced by wind. Sit on the ground, both legs extended, and tie them to the rope [of the well-pulley]. Then use the well-pulley to pull [yourself] up and down. Hold the rope with both hands, keeping your legs up and your head down, away from the ground. Hold this for as long as you can and repeat it twelve times. This cures dizziness and madness induced by wind (*Zhubing yuanhou lun* 2.42 and 43; Yang 2018: 396, 399–440).

Thus, by the 7th century CE, “hanging upside down” was part of the standardised repertoire of *daoyin* exercise as a medical cure. Other unusual and challenging exercises found in this text include:

- Bring one leg to your neck; hold your breath. Do this twelve times.
- Raise both knees and press them against the sides of your cheeks. Press your hands against the ground, while squatting.
- Put both of your hands behind and hold both your feet upside down as much as possible. Raise your head and with effort, turn your toes outwards; move back and forth slowly and then quickly seven times.
- Sit on the ground, legs crossed. Tuck your arms in your bent legs. Lower your head, interlace your fingers and put them on your neck.

These exercises are in some ways closer to modern postural yoga, much of which involves “extreme postures,” a term used frequently in *Bingyuan* as part of the instructions for many *daoyin* exercises.

Kumbhaka (“breath retention”)

Kumbhaka consists of two kinds of technique, known as “accompanied” and “unaccompanied.” “Accompanied” is when retention of the breath occurs after inhalation or exhalation, whereas “unaccompanied” is spontaneously retaining the breath for as long as one wishes, with no regard for inhalation or exhalation (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 131). The latter is called *kevala kumbhaka*.

While the practice of breath control has a long tradition in India, similar practices can also be found in ancient and mediaeval China. *Kumbhaka*, for example, can be compared with the techniques of *taixi* (“embryonic breathing”). According to Despeux (2008), embryonic breathing has two meanings. The first is “the way an embryo breathes,” which means that breathing through the nose appears to stop and is replaced by breathing through the navel and the pores of the skin. The second refers to the refinement and cessation of breathing technique performed by *neidan* adepts, influenced by Buddhist notions of *tathāgatagarbha* (“Buddha-embryo or Buddha womb”).

Ge Hong claims that when his great uncle, Ge Xuan (164–244 CE), became over-heated and intoxicated during the summer, he was able to remain under water for a whole day by holding his breath and practising embryonic breathing (*Baopuzi*, 8.137). He Mengjie

was one of the *fangshi* favoured by Cao Cao (155–220 CE), a founding figure of the state of Cao Wei of the Three Kingdoms (220–265 CE). He became leader of all the *fangshi* at Cao Cao’s court. According to the *Houhanshu* (*Book of the Later Han*):

Mengjie could hold a date stone in his mouth and abstain from eating for five to ten years. He could also hold his *qi* and not breathe, his body would not move, and he looked like a dead person. He could be like this for one hundred days to half a year. He had a family, and was meticulous and cautious in his speech like a learned gentleman (*Houhanshu*, 82.2750, tr. by the author).

While it is doubtful that these events took place, they certainly existed as part of the imagined repertoire of adepts and therefore were “real” culturally. The extraordinary feats of Ge Xuan and He Mengjie are comparable to the descriptions of yogis who achieve a state of *kevala kumbhaka*.

Another *fangshi*, known as Wang Zhen, claimed to be practising “embryonic breathing” and “embryonic eating” (*taishi*), which made him look remarkably young:

Wang Zhen from Shangdang, whose courtesy name was Shu Jing, practised holding the breath before swallowing it. This is called “embryonic breathing.” He practised generating liquids under his tongue before swallowing them. This is called “embryonic eating.” Practising these, Zhen was able to live for more than 200 days without grains. His flesh was shining and beautiful. His strength was greater than that of several people’s combined (*ibid.*, tr. by the author).

Terms such as *buxi* (“not breathing”) and *biqu* (“holding the breath”) appear in *Bingyuan* more than sixty times in connection with curing various diseases (Yang 2018: 149). The first *daoyin* exercise found in this medical text instructs the practitioner to “Lean upright against the wall. Holding your breath, move the *qi* from your head to your toes. This cures *ju*-abscess, hernia, leprosy, withering on one side of the body and various obstructions associated with wind” (*Zhubing yuanhou lun*, 1.13; Yang 2018: 373).

Many texts on “embryonic breathing” were written during the Tang and early Song periods of the 9th and 10th centuries CE, including:

- *Taixi jing* (*Scripture of Embryonic Breathing*, DZ 14)
- *Taixi jingzhu* (*Commentary to the Scripture of Embryonic Breathing*, DZ 130)

- *Taixi miyao gejie* (*Oral Formulas and Songs on the Principle Secrets of Embryonic Breathing*, DZ 131)
- *Yanling xiangsheng ji xinjiu fuqi jing* (*Master Yanling's Collection of Ancient and Modern Treatises on Breath Absorption*, DZ 825)
- *Taishang yangsheng taixi qijing* (*Most High Scripture on Embryonic Breathing and Nourishing Life*, DZ 819)
- *Taixi jingwei lun* (*Discussion of the Subtleties of Embryonic Breathing*, DZ 829)
- *Songshan Taiwu xiangsheng qijing* (*Breath Scripture of Master Great Nonbeing of Mount Song*, DZ 824)⁶

Thus, practices comparable to *kumbhaka* appear in many Chinese sources related to “embryonic breathing” composed before the 10th century CE. The majority are found in the *Daozang* (*Daoist Canon*) edited in 1445 CE (Schipper and Verellen 2004).

“Embryonic breathing” is also an important feature of *neidan*. A typical *neidan* practice consists of four stages: a preliminary stage known as *zhuji* (“laying the foundations”) and three main stages. The preliminary stage focuses on re-establishing a perfect state of health by means of certain breathing and *daoyin* exercises, thereby replenishing the “original essence,” “original breath,” and “original spirit,” making one ready for the following stages. At the first main stage, essence becomes breath through a cyclical process known as *xiao zhoutian* (“the microcosmic orbit”). “Embryonic breathing” occurs at the second main stage, as the breath is refined and transmuted into spirit. At the third main stage, this breathing feeds the embryo (i.e. the spirit), which then rises to the “upper cinnabar field” in the brain when the embryo reaches maturity (Pregadio 2012; Despeux 2008).

There are also four *avasthās* (“stages”) of *haṭhayoga* practice described in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, and in the *Dattātreya-yogaśāstra* (circa 13th century CE). The four stages—*ārambha* (“commencement”); *ghaṭa* (“the pot”); *paricaya* (“accumulation”) and *niṣpanna/niṣpatti* (“perfected”)—are concerned with breath control in order to achieve *kevala kumbhaka* (“unaccompanied breath retention”). The *Dattātreya-yogaśāstra* describes this as follows:

When in the course of his progress from *ghaṭavasthā* to *paricayavasthā*, the yogi develops the ability to hold his breath for three hours, he can then

⁶ See Schipper and Verellen 2004: 366–376; and Huang and Wurmbrand 1987.

perform *pratyāhāra* [i.e. sense withdrawal] and achieve mastery over his sense organs (Mallinson 2012: 335).

The idea of “the pot” in the second stage is reminiscent of the tripod and cauldron used in alchemy for making elixirs. Mallinson, in a talk entitled “Alchemy and *Haṭhayoga*” (2019), showed how some of the terminology in the *Amṛtasiddhi* is derived from alchemical practice, citing several examples of alchemical terms used in the text, including *bandha* (“binding”), *vedha* (“transmutation”), *mūrcchanā* (“coagulation”) and *saṃpuṭa* (“alchemical crucible”).

The writing style of the *Amṛtasiddhi* suggests a strong parallel with that use in the *neidan*. On the other hand, *yangsheng* practices such as “embryonic breathing” and “returning the semen/essence to replenish the brain” are comparable to the practices of *kumbhaka* (“breath retention”) and the forcing of breath/semen along a central channel to the brain in *haṭhayoga*.

Mūlabandha (“root lock”)

The technique of *mūlabandha* involves the practitioner contracting the anus and perineum while holding the breath (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 238–239). In *Amṛtasiddhi* (Chapter 12), *mūlabandha* is taught as one of the two *bandhas* known as *mahābandha* (“great lock”). The other one is *jālandharabandha* (“throat lock”). The practice of *mūlabandha* can also be found in Chinese bedchamber manuals and in later *neidan* texts. For example, an exercise similar to *mūlabandha* appears in the Mawangdui excavated text entitled *Tianxia zhidao tan* (*Discussion of the Culminant Way under Heaven*) which says:

To rise at dawn, sit upright, straighten the spine, open the buttocks, suck in the anus, and press it down is “cultivating vapor.” When drinking and eating, to relax the buttocks, suck in the anus, and let the vapor pass through is “bringing the fluid” (Harper 1998: 430).

Daoshu (DZ 1017, *Pivot of the Dao*), a 12th-century compendium of *yangsheng* self-cultivation and *neidan* texts compiled by Zeng Zao (1091–1155 CE), describes a breath cultivation technique as follows:

At *zi* time (11pm–1am), sit upright facing either to the south or east, cutting off any thoughts and worries within. After inhaling through your nose, visualise the inhalation moving to your heart. Hold it there for a while, then repeat the movement. Then, take another breath and swallow

it, sending it to the navel. Gently hug the navel wheel with your left and right hands, while contracting the anus as much as possible (*Daoshu*, 35.800; tr. by the author).

The description of this breathing technique continues with the visualisation of the breath as fire, moving from the navel to the base of the spine and up to the brain:

Slightly tightening your lower abdomen, wait for the “fire” to move to below your navel and become hot. Slowly raise your lumbar and hips, wait for the *qi* (breath) to enter your tailbone and both your lumbar and hips to become hot [...] Wait for the *qi* of fire to reach the spinal ridge (*jiaji*, the middle section of the back), causing both gates of the spinal ridge to be opened. Raise your head up and contract your neck as much as possible, which will cause the fire to reach your brain (*ibid.*).

The instructions in this *neidan* practice to contract both anus and neck closely resemble *mūlabandha* and *jālandharabandha*. Where they differ is that in *jālandharabandha* the yogi presses his chin against his chest and constricts his throat to stop *bindu* from dripping downwards (Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 228, 241), whereas in the *neidan* exercise, the constriction is achieved by raising the head.

It is worth noting that the terms *qilun* (lit. “navel wheel”) and *mañipūraka cakra* both employ the image of a wheel. The term *qilun* is also found in an earlier Tang text entitled *Taixi biyao gejue* (DZ 131, *Oral Formulas and Songs on the Principle Secrets of Embryonic Breathing*), which instructs the practitioner to “swallow” the breath to the “navel wheel” on an empty stomach on a day of fasting.

Several *neidan* texts refer to techniques of contracting the anus and neck. A 12th–13th century text, *Zhenxian michuan huohou fa* (DZ 274, *The True Immortal’s Secret Transmission of Fire-phasing Techniques*), describes the timing, sequence and intensity of various methods for circulating *qi* within the body. Among the various techniques listed are “returning the essence/semen to replenish the brain”; pressing the tongue against the palate; holding the breath; bending the back; constricting the neck and contracting the anus.

Khecarīmudrā

The technique of *khecarīmudrā* is a yogic seal, whereby the yogi bends his tongue towards, and if possible into, the cavity above the soft palate. The purpose of *khecarīmudrā* is to “seal” the *bindu* in the head and prevent it from dripping down.

However, there is also another interpretation, which is that the whole body is flooded with *amṛta* (Mallinson and Singleton 2017). The *circa* 14th-century *Khecarīvidyā* of Ādinātha is an early *haṭhayogic* text which describes the practice of *khecarīmudrā*. The Buddhist Pali Canon contains three passages in which the Buddha's attempts to control his mind by using physical practices such as the pressing of the tongue against the palate are described (Mallinson 2007).

The practice of curling the tongue far into the nasal cavity can also be found in the writing of one of the Song literati, Su Shi (1037–1101), who says: “When holding your breath, curl your tongue up to lick the nasal cavity. Although not normally possible, if you use your intention to reach it you will, after a long period of time, succeed” (*Su Shen nei han liangfang*, 6.19). According to Su Shi, this secret method may seem laughable but is very effective. After practising it for many days Su experienced a sharp pain under his tongue, but nevertheless believed this method to be a short cut for his *neidan* practice which should be kept secret (*ibid.*: 6.20).

A similar exercise named *fanshe saiho* (“turning the tongue backwards to block the throat”) is found in several Daoist texts, including *Zhengao* (*Declarations of the Perfected*), written in 499 CE by Tao Hongjing, who quoted this particular technique from another text entitled *Xiaomo shangling jing* (*Scripture of Great Divinity for Eradicating Demons*):

The *Scripture of Great Divinity for Eradicating Demons* says: “If you feel restless in the body, plug your throat with your tongue. Gargle the seeped saliva before swallowing it. Do this many times. Within a short while, the restlessness will disappear and you should also feel your body relax and soften” (*Zhengao*, 9.538; tr. by the author).

It seems that, over time, this particular technique became more and more extreme, with the *haṭhayogic* version of *khecarīmudrā* requiring the practitioner to sever the *lingual frenulum* gradually with a sharp implement.

“Chewing Stone” and “Drinking Air”

Two techniques in the *Amṛtasiddhi* are described as “useless,” i.e. *śilām carvati* (“chewing stone”) and *khaṃ pibati* (“drinking air”) (Szántó 2016: 4; Mallinson 2020: 420). “Chewing stone” bears a strong resemblance to “keeping a date stone in the mouth,” a technique which appears in the story of He Mengjie mentioned earlier. This technique is also described in the 3rd-century Daoist text *Taishang lingbao wufu xu* (*Preface to the Five Talismans of Numinous Treasure*) as a means of attaining longevity:

A method of longevity: Regularly hold a date stone in your mouth, just as a baby suckles a nipple. Hold it for a long time until the juice fills your mouth. Divide this into three measures, swallowing two thirds and keeping one third in your mouth. Ingest each mouthful together with air. This is called “returning the essence” (*huanjing*). When you complete [each turn] you should start again, in a continuous cycle (*Taishang lingbao wufu xu*, DZ 388; Raz 2012: 61–62).

This exercise, as part of the *daoyin* repertoire, was incorporated into the 7th-century medical text *Bingyuan* for curing symptoms of deficiency-exhaustion and shortage of *qi*:

If you habitually keep a date stone in your mouth and swallow [the saliva it produces], it will cause you to receive *qi* and generate fluids. This is of great importance (*Zhubing yuanhou lun*, 3.14; Yang 2018: 150).

The term “drinking air” is strikingly similar to “eating *qi* or vapour” (*shiqi*) found in many *daoyin*-related sources. The earliest mention of “eating vapour” can be found in the manuscript from the Mawangdui Han tomb, which depicts forty-four figures performing *daoyin* exercises:

[...] Those who eat vapour practice *xu* exhalation and *chui* exhalation when they first go to bed and first arise. Whenever doing *xu* exhalation, in mid-breath change to *chui* exhalation. A twenty-year-old does it twenty times at dawn, twenty times at dusk, and two hundred times every second day at dusk. A thirty-year-old does it thirty times at dawn, thirty times at dusk, and three hundred times every third day at dusk. Use this calculation to extrapolate (Harper 1998: 306–307).

The techniques of “holding a date stone in your mouth” and “eating *qi*” are both related to “abstaining from grains,” a method practised by the *fangshi* and later by Daoists and Buddhists to gain the ability to go without food for a long time.

The fact that the techniques of “chewing stone” and “drinking air” were mentioned in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, albeit dismissively, suggests the existence of practitioners who regarded them as a means of achieving longevity or *jīvanmukti*.

Conclusion

There is undoubtedly a striking resemblance between techniques found in the first extant *haṭhayoga* texts and those found in earlier Chinese sources, dating from the 3rd

JOURNAL OF
YOGA STUDIES

Yoga and the Traditional Physical Practices of South Asia

century BCE onwards, relating to *yangsheng* self-cultivation practices, including breathing exercises, sexual cultivation and *daoyin*. While these bodily practices were appropriated from the 9th and 10th century CE onwards by *neidan* practitioners to develop their “alchemical bodies,” similar practices also began to appear in what was to be known as *haṭhayoga* in India, from the 11th century onwards. This historical juxtaposition, with *neidan* preceding *haṭhayoga* by just a couple of centuries, makes *neidan* a likely candidate for the conduit of knowledge transfer of bodily practices between China and India. While strong resemblances exist between *neidan* and *haṭhayoga*, certain ideas and practices in *haṭhayoga* are more akin to the *yangsheng* self-cultivation practices from which *neidan* also draws many of its ideas. Exercises such as hanging upside down are more typical of the *daoyin* repertoire than of *neidan* practices. One could also argue that the practice of forcing breath/semen along the central channel to the brain, described in the *Amṛtasiddhi*, is in character closer to the *yangsheng* self-cultivation practice of “returning the semen to replenish the brain,” than to the intangible “essence” refashioned in *neidan*. Several *daoyin* movements, prescribed in the 7th-century Chinese medical text *Bingyuan*, are undoubtedly strenuous, require considerable physical stamina and resonate more with certain *āsanas* in modern postural yoga than with *taiji* and *qigong*, both of which are modern expressions of Chinese therapeutic exercises where the emphasis is softer and gentler.

The “family resemblance” between *haṭhayoga* and *yangsheng* practices, of which *daoyin* was an important part, begins to come into focus when we start searching for the origins of the *haṭhayoga* traditions. It is indisputable that it might be possible to trace the roots of certain *haṭhayoga* techniques to the various ascetic practices of 500 BCE at the time of the Buddha, but the rich traditions of bodily practices in China, cited in many textual sources dating from the 3rd century BCE onwards, deserve to be highlighted. The “appearance” of the *haṭhayoga* texts from the 11th centuries onwards cannot be explained by solely tracing their roots to antiquity. The paper argues that some of the most likely influences could have come from China. It is equally possible that what appears to be Chinese could have come from India and vice versa (see Steavu in this volume). There is no doubt that such knowledge transfer of bodily practices would have been circulating in both directions between China and India during the mediaeval period, each adding its own cultural flavour which became more and more distinctive.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Vivienne Lo, Di Lu, Michael Stanley-Baker, Dominic Steavu, Yunju Chen, Wenqin Huang, Yan Liu, James Mallinson, Daniela Bevilacqua and an anonymous reviewer for their valuable comments on early drafts of this paper. Thanks also to Sally Stewart, Marye Wyvill and John Metcalf for their help in editing the drafts. The author is particularly grateful to James Mallinson for sharing his and Péter-Dániel Szántó's full translation of the *Amṛtasiddhi* in advance of its publication.

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Yoga and the Traditional Physical Practices of South Asia

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