

## A Look at Stephen Eskildsen: Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity

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# A Look at Stephen Eskildsen: Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity

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**ABSTRACT** This piece is in the form of a review article of Stephen Eskildsen's recent study *Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity,* which deals with the history of contemplative traditions in Daoism including a detailed survey of their various direct and indirect links with Buddhism. While this essay presents a critical evaluation of this author's work and its findings, it also seeks to place it within the wider research-frame of Daoist studies and Chinese religions.

KEY WORDS Daoism, Buddho-Daoism, Meditation, inner alchemy

Whereas the field of Daoist studies has been steadily declining in Europe, it is encouraging to see how interest in the study of this seminal aspect of Chinese religion has by now become a major aspect of the study of Chinese religion in the US. It is also a positive sign, now that a number of the 'old guard' of scholars are beginning to retire, that a new generation of emerging students of the Way are appearing on the academic stage. Although hardly a newcomer to the study of Daoism and Daoist meditation, Stephen Eskildsen belongs to the new line of scholars, who have embarked on in-depth studies of various aspects of Daoist practices, many of which have previously eluded the attention or at least remained outside the scope of interest of the other members of the concerned scholarly community.

With Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity<sup>1</sup>, Eskildsen originally emerging as a specialist in the Quanzhen 2 tradition of Jin/Yuan Daoism<sup>2</sup>, has by now abandoned the study of the religion in the early premodern area, and has here turned his attention to the medieval period, in particular that of the Sui (581-617) and Tang (618-906)<sup>3</sup>. This is a fortunate change of focus, as there is so much important, primary material from this period, which still needs to be dealt with in greater detail. Moreover, the thematics of contemplation, absorption and transcendence are really central to Daoist practice, and are certainly themes which are far from exhausted in previous scholarship.

Eskildsen's study consists of the following parts: Chapter 1. "Introduction" [pp. 1-28].

Chapter 2. "The Earliest-known Daoist Religious Movements" [pp. 29-74]. This chapter deals with the earliest recorded contemplation practices current during the incipient stage of Daoist religion. Most of the data on which the author bases his discussion derives from the *Taiping jing* 太平經 (Classic of Great Peace)<sup>4</sup>.

Stephen Eskildsen. 2015. Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity. SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture. Albany: SUNY Press. 387 pages, \$85.00 (hardcover), ISBN: 978-1-4384-5823-6

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Eskildsen. 2004. *The Teaching and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

<sup>3</sup> Eskildsen's interest in Daoist practices of the medieval period has manifested in a number of essays, such as "Mystical Ascent and Out-of-Body Experience in Medieval Daoism." *Journal of Chinese Religions*, No. 35 (2007): 36-62; *idem*."Emergency Death Meditations for Internal Alchemists." *T'oung Pao*, 92/4-5 (2006): 373-409, etc. In a sense the present study under review represents the culmination of this endeavor.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Daozang* 道藏 (*The Daoist Canon*; hereafter DZ) 1101.24, Wenwu edition, Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1988, 311c-620a.

Chapter 3. "Dramatic Physical and Sensory Effects" [pp. 75-142]. Here the author discusses bodily signs accompanying the various phases of contemplating the coursing of primal energy in the body, the transforming powers of the Dao inside one's own body to complete the gestation of 'a baby,' to be produced through the correct union of the yin and yang energies in the human body, and ends with a discussion of the visualizations of the *Taishang hunyuan zhenlu* 太上混元真錄 (The Highest True Record of the Chaotic Origin)<sup>5</sup>. All topics which may be classified under the general heading of inner alchemy (*neidan* 內丹). The practices discussed in this chapter derive from scriptures dating from the end of the Han to the early Tang, a span of four centuries. Even so the author expresses some hesitation concerning the dating of the last scripture under discussion.

Chapter 4. "Integrating Buddhism: Early Phase" [pp. 143-180]. Acknowledging the indebtedness of Daoism to Buddhism, the author in this chapter traces the influences of the latter on the meditation practices of the former. It also features a discussion of the different concepts of emptiness/vacuity in Daoism and Buddhism respectively, and shows that the Daoists in the scriptures belonging to the early phase of interaction, basically misunderstood the Buddhist concept of emptiness.

Chapter 5. "Integrating Buddhism: Emptiness and the Twofold Mystery". This chapter continues where the previous one left off and is meant to highlight Buddhist influence on Daoist practices of meditation and contemplation. Scriptures belonging to the so-called 'Two-fold Mystery' (chongxuan xue pai 重玄學派) tradition are at the center of the author's presentation.<sup>6</sup> Three scriptures are pivotal to Eskildsen's discussion, the

<sup>5</sup> DZ 954.19, pp. 507b-516b.

A detailed discussion of this phenomena can be found in Robert H. Sharf. 2002. *Coming to terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise*. Studies in East Asian Buddhism 14, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 47-76, etc.

Benji jing 本際經 (Scripture on the Fundamental Occasion)<sup>7</sup>, the Wuchu jing 五廚經 (Scripture on the Five Kitchens)<sup>8</sup>, and the Qingjing jing 清靜經 (Scripture on Lucidity and Tranquility)<sup>9</sup>.

Chapter 6. "Serenity and the Reaffirmation of Physical Transformation". This chapter evolves around the *Zuowang lun* 坐忘論 (Treatise on Sitting in Forgetfulness¹o, and its derivatives exemplified by the *Dingguan jing* 定觀經 (Scripture on Focused Contemplation).¹¹ The material discussed here represents a transition between visualization-based introspection and a return to more body-fixated practices including etheric sublimation through the circulation of qi and various strategies to attain corporal immortality as opposed to immortality of the spirit.

Chapter 7. "Serenity, Primal Qi, and Embryonic Breathing".<sup>12</sup> Here the author focuses on meditation practices involving the circulation of *qi*. Spiritual union with the Dao is essentially an internal, alchemical process through which enlightenment is attained. As such the material discussed here reflects a conscious effort to distance itself from overt Buddhist influence, even including what is commonly referred to as the Buddho-Daoist discourse which otherwise dominated many Daoist scriptures from the early Tang. The practice of so-called 'embryonic breathing' (*taixi* 胎息), a pure neidan practice takes up the remainder of the chapter. Interestingly, the primary work representative of this practice, the *Taixi jing zhu* 胎息經註

Partly in DZ 1111.24, 653c-659b. Complete Dunhuang version reproduced in Ye Guiliang, 2010. Dunhuang ben Taixuan zhenyi benji jing - jixiao (The Dunhuang Edition of the Benji Jing [With Annotation]), Chengdu: Sichuan chuban jituan Bashu shushe.

<sup>8</sup> DZ 763.17, 213a-215a.

<sup>9</sup> DZ 620.11, 344ac.

<sup>10</sup> DZ 1036.22, 891c-898a, etc.

<sup>11</sup> Zangwai daoshu (Daoist Books Outside the Canon), 137.6, comp. 陳耀庭 Chen Yaoting, Duan Wengui 段文柱, Lin Wangqing 林萬清, 1992. Chengdu: Ba Shu shushe chuban, 24ab, etc.

<sup>12</sup> DZ 130.2. 868b-869b.

(Annotated Scripture on Embryonic Breathing), as well as an apocryphal Buddhist *neidan* text attributed to Bodhidharma, the so-called 'First Patriarch' of Chan Buddhism, which Eskildsen discusses at some length.<sup>13</sup> Chapter 8. "Conclusion". In which the author sums up the findings of his study, and adds further perspective on the topics treated in each chapter.

To this we may add, that the author follows a fixed model of presentation in which each of the six primary chapters (i.e. 2-7) evolves around two, and in one case three, different texts. Essentially this means that his discourse adheres to a rather tight structural scheme, which presupposes that the texts in each cluster are both conceptually and historically related. One can always raise questions in regard to how this selection has been made, but I would say that Eskildsen has certainly chosen a series of highly important scriptures to serve as the basis for his findings and argumentation. Moreover, the fact that the study is furnished with Chinese text for each translated passage, makes it much easier to follow the author's arguments and to appreciate the manner in which he goes about the different text excerpts he uses.

Let me state that Eskildsen's book is well-thought and raises a series of interesting questions which have not been quite as well dealt with before in the forum of contemporary Daoist studies in the West. Of course Livia Kohn, as the hallowed trailblazer in the research of a good number of the primary Daoist practices relating to transcendence and mysticism, has touched on many—if not most—of the issues and texts this study deals

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the Damo dashi zhushi liuxing nei zhen miaoyong jue 達摩大師住世留形內真妙用訣 (Inner True Wondrous Method of the Great Master Bodhidharma for Preserving the Body [While] Dwelling in the World).

Cf. Yunji qiqian 雲笈七籤 (Seven Tallies of the Cloud Satchel), ch. 59, DZ 1032.22, 412b-413c.

with.<sup>14</sup> However not in quite as deep and focused fashion as Eskildsen does here. Like the bulk of Kohn's work, this book is also primarily concerned with the medieval period, the latter part of which still needs much more detailed research. And to this end, Daoism, Meditation and Wonders of Serenity offers much new data, especially that which relate to introspective forms of transcendence.

One cannot deny that Eskildsen's study is extremely text-fixated, perhaps overly much so. However, he does a good job at contextualizing each scripture he deals with and dutifully provides his readers with as much historical data on each text as he can find. Moreover, he is conscientiously relating the scriptures under discussion to each other, thereby showing both continuations and discontinuations. His notes, which often contain interesting discussions rather than being mere source references, are also highly interesting. Together, this prevents the book from becoming rigid and boring despite its very tight format, even though—I must say— it is in parts quite dense and heavy with information.

The author problematizes the Daoist appropriation of Buddhist dogma and practices in a perceptive and useful manner, which in some of the chapters can be seen to play out in the dichotomy between transcendence in spirit and corporal transcendence. The first reflecting both the central notions of the Lao-Zhuang tradition as well as Buddhism, the latter of the two with its noted anti-corporal attitude, reflecting the more simplistic Daoist concerns with longevity and the prolongation of physical existence in the body.

See Livia Kohn. 1988. Seven Steps to the Tao: Sima Chengzhen's Zuowang lun, Monumenta Serica Monograph Series XX, Sankt Augustin: Steyler Verlag; idem. 2010. Sitting in Oblivion: The Heart of Daoist Meditation. Dunedin, Fl.: Three Pines Press; idem. 1992. Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition. Princeton: Princeton University Press, etc.

It is refreshing to see that the author does not belong to those scholars of Daoism, who feel they need to defend Daoism against Buddhism, and in that process down-play the impact of the latter on the former. Instead, he offers a balanced and perceptive discussion which clearly shows that much of Daoist doctrine would never have come about without the Chinese translations of the primary Buddhist scriptures. This ready openness to accept that Buddhism played an immense role in the formulation of Daoism after the middle of the *Nanbeichao* 南北朝 (386-581), while at the same time explaining how and why the appropriated material was being understood and utilized the way it was, makes it so much easier to appreciate and access the presented material and the author's line of argument.

There have been a number of previous attempts at coming to terms with the contemplative aspects of Daoism, including some notable studies by Andersen, Kohn, Robinet, and others. However, no one has to date gone quite the same distance in discussing the non-dual meditations supposed to lead to union with the Way as Eskildsen has done here. Moreover, in focusing on the Tang period, we are afforded insights into a number of primary Daoist scriptures from this period, works which deal at great length—and in some cases even exclusively—with contemplation and introspection.

Chapter four, which is devoted to discussing Buddhist influence on Daoist practices in what Eskildsen refers to as 'early phase' uses two scriptures, the Xisheng jing 西昇經 (Scripture on the Western Ascension)<sup>16</sup>, and the Taishang Laojun xuwu ziran benqi jing 太上老君虛無自然本起經 (Scripture of

<sup>15</sup> See e.g. the pioneering study by Poul Andersen. 1980. The Method of Holding the Three Ones: A Taoist Manual of Meditation of the Fourth Century A.D., Studies on Asian Topics No. 1, London and Malmö: Curzon Press; and Isabelle Robinet, 1979. La meditation taoïste, Mystiques et Religions, Paris: Dervy-Livres. For the studies by Kohn, see the previous note.

<sup>16</sup> DZ 666.11, 489c-513b.

the Exalted Lord Lao on the Spontaneously Arisen, Empty Nothingness)<sup>17</sup> as his primary sources. The author assigns the first works to the 5th century, while the latter, which John Lagerwey somewhat uncritically regards as being from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Eskildsen correctly moves two centuries back in time. Thereby dating it more or less to the same time as the Western Ascension. This he does on the basis of a careful analysis of terminology and the manner in which the concept of emptiness, or rather vacuity as the case is here, is being discussed (pp. 161-162).

As noted above, the author applies a highly systematic approach to the scriptures and texts he discusses by almost slavishly providing textual highlights followed by his comments and analysis. Methodologically he appears to have been very much influenced by the manner in which the individual Daoist scriptures are being presented in the The Taoist Canon, the primary resource on Daoism to date.18 I am not intending to offer criticism of that major and important handbook here, but should think that Eskildsen could have approached the sources he deals with in a more engaging and discursive manner, rather than sticking doggedly to his overwhelmingly diachronic model of textual presentation/example followed by commentary. Perhaps we as readers would have been better served if he had organized his material after pre-defined topics or specific contexts rather than adhering strictly to this scriptural model? But of course, his insistence on the diachronic model to explain the historical development of the discourses on Daoist contemplation offered in the scriptures at hand prevents that to some extent.

The major and primary problems encountered by the author in his study concern handling of the many terms and concepts of Buddhist origin that

<sup>17</sup> DZ 1438,34, 620b-625a, etc.

<sup>18</sup> See Kristoffer Schipper and F. Verellen (eds.). 2004. *The Taoist Canon*, 3 vols. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

appear with great frequency in his selection of Daoist sources. Eskildsen is very conscious of this problem, and should be lauded for taking a humble and cautious approach while trying to solve the problem. The fact that Buddhist terminology and concepts entered Daoism at an early stage in the religion's development meant that they were greatly influential in shaping it, both directly as well as indirectly. However, while the acknowledgement of this fact should not be downplayed—as a number of recent studies on Daoism have tended to do—it is also important not to go overboard and read Buddhism including its doctrines and beliefs into the Daoist scriptures every time we encounter a term or textual passage, which seemingly bears a Buddhist connotation. I believe that it will be most useful if we differentiate between early, middle and later phases of Buddhist influence and imprint on Daoist scriptures where they occur, so as to avoid the easy solution that every time a Buddhist-sounding term or concept appears, it is automatically taken as an indication of Buddhist influence. Of course much of the appropriated terminology does reflect influence from Buddhism, in cases such as kalpa, karma, rebirth, heaven and hell, etc., do so. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that by the late Nanbeichao, Buddhist influence on Daoism had already been effective for the better part of three centuries, if not more, and in that period had become at least partly absorbed, transformed and reconfigured in accordance with the requirements of the receiving religion. Moreover, the appropriation of Buddhist lore by Daoism was an ongoing process, which, as time wore on, took place in a religious and cultural environment, in which Buddhism was already present in various stages of absorption and transformation. Hence, we must acknowledge that at some point in the development of Daoism, the original Buddhist material was no longer entirely 'Buddhist,' but had become, or better was in the process of becoming, part of the language of Chinese culture including that of Daoism. Stephen Bokenkamp has dealt

in some detail with this issue in relation to the Lingbao [靈寶] tradition<sup>19</sup>, and we may as well extend such reading to the other Daoist movements, the scriptures of which betray Buddhist influence, such as the 'Two-fold Mystery', etc. In fact we have already encountered the phenomena of displaced Buddhist meaning in Chinese religion and philosophy before, namely when the scholarly community became interested in the *Xuanxue* 玄學 (Abstruse Learning movement under the Southern Dynasties (3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries) more than half a century ago.<sup>20</sup> In the sources of this mainly intellectual movement Buddhist terminology also occurs with some frequency, but a close reading of this material reveals that the persons involved did not, in the majority of cases, really get the correct Buddhist meaning behind many of the terms they used.

Coming back to Eskildsen's struggle with Buddhist-sounding terminology in the Daoist scriptures he deals with, he expresses some degree of exasperation as regards terms like <code>samādhī</code> (<code>ding</code> 定), which means 'meditative absorption' or 'fixed concentration,' a term he renders 'stability,' <code>viṣaya</code>, <code>artha</code>, <code>gocara</code> (<code>jing</code> 境), which simply means 'environment' broadly stated, he renders variously as 'projected reality' (following Kohn), and <code>dharmakāya</code> (<code>fashen</code> 法身), which is correctly rendered 'Dharma Body,' etc. In themselves these examples all reveal some sense of displacement of the original Buddhist meaning(s). For example 'stability' in his rendering of 'ding' has very little to do with the Buddhist concept of <code>samādhī</code>. Although it can of course be said that mental and physical stability is a pre-condition for attaining <code>samādhī</code>. As far as 'projected reality' goes, it may in some cases be a fairly accurate rendering of <code>viṣaya</code>. However, it is in any case only

Stephen R. Bokenkamp. 2014. "The Silkworm and the Bodhi Tree: The Lingbao Attempt at Replacing Buddhism in China and Our Attempt to Place Lingbao Taoism." In *Religion and Chinese Society*, Vol. 1 (Ancient and Medieval China), ed. John Lagerwey, 318-39. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2004.

<sup>20</sup> The Xuanxue movement was basically a precursor to the Twofold-mystery tradition of the early Tang.

one of several meanings depending on a given context, which is also the conclusion the author arrives at after some deliberation (pp. 246-247). In the case of the Daoist notion of 'Dharma Body,' the manner it is presented in the context of inner alchemy, makes it abundantly clear that it has very little to do with the Buddhist concept of *dharmakāya*, but rather denotes a much more physical and immanent entity than the highly metaphysical idea behind the Buddhist concept. As it stands, 'Dharma Body' is an excellent example of an appropriated, transformed and displaced primary Buddhist concept, a concept which finds its Daoist expression as part of neidan practice (p. 247).

No matter how one goes about translating appropriated terminology, such as the case is here, one has to be extremely sensitive to both the date of one's sources as well as detailed aspects relative to the religious context in which they occur. In short, the intended meaning of an appropriated or adopted Buddhist term depends firstly on the degree to which a given Daoist author has understood the nature of what he had borrowed, and secondly on the manner in which he sought to apply it. In regard to the latter, it is more than likely that the Daoist authors consciously modified the Buddhist concepts to fit with pre-existing Daoist schemes of meaning.

There are places in his book where Eskildsen may actually be reading too much Buddhism into the scriptures he discusses. One case being the Zuowang lun, a text which strikes me as being a good deal more liberated from Buddhist dogma and concepts than, say the *Benji jing*, or the *Qingjing jing*, both works Eskildsen assigns to the Twofold Mystery phase of early Tang Daoism (pp. 211-230). In fact I would be tempted to see the Zuowang lun and its commentary as an example of a Daoist text, which has consciously sought to purge its discourse and use of concepts from overt Buddhist influence.

A scripture which could have added further dimensions to Eskildsen's discourse, and which also belongs to the Sui-Tang transition, is the Wushang neibi zhenzang jing 無上內祕真藏經 (Scripture on the True Treasury of the Highest, Inner Secret;)21, which although it does not exclusively deal with meditation, features a number of highly interesting concepts and instructions on contemplation. Among these we find the expression: 'Do not use the mind to contemplate the mind (feixin, guanxin 非心觀心),' and 'forgetting one's body and person [so as to be] without self (wang shen zi wuwo 忘身自無我).' It also refers to 'the mark of emptiness (xukong xiang 虚空相),' which represents another Daoist take on the Buddhist concept of śūnyatā, and the non-dual (wuer 無二) practice of the Way which consists of being 'without thinking and without reflection (wusi wunian 無 想無念).' In varying degrees of significance, these statements reflect 'deep level' borrowings from Prajñāpāramitā-based doctrine, a phenomena which characterizes much of the Two-fold Mystery material dealt with in Eskildsen's study. The Taishang dongxuan lingbao zhihui dingzhi tongwei jing 太上洞玄靈寶智慧定志通微經 (Lingbao Scripture of Supreme Cavern Mystery on Wisdom and Focusing One's Determination for Penetrating the Sublime)<sup>22</sup> also features instructions in meditation and could have been interesting for comparative reasons. However, I am well aware that the art of limitation is very important when writing a book on a single subject. Even so, I believe that Eskildsen's study could have benefitted further from a perusal of the above scriptures.

Occasionally, there are translated passages in the book, which I find somewhat stiff and overly literal, and which could perhaps be rendered in a more fluid fashion (or at least showing a bit more sensitivity for

<sup>21</sup> DZ 4.1, 452b-495c.

<sup>22</sup> DZ 325.5, 888b-896c; 5563, etc.

mysticism, especially since the discussion evolves around meditation and transcendence). One such example is the passage:

能知無知 道之樞機 空滅成無 何用飛仙/空虛滅無 何用仙飛

To be able to know [how to be] without knowledge is the pivotal mechanism of the Dao. If you can disappear into empty space and become nothing, what need is there to fly away as a Transcendent? (p. 149)

Instead I would read it as:

To be able to know without knowing is the pivot of the Way. If one can dissolve into emptiness and [thereby] attain to nothingness, what is the use of becoming an Immortal? As empty space dissolves into nothingness, why bother becoming a flying Immortal?

There is also the passage:

不以意思意 亦不求無思 意而無有意

Do not intentionally think or intend, but also do not seek to not think. Be conscious, but do not have thoughts (p. 198).

This I would read as:

Do not construe thinking with thoughts, and also do not try to be without thinking. In a moment of thought, one is without thoughts.

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#### Another one is:

#### 人能常清靜 天地悉皆歸

If a person can always be clear and calm, heaven and earth will all return (p. 202).

#### Instead I would render this as:

If someone is always able to remain lucid and tranquil, heaven and earth will all revert to him.

Likewise, I would prefer to translate the *Qingjing jing* as the 'Scripture on Lucidity and Tranquility,' and not as *The Scripture of Clarity and Calmness* as Eskildsen does (p. 201). These points are not meant as a criticism of the author's ability as a translator, or pedantry for that matter, but should rather be seen as reflecting differences in textual interpretation. Even so, a high degree of sensitivity to the discourse and tone of a given text combined with a modicum of common sense should of course be de rigueur in a study of this kind.

There are instances in the study where the author expresses uncertainty as to the meanings of certain terms. One such being the ubiquitous *chi* 持 'to hold or uphold' (p. 197). It is commonly used in describing the praxis of chanting spells in both the Chinese Buddhist and Daoist literature, and in this case it does indicate recitation (as Esklisen also suspects).

There are minor, formal mistakes here and there, but nothing really serious. One case being the odd rendering in Chinese of the *Prajñāpāramitā* 

hṛdaya sūtra<sup>23</sup> which the author wrongly gives as 'Bore xinjing 般若心經.' It should of course be 'Banruo xin jing' (p. 201).

While Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity is a book for the specialist, it is not overly arcane, which means that it can also be used with success in the classroom, especially for graduate students. This is because of the manner in which the author has structured his material, i.e. after each translated passage together with the original text in Chinese, Eskildsen offers extensive explanations to underscore each point he makes. Moreover, his manner of expression throughout is relatively simple and straight-forward, even when dealing with inherently difficult material such as that in question here. This is something which I personally find both refreshing and revealing a high degree of pedagogical skill. There is nothing worse that a text written in a complex and artsy language, when its actual message turns out to be ordinary. Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity is a welcome and useful study on a central aspect of medieval Daoist practice, one which fills a gap in our hitherto understanding of the evolution of that religion. As such it is one that is sure to find its place among the classical studies on medieval Daoism.

### **Abbreviations**

- DZ Daozang
- P. Pelliot Collection of Dunhuang manuscripts. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.
- T. Taishō shinshū daizōkyō, vols. 1-55, 85.

<sup>23</sup> T. 251.8, 848ac.

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Taishang shuo wuchu jing zhu 太上說五廚經註. DZ 763.17.

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