Daoist quiet sitting (jingzuò 靜坐), which is also referred to as “tranquil sitting” and “sitting-in-stillness,” is one of the primary forms of Daoist meditation. Along with quiet standing (jingzhàn 靜站), it is the essential and foundational meditation practice used in the Daoist Foundation.

The practice was originally referred to with a wide variety of classical and foundational Daoist technical terms, including bāoyī 抱一 (“embracing the One”), shǒuyī 守一 (“guarding the One”), xīnzhāi 心齋 (“fasting of the heart-mind”), zuòwàng 坐忘 (“sitting-in-forgetfulness”), and so forth. These terms appear in the texts of classical Daoism, the earliest Daoist writings (ca. 300s BCE) associated with the inner cultivation lineages. The terms clarify the practice. Yī 一 refers to the Dao (Oneness), the process (unification), and the associated state (union). As the heart-mind (xīn 心) is the psychospiritual center of human personhood from a Daoist perspective, “fasting” involves withholding mundane nutrients and ordinary sustenance in the form of perception, desire, thought, and the like. We discontinue habituated consumption. “Forgetting” directs us to sit and forget until even forgetting in forgotten. This is the state of forgetfulness, which parallels emptiness and stillness.

Because of the influence of the early 20th-century Yinshizi jìngzuò fā 因是子靜坐法 (Master Yinshi’s Quiet Sitting Methods), and the earlier practice of jìngzuò among late medieval Ruists (“Confucians”), there has been misunderstanding about the Daoist origins and development. While the full history of the term and practice remains to be written, a relatively early Daoist precedent appears in Discourse 7 of Wáng Zhé’s 王嘉 (1113-1170) Lìjiào shìwǔ lùn 立教十五論 (Fifteen Discourses to Establish the Teachings): “If there is even the slightest trace of a thought about movement and stillness, this cannot be called quiet sitting.”

Our own practice of quiet sitting is based on the method transmitted in a poem by Niú Jīnbǎo 牛金寶 (1915-1988), an influential representative of the Qiānfēng 千峰 (Thousand Peaks) sub-lineage of Lóngmén 龍門 (Dragon Gate). In some sense, this is an application and quasi-commentary on the xīnzhāi passage in the Zhuāngzi 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuāng; ch. 4). Our understanding has been clarified by oral instructions from various other Daoists.

The practice basically involves sitting-in-silence, just letting any thoughts or emotions to dissipate naturally. It is contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic. As such, it is a method informing and informed by wúwéi 無為 (“non-action”). We thus refer to it as Daoist apophatic and quietistic meditation. The associated view is that our innate nature (xìng 性) is stillness (jìng 靜). This is our original and inherent connection to the Dao-as-Stillness. Thus, quiet sitting involves “returning to the root(s)” (guīgēn 歸根).

This form of Daoist meditation became the basis of the Chan/Zen Buddhist practice of “silent illumination” (mòzhào 默照), which is also known as shikan-taza 只管打坐 (“just sitting”). We may thus benefit from consulting manuals of Sōtō Zen meditation and other traditions emphasizing contemplative silence. Contemplative ways of being and living. Interiority, awareness, presence.