



Introduction
to the
Dao

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Radha Soami Satsang Beas

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CONTENTS

Preface	vii
CHAPTER ONE: At the White Cloud Temple	1
CHAPTER TWO: Dao: Where It All Begins	31
CHAPTER THREE: Dé: Living in the Dao	53
CHAPTER FOUR: The True Man: Embodiment of Wu-Wei	89
CHAPTER FIVE: Cultivating the Dao	113
CHAPTER SIX: I Dreamed I Was a Butterfly	143
Endnotes	152
Bibliography	157
Books on Spirituality	159
Contact and General Information	162

PREFACE

Origins of Daoism

The origins of Daoist teachings are not known. Some scholars trace the first evidence to about 5,000 years ago, when shamans were thought to guide society. Shamans reputedly had the power to shape-shift between human and animal forms, take celestial journeys, and descend to an underworld. They could read omens, had revelations, and acted as healers, diviners, and interpreters of dreams. There were several mythical shamanic figures associated with ancient Chinese history, and it seems that some elements of shamanism were found in early Daoist ceremonies.

At a certain point in ancient times, there seem to have been people who had direct experience of the superconscious state that we call God – in Chinese language referred to as the *Dao (Tao)*. These superconscious beings developed a spiritual practice or method to quiet the mind and attain inner stillness, and eventually taught that sublime experience to their disciples. There is evidence of these practices in the fourth-century BCE text *Nei-yeh* (“Inward Training”), although the human experience of this divine presence probably goes back much farther than that. The many remote, austere mountain ranges of China would have provided countless caves and solitary spots where hermits could practice.

The Daoist teachings, as they developed and were recorded, impart certain principles of spiritual life and how to live in the world – essentially the need to find harmony and balance within,

often referred to as holding on to the center, the Dao. Literally Dao means “the Way”; the term refers to the superconscious, formless origin of the creation, the dynamic principle immanent in all the creation. It also refers to the inner path of the soul rediscovering its spiritual identity and origin, the inner Way. The path of Dao teaches the principles of living in harmony with nature and not trying to dominate it: “leading from behind” rather than pushing oneself forward, and *wu-wei* (selfless action, or acting without selfish motive) – going with the flow of life.

The Dao implies an understanding that true inner balance and harmony occur at the center point between the opposites of *yang* (outward, masculine) and *yin* (inward, feminine) – cogently explained through the text of the *Yijing* (*I Ching*, the “Book of Changes”), an ancient divination manual which dates from as early as the tenth century BCE. Scholars believe that this is the most ancient text that presents the teachings eventually associated with Daoism.

Eventually distillations of Daoist beliefs and practices appeared in collections of sayings and parables like the *Daodéjing* (*Tao te Ching*: the “Classic of Dao and Dé”), attributed to an archivist named Laozi (Lao-tzu), who probably lived sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, and *Zhuangzi*, from the fourth and third century BCE, attributed to a man named Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu). It is not known if Laozi actually existed – his name means “the old man” – but there is some evidence that Zhuangzi was an actual person. He names both Confucius and Laozi in his writings.

The teachings of Confucius (Kong Qiu) probably started influencing Chinese society at the same time as early Daoist teachings, and he seems to have been a contemporary of Laozi.

Confucianism began as guidance in right living for someone seeking to live in harmony with Dao and included benevolence, righteousness, good manners, and knowledge. It spells out a foundation for morality and ethics that provide society with common values. Later on, Confucianism elucidated external practices and rituals.

In the second century CE, Indian monks arrived in China, probably along the Silk Road, and began to teach Buddhism. They translated Buddhist texts from Indian languages into Chinese. Buddhist practices and beliefs began to influence Chinese life, and Daoism adopted the concepts of karma and reincarnation, as well as monastic community organization. By the fifth century, Buddhism was established in south China.

Over time, the Chinese Buddhist canon became the largest and most comprehensive collection of Buddhist texts ever compiled, preserving the expansive teachings and history of Indian Buddhism. By the thirteenth century, Buddhism had largely died out in India, and with few exceptions, the manuscripts, often written on materials such as palm leaves and birch bark, disintegrated. Meanwhile, Buddhism continued to flourish in China. The use of wood-block printing on paper, as well as imperial patronage, ensured that the Chinese Buddhist canon was carefully preserved. At the same time, Daoist principles and literature continued to be taught in China. Many similarities between the two traditions were also noted; some even believed that Laozi, after leaving China for the West, had become known as the Buddha.

In this book, the focus is on the Chinese Daoist beliefs and practice, although in some instances the two traditions merge into one another.

Spelling and Transliteration of Chinese Words

There are two principal methods of transliterating Chinese words into the Roman (English) alphabet. These are the Wade-Giles system and the Pinyin system. Wade-Giles developed from a system produced by Thomas Francis Wade, during the mid-19th century, and was given completed form with Herbert A. Giles's Chinese-English Dictionary of 1892. Pinyin was created under the auspices of the People's Republic of China after World War II and more closely approximates the sounds of the Chinese language. All Chinese terms used in this book follow the Pinyin system. Where certain words and names have become common in English in the Wade-Giles system, they are included in parentheses where they first appear. A few relevant examples are: Laozi (Lao-tzu), *Daodéjing* (*Tao te Ching*), and Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu).

Translations of Classics like Daodéjing and Zhuangzi

Several published translations of *Daodéjing* have been used, selected according to their resonance with the spiritual nature of the teachings as well as their literary quality. Some revisions to these translations have been made by a team of researchers associated with the multi-volume *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, published by Science of the Soul Research Centre. The published translations include those by Ellen M. Chen, Wing-tsit Chan, Gia-fu Feng with Jane English, Lin Yutang, Red Pine, and others.

For the writings of Zhuangzi, I have mainly used the translations by Burton Watson in his *Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (2013) and *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings* (2003). These are both published by Columbia University Press. I have also used translations by Thomas Merton, in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (with terms converted

to Pinyin) for some passages where Merton was clearer, more passionate, and more poetic.

Translations of other texts, like the *Huainanzi* and *Nei-yeh*, are indicated in the endnotes.

Defining and Translating Spiritual Terms from Chinese to English

Words are vessels which carry the impressions of experiences (spiritual or otherwise) that can't be explained with words. They function as symbols or reminders and mean something different to everyone who uses them.

We are used to thinking of mystical truths as ideas or concepts which can be expressed in words and texts. However, this is a mistake. That was made clear in correspondence with Chinese Daoist scholars like Professor Russell Kirkland. I was trying to understand a specific Daoist concept and define it in English and wrote to Dr Kirkland about it. He replied:

I think that your problem is that you seem to be seeking precision and singular meanings of terms for which Daoists do not offer (or generally even seek) precision or singular meanings. Christian theology offers precision and singular meanings of terms, because of its peculiar history of political pressure to achieve orthodoxy, so that everyone believes and says the same thing. Daoists do not generally try to “find” an exact “meaning” of terms – even of “Dao” itself. Daoists are usually content to work with a general or vague “meaning” of any term, even “Dao.” Remember that Daoists regarded the vague *Daodéjing*

and *Zhuangzi* as epitomizing their truth. Do either of them offer precise, singular definitions of their terms?

I'd advise against seeking terminological precision in understanding Daoist spirituality: that effort would seem always to lead to personal confusion, rather than personal enlightenment. Once you "have gotten the sense" of a term in a way that speaks to *you*, that is its "meaning" for a Daoist.

Another scholar wrote in an email:

Daoism has never attempted to assert that its teachings give the complete and whole truth of the *Dao*. Laozi says in *Daodéjing* that the *Dao* is so vast and boundless that it is beyond the limitation of words. Any attempt to describe the *Dao* with words will not do it justice. For this reason, descriptions of the *Dao* in Daoism appear obscure, difficult to understand, and sometimes even conflicting. However, the vagueness of the subject matter, the *Dao*, owing to its profound and indescribable nature, should not lead to the conclusion that the philosophical system of Daoism which attempts to address the understanding of the *Dao* is also vague.

The approach of Daoism to address the lack of clarity is the practice – to personally experience the *Dao* through meditation, to attain clarity in understanding of the *Dao*. The guidance of a living teacher is necessary.

The unknown author of the *Scripture on the Three Pure Subtle Natures* in the eighteenth century (who attributed his collection of sayings to the eighth-century Master Lu Dongbin) advises

those who want to pursue the “great *Dao*” not to try to follow this path alone. He says that guidance should rather be sought from “real people,” meaning enlightened living teachers who have mastered the *Dao* themselves:

It is necessary to seek far and wide for the guidance of truly elevated people. If you do not meet real people (*zhenren*) who can point out the profound subtleties, you will not understand the great *Dao*. Even if you understand something, it will only be scratching the surface. In the end, you will fail to attain the profound Mystery. If you do not attain the Mystery, how can you understand the great *Dao*? So to know the great *Dao*, you must seek authentic teachings.

Authentic teachings are received individually from a master (*shi*). His guidance in the dark reveals flashes of enlightenment, so that you can have perfect understanding of the mystery of mysteries, by which you can know the great Path. To have this knowledge is to have attainment. With such attainment you realize the ultimate mystery; then non-doing (*wu-wei*) is finally achieved.¹

Many thanks to Professor Roger T. Ames for his generosity in permitting use of the quotations cited herein from his book *Yuan Dao*.

Please note: For clarity and consistency, the spelling, capitalization, and italicization of certain Chinese and English words appearing in excerpts from cited sources have been edited to conform to this book’s overall editorial style.

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CHAPTER ONE

At the White Cloud Temple

The purpose of a fish trap is to catch fish, and when the fish are caught, the trap is forgotten. The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits. When the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten. The purpose of words is to convey ideas. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten. Where can I find someone who has forgotten words? I would like to talk to him.²

Meeting with a Daoist Master

We were three friends meeting up in Beijing, to explore how Daoism is practiced today in China. Reading books is one thing, but I had long ago realized that I would need a human encounter to give me an accurate sense of what Daoism could offer the spiritual seeker. So I contacted a couple of Chinese friends and asked them to join me on a journey to China, to help translate and make logistical arrangements. Our week in Beijing in September 2017 was an eye-opener in many respects, but most important is that we were able to have significant conversations with three Daoists: Master Meng Zhiling, a true

Daoist master of the Longmen (Dragon Gate) Quanzhen lineage, who is living and teaching at the Bayun Guan (White Cloud) temple; the student and former priest Heven Qiu from the same temple; and the scholar Yin Zhihua, who lectures and publishes extensively. After our interviews, which took place at the Bayun Guan temple on three successive mornings, we transcribed the recordings and simultaneously translated them into English. This allowed us to continue our discussions into the afternoons. We'd get some lunch, rest a bit, and then continue.

To get more background on Master Meng before meeting him, I read Shi Jing's interview with him in the United Kingdom in 2012, which was published in the UK periodical *Dragon's Mouth* (2013). In it Master Meng gave a candid account of his arduous and austere spiritual search, which lasted for about thirteen years, until he found his master and embarked on the contemplative practice that he follows now.

Master Meng said that when he was twenty-four years old, in 1984, he left home to escape some personal problems, and was searching for spiritual direction and meaning. He wasn't particularly religious then and didn't know anything about Daoism, and just a little about Buddhism. At that time, he explained, people in China weren't so familiar with Daoism, and it was considered an embarrassment, as society had become more materialistic. He went to a number of temples, including the famous Shaolin temple, the complex at Wudangshan (Wudang mountain), and many others, but none would accept him. He continued travelling and searching, ultimately passing through seven provinces of China including Sichuan, but still he could find no master or temple that would accept him as a disciple.

Finally someone took him to a remote temple where there was an old Buddhist nun. She allowed him to stay, but after a

few days she told him that he should move on, as it had come to her in a dream that he really wasn't meant to be a Buddhist, and that he should find a Daoist temple. He was feeling very frustrated and rejected by this time; he couldn't understand why he had been searching for so long and no one would accept him. The nun agreed to help him find another place to stay, and he ended up at a very small temple that was difficult to reach on foot. He stayed there for perhaps a year, sharing the space with another man, but after a while an official from the government security department visited and said that since that temple wasn't officially recognized, they would have to leave. He felt he had wasted another year!

By then Master Meng had decided to continue his search at the larger temples and mountains. He went to a number of famous temples but was turned down by all of them. He returned to Wudangshan, which still wouldn't accept him, so he went to Taishan, another mountain range. On the way he passed through the Songshan mountains, where he found a Daoist temple called Zhongye Miao (Middle Peak temple). There the head priest, Meng Minglin, accepted him as a disciple, and he was finally ordained (initiated) by him into the Dragon Gate tradition. But after a while, Meng Minglin sent him to the Bayun Guan (White Cloud) temple in Beijing to get a deeper understanding of Daoism.

At Bayun Guan he enjoyed the company of other Daoists, and he stayed and worked with the Chinese Daoist Association and the Daoist College located there. For the first time, he immersed himself in the Daoist classics of Laozi and Zhuangzi, under the guidance of the old Daoists there. But he missed the peace and quiet he had enjoyed in the mountains and became fed up with city temple life. He was impressed that the older generation of

Daoists he met at Bayun Guan spoke simply about the teachings while having deep insights into life, and he realized that intellectual education wasn't so important – these people had a deeper wisdom despite not being educated. They told him that to gain this understanding he would need to engage in inner cultivation of the Dao. Then he also could become “a spirit immortal.” He was a bit skeptical about all this but decided to return to the mountains and meet some of the old Daoists there.

At this point it was 1992, and he had taken on numerous administrative duties at Bayun Guan. He was administrator of the Daoist Academy, and many of his colleagues wanted him to stay and even become a government official. But Master Meng wasn't interested in working for the government; he wanted to get back to his practice of cultivating the Dao. So in 1993 he left secretly in order to travel around and search out more of the old Daoists, and find a quiet place where he could be a recluse and cultivate the Dao, which he had decided was the true path to follow.

He ended up in Dongbei (Manchuria), in remote northeastern China. It is very cold there, and he dug himself a cave where he lived as a hermit. He didn't accept donations and used his own money for the few things he purchased, such as cooking oil and salt. Otherwise he ate the plants and vegetables he gathered. He rejected anything that would make his life easier; he even slept on the ground, emulating the early practitioners of Quanzhen Daoism. Eventually the villagers in the area started to visit him and ask questions about the Dao; he couldn't get rid of them, so once again his tranquility was interrupted. He travelled farther and found a place even more remote, where he lived in an abandoned hut. Adopting this austere life, his

clothes became rags; he undertook any task to make his life even more difficult. He spent all his time attending to his daily needs and meditating.

Master Meng had set out to use these hardships as part of his self-cultivation – overcoming them, he believed, was the means to reclaim his “original nature.” He wanted to follow the Dao, to achieve oneness with the Dao, and he used his hardships as a tool to purify his mind.

After a while he realized that even physical difficulties can be surmounted mentally and spiritually, and so there would be no end to this process. Eventually, through his contemplative practice and austere hard labor, he says he reached a state of total tranquility, and his mind stabilized. To put it in Daoist terms, he recovered his original nature by “removing the dust” of his thoughts and desires. As Master Meng explained:

Our original nature is connected to immortality, to the formless. It is like a glowing pearl, but through our day to day lives, with all our thoughts and desires, we accumulate dust which covers its original condition. But if we remove this dust, then the pearl will be able to shine again. The term for this method of cultivation is to stabilize our heart and transform our nature (*xiangxin huaxing*). To stabilize our heart means that we stay tranquil. When we stay tranquil we stop accumulating more dust. And by removing the old dust that we have already accumulated we transform our nature. So once we've removed all the dust from our heart then our true nature is revealed. And our true nature is Dao.

The cultivation is to gather our eyes, ears, mouth, and heart, and focus wholly on one point without being distracted or wandering from the focal point. If you cultivate this way for a long time then you will become stable and focused.

You'll find this teaching in many stories connected to the Quanzhen masters. For example, there was a period when Qiu Chuji was living near a river. If anyone came along who needed to cross the river he would carry them on his back. It never bothered him who they were and he never asked for any reward; he just wanted to be of service. He kept his eyes, ears and heart focused. This is the real cultivation of *xiangxin huaxing*. Whatever we are doing, when our hearts are stabilized, nothing can distract us. This is when our innate wisdom can be revealed and our original nature can glow.

Master Meng continued describing how he would intentionally undergo physical hardships during the seven years he travelled around. He would go to the coldest parts of China and live outdoors, and then he would go to the hottest places during the summers. He ate only what he could find in the forest. He even survived an attack by wolves.

With this kind of life there are few unnecessary thoughts and the heart can become clear. I even forgot whether I was alive or dead. I went there without any food, without anything, and let nature take its course. Whether I would live or die was not for me to decide; I just left it to the immortals.

Ultimately, in 2005 people from the Chinese Daoist Association found him and, after many attempts, convinced him to return to Beijing, just for a little while, to teach some students. Finally he agreed, but the “little while” has become longer and longer and he is still there.

When I met Master Meng in September 2017, he was very welcoming, with a gentle, respectful demeanor. He was dressed in a traditional Daoist robe; his appearance was neat and orderly, as was his office. But more than anything, it was his smile and logical yet modest way of speaking that charmed and relaxed me enough to bring up the deep subjects I had been mulling over.

What impressed me most during the discussions was Master Meng’s emphasis on personal experience rather than mere reading of books and intellectual analysis. By experience he meant both meditation and the physical tasks his master had asked him to do.

First I asked him how he had found his master – and this is what he said:

The process of finding the master is very difficult. There are many people seeking Dao. Some never found a master their whole life. Some took twenty or thirty years to find one. Some took two or three years. It all depends on karma and the determination of the seeker. I once wrote a little poem, “I will seek Dao until (the bones in) my knees are exposed.” It often takes great refinement of the mind of the seeker, not just physical hardship. You must truly humble yourself, clear your mind, until nothing bothers the mind.

He then mentioned the Daoist belief that there are several masters on inner planes – immortal beings – who monitor the

seeker's progress. Ultimately, however, a person's own master will appear. As Master Meng explained:

When a seeker begins, many masters know and pay attention to his progress. They don't have to meet each other or know each other. When the student is ready by making himself a true, great vehicle of Dao, any one of the masters appears and can guide and teach the student. Once the human mind dies, the mind of Dao appears. So it's not a disciple looking for the master, but the master is looking for the disciple.

In other words, I thought, as long as we have an active mind, entrapped by the impurities of this physical human level, then our higher or refined mind, which Master Meng calls the Dao mind – the mind activated by Dao – is suppressed. The master will appear once these base tendencies, which Master Meng called the human mind, are controlled. Then he continued:

Very few people can find a master and have the technique. Once they find the master and have the technique, they need to find a solitary place or monastery to put it into practice. I can explain with my own experience what it is like in the beginning, to show that it is not a path for the people of the world.

The first thing I did is to stop reading books. It's an obstacle, as are all ways of intellectual thinking and even remembering friends. So in twenty-four hours, except for a short time for sleep, all I did was to focus the mind. To help focus the mind, I only did two things:

One was sitting in meditation to still the thoughts and calm the mind. Of course, there's a method to do that. The practice of meditation leads to a change in the normal physical functions of the internal organs. The initial change is that the physical functioning of the body stops. The medical world may consider this as a sickness, but it is not. By using a certain technique, one blocks the physical functions of the body. This is the same for male and female, until they return to the physical state of a baby. This is the initial stage of the practice. The purpose of sitting in meditation is to still the mind, because our mind throughout the day is not under our control. The practice is in order to keep the mind controlled. It takes a long time to get into the state.

The second thing I did was hard work (austerity). There's a saying that the practice must come from "the field of bitterness." This is not like the passive acceptance of bitterness in life. This is actively looking for bitter, hard work. You do the hard work without asking any questions. For example, our ancestral master Qiu would roll a stone up the mountain and then roll it down and back up again. This is the method of refinement to help focus the mind – just control the mind and focus on the actual work you are doing.

Seeking out such difficulties and austerities to control the mind is considered by many Daoists as a necessary mental discipline as well as a way of inculcating obedience to one's master – ultimately a foundation for developing humility and

giving up consciousness of self. Now Master Meng shared his own experience.

Sitting in meditation is to separate our spiritual consciousness from our physical body, because the spiritual nature is independent of the body. Our ancestral master says that the practice is 70 percent work on *xing* (human nature or character), and 30 percent on *ming* (inner life; the inner world). So meditation is 30 percent of the work. The other is on the temperament of the mind, which cannot be refined through meditation. One needs the right environment to help cultivate the mind, in the mountains, where you don't have any resistance. Once you develop the resistance, you can return to the mundane world. At that point, you blend in and conceal your practice.

Then he shared what he did to refine his *xing* – his human nature or temperament. He did all kinds of physical work in the mountains in order to control the outward tendencies of his mind and make it focus without surrendering to distractions.

For example, I went to look for hard work. During the cold winter, I'd go into the mountains to look for firewood. The wood must be from dead trees, and I'd pull them over. So I just did the work without asking any questions. There were other tasks, like digging a well without my even having the knowledge or skills or physical strength to do it. So during the years that I was in the mountains, I have done almost all

kinds of work – wood work, roof work, and the like. During that work I focused all my senses, including my ears, eyes, etc., on the task I was doing, without minding anything surrounding me, until I reached the state of not considering or being bothered by anything around, and the mind not being disturbed by anything. A true saint or true human being would not move in front of a crumbling mountain.

I asked him why he had adopted this technique – whether it was on instructions from his master – and he answered in a way that echoes much of what I heard not only from Master Meng, but from several other Daoists during my visit to China: that the practice is extremely individual and secretive. It cannot be shared or discussed with others because it exists solely between master and disciple. He explained:

There's no need to discuss the details of the instruction, because everyone's technique is different. What you are seeing is the manifestation of the technique.

Another example is that when I prepare my food and I'm cutting the vegetables, I put all my attention on the cutting. Even if the pot is burning, I would not be disturbed until I finish cutting the vegetables. Or if a box of matches drops on the floor, I would not let my mind be disturbed; I'd pick up the matches one by one and put them nicely and neatly back into the box, with an undisturbed peaceful mind; the same example with rice falling on the ground. That's why our ancestral master says that 70 percent of the practice is to refine the mind (*xing*, human nature).

To give you an example of the initial effects of the practice, the *Zhuangzi* says, “Observe the opening, then in the room of emptiness, there appears bright, pure light.” It means that after practicing the technique for a long time, there appears daylight even if you are in a dark room. This is similar to the section of the *Zhuangzi* that discusses “fasting of the mind” (which, he said, is very basic). At the later stages the effects of the practice get much broader, deeper and greater.

Master Meng explained how these practices led to inner visions of light, which have always accompanied him.

You will understand this only when you experience it yourself. In the mountains, I didn't sleep in the evenings. I sat through the evening, but maybe dozing off here and there. All of a sudden, the room would be lit by daylight. I opened my eyes, but it was dark outside. Later, there were more and more of these instances. So then I understood what it means. When one of my masters taught me the practice of refining my nature, he said that once you are done with this practice, there will be no dark nights. The daylight later turned into a vision, and it became constant.

He described other inner visions of future events that he experienced as a result of both his meditation and ascetic practices.

One day I had a vision of a mountain and water, and at the foot of the mountain there appeared a young Daoist monk dressed neatly and looking smart. The

next morning, someone called me outside, and the same person walked up towards my vegetable garden. This also happened when I was seeking Dao – those masters all knew in advance that visitors were coming. Later I understood these are very basic initial effects of the practice. This cannot be explained by science or philosophy.

Trying to find spirituality by intellectual means is futile, Master Meng emphasized. Yet this is the path that most modern people attempt. He said:

If you are looking for how modern people are practicing Daoism, you'll be hugely disappointed, because the traditional Daoism and what modern people think is Daoism are very different, even from the Daoism of twenty or thirty years ago. In this college (at the Bayun Guan temple, which is the top Daoist college among the nine Daoist colleges in China), there are graduates and post-graduates. These young folks have no idea of what traditional Daoism is.

The only one who can talk about traditional Daoism is me, because of my background, interests, and personal experience of seeking to understand traditional Daoism by visiting the traditional Daoists. So I have been invited to this and other colleges to explain and teach the traditional Daoism.

I don't think Master Meng was saying this out of pride or arrogance; he was simply stating a fact – that most people today do not understand what Daoism is. He continued:

Young people nowadays are much more intellectual and have much stronger capabilities to read and study than we older generations did. They are also very devoted and enthusiastic about Daoism. But because the method has changed, their understanding of Daoism has changed too. Traditional Daoism begins with the actual practice. And then, with the understanding gained from the practice, the students confirmed that understanding by reading the classical books and writings. To bolster their experience, they took guidance from the classical books and writings to help with their further practice.

The young people's study of Daoism today is based on books and becomes an understanding of a culture rather than actual practice.

Dr Yin Zhihua, an academic and scholar of Daoism whom we met a few days later, expanded on Master Meng's observation, pointing out that even the physical practices like *taiji* and *qigong* don't represent the deepest level of Daoism. "The Daoist practices have two levels. One is internal alchemy, internal practice to become immortal. The other is for the common people; it is a physical practice, a series of physical exercises, which originated from *daoyin* in ancient times. They are practices of breathing and physical exercise for physical well-being. These are for ordinary people. But the fundamental practice of Daoism is not that."

In my conversations with Master Meng, we explored the basic concepts and practices of Daoism that he teaches his students and disciples, focusing on the idea that the Dao exists of itself, emulating nothing else, based on nothing else.

I would cover the two key basic concepts of Daoism, *ziran* (self-existent, of its own nature) and *wu-wei* (non-doing), as taught by Laozi and Zhuangzi. The academic world's understanding of these terms is different from the way those of us who practice Daoism understand them.

The Western cultures, including Chinese culture, are focused on human beings. They consider human beings as the center of the universe; Daoism is the opposite. The *ziran* and *wu-wei* are the core characteristics or intrinsic nature of Dao, and everything comes from that. Dao is the origin of everything (in the creation). We human beings and everything in the creation have their own intrinsic, original nature, i.e., *ziran*. "The Great Dao exists in myriad things," says the Daodéjing. This is the meaning of it. (The all-pervading intrinsic nature of everything is the Dao.)

The term *ziran* appears in Chapter Twenty-five of the Daodéjing, where the text gives us a sense of the order of the creation – each level is dependent upon the one higher – but the Dao is the origin of all, self-existent and pervading all:

The human being emulates earth.

Earth emulates heaven.

Heaven emulates the Dao.

The Dao exists by virtue of itself, self-existent.

Master Meng explained the deeper level of meaning of the term *ziran*:

Zi means self, *ran* means so. It means just so, just is, just the way it is, self-existent (“suchness,” as it is called in Buddhism). In Daoist terms, it is also called *ben lai mian mu*, the original way, the original nature. Our physical appearance is not what we are; *ziran* is what we originally look like. In essence, it is the spiritual consciousness in us. It is our true self.

The first thing to know is that Dao is formless. *Ziran* is formless. The formless does not mean air but is beyond the physical world.

The Daoist view of the universe is that it consists of two parts: one is the physical world (which we can perceive through our senses), and the other is the non-physical world. The world of Dao is beyond the physical world, and it is the original state of man, heaven and earth, and the myriad things (the multiplicity of creation). Our physical body belongs to the physical world. It is a vehicle. But our original, true nature is not this physical body, and is formless. The formless part is the spiritual part.

The *Yijing (I Ching, Book of Changes)*, says, “That which is beyond the forms is called Dao. That which has a form is called a vehicle.” Dao dominates the vehicle. The vehicle is the carrier of Dao. Human beings and everything else are the vehicle or container of Dao. This is the fundamental principle of Daoism.

The formless part of the human being is absolutely harmonious and universally connected with everything else. Our connection or commonality with plants and animals is at the formless level (which our conscious awareness or intellect cannot reach),

and is harmonious. The uniqueness of Daoism is that it puts great emphasis on the universal, original nature (*ziran*) of human beings and everything else at the formless level, which is Dao. At the level of the formless Dao, all things in the creation, including human beings, are unified and in harmony.

He continued:

The vehicle has forms. All disharmony is caused by leaving the source, the root, which is the formless, and entering the physical world of forms, which are the branches. Within the creation, all disharmony is due to forms. Where there is no form, there is harmony. For example, if we humans deal with things only at the physical level, we see some beautiful people and some not such beautiful people; we see people with wealth and poor people. This is how and where discord happens. But at the formless, spiritual level (because there is a connection at that level), there is harmony. This is why Daoism strives to let the formless dominate the form.

The harmony in the formless realm is eternal. The harmony in the realm of forms cannot last long. For example, due to the physical forms of tigers and lions, they are in conflict with us. But if you raise them from a cub, and you establish a certain connection, you are in harmony with them. It's the same with a society – if the formless dominates, there is harmony in the society. If the formed dominates, there is chaos and discord in the society. The highest concept of the

formless is Dao and *dé*. (*Dé* is the Dao as manifested in the individual.)

All activities of human beings must obey, follow, and submit to the harmonious relationship, instead of putting human beings ahead of everything else; this state of harmony is not only the true nature of human beings but also the universal nature of the creation, the nature of Dao. This is the concept of *wu-wei* (non-doing) from Laozi. Dao is the principle of overall harmony in the creation.

To do that, human beings must first become aware of their own original nature, i.e., *ziran*, and then follow and submit to that nature, which is the act of *wu-wei* (non-doing). Non-doing means not to act according to our own desires and opinions, which are limited. So Laozi tells us to abandon our smartness and cleverness. Anything you do without thinking is *with* nature. The more thinking you do, the more problems there are.

That concluded Master Meng's discussion of the basic principles of Daoism: *ziran* – “of itself” – inherent original nature; and *wu-wei*, “non-doing.” He said:

As long as we follow our own original, inherent nature, instead of viewing ourselves, us human beings, as the center of the universe and controlling the universe, we should be submissive to our own inherent nature and let that nature be in control of us, so that we have harmony.

The second part of my meeting with Master Meng was focused on Daoist practice. Master Meng introduced the subject by emphasizing the necessity of beginning one's practice in the mountains, seeking out a monastery or quiet place where one can follow the life of a recluse.

The practices all take place in the mountains. Some go to monasteries to practice for eight to ten years, and when they come back to the mundane world, they have developed good resistance, as they have been keeping their mind constantly calm. The students here in the college do not do this kind of practice; they only study books.

I asked him to tell me more about the practice. He said:

The first step of the three steps is to realize our original nature. This is different from intellect or smartness. They (practitioners) must give up the intellect, intellectual knowledge gained through the senses, so that they appear dumb, and enter the silent state by means of some techniques, in order to experience the formless realm of Dao.

I asked if their techniques include *zuowang*, “sitting in forgetfulness,” which is discussed in many Daoist texts. He emphasized that it is difficult to talk about, as “only those who practice can discuss technique.”

Conceptually, it is to practice the “silence” mentioned in the Daodéjing, to be silent and still (*qingjing*),

and non-doing (*wu-wei*). . . . Laozi says, “You can know everything under heaven without leaving the house.” . . . Just now you mentioned “sitting in forgetfulness,” *zuowang* – that is a very limited technique, very basic. But there is a secret technique that has been passed along over thousands of years. Through this technique, another world is discovered.

Compared to that world, we realize how simple this physical world is. It is like the world of ants or bees. Their worlds are wonderful but not without limitations. It is the same with our world of the senses; there are limitations to our world. The realm of Dao is much beyond our world, beyond our senses. It is also like the fish in the water. To the fish, the water does not exist, but we can see the water. To us, the air is nothing, but to the world of Dao, it is the substance of Dao. This is why the realm of Dao, which is clear and empty, cannot be understood with the senses.

So you must let go of anything physical, including the self and the physical body – as Laozi puts it, “I have a great ailment because I have a physical body” – to be unobstructed in the formless realms.

I have had many masters (teachers) who are illiterate. Their knowledge and wisdom are not from books but from the practice of abandoning the physical senses. Their knowledge and wisdom are much superior, which is called the attainment of Dao. When you are internal and one with Dao, you become universal with everything, and become knowledgeable and conscious of everything. This knowledge does not come from books.

Master Meng continued to explain that the technique has been taught by masters for thousands of years, even before Laozi appeared.

Since ancient times – we have had saints before Laozi – and even before there was written language – there is a secret technique that has been passed along since then. Not to mention that if you come and ask about the technique, even if you're a student, a disciple, when it is not the right time, you cannot get the instruction from the master. The technique is not a business. It is like a precious sword; only the one (who is worthy) can be given it. So they are very careful in giving out the secret technique. There is a rule that you must give the technique to the right person and you must not give it to the wrong person. That is why it cannot be discussed. But I can discuss on the outside what the techniques appear to look like, what they (practitioners) do in the mountains, to give you some ideas of the technique.

Does it mean that the student must be prepared? I asked.

The preparation is not what you imagine. They don't have to do any preparation. Without having the technique, regardless of how good they may be, they won't have the Dao. For example, regardless of how good a person's car is, if they don't find the right exit to the right path, however good the car is, they won't find the path.

So this is the difference between Daoism and other religions. In Daoism, it is believed that our human destiny is in our own hands, not in heaven (with God). Anyone can become an “immortal.” Western religions dare not say that. Daoism has a huge system of immortals, a status attained from being human.

Master Meng emphasized that the Western worldview looks at human beings as having a role in the transformation of the world. This is not the Chinese viewpoint. The Chinese view destiny and nature as carrying everything along, and that human beings need to act in accord with nature, becoming part of the flow, not trying to impose their will.

When someone asked him what advice he could give those in the West who wished to follow Daoism, Master Meng replied:

This might seem basic, but the most important thing is to keep your heart simple and clear. This is the same for everyone, whether you are cultivating the Dao in the East or the West. Don't get caught up in too many theories about cultivation; that just creates more ideas. Just keep your heart simple and clear. There are many ways to cultivate the Dao but this is the important point.

Meeting with a Disciple

The day after meeting with Master Meng, we had a very pleasant interaction with Heven Qiu (Qiu Qing), a student of the Daoist college at Bayun Guan temple. Qiu originally had been a priest at the temple and has lived there for twenty-one years. Qiu

explained that he took the English name “Heven,” intentionally misspelling the word “heaven,” because he is not perfect. Also, to him the letter “a” represents his master, He Yongzhang, who had passed away some time earlier, so Qiu chose the name Heven as a tribute to his master. While He was alive, Qiu would visit him once a year. Qiu explained that his master was from the eighteenth generation of the Quanzhen Dragon Gate lineage, which makes Qiu from the nineteenth generation. He commented that Master Meng is also of the Dragon Gate lineage. Qiu explained:

There are many teachers. But at this college, only Master Meng is a Daoist. Other teachers are professors from outside the college from other universities. Master Meng is also my teacher. But a teacher is different from a master. A Daoist master is a Daoist father. Master Meng is not my Daoist father. A teacher can have many students. I’m one of his students, but not his disciple, as He Yongzhang is still my master.

Our discussion with Qiu covered many of the same subjects we had broached with Master Meng, although more briefly. Concerning meditation, he echoed what we had heard from others, including Master Meng:

I can talk about meditation, not the method. The method of meditation is not publicly discussed, just as Master Meng said. There’s a saying that among six ears (three people), Dao must not be transmitted. It is only transmitted one to one between the disciple and the master. Because everyone is different, their methods are also different.

So everything seems to boil down to the individual relationship between master and disciple. Yet the master won't spell out everything for the disciple, who has to come to realizations by himself.

Qiu then elaborated on the most desirable times and postures for meditation, and the way to create the best atmosphere for meditation. He said that the best times to meditate are midnight, midday, morning and evening, i.e., 12:00 am, 12:00 pm, 6:00 am, and 6:00 pm. These are the special times for meditation when *yin* and *yang* alternate, he said. Daoists generally meditate each time for about 30 minutes to one hour, sometimes sitting cross-legged or in a lotus position. Qiu prefers sitting straight in a chair, with his hands on his knees. He stated that the technique differs from person to person because each person is different, and even his state of mind differs from day to day. He said, "Dao changes; your own thoughts, your own body, and your own state all change." One can focus one's meditation and breathing on any one of the three "elixir fields," which are non-physical centers in the body located in the abdomen, heart, and brain. He also said that one can count one's breaths or focus one's eyes on an outer object or focal point. One can burn incense or practice *qigong*.

Concerning karma and reincarnation, Qiu acknowledged that Daoists believe in reincarnation but don't emphasize it. Instead of focusing on the next life, as in Buddhism, they would rather focus on their purpose in this life – to attain Dao and not have a next life. Qiu stated that most people are concerned about the future or their destiny. He said that Buddhism and Daoism share many common beliefs about karma, but Daoists believe that our future is in our own hands. Destiny is the result of cause and effect from the past life. This cannot be changed, but we *can* change our future.

I asked about devotion, or love for their master. Qiu connected devotion and love to external prayer as a way of translating love into action. He also spoke of the Daoist belief in the “immortals” – advanced souls, no longer in the physical body, who embody the Dao. The purpose of his life is to become an immortal.

About his prayers, he said that practitioners of Dao recite and chant certain scriptures, including *Qingjingjing* (“The Scripture of Clarity and Stillness”). Every day they publicly chant a daily scripture. Their own chanting is done in the morning and evening and includes singing with tones and music. Qiu explained:

The master initially would go through the scripture by having us kneel down in front of the statues of the immortals, to teach us how to chant. There are some terms that are taboos, so we need to use substitutes. . . . This chanting method is passed on by master to disciple by word of mouth. The master only teaches me how to read or chant, but he does not explain the meanings of the scripture. It is up to the individuals to understand the scriptures.

Qui similarly elaborated on the need for the understanding of Daoist principles to come from one’s individual practice. He said:

The understanding of Dao and other terms all depends on individual practice and awareness. When they get on the path, their masters don’t explain to them what these terms mean. It’s up to individuals to read the scriptures many times to get their own understanding. Daoism puts emphasis on cultivation of life and nature.

Meeting with a Daoist Scholar

The third person we interviewed during this research trip was Dr Yin Zhihua, mentioned earlier, a noted scholar of Daoism. Mostly we discussed many of the same subjects we had discussed with Master Meng, but Dr Yin offered a more historical and academic perspective.

Concerning the need to keep the actual practices secret, he confirmed that the practices differ among individuals and depend on guidance from the master. He said:

The appearance of Daoism may have changed, but the actual practice has not changed since ancient times. It differs from Buddhism, in that Buddhism focuses on stillness and observation, while Daoism focuses on *qi* (the energy), and congealing (merging) of *jing* (vital essence), *qi*, and *shen* (spirit) into one. Also, Daoism is more focused on the individual practice. They say that my life is in my own hands, not in Heaven's (God's) hand, and does not depend on destiny.

“Do you carry your destiny from your previous life?” I asked him.

“Yes,” he answered, “but what you do in this life can change it.”

“So you have some free will?” I asked. With great conviction, he answered:

Yes, because human beings have the ability to understand the mystery of the universe. If they can grasp the mystery of the universe, they can transcend their destiny. Daoism has a high regard for human beings,

because they don't have to passively accept destiny. They have the ability to discover the natural law and have it serve their own purpose. The Daoist classic "Scripture of the Harmony of Seen and Unseen," also translated as "Classic of the Yin Convergence," says, "Observe the *Dao* of heaven; then you can have a grasp of the way the divine works, through practice."

Dr Yin stressed several times that the path of Dao is natural, and one shouldn't try to intellectualize what will naturally be revealed to you at the right time. He recommended cultivating an awareness of breathing. I did ask him further about visions, inner sounds of thunder, and the "stringless melody" mentioned in the tenth-century poem *Baizibeh*. He emphasized that certain states of consciousness will envelop a person, but this doesn't come from the mind but from the soul.

Those are descriptions of the state, or advancement, of the practice. When you reach a certain stage of practice, these will happen. It is not what you are pursuing, but it is what will happen when you are at a certain stage. It does not necessarily come from within the mind nor is it a psychological phenomenon. It is when the consciousness and awareness are at a certain level that these are revealed to you, and you are part of it, and you experience it, and you are not separate from it.

I found it interesting that he described inner experience as something that you become part of, which you merge into, not something achieved through any intellectual or psychological

process. This means that it is purely a spiritual experience, not something that one's mind projects.

In Daoism there is a lot of discussion about "internal alchemy," and I asked Dr Yin whether it signifies a form of meditation. In his view it is not a form of meditation. It is actually a refining of our coarse physical being into energy, and ultimately into spiritual light.

The internal alchemy is the transformation of life, from coarse physical form to a purer and finer entity, by refining and congealing the *qi* (energy) and consciousness into one, as if you are producing a new baby within yourself out of nothing. This new baby is formless, till it comes out of the top of your head (*dingmen*), which is called *yang* spirit (the pure positive spirit). Then it is further refined to merge back with Dao, which is the original source and ocean of life.

A simple way to explain what "internal alchemy" means is that it is a way to reconstruct or reproduce the (true or real) self. Our life is in this physical form. We need to exist in another form of life, as the *qi* – energy. The highest state of that life according to *Zhuangzi* is to exist in the form of light – to be transformed from a coarse being into a refined being, and then into light. The highest state of attainment is to exist in the form of light.

Dr Yin had spoken of the *dé* as the Dao manifesting in an individual, as that person's inherent intrinsic nature. I asked him if he would say that love is our essential *dé* – not love as an individual quality but as a universal power. Yin replied:

There is difference between the Chinese and Western culture and religion. Love is a concept in Christianity; in Daoism, the basic principle is life or creation – it is to allow life in the creation, for example the producing of a plant. The core of the creation is probably the same as the power or force of love. The Daoist view of creation is to welcome the life of everything. The Chinese culture's view of the Dao as mother has not so much to do with love but with the creative power.

There are two levels of practice in Daoism – one is the actual practice with techniques. The other level is awareness or enlightenment to Dao – that does not need language. Only experience is required to raise awareness. So it doesn't matter if the practitioner is a Chinese or Westerner.

The ancient Daoist master Laozi said in the *Daodéjing* that the Dao is so boundless that it is beyond the limitation of words. It is indefinable. To try to give precise meanings to Daoist terminology is futile and would result in confusion, because to do so falsely assumes that one can portray the Daoist experience in words. Yet, despite these limitations, through meeting with a Daoist master and through an appreciation of the beauty of ancient and modern Daoist literature, we can at least open ourselves to the vastness of the experience. We can recognize a hint of our inner spiritual nature, mirrored in these sublime teachings. Boundlessness is intrinsic to the profound nature of the Dao and how human beings can embody and reflect the Dao in their life – in their very being.

By purifying the mind through meditation and transforming it into a still, clean mirror, we allow the ultimate clarity and light of the Dao to emerge.

道

CHAPTER TWO

Dao: Where It All Begins

Only a mind empty of content can follow Dao freely.³

It is absurd to try to write about the Dao. The Dao is a subject, a reality, so all-encompassing, so difficult to understand – even conceptually – that it is impossible to put into words. The best I can do is to share some of the metaphors used to describe the Dao. Maybe, by circling around the subject, we will get inspired to experience it ourselves. That would be the only way to know what it is – by experiencing it.

I can still remember my introduction to an English translation of the *Daodéjing* back in 1969 or 1970. I found it mysterious yet alluring. It seemed to be a collection of paradoxical sayings, yet they somehow made sense to me. It was as if I were discovering a voice that expressed my innermost soul, and reading the book made me feel balanced and at peace.

Attributed to Laozi, which literally means “the old man,” the *Daodéjing* probably dates from about the fourth or third century BCE. It isn’t known whether these passages were written by a

person named Laozi or if they are an anonymous collection of wisdom sayings handed down for generations before they were first published.

The title means the classic (*jing*) of *Dao* and *dé* (*te*). *Dao* is ultimate emptiness, non-being, non-existence, the eternal formless reality that precedes the creation and yet pervades it; it is eternal. In western religions, the level of non-being would be what precedes the existence of the creator, or God. From non-being or ultimate emptiness is projected being – existence. Being brings forth the myriad things of the creation, which the *Daodéjing* literally calls “the 10,000 things.”

Existence is produced from non-existence. The physical world of forms originates in the non-physical formless realm. Existence and non-existence are both present simultaneously, but at different levels of awareness or consciousness. Our awareness or consciousness is not stable; it is always in flux, so sometimes we experience only the level of existence, of being, and sometimes we approach an experience of non-existence or non-being – a level of higher consciousness that contains no trace of the physical or material realms.

Dao also means “the way.” So *Dao* is not only the flow of the spiritual power or essence from the state of nothingness, of formlessness, to its manifestation in the “myriad things” of creation. It is also the path of return to the origin or source of creation. From the standpoint of the individual human being, *Dao* is both the source of the creation and the inner path back to the source. One could also say that *Dao* is higher spiritual consciousness, which pervades and encompasses all. It cannot be apprehended on the physical or material plane but can be experienced only through one’s higher spiritual consciousness. Yet it is present everywhere.

Dé (the second character in the book's title) is best described as the Dao when manifested in the creation, at the level of being; it is the intrinsic spiritual nature of every person, creature, and thing. Everything and everyone has its own *dé*. A person's *dé* is the essential nature of that person, how the Dao manifests in him or her. Sometimes *dé* is translated as potency, intrinsic power, or even virtue, but potency is an older and better translation.

Dé is the innate potential in a seed that compels it to become a tree. The sunflower faces the sun every day. That is its *dé* when manifested. The *dé* of human beings is the essential, inherent spiritual nature which instills in each person the pull towards realization of its divine impulse within. The *dé* could be thought of as the Dao when manifested in the realm of being. A human being is true to his or her *dé* when acting in accord with Dao, in harmony with Dao. *Dé* follows nature. The Dao is ineffable and abstract, yet concrete when expressed as *dé*. It is the abstract become concrete. By virtue of the Dao everything finds its *dé*, its intrinsic nature – its inner compulsion to become what it was created or programmed to be.

The Daodéjing

The *Daodéjing* is the classic guidebook for anyone who wishes to understand how the Daoists of ancient times viewed life. Although they experienced Dao as the vast spiritual emptiness, totally unknowable and abstract, it is a paradox of human nature that we want to understand the unknowable intellectually, by reducing it to words, rather than experiencing the spiritual reality.

Here are a few lines that may seem paradoxical but which come close to explaining what the Dao is. By saying what it is not, we can get a feeling for what it is. The following is from

Chapter One of the *Daodéjing*, which introduces us to the idea that the Dao is the great origin or source – nothingness – beyond being. From Dao came the Creator, the mother or origin of all creation.

The Dao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Dao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The Nameless is the beginning of Creation.
The named is the mother of myriad beings.

To contemplate the subtlety of Dao,
one has to be constant, free of yearnings
and non-existent.
Being constantly existent and with yearnings,
one perceives the boundaries
of the manifestations of Dao.

Both subtlety (Dao) and manifestation
originate from the same source,
but differ in name.
That same source is called the mysterious.

It is the mysterious beyond mysterious.
It is the pathway between the multiplicity
(of the creation) and the subtlety (of Dao).⁴

What does this mean?

The Dao is the uncreated and unmanifested void or emptiness.
No words can describe it. No name can define it. It is constant,

unchanging, and eternal. It is nameless. We call it Dao because we have to refer to it somehow.

The nameless is the beginning and the origin of the Creator, which is the creative power; Dao precedes the Creator and all things and beings in the creation that the Creator has brought about.

The named is the Creator. The named, which we call Being, is the origin of heaven and earth, and all things and beings in the creation. It is the mother of all things.

Nothingness, or non-being – extreme emptiness – is the hidden, unrevealed aspect of Dao. Being, or existence, is the Dao revealed, in the process of becoming concrete.

In Chapter Forty of the *Daodéjing*, this point is made clear: “Myriad things in the universe are created by existence (Being). Existence is created by non-existence.”

Returning to the first chapter of *Daodéjing* we read that to understand the subtlety of Dao, one must become like Dao, constant and eternal, empty, free of aspirations and desires. “Constant” means calm and tranquil, aloof from reaction, desire, and personal motive, not attached to physical existence. This is the goal of Daoist meditation – self-purification, which allows one’s empty vessel to be filled with spirit.

However, if one is constantly beset by aspirations and desires – which come from attachment to one’s physical existence – then one stays within the limitations of the manifested creation. One remains impure.

Non-existence and existence both share the same source, called “the mysterious.”

The mysterious is the gateway or opening to both the multiplicity of existence in the creation, on the one hand, and the

extreme subtlety of non-existence on the other. The gateway is hidden – it can't be seen with the physical eyes. On one side of the opening is the gross material creation, and on the other is pure, subtle, unmanifested Dao.

As Master Meng explained during our meeting:

The world of Dao is beyond the physical world, and it is the original state of man, of heaven and earth and the myriad things (the multiplicity of creation), the same as in human beings. Our physical body belongs to the physical world. It is a vehicle. But our original, true nature is not this physical body and is formless. The formless part is the spiritual part.

This means that the Dao is all-pervading, but not on a physical level. If we could see beyond our life in the physical world, we would see that the Dao is everywhere, in every object and being, and that through Dao everything is connected. As a scholar wrote, “Dao alone is the absolute nothingness that penetrates all beings.”⁵

One could say that Dao is like an electrical vibration that courses through everything. Vibrations are always in subtle motion, so although we say that Dao is unchanging and eternal, paradoxically it is also in constant motion. It is the continuous vibration of the universe.

Chapter Forty of the *Daodéjing* says: “Reversion is the movement towards (or of) *Dao*.” This means that while the Dao is vibrating in an outward motion, it is also returning, or reverting inwards. In human terms, as the Dao becomes manifest

in the creation by entering the level of being, so it is always returning, withdrawing from the physical back to its source in the great void or emptiness. It is in constant cyclical or circular motion.

Ellen M. Chen, a translator and interpreter of the *Daodéjing*, points out that *wu* (nothing) and *yu* (being) are in constant cyclical movement towards each other and away from each other. That is the primal principle. There is mutual dependency, as together they are one dynamic whole. That is the essence of the constant vibration.

Some Daoists call the Dao “earlier Heaven,” from which “later heaven” (the realm of the creation – the duality of heaven and earth) has manifested. Dao is nameless, but when it gives rise to existence (the material creation) it becomes named. Heaven represents *yang* (active, masculine, firm, outward) and earth represents *yin* (passive, feminine, yielding, inward). These are the two poles of duality. Each contains the potential for the other, and that dynamic energy is always flowing from one to the other and returning back again.

The *yin-yang* symbol illustrates this dynamic. In the dark half there is a spot of white; in the white half, there is a spot of black, showing the potential for each to become, or transform into, the other. The hint of the opposite reality represents the link between the two poles.

Chapter Four of the *Daodéjing* says:

Dao is absolute, ultimate emptiness;
 yet in use, it is inexhaustible.
 Fathomless, it seems to be the ancestor
 of ten thousand (myriad) beings.

It blunts the sharp,
unties the entangled,
harmonizes the bright,
mixes the dust.

Dark,
It seems perhaps to exist.

I do not know whose child it is.
It is an image (*xiang*)
of what precedes God (*Di*).⁶

In its nothingness, Dao has no limitations; it is infinite and inexhaustible – it has the potential for all creation to emerge from it. Being emerges from Dao, the undifferentiated primal emptiness or source. Being gives rise to the myriad things of creation, and to the cyclical process of the Dao returning and merging back into emptiness. This is the rhythm of life itself. Dao unceasingly pours out from itself, inexhaustible. One cannot fathom its depth because it is never depleted. The constant cyclical motion of the Dao is the rhythm of life.

So, Dao is eternal stillness and also the eternal process of self-creation – the movement from being to non-being and back to being. Dao is not a static entity but rather vibrating movement itself.

In the passage just cited, Laozi lists several examples of opposites, the extremes of duality, which Dao harmonizes and unites within itself. The opposites interact and merge within the Dao, absorbed in it. Therefore, he says, the Dao “blunts the sharp, unties the entangled,” and so forth. Because the Dao penetrates all and encompasses all, it unifies all opposites – they become one.

When he says in this passage that the Dao only “seems” to exist, he is saying that it is so abstract, so imperceptible, that it can only be experienced. Though it is undetectable, it is “the mother of all things.” In its emptiness, it is the ultimate origin; nothing precedes it, not even God.

Chapter Twenty-five of the *Daodéjing* goes into more detail about the state preceding creation. It alludes to the very first hint of creation even before heaven and earth were created, before duality manifested. It tells us that this was a state prior to change; it is ultimate emptiness. But in its emptiness, it is the source of all.

This entity, it is undifferentiated,
 existent before heaven and earth.
 Desolate and still, it stands independent
 of all else, ever unchanging.
 The perfect and complete creative power
 that is inexhaustible
 is truly the mother of all things.

I do not know its name. I call it the Dao.
 This name is imposed on it to describe its greatness.

To call it great is to portray
 that it is far reaching.
 To say it is far reaching is to explain
 that it is deep and profound.
 To express its depth and profundity
 is to illustrate that it is returning inward
 (withdrawing from the world).

Therefore the Dao is great,
 heaven is great, earth is great,
 and the saint is also great.
 Of the four greats (in all the realms),
 the saint is at the top.
 The human being emulates (derives from) earth.
 Earth emulates heaven.
 Heaven emulates Dao.
 Dao emulates itself –
 exists by virtue of itself,
 self-existent (*ziran* – true to itself).⁷

In other words, Dao emerges from itself – it is what it is and doesn't exist in relation to anything else. This process is ongoing. As Master Meng emphasized, Dao is *ziran*, totally self-sufficient, self-absorbed, isolated, silent. *Ziran* is the essential quality of Dao – meaning that it cannot be explained or described in relation to anything else. It is not influenced by anything else, nor does it derive from anything else. It simply is. It has no qualities; it is beyond time.

In Daoist literature, Dao is not personified as he or she, or as god or goddess, or as any being with a gender. But Dao as the source of all is sometimes compared to a loving mother – always giving, the infinite source from which all creation emerges. Dao is inexhaustible, allowing everything to exist without judgment, limitation, or boundaries.

The mother, the feminine *yin*, metaphorically is the creative womb from which the masculine *yang*, the father, originates. In Chapter Six of the *Daodéjing*, the feminine principle or fertile mother is expressed as the “valley spirit” and the “dark mare.”

The valley spirit is deathless;
 it is called the dark mare.
 The door of the dark mare
 is called the root of heaven and earth;
 Continuous, it seems to exist,
 yet in use it is inexhaustible.⁸

Here the Dao acquires two new names – valley spirit and dark mare – symbols of fertility and feminine power. Translator Ellen Chen says that the valley is the place where the spirit is nourished and never dies, constantly renewing itself; it is the primal source of fertility, giving birth to and nourishing all beings. The dark mare is a symbol of the invisible mystical womb from which all beings are born.⁹

Valley spirit or dark mare, which is the inexhaustible creative function that produces without end, is the root of heaven and earth, of being that verges on non-being, thus only seeming to exist.¹⁰

Being, the creative function, is everlasting, while the physical will perish. Because the Dao – the eternal primal vibration – is constantly renewing itself and is thus inexhaustible, it can't exist physically. It verges on non-being, thus we have only a hint of it, an impression. It only *seems* to exist.

Zhuangzi

Another source of insight into how the ancients taught the Dao is found in the *Zhuangzi* – a collection of parables, tales, jokes,

and riddles. Many of these selections can give us intuitive flashes of understanding – what some have called the “Aha” moment of recognition. We recognize what we seem to already know, without knowing exactly how we know it.

This first passage demonstrates that Dao is found everywhere, even in the least likely or most distasteful part of the creation. You can't really measure Dao – it is in the least of things and in the largest – in the part and the totality. The reality of Dao is one. It can't be divided, diminished, or augmented.

Master Dongguo asked Zhuang:

“Show me where the Dao is found.”

Zhuangzi replied:

“There is nowhere it is not to be found.”

The former insisted:

“Show me at least some definite place

Where Dao is found.”

“It is in the ant,” said Zhuang.

“Is it in some lesser being?”

“It is in the weeds.”

“Can you go further down the scale of things?”

“It is in this piece of tile.”

“Further?”

“It is in this turd.”

At this Dongguo had nothing more to say.

But Zhuang continued: “None of your questions

Are to the point. They are like the questions

Of inspectors in the market,

Testing the weight of pigs

By prodding them in their thinnest parts.

Why look for Dao by going ‘down
 the scale of being’
 As if that which we call ‘least’
 Had less of Dao?
 Dao is great in all things,
 Complete in all, Universal in all,
 Whole in all. These three aspects
 Are distinct, but the Reality is One.

Therefore come with me
 To the palace of Nowhere
 Where all the many things are One:
 There at last we might speak
 Of what has no limitation and no end.
 Come with me to the land of non-doing (*wu-wei*):
 What shall we there say – that Dao
 Is simplicity, stillness,
 Indifference, purity,
 Harmony and ease?
 All these names leave me indifferent
 For their distinctions have disappeared.
 My will is aimless there.”¹¹

The “palace of Nowhere” is the void, the realm of nothingness. There is only Dao there, beyond the realm of being. Emptiness is where the myriad things that make up the creation merge and become one – all and nothing. Emptiness is the source of being, from which the creation has emerged. There is no limit to emptiness; it is where there is only non-action, non-doing. It is prior to existence, so it precedes even simplicity, stillness,

and other subtle qualities associated with existence. There are no distinctions in the “palace of Nowhere”; all is one, or nothing. At that level, there is no purpose, will, or motive to act.

But then the interlocutor asks: How can I experience this? How can I be aware of it, if it is nowhere and nothing?

If it is nowhere, how should I be aware of it?
 If it goes and returns, I know not
 Where it has been resting. If it wanders
 Here then there, I know not where it will end.
 The mind remains undetermined in the great Void.
 Here the highest knowledge
 Is unbounded. That which gives things
 Their thusness (*ziran*) cannot be
 delimited by things.

So when we speak of “limits,” we remain confined
 To limited things.
 The limit of the unlimited is called “fullness.”
 The limitlessness of the limited
 is called “emptiness.”
 Dao is the source of both (fullness and emptiness).
 But it is itself
 Neither fullness nor emptiness.

Dao produces both renewal and decay,
 But is neither renewal nor decay.
 It causes being and non-being
 But is neither being nor non-being.
 Dao assembles and it destroys,
 But it is neither the Totality nor the Void.¹²

We can't define the Dao; it is what it is; it can't be described in terms of anything else. As the *Daodéjing* says, it is *ziran*, true to itself. The Dao is unbounded, the great void. The highest spiritual knowledge can be attained when the mind is not limited, as then it can roam freely without boundaries. Dao produces both the opposites of renewal and decay, *yang* and *yin*, but it is neither. Dao is the source of both fullness and emptiness, but it is neither. One cannot explain Dao, as it contains all and produces all, yet it is not there; it has no substance.

The *Zhuangzi* calls Dao “the music of the earth,” which is played through every living thing; its sound comes through the “thousand holes,” just as the music that human beings create is played through flutes and other instruments. But the music of the Great Beginning is the power behind all this – it is the music of the Dao, the primal sound before sound.

The next passage takes the form of a discussion between two mystics, Ziyu and Ziqi. Ziqi introduces the subject:

When great Nature sighs, we hear the winds
Which, noiseless in themselves,
Awaken voices from other beings,
Blowing on them.
From every opening
Loud voices sound. Have you not heard
This rush of tones?

There stands the overhanging wood
On the steep mountain:
Old trees with holes and cracks
Like snouts, maws, and ears,
Like beam-sockets, like goblets,

Grooves in the wood, hollows full of water:
 You hear mooing and roaring, whistling,
 Shouts of command, grumblings,
 Deep drones, sad flutes.
 One call awakens another in dialogue.
 Gentle winds sing timidly;
 Strong ones blast on without restraint.
 Then the wind dies down. The openings
 Empty out their last sound.

Have you not observed how all then
 trembles and subsides?

Ziyu replied: I understand:
 The music of earth sings through a thousand holes.
 The music of man is made on flutes
 and instruments.
 What makes the music of heaven?

Master Ziqi said:
 Something is blowing on a thousand different holes.
 Some power stands behind all this
 and makes the sounds die down.
 What is this power?¹³

The passage ends with a pregnant question: What is this power? That is what we cannot *know* – we can only *experience* it. It is the Dao.

Following is another beautiful passage from the *Zhuangzi*: When we are immersed in Dao, we have great spiritual knowledge, but when our mind fragments into duality, in the creation, we

see only the many – multiplicity and diversity. At that point we get caught up in mundane activity and lose our peace of mind. Yet, he concludes: there must be a true Master (God) behind it all. It has no form that we can identify, but we can see its actions.

Great understanding is broad and unhurried; little understanding is cramped and busy. Great words are clear and limpid; little words are shrill and quarrelsome. In sleep, men's spirits go visiting; in waking hours, their bodies hustle. With everything they meet they become entangled.

Day after day they use their minds in strife, sometimes grandiose, sometimes sly, sometimes petty. Their little fears are mean and trembly; their great fears are stunned and overwhelming. They bound off like an arrow or a crossbow pellet, certain that they are the arbiters of right and wrong. They cling to their position as though they had sworn before the gods, sure that they are holding on to victory.

They fade like fall and winter – such is the way they dwindle day by day. They drown in what they do – you cannot make them turn back. They grow dark, as though scaled with seals – such are the excesses of their old age. And when their minds draw near to death, nothing can restore them to the light.

Joy, anger, grief, delight, worry, regret, fickleness, inflexibility, modesty, willfulness, candor, insolence – music from empty holes, mushrooms springing up in dampness, day and night replacing each other before us, and no one knows where they sprout from. Let it be! Let it be!

[It is enough that] morning and evening we have them (emotions), and they are the means by which we live. Without them we would not exist; without us they would have nothing to take hold of. This comes close to the matter. But I do not know what makes them the way they are. It would seem as though they have some True Master, and yet I find no trace of him. He can act – that is certain. Yet I cannot see his form. He has identity but no form.¹⁴

Huainanzi

The *Huainanzi*, a text from the second century BCE,* shares an evocative metaphor for the Dao and its all-pervading, nurturing presence. It describes Dao as a never-ending flow of gushing water – a continuous waterfall. Although Dao itself has no qualities, this metaphor evokes the essential quality of Dao as an eternal flow of divine power that absorbs and sustains all.

As for Dao: . . .

Flowing from its source it becomes
a gushing spring.

What was empty slowly becomes full;
first turbid and then surging forward,
What was murky slowly becomes clear.¹⁵

Water is both *yin* and *yang*. Water dissolves all opposites, all hard and unyielding qualities. Water is pliant and yielding, yet

* The *Huainanzi* was compiled under the auspices of, and probably with the active participation of Liu An (179?–122 BCE), the king of Huainan.

it is strong in its surging power, its ability to wear away even the hardest stone.

In the world there is nothing more pliant
and weak than water
And yet it is great beyond reckoning
and deep beyond fathoming. . . .¹⁶

The downward flow of water as rain also reverses itself. When it evaporates it transforms into the cloudy mist, and then flows down to earth again as rain and dew. It is a never-ending cycle of the downward and outward flow and the upward and inward return.

Going up to the heavens it becomes rain and dew;
going down to the earth it becomes moisture.¹⁷

Water is generous. It sustains and revitalizes all – even the smallest creatures. Water gives without favoring anyone or anything, just as the Dao, like a mother, nourishes all and is never exhausted. Dao cannot be limited, injured or diminished in any way, nor can it be divided. It can penetrate all solid objects and is stronger than any substance.

Having given to the world, it is nevertheless
not exhausted in its riches;
Having bestowed on the people,
it finds this to have cost nothing to its bounty.
It is ever flowing, yet we can never see it
reaching its end;
It is tiny, yet we can never hold it in our grasp. . . .

Hack at it and you will not sever it;
 Put fire to it and you will not burn it.
 Being fluid it flows and follows
 its own inclinations;
 Mixing and coalescing,
 it cannot be divided up.
 Its sharpness is such
 that it can penetrate metal and stone;
 Its strength is such
 that it can give succor to the entire world.¹⁸

“It can give succor to the entire world” – water mimics the spiritual, nourishing character of the Dao itself; it is boundless and cannot be contained or limited, but gives to all objectively, without favouring anyone – it is like the mother of all. It never coerces but allows all to develop according to their own intrinsic nature.

It moves into the realm of the formless
 and soars above the elusive and ethereal;
 It meanders through the river valleys
 and swells over into the vast wilderness.
 In its abundance and insufficiency
 it allows the world to take from and give to it,
 Dispensing to the myriad things
 without favoring anyone.¹⁹

The Dao, like water, true to its nature, flows quietly sometimes and at others wildly, violently, with a loud, thunderous noise. It flows to the level of being, the realm of creation, the world

of myriad things, where it manifests as *dé*, the inner nature or potency that characterizes all created beings.

Now the well-known Daoist principle is quoted: the weak will always overcome the strong; the flexible will overcome the rigid. This is because receptivity, which is soft and moist, is alive and stronger than the dry and brittle, which is death-like. When we become dry and brittle, we start to die.

The author concludes this section with an ode to the formless nature of the origin of all – the realm of non-being, of emptiness – here called the great ancestor of things.

Whatever is audible to our physical ears originates in the silent and soundless. In that way, light and water, which have form, both originate in the formless.

The formless is the great ancestor of things, and the soundless is the great ancestor of the audible. Light is the son, and water is the grandson of the formless, and both are born out of it.²⁰

Flowing outward from the origin, the Dao gives birth to the material realm of being. Returning to Dao, the formless, means death, as it is a return to the source. Here the *Huainanzi* evokes the eternal flow from non-being to being and back to non-being – from the unmanifested Dao to the *dé* manifested in the creation and its cyclical return.

Chapter Fifteen of the *Daodéjing* presents this same reversive, cyclical process. The natural and pure, undifferentiated state of Dao is likened to an uncarved block of wood. The impure state of life in the world, where human beings interfere in the natural process of life and become artificial, is compared to the impure

and muddy state of water that has been churned up. Yet each state is in the process of constant transformation. The impure gradually settles and becomes clear and pure, and the settled or clear, like water, gets stirred up and becomes impure.

Simple, like a block of uncarved wood (*pu*);
 Open, like an empty valley (*gu*).
 Murky like muddy water,
 The muddy, being stilled, slowly becomes clear.
 The settled, being stirred, slowly comes to life.²¹

The *Huainanzi* emphasizes that this process of transformation is hidden from us but is always going on – it is “godlike” in that the process of change is natural and underlies all, though it is concealed.

Its movements are hidden from sight,
 And its changes and transformations are godlike;
 It does not leave any traces behind in its progress;
 It is ever in the lead
 though always coming behind.²²

The Dao is the mystical truth of creation and return, and from it comes the *dé* – the Dao in practical application to living in this world – the abstract Dao manifested in being.

道

CHAPTER THREE

Dé: Living in the Dao

To live in harmony with the Dao, one has to follow one's own intrinsic nature, which is called *dé*. Dao is the natural process of life unfolding. A human being is true to his or her *dé* when acting in accord with Dao. In this way one mirrors the Dao in one's life and lives according to the spiritual law of nature. The abstract Dao becomes concrete as *dé*.

A person's *dé* is developed through inner spiritual cultivation. It is one's essential spiritual nature maturing and expressing itself. The American Daoist Louis Komjathy has emphasized that *dé* comes from the Dao: "Inner power (*dé*) is one's personal endowment from and expression of the Dao. By cultivating stillness, a pivot of emptiness becomes established. The emptiness creates the space for the sacred to enter and manifest through the individual adept."²³

Master Meng, whom I met in Beijing in 2017, also explained that a person's *dé* is his spiritual nature, which is universal and unites him with all living beings. It is the inner pull or yearning to perfect oneself, to realize one's essential nature as spirit. We use the term Dao to express our common spiritual origin, which

is not personified; it is also the inner spiritual path or way that leads back to that origin or source. Chinese mystics speak of “cultivating the Dao.” By living in tune with Dao, being true to one’s *dé*, they say, one will easily find happiness and peace within oneself.

Human beings have two tendencies in their nature – one, the outward-seeking mind and its associated senses, which churn up desires, fears, and other emotions; and the other, *dé*, our spiritual nature, which pulls us inward to experience the peace and equilibrium that are the hallmark of the Dao. The inner pull provides balance for the outward energy that involves us in the world. Our experience of the world is the experience of change, while balance and stillness are the nature of Dao.

Change is an unalterable fact of life in the material plane, the world of form.

In Daoist literature, change is often called “the transformation” of things. But the Dao is unchanging. It is the pivot around which all change occurs. Change occurs on the periphery. Many Chinese texts advise us to hold on to the pivot while allowing the flow of changing events to continue around us. If we do so, we will be unaffected by the changes and the transformations. Also, if we are true to our *dé*, our inner spiritual core, we will not advance ourselves above others; we will be humble, not contending, remaining in harmony with nature and other people; in tune, at peace. The Chinese mystics advocate that if a person wishes to live peacefully, in harmony with the law of nature, with the Dao, he will not compete with others to advance himself but will “stay behind” – following, not leading.

An evocative passage from the “Yuan Dao,” the first chapter of the *Huainanzi*, summarizes the secret of living naturally, without stress, in touch with one’s intrinsic spiritual nature. It advises

us to reject from our consciousness all that is external to our well-being and focus on the needs of our true self. In this way, one can easily find personal happiness. This passage exemplifies what it is like to live as a sage, a mystic – in touch with the Dao by being true to one’s inner nature. The *Huainanzi* urges us to live peacefully and respond appropriately to the world around us, “and to observe and watch changes as they arise. As easy as turning a ball in the palm of one’s hand, it enables one to find personal happiness.”²⁴

“As easy as turning a ball in the palm of one’s hand” – this phrase says it all. Rolling the ball in our hand is easy, if we relax and don’t hold on too tightly – just as it is best not to hold tightly to our opinions, our possessions, our family, our ego, our status. Then we will be able to drop our obsession with the external world. The Dao puts us in touch with our intrinsic nature, our inner equilibrium – the balance between our outward nature and inner pull. This is the stillness that allows us to hold on to the pivot and be in tune with the Dao.

The Dao is hidden. It leaves no traces. In that way it is humble, always leading from behind. This is the characteristic of *dé*, and of the sage or leader who follows Dao. He is modest and goes along with others or events, minimizing his desires. He reduces his wants and thus his wants are satisfied. He is objective and doesn’t indulge in excess. He knows his inner self, his *dé*, which he calls the “one norm,” and he’s in tune with reality, ignoring external considerations and ambition.

He puts aside cleverness and follows Dao;
 Together with the people he goes along
 the path of impartiality.
 He sets aside all yearnings,

Abandons all desires,
and does away with all deliberation.

Since he reduces to essentials what he abides by,
he is discerning;
Since he curtails what he seeks, he gets it
(that which he seeks).
Those who rely on their eyes and ears
to see and hear
Tire out their persons,
yet fail to see or hear things clearly;
Those who govern through cleverness
and deliberation
Toil their minds yet achieve nothing.
No desire, no excess; . . .

Hence, the sage follows the course
of the one norm. . . .
Following the water gauge and adhering
to the plumb line
He does in every way what is fitting
to the circumstances.²⁵

Here the text of *Huainanzi* returns to the metaphor of water for the Dao and *dé*. The mystic keeps himself attuned to the norm. He has the internal “water gauge” to know the flow of the Dao, and the inner plumb line to know its depth. Because he has inner knowing, he can adapt to all circumstances without distorting himself.

The *Huainanzi* contrasts the ideal and pure ways of “heaven” (Dao) with our human ways, which are totally out of tune with

the Dao and governed by self-interest and deception. “Heaven” is a metaphor for the state of non-being, spiritual purity – untouched by human motive. The examples of heaven are taken from the natural world. Letting an animal maintain its original unbridled state is an example of heaven. A piece of uncarved wood or jade is simple and natural, like heaven, as is a new-born infant. But artificially controlling an animal or carving a piece of wood or jade into objects that can be purchased and cherished are examples of man’s attempts to dominate nature. The author explains that those who follow their *dé* will always remain in the company of the Dao; those who give in to the artificial pressures of society will remain out of touch and become base and coarse.

By “Heaven” is meant pure and unadulterated
 like uncarved wood and undyed silk;
 Original simplicity and sheer whiteness,
 which has never been mixed with anything else.

By “man” is meant studying each other
 and exercising one’s knowledge
 and presuppositions,
 Being crafty and deceptive to others,
 in order to get on in the world
 and to be able to deal with the vulgar.

Thus an ox’s having cloven hoofs and horns,
 And a horse’s having a mane and uncloven hoofs
 is what is “Heaven”;
 Bridling a horse’s mouth
 And boring an ox’s nose
 is “man.”

Those who follow Heaven ramble about with *Dao*,
 Whereas those who accede to man have dealings
 with the vulgar.²⁶

In this passage, the poet says that the person who understands and follows the Dao is true to his natural state. He may adapt his external behavior to society, but internally he remains true to himself.

Thus, one who understands Dao
 Does not barter what belongs to Heaven
 for what is man's.
 While externally he is transformed
 along with the transformation of things,
 Internally he does not become other than
 what he is really like.²⁷

Because he is in harmony with Dao internally, he experiences its purity and stillness within; he is holding on to the pivot of Dao, the point of balance between external activity and inward stillness. In the next stanza, he says, the mystic can return to this point – it is his origin, and so, with his mind in control, he can swing back to that point, like a pendulum. This is why he can practice the ideal of *wu-wei* – acting without motive, “doing without doing.” He is detached from results. He is not involved with the passing show but “lodges his spirit” in the pure emptiness of the Dao. He has entered the “mysterious pass,” the gateway to the inner realms, which is the inner point of concentration, called the “Gateway of Heaven” in the passage below.

Hence, one who understands Dao
 Returns to his limpidity and stillness,
 And one who knows all there is to know
 about things (the mystic)
 Always ends up with nonactivity.
 If one nourishes his nature with tranquility
 And lodges his spirit in emptiness,
 Then he has entered the Gateway of Heaven.²⁸

The Daoist masters advise against indulging in strong emotions, which would throw the practitioner off-balance, causing an imbalance between his *yin* (inward) energy and his *yang* (outgoing) energy. They advise that it is important to maintain control and adjust to the events of life without getting caught by the passions that drive people to act in extreme ways. Here Dao and *dé* are often used interchangeably to express the spiritual center and balance.

Gladness and anger are a deviation from Dao;
 worry and sorrow are a falling from *dé*;
 likes and dislikes are excesses of the heart;
 cravings and desires are a burden on the nature. . . .
 In man, a great anger shatters the *yin*,
 While great gladness weighs down the *yang*. . . .

Hence, if one regulates the external
 from the core of his person,
 His various affairs will not end in failure.
 If he gets it at the core,
 He can nurture externals.²⁹

Our core is our center, the point of balance and stillness, the pivot, the manifestation of the Dao within, which is likened to the “handle” of Dao that the charioteer holds as he rides the chariot of life. If we hold on to the pivot, we can engage in worldly activities without losing ourselves; we can remain calm. We can stretch and bend with changing events, as if we were an echo or a shadow. We don’t lose our balance but remain composed and serene.

The Pivot of Dao

The idea of the Dao as a pivot is profound. The pivot is the central axis of the wheel around which all revolves. The rim of the wheel revolves, but the pivot or axis stays in one place, totally still. It may rotate around itself but is never thrown to the rim, the arena of change. Therefore, the person who keeps hold of the pivot, keeping his mind merged in the Dao, can go through life with balance and not be buffeted by changing circumstance. He is steady because his center is still. Any extreme contains the potential for loss of stability.

As Thomas Merton, the Catholic priest who did a deep study of the *Zhuangzi* and published a poetic rendition of his favorite sections, wrote in his commentary:

He who grasps the central pivot of Dao is able to watch “Yes” and “No” pursue their alternating course around the circumference. He retains his perspective and clarity of judgment, so that he knows that “Yes” is “Yes” in the light of the “No” which stands over against it. He understands that happiness, when

pushed to an extreme, becomes calamity. That beauty, when overdone, becomes ugliness. Clouds become rain and vapor ascends again to become clouds. To insist that the cloud should never turn to rain is to resist the dynamism of Dao.³⁰

The clouds must become rain according to the natural law, in which transformation is always taking place on the physical plane. It is pointless to resist the process.

Merton explains the concept of Dao as the still point, the pivot of all opposites. The opposites go to the extremes; Dao is the center point that finds the stillness between the opposites. Merton quotes the *Zhuangzi*:

Dao is obscured when men understand only one of a pair of opposites, or concentrate only on a partial aspect of being. . . . If I begin from where I am and see it as I see it, then it may also become possible for me to see it as another sees it. Hence the theory of reversal, that opposites produce each other, depend on each other, and complement each other. . . .

However this may be, life is followed by death; death is followed by life. The possible becomes impossible; the impossible becomes possible. Right turns into wrong and wrong into right – the flow of life alters circumstances and thus things themselves are altered in their turn. But disputants continue to affirm and to deny the same things they have always affirmed and denied, ignoring the new aspects of reality presented by the change in conditions.

The wise man, therefore, instead of trying to prove this or that point by logical disputation, sees all things in the light of direct intuition. He is not imprisoned by the limitations of the "I," for the viewpoint of direct intuition is that of both "I" and "Not-I." Hence he sees that on both sides of every argument there is both right and wrong. He also sees that in the end they are reducible to the same thing, once they are related to the pivot of Dao.

When the wise man grasps this pivot, he is in the center of the circle, and there he stands while "Yes" and "No" pursue each other around the circumference.

The pivot of Dao passes through the center where all affirmations and denials converge. He who grasps the pivot is at the still-point from which all movements and oppositions can be seen in their right relationship. Hence he sees the limitless possibilities of both "Yes" and "No." Abandoning all thought of imposing a limit or taking sides, he rests in direct intuition. Therefore I said: "Better to abandon disputation and seek the true light!"³¹

Three in the Morning

There is a humorous story told by the master Zhuangzi that illustrates how to be balanced and not cling to a partial view of life, but to always see both sides; how not to be attached to one's own opinion or course of action and not to contend. We often think we are being "reasonable," but whatever we are thinking is only our opinion. But by looking at both sides of

every problem, we are able to adjust to all circumstances with equanimity. This story demonstrates how the sage, “firmly centered in Dao,” resolves the problem. He sees things in perspective, and then acts. By employing such a mundane and childish example, Zhuangzi shows us how ridiculous it is for us to guard our closely held opinions.

Dao is obscured when men understand only one of a pair of opposites, or concentrate only on a partial aspect of being. Then clear expression also becomes muddled by mere wordplay, affirming this one aspect and denying all the rest. . . .

When we wear out our minds, stubbornly clinging to one partial view of things, refusing to see a deeper agreement between this and its complementary opposite, we have what is called “three in the morning.”

— What is this “three in the morning?” (we ask).

A monkey trainer went to his monkeys and told them:

“As regards your chestnuts: you are going to have three measures in the morning and four in the afternoon.”

At this they all became angry. So he said: “All right, in that case I will give you four in the morning and three in the afternoon.” This time they were satisfied.

The two arrangements were the same in that the number of chestnuts did not change. But in one case the animals were displeased, and in the other they

were satisfied. The keeper had been willing to change his personal arrangement in order to meet objective conditions. He lost nothing by it!

The truly wise man, considering both sides of the question without partiality, sees them both in the light of Dao.

This is called following two courses at once.³²

The secret is to become detached from personal opinions – the need to always be right and impose one’s will – but to accept the ways and opinions of others. In this way, the sage leads from behind; he acts without imposing himself on others.

On Becoming Inwardly Happy and Mature

The author of *Huainanzi* counsels people not to look for stability and pleasure in outward activities but to seek inside. Generally, people feel something missing within and try to soothe their hearts and minds with external pleasures, like music or some other entertainment. But this comfort will be only temporary. When the music – the external pleasure – stops, the internal need will remain unfulfilled; people will again feel sad and their spirits will be in turmoil. This is what happens when one alternates between the two extremes of happiness and sadness. There is no constancy, no stability.

Vaguely they feel as if something is missing
Or as if pining after something lost.

What is this?

Because not looking for the inward to please the external,
They were pleasing the inward with the external.

When the music starts, they feel happy,
 But when the performance is over, they are sad.
 With happiness and sadness giving rise alternately
 to one another,
 The spirit is thrown into turmoil
 and cannot find a moment's peace.³³

Yet, not everyone can act on such good advice because they don't have the inner maturity. It doesn't resonate with who they are. "They are unable to look inward and find it in their own nature," as the author says below:

Thus, on hearing good advice or sound counsel, even an idiot knows enough to be taken away by it; where the highest *dé* and lofty conduct are held forth as examples, even an unworthy person will know to want to emulate it. Those who are taken by it [the advice] are numerous, but those who can actually adopt it are rare; those who are attracted by it are many, but those who can actually put it into practice are few. Why is this so? *Because they are unable to look inward and find it in their own nature.* For one who insists on learning while being internally unresponsive, what is taught neither enters the ears nor registers on the mind. . . .

Hence, for a man to have the ambition to manage the world while not finding it in his own heart is like a person without ears trying to tune the bells and drums, or a man without eyes wanting to take delight in colors and designs. He is sure to be unequal to the task.³⁴

This means that even if we want to accept good advice, we can't practice it unless we have come to that realization within ourselves. Hearing advice and acting on it are not the same. Because we don't have the ability to take our attention inward, we are unreceptive. Nothing registers within. The truth isn't mirrored from within us. We can't manage the world if we haven't found the strength within. Our actions must start from our center.

Yet, if we follow the way of our heart by tuning in to our *dé* and become detached from externals, then all our desires, likes, and dislikes will become extraneous. Everything becomes equal. We find our equilibrium; we become balanced.

Hence, there is nothing one is pleased with,
 there is nothing one gets angry about,
 There is nothing one finds enjoyment in,
 there is nothing one finds hardship in.
 The myriad things (of the creation) merge
 in mysterious unity:
 Without right or wrong –
 In a bedazzling transformation,
 life is like death.³⁵

How does one govern oneself? By being detached from desire and emotion, life becomes like death, in that the myriad things of the world, including our emotions and experiences, become unimportant. We are not advancing our own motives, as we have no personal motive.

Thomas Merton wrote about the “inner law of *dé*” as our guide to self-discovery. A person who follows his *dé* keeps his motives hidden from others, and thus he is true to himself; his

actions aren't dictated by other people or outer conditions. He sees the light within, which guides him. The person whose "law" is outside himself always tries to influence what is *not* under his control. He no longer values himself and will never be valued by others. He ultimately will be abandoned. The play of nature and its inevitable changes rob him, because he doesn't exert his inner power and instead tries to exert his will over external conditions. The master Zhuangzi is quoted:

He whose law is within himself
 Walks in hiddenness.
 His acts are not influenced
 By approval or disapproval.
 He whose law is outside himself
 Directs his will
 To what is beyond his control,
 And seeks to extend his power
 Over objects.

He who walks in hiddenness
 Has light to guide him
 In all his acts.
 He who seeks to extend his control
 Is nothing but an operator.
 While he thinks he is
 Surpassing others,
 Others see him merely
 Straining, stretching,
 To stand on tiptoe.
 When he tries to extend his power
 Over objects,

Those objects gain control
Of him.

He who is controlled by objects
Loses possession of his inner self:
If he no longer values himself,
How can he value others?
If he no longer values others,
He is abandoned.
He has nothing left!

There is no deadlier weapon than the will!
The sharpest sword
Is not equal to it!
There is no robber so dangerous
As Nature (the duality of *yang* and *yin*).

Yet it is not Nature
That does the damage:
It is man's own will!³⁶

Humility

When I met Master Meng in Beijing, I asked him how Daoists regard pride or arrogance on the spiritual path. His answer surprised me in its boldness. He said:

The ego and pride is the path of death. With it there will be no progress on the path of Dao, because it is harmful to our original nature. The practice of Dao is to pursue the original and internal, nothing

external. In my practice of thirty years ago, if you showed even a slight sign of pride, your master would point it out to you. Since ancient times, those who have Dao do not show it, as in the Chinese saying “They have the greatest wisdom, but they appear like an idiot.” The more advanced they are, the less they show. The more light they have, the less they reveal it outside.

The advice to live humbly and not flaunt one’s qualities to others is a simple guideline for the sincere Daoist.

A beautiful passage from the eighteenth-century master Liu Yiming expresses the essence of humility. He says it comes from having “no-mind” (*wuxin*), meaning that one doesn’t carry a sense of self and ego, which creates separation between people. He uses an example from the natural world to illustrate his meaning:

(It is said that) a fierce tiger will not harm an infant, and that a hungry hawk will not snatch an infant. How can this be? Because the infant has no-mind (*wuxin*)...

The only reason people cannot attain the Dao is because they have a mind (*xin*). Having a mind means having a self. Having a self means having a perception that others are separate. The moment there is a perception of others as separate, people immediately contrive to benefit themselves at the expense of others. Full of all manner of clever schemes, their selfish desires run rampant, their inherent conscience completely obscured. If you cannot even accumulate virtues, how can you presume to realize the Dao?

True seekers of the Dao hasten to break down the mountainous barrier between themselves and others, and steer clear of narrow byways. They discipline themselves and adapt to the world. They see themselves and others as the same. They regard all classes of people as equal. They attend to things and situations as they come. They deal with them, but are not affected by them. They let things go and do not cling to them. They approach every situation they encounter with no-mind (*wuxin*). Having no-mind, they have no ego. Having no ego, they are pure within. Being pure within, they are clear and without blemish – totally merged with the celestial law.

This is called original virtue (*yuandé*). Original virtue has neither form nor sign. It cannot be seen or heard. It is a virtue unified with heaven and earth, as radiant as the sun and moon, as ordered as the four seasons. . . . Then creation cannot constrain you; the myriad things (of the creation) cannot harm you.³⁷

Another Daoist ideal that embodies humility is uselessness. It means not advancing oneself but presenting oneself as useless. Daoist literature uses the metaphors of the useless tree, the broken pot, the empty spaces between the spokes of the wheel, the windows in the wall of a house. Emptiness and uselessness invoke the ideal of humility. Uselessness is a metaphor for the principle of non-being. It is seen as an advantage rather than a disadvantage. Chapter Eleven of the *Daodéjing* tells us:

Thirty spokes are united around the hub
to make a wheel,

But it is on its non-being
 that the utility of the carriage depends.
 Clay is moulded to form a utensil,
 But it is on its non-being
 that the utility of the utensil depends.
 Doors and windows are cut out to make a room,
 But it is on its non-being that the utility
 of the room depends.
 Therefore turn Being into advantage,
 and turn non-being into utility.³⁸

Two evocative parables in the *Zhuangzi* also teach about the advantage of uselessness – to deflect attention from oneself and survive any assault or ill wind. If you draw attention to yourself, you risk provoking jealousy.

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “I have a big tree called a *shu*. Its trunk is too gnarled and bumpy to apply a measuring line to, its branches too bent and twisty to match up to a compass or square. You could stand it by the road, and no carpenter would look at it twice. Your words, too, are big and useless, and so everyone alike spurns them!”

Zhuangzi said, “Maybe you’ve never seen a wildcat or a weasel. It crouches down and hides, watching for something to come along. It leaps and races east and west, not hesitating to go high or low – until it falls into the trap and dies in the net. Then again there’s the yak, big as a cloud covering the sky. It certainly knows how to be big, though it doesn’t know how to catch rats. Now you have this big tree, and

you're distressed because it's useless. Why don't you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village or the field of Broad-and- Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for a free and easy sleep under it? Axes will never shorten its life; nothing can ever harm it. If there's no use for it, how can it come to grief or pain?"³⁹

By being useless, the tree is able to live peacefully. When we push ourselves ahead of others or try to do something important to have an impact, to be recognized for our accomplishments, we will be "cut down" to size. But if we just rest "in emptiness" – in the spirit of Dao – we can survive nicely. So what if people think we're useless!

There's another passage in the *Zhuangzi* that expresses the same thought even more strongly:

The mountain trees do themselves harm;
 the grease in the torch burns itself up.
 The cinnamon can be eaten,
 and so it gets cut down;
 the lacquer tree can be used,
 and so it gets hacked apart.
 All men know the use of the useful,
 but nobody knows the use of the useless!⁴⁰

Here again he is saying that by projecting yourself as important you will attract negativity and be attacked. One needs to follow along with the pattern and flow of life without trying to make an impact. In that way, one can accomplish everything without calling attention to oneself.

Zhuangzi also cites the metaphor of an empty boat. The empty boat describes a person without ego, one who is truly humble. Zhuangzi says that a person crossing a river who collides with an empty boat will not become angry, as the empty boat did not intentionally bump into him. But if he sees that there is someone in the boat that bumped him, he will become angry. He might even think it is intentional.

Zhuangzi is saying that no one will quarrel with you if you can empty your boat as you navigate the river of life. You will meet with no resistance.

If a man, having lashed two hulls together, is crossing a river, and an empty boat happens along and bumps into him, no matter how hot tempered the man may be, he will not get angry.

But if there should be someone in the other boat, then he will shout out to haul this way or veer that. If his first shout is not heeded, he will shout again, and if that is not heard, he will shout a third time, this time with a torrent of curses following.

In the first instance, he wasn't angry; now in the second, he is. Earlier he faced emptiness, now he faces occupancy.

If a man could succeed in making himself empty and, in that way, wander through the world, then who could do him harm?⁴¹

Then, in another passage, he talks about the tree that grows straight and the spring of clear water – metaphors for the person who allows his light to visibly shine outwards so that others will see it, rather than keep it within himself. He advises against

achievements that bring too much attention to oneself. They invite disgrace. People will become jealous and seek to take you down. Be like the masses of men who flow with the Dao, unseen. Don't draw attention to yourself or put yourself forward. Come from behind rather than going in front – even seem like a fool.

The straight tree is the first to be cut down,
The spring of clear water is the first to be drained dry.
If you wish to improve your wisdom
And shame the ignorant,
To cultivate your character
And outshine others,
A light will shine around you
As if you had swallowed the sun and the moon:
[Yet] you will not avoid calamity!

A wise man has said:
“He who is content with himself
Has done a worthless work.
Achievement is the beginning of failure.
Fame is the beginning of disgrace.”

Who can free himself from achievement
And from fame, descend and be lost
Amid the masses of men?
He will flow like Dao, unseen;
He will go about like Life itself
With no name and no home.
Simple is he, without distinction.
To all appearances he is a fool.

His steps leave no trace. He has no power.
 He achieves nothing, has no reputation.
 Since he judges no one,
 No one judges him.
 Such is the Perfect Man:
 His boat is empty.⁴²

The story emphasizes the Daoist principle of living meekly and humbly, “following from behind” rather than trying to lead. Keep your boat empty. This will lead to safety and security as it will not provoke jealousy. You will live like the sage, the mystic, the Perfect Man.

The *Huainanzi* offers other analogies from the natural world to emphasize the importance of living modestly:

Because earth dwells below
 and does not contend for a higher station,
 It is safe and secure;
 Because water flows downward
 and does not contend for the lead,
 It flows rapidly instead of slowly.⁴³

It is safest to be modest. Like water, whatever flows to the lowest point makes the fastest and greatest progress. And the Dao is like water – it flows to its natural level. To live according to Dao one has to follow one’s *dé*.

The *Huainanzi* gives general advice on how to live in harmony with oneself and with the environment in which one lives by being in control of one’s spirit. All the creation’s inhabitants know their likes and dislikes because they are true to their inner

nature. Similarly, a human being is able to govern his body, and has the intelligence to discriminate right from wrong, because his *qi* (his vital energy) dominates his senses and desires, and so he finds internal balance.* But when he is not in harmony with himself he stumbles and falls; his attention is gone. The *Huainanzi* observes:

All of the myriad things in the world down to the tiny bugs and swarming insects squirming and wriggling about know what they like and dislike, what will benefit them and cause them harm. Why? It is because they have . . . their nature which has not deserted them. Once their nature leaves them, they will be unable to know their own kind.

Now, man is able to see and hear with discernment, is able to raise his body and lift his limbs, and can bend and stretch his joints; in his discrimination he is able to distinguish white from black and the beautiful from the ugly, and in his intelligence he can differentiate sameness from difference and the right from the wrong. Why? Because his *qi* fills his body and his spirit is at his bidding.

How do we know this to be so? Because whenever the focus of a man's mind is directed toward something (external) and his spirit is bound up with something, then he can stumble over a stump or bang his head on a tree without even being conscious of it. And if you try to beckon him, he won't be able to see, and if you try to call him, he won't be able to hear.

* Some Daoist writers use *qi* (energy) interchangeably with *shen* (spirit).

It is not that his eyes and ears have deserted him – yet he is not able to respond. Why? It is because his spirit has left its station.⁴⁴

He has all his sensory faculties, but he has lost his focus – he is not in touch with his inner spirit. His spirit has left its station. Then the author reminds us that our attention follows whatever we focus on and ignores what is irrelevant. Since there is no place absent of the spirit, whoever focuses on emptiness, the Dao, is aware of everything – from the vastness of the cosmos down to the tip of a hair.

Thus, where the attention of the spirit is directed
 toward the small
 it is oblivious to the big;
 Where it is directed toward the internal,
 it is oblivious to what's going on externally;
 Where it is directed toward what is above,
 it is oblivious to that below;
 Where it is directed toward the left,
 it is oblivious to the right.
 It is only when there is no place
 that the spirit does not fill
 that there is nowhere toward which the focus
 is not directed.
 Hence, one who values emptiness
 takes the tip of an autumn hair as his abode.⁴⁵

When our spirit is in tune with Dao, our spirit is everywhere – it fills all of creation – and then we have focus. We become aware of everything, down to the smallest insect or hair.

That is when we are empty of self and desire. But when we are caught up with desires and attachments, we are out of tune, and our spirit leaves its station. Thus, when “there is no place that the spirit does not fill,” then there is nowhere and nothing that we are not aware of. The man of *dé*, who values the Dao and is empty of self, can focus his attention on the tip of a hair or, equally, on the vast cosmos.

This is the person we call the sage, the real or perfect man; he is humble, whole, and follows the natural course of *wu-wei*. He is in harmony with Dao. But the person who is not in touch with the Dao – not following his *dé*, his inner nature – is always inappropriate. He is like an insane person, stumbling through life. Why? “Because his body and spirit have lost their position.”⁴⁶ When the spirit dominates, all is well. He has integrity. But when the body is in control, the spirit will be harmed. When the body is in control, then lust, desire, pride, and greed dominate him, and his spirit is increasingly squandered; eventually he will lose touch with his inner self.

The passage below describes the person whose spirit is his master. He is the sage, the real man; he nurtures his spirit. He rises and falls with Dao. But the greedy person, under the influence of desire, squanders his spirit; it roams far from home, attaching itself to the external world, without returning to its center. The natural way is for the spirit to go out and return. If it doesn't return, he has no centre or pivot to link him with Dao. The sage, the person governed by his inner nature, his *dé*, detached from the external world, is not disturbed by the myriad transformations of the created realm of beings.

Thus, where the spirit is master,
the body will go on to be benefited,

But with the body in control,
 the spirit will go on to be harmed.
 Because a covetous and avaricious person
 Is submerged in power and profit
 And is engrossed in the desire
 for reputation and position,
 And he hopes against hope
 that by means of surpassing cleverness
 He can establish a high reputation in the world,
 His spirit is squandered day by day,
 and goes increasingly far afield.

If for a long time it wanders too far from home
 without coming back,
 The body will shut its apertures
 and resist from within,
 and there will be no way for the spirit to gain entry. . . .

Hence, the sage nurtures his spirit,
 harmonizes and retains the fluency of his *qi*,
 calms his body,
 and sinks and floats, rises and falls with Dao. . . .

Thus, of the myriad transformations of things,
 there is none that he cannot match.
 Of the hundred changes of affairs,
 there is none to which he cannot respond.⁴⁷

Living in Harmony with Nature: A Vegetarian Diet

Being true to one's *dé*, one's intrinsic spiritual nature, means living in harmony with Dao, the underlying natural order of

life. This is not just an abstract concept. It is a principle that needs to be made concrete, a moral and ethical guidepost for every thought and action. Although Laozi, Zhuangzi, and other Daoist masters have taught the ideal of living in harmony with nature, the way in which society and individuals have translated this principle into action has varied. In general, it means leading a simple, balanced life, causing minimum harm to other creatures, and not indulging in any form of excess. Historically, this has sometimes meant adopting a vegetarian diet, though not always. Yet over the centuries, many Daoist teachers have emphasized the importance of refraining from killing animals and indulging in alcoholic drinks.

Ancient Daoist texts include many prescriptions for austere and healthful diets. Some even forbid the eating of grains, and some suggest eating minerals. *Bigu* or *pigu* was the term used for the avoidance of grains and cereals – probably a way of describing practices of fasting. These austerities were intended to help attain spiritual immortality and induce bodily longevity. The prohibited grains are often listed as rice, various types of millet, wheat, and soybeans. The idea was to eat as little as possible in order to preserve health. To that end, herbalists also created a variety of potions and concoctions of minerals and herbs as hunger suppressants, and devised various techniques, such as breathing exercises and swallowing of air, saliva, and special “talismanic water” (water mixed with the ashes of burned talismans), which were believed to contain pure life energy (*qi*).

For example, in the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, an advanced Daoist *shenren* (divine person or master) is described as one who “eats none of the five grains (*bushi wugu*), but inhales the wind and drinks the dew. He mounts the clouds, rides flying dragons, and wanders at ease beyond the four seas.” The adept,

nourished and maintained by the spirit, has free access to the spiritual realms, and travels in higher consciousness beyond the confines of the body.

Natural law dictates that one should not kill any living creature. Love for all creatures is considered the mark of a true human being, as emphasized in a fifth-century text of instructions for Daoists:

Maintain your humanity and do not kill. Rather feel sympathy and support for the multitude of living beings. Be compassionate and loving! Reach out, succor, and benefit all.⁴⁸

In the *180 Precepts Spoken by Lord Lao*, written in the sixth century, adherents of the Celestial Masters school (*Tianshi*) are instructed:

Do not kill or injure any being; . . .
 Do not engage in killing;
 Do not encourage others to kill; . . .
 Do not fish or hunt
 and thereby harm or kill
 the multitude of living beings.⁴⁹

Respect for the life of animals extended to an understanding that all animals, including human beings, are creatures of the one Creator. The same scripture enjoined followers to adopt the attitude taught by Laozi. It begins:

Lord Lao said: “The first precept is to abstain from killing. . . .

“The precept to abstain from killing means that you must not kill any living being or anything that contains life energy (*qi*), be it flying or merely wriggling. . . .

“The precept to abstain from killing . . . concerns the life energy, which maintains life and induces growth. Those who harm and kill living beings will receive corresponding harm in their own lives.” . . . Thus, not to kill means that you must not even entertain the idea of killing.⁵⁰

Some people even adopted a practice of capturing and then releasing animals back into the wild, as taught by the *Fangsheng* (Mercy Release) school. The *Precepts of the Three Primes* of the fifth-century *Lingbao* (Spiritual Treasure) school of Daoism synthesized many of the teachings of the *Tianshi* (Celestial Masters) with Buddhism and *Fangsheng*. It lists a number of forbidden things:

The sin of killing living creatures; . . .
 The sin of killing or harming
 the multitude of living things; . . .
 The sin of slaughtering the six domestic animals
 or killing living creatures;
 The sin of shooting wild animals or flying birds;
 The sin of burning the mountainsides for hunting.⁵¹

Centuries later, in one of the moral stories related in *Taishang Ganying Pian* (“Chapters on Action and Response”), written in the sixteenth century, a hunting party comes across an old sage, who advises them:

To refrain from injuring all growing things, and from killing whatever is awakening into life, is the part of universal lovingkindness as observed by saints and sages.⁵²

Spiritual and moral guidance also included warnings about the negative consequences of drinking alcohol. The *Precept Scripture of the Lord Lao* of the Celestial Masters school graphically depicts the descent into immorality that occurs when a person indulges in intoxicating drinks:

Dead drunk, people get into disputes and quarrels, bringing misfortune to their lives and shame on themselves. Lying and cheating, they lose sight of all the principles they should follow. Even stealing from their six relations, they grab from all, not just from strangers. Killing and injuring a multitude of living beings, they are only interested in giving satisfaction to their tongues and stomachs.⁵³

A sixth-century *Lingbao* text, the *Twelve Highest Precepts of Admonition*, gives a vivid description of the long-term consequences of drinking alcohol:

People who drink wine may expect three kinds of retribution for their sins:

- In this world, they hinder or lose all goodness and connection to the divine law. In future lives, they will be born with a dark and obtuse spirit.
- They are crazy and confused in their minds, lacking clarity and radiance. Later they will fall among the bats, lizards, and similar creatures.

- Even if they attain human birth again, their conscious minds and inner natures will be mad and deluded, full of evil and folly.⁵⁴

In the early third century, the Celestial Masters school was forced to move from its base in Sichuan province to different parts of the empire. When the movement was revived in the early fifth century, it was more organized, eventually securing state sponsorship. In the year 440, an emperor accepted Daoist initiation, after which vegetarianism was decreed by state law for some years.

Over the centuries numerous Daoist masters have reminded the general populace about the importance of maintaining the balance of nature by refraining from killing animals and eating their meat, including the rare and exotic species of animals that sometimes have been used for medicines as well as food. Yet the custom has persisted into modern times in the mistaken belief that consuming these creatures can extend longevity, increase virility, or get rid of evil spirits.

Dr James Miller, professor of Chinese studies at Queen's University in Canada, has studied the relationship of ecology and Chinese religion. Miller points out that Daoism has a strong tradition of vegetarianism, especially among Daoist monks and nuns who have long adopted a strict vegetarian diet as part of their ethical code.⁵⁵ In fact, many ancient Chinese sages taught that eating wild animals would cause great harm to the body.

When I met Master Meng in Beijing in 2017, I asked him whether the vegetarian diet was important for Daoists today. He said that today there are very few people who are strict

vegetarians like he is, and that his reasons for giving up animal food are very different from modern vegetarian trends, which are not based on spiritual principles. If he ate animal food, it would affect his spiritual practice. He was very clear about this, linking his practice with the basic teachings of Laozi:

We shall not kill. All creatures are equal. So we must not kill our fellow creatures. This is part of the *ziran* (natural) concept of Laozi.

He added:

There are very few strict vegetarians, even among Buddhists, because there are no strict rules or requirements. They used to be, but not anymore. But for those who are on the Daoist path, even if you ask them to eat meat, they cannot. For example, I can tell if anyone is vegetarian or not, or if the vegetarian food is cooked in woks that are used to cook meat.

I have been a strict vegetarian for 30 years, *i.e.*, no meat, no alcohol, no egg, no dairy, no onions or garlic, including no cigarettes. Onion and garlic is not helpful to the reversal of the physical function of the body. I eat one meal a day or one meal every two days. I carry my own pot and food when I travel. I don't eat in restaurants or hotels. The reason I don't eat dairy is because its smell is too strong. The smell of eggs is even stronger.

Asceticism

As we read in Master Meng's account of his early spiritual seeking, many Chinese Daoists adopt an ascetic, austere lifestyle – living as hermits in the mountains in order to pursue the spiritual path. This way of life has often been idealized in novels and films, but is not the only option Daoist masters advocate for pursuing a spiritual objective. Sometimes, in fact, life as a hermit is seen as a temporary choice to help a person gain inner strength before returning to a life in the world.

I found similar observations in the interviews with Daoist hermits conducted by an American Daoist named Bill Porter, who is also known by his Daoist name, Red Pine. His accounts, collected in his book *Road to Heaven: Encounters with Chinese Hermits*, confirmed that the approach Master Meng described is widespread among Chinese practitioners.

Porter begins his book by giving an historical view of the role of the hermit in the Chinese Daoist and Buddhist tradition, and then continues with his interviews of several hermits he met as he travelled in the Chungnan (Zhongnan or Taiyi) mountains of southwestern China.

A Daoist monk called Jen told Porter that he had lived as a hermit for fewer than three years. He said:

It was a good experience. Sooner or later all Daoists have to live alone for a period to concentrate on their practice. To practice you have to find a secluded place, at least in the beginning. But the important thing is to learn to still your mind. Once you can do that, you can live anywhere, even in a noisy city.⁵⁶

When Porter asked him if it is necessary to be a monk or nun, Jen responded:

The important thing is to lead an upright life. You don't have to be a monk or nun to do this. It doesn't do any good to be a monk or nun if you don't keep the precepts. What's important is to keep the precepts. But anyone who leads an upright life does this. This is the basis of practice. The precepts are the demands you place on yourself. Precepts make practice possible. If you don't make demands on yourself, you won't get anywhere in your practice.⁵⁷

道

CHAPTER FOUR

The True Man: Embodiment of Wu-Wei

The ideal of living in harmony with Dao leads to the principle of *wu-wei*. Sometimes defined as “doing without doing,” “actionless action,” or “non-interference,” *wu-wei* describes action without personal motive. It means immersing oneself in the natural flow of life, letting oneself be carried by the current of Dao without imposing one’s own ego or will. It presupposes an acceptance that life has its own momentum, its own pattern, and that human beings need to submit to it and not impose themselves. Thus, living according to the principle of *wu-wei* forms the foundation of a life of peace and happiness.

As Professor Ellen Chen, translator and scholar of the *Dao-déjing*, writes:

Daoism does not regard humans as the only active agents. Nature untouched by civilization is a dynamic realm while human action (*wei*) only interferes with and stifles the natural processes of things. Dao lets all

beings operate on their own, accomplishing everything by doing nothing (*wu-wei*).

The action that characterizes Dao is called transformation or self-transformation. Human action (*wei*), imposing an order on nature, is disruptive and destructive; transformation is the process by which natural beings unfold according to their inner rhythm. When the ruler imitates Dao by a policy of *wu-wei*, he allows peace to prevail among humans and between humans and the natural world.⁵⁸

The Chinese Daoists rarely personified God. They taught that the Dao is the divine principle that has always existed before creation, and which provides the path back to union with the great emptiness of non-being. They taught people to live in accord with the Dao and to allow their *dé*, or inner potency, to nurture their intrinsic inner nature. When sages emphasized the importance of living according to *wu-wei*, they were teaching their disciples to remove personal motives from their actions and be detached from the results; not investing themselves intellectually or emotionally but allowing nature to take its course.

Daoist classics like *Daodéjing* and *Zhuangzi* use metaphors from nature to show how to live in the Dao according to the principle of *wu-wei*. The events of life will keep rolling along, but the sage withdraws, rejecting self-importance and the need to interfere in events.

Humility allows him to live effortlessly and do “nothing to disturb the spontaneous flow of things.”⁵⁹ The *Daodéjing* gives this advice:

To learn, one increases day by day;
 To cultivate Dao,
 one reduces day by day.
 Reduce and reduce and keep on reducing,
 Till the state of non-interference (*wu-wei*)
 is reached.⁶⁰

Human intervention in the affairs of the world is not necessary – not even for kings and rulers, much less so for the rest of us or any other of the myriad beings of creation.

Dao everlasting does not act (*wu-wei*),
 and yet nothing is not done.
 If kings and barons can abide by it,
 The ten thousand things will transform
 by themselves.⁶¹

The sage or spiritual master embodies the ideal of *wu-wei*; he lives in the current of Dao. In keeping with this principle, he never promotes himself. He is modest and humble. He is not interested in creating a personality cult around himself, but rather acts as a guide for his disciples in cultivating the Dao, so they can experience it for themselves. Disciples must undertake their own spiritual cultivation, under their master's guidance. This cultivation includes their way of life in the world as well as their inner meditation practice. The *Huainanzi* offers this description of the sage who cultivates the essential and lets go of the superficial:

The sage inwardly cultivates that which is the root
 instead of outwardly putting ornament on that which

is the tip. He preserves his spirit and puts aside his cleverness. Quiescently he does nothing, yet leaving nothing undone; serenely he does not impose order on anything, yet there is nothing that is not ordered.⁶²

As Master Meng emphasized in my meetings with him, “the most important lesson a master teaches his disciple is how to be a human being, how to have *dé*.” And the master himself embodies this through the way he lives in accord with *wu-wei*.

Master Meng also said that “generally people have an instinctive love for their parents. Next to that love, there is the instinctive love of the disciple for his master. The love of the master is strict and unconditional. The disciple sees the master as the one who will get him over to the other shore.”

Many of the stories in the *Zhuangzi* hold up the sage as the embodiment of *wu-wei* and an example to emulate. They may not specifically mention *wu-wei*, but *wu-wei* is the thread that unites all Chinese Daoist teachings. People look for guidance on how to live, and the Chinese mystics provided that guidance through their living example and stories.

By getting lost in Dao, forgetting oneself, one can achieve a state of *wu-wei*. Dao is often compared to water, which flows steadily and continuously, overcoming all obstacles. It epitomizes the Daoist ideal of effortless action. Fish are not aware they are swimming in water, yet they live in it all the time. They do not analyze themselves in relation to their surroundings. They just live. This is the Daoist ideal. Simply by getting lost in Dao, one achieves the state of *wu-wei*, and all is accomplished effortlessly.

Fishes are born in water;
Man is born in Dao.

If fishes, born in water,
 Seek the deep shadow
 Of pond and pool,
 All their needs
 Are satisfied.
 If man, born in Dao,
 Sinks into the deep shadow
 Of non-action
 To forget aggression and concern,
 He lacks nothing.
 His life is secure.

Moral: "All the fish needs
 is to get lost in water.
 All man needs is to get lost
 in Dao."⁶³

Another parable from the *Zhuangzi* emphasizes that if a person functions in the world through intuitive understanding, flowing with the natural currents of life rather than by applying intellectual analysis and calculation, he will be in tune with the ideal of *wu-wei* and arrive at the natural state of nothingness, the primal emptiness of Dao.

To the north of the Red Water,
 To the Kunlun mountain.
 He looked around over the edge of the world.
 On the way home
 He lost his night-colored pearl.
 He sent out Science to seek his pearl,
 and got nothing.

He sent Analysis to look for his pearl,
 and got nothing.
 He sent out Logic to seek his pearl,
 and got nothing.
 Then he asked Nothingness,
 and Nothingness had it!

The Yellow Emperor said:
 “Strange, indeed: Nothingness,
 who was not sent,
 Who did no work to find it,
 had the night-colored pearl!”⁶⁴

The night-colored pearl is a symbol of the darkest of dark, the inner valley or deepest source of all spiritual knowledge, also called the “valley spirit.” It is where the seed of spiritual awareness germinates within us. It is the awakening of our *dé*, our spiritual potential. Science can’t find the pearl, nor can logic or analysis. Only nothingness can find it.

Nothingness found it not by looking but by *not* looking. Because nothingness (formlessness) is of the same essence as the origin of spiritual knowledge (Dao), it is empty of intellectual activity and so can see the pearl.

The quotation below from the *Huainanzi* teaches that one can maintain stillness by maintaining a balance between the external and internal worlds or states of consciousness. This stillness is the balance point between involvement and objectivity, between external conditions and being true to one’s inner self and its spiritual potency, the *dé*.

Here the Dao is referred to as emptiness; it is the highest realm or place of non-being, the origin of being. Being generates

the myriad forms of the creation. So the mystic here is saying that his spirit abides in stillness, in the pure state of non-being. To reach there, he has entered the “Gateway of Heaven,” the point of transition between the physical world and the realm of spirit. By passing through that point, he can enter the realm of spirit and follow the ideal of *wu-wei*.

Hence, one who understands Dao
Returns to his limpidity and stillness,
And one who knows all there is to know
about things
Always ends up with non-activity.
If one nourishes his nature with tranquility
And lodges his spirit in emptiness,
Then he has entered the Gateway of Heaven. . . .

He succeeds without deliberating,
He accomplishes without doing.⁶⁵

To maintain this state, a person needs to have a pure heart and give up calculation and analysis. He follows his true nature. As *Huainanzi* says:

Thus, when a man harbors a calculating heart
in his breast,
The quality of his person is contaminated
and his spirituality is not kept whole.⁶⁶

It is the wise man, the sage, the mystic, who embodies the principle of *wu-wei*. He is always tranquil, as he is one with the Dao. He embodies inner stillness.

The non-action of the wise man is not inaction.
 It is not studied. It is not shaken by anything.
 The sage is quiet because he is not moved,
 Not because he wills to be quiet.
 Still water is like glass.
 You can look in it and see the bristles on your chin.
 It is a perfect level;
 A carpenter could use it.
 If water is so clear, so level,
 How much more the spirit of man?
 The heart of the wise man is tranquil.
 It is the mirror of heaven and earth,
 The glass of everything.
 Emptiness, stillness, tranquility, tastelessness,
 Silence, non-action: this is the level
 of heaven and earth.
 This is perfect Dao.
 Wise men find here their resting place.
 Resting, they are empty.

From emptiness comes the unconditioned.
 From this, the conditioned,
 the individual things.
 So from the sage's emptiness, stillness arises:
 From stillness, action; from action, attainment.
 From their stillness comes their non-action,
 which is also action,
 And is, therefore, their attainment.
 For stillness is joy.
 Joy is free from care,
 Fruitful in long years.

Joy does all things without concern:
 For emptiness, stillness, tranquility, tastelessness,
 silence, and non-action
 Are the root of all things.⁶⁷

The heart-mind of the wise man is still because it is in perfect balance. In its stillness it mirrors the balance of heaven and earth, *yang* and *yin*, positive and negative. Joy is attained through stillness, silence, and *wu-wei*, which are at the root of everything.

In Chinese classical literature, the master or sage is often called the *shenren*, the man of spirit, the real man, the true man. This is because he is true to himself, to his inner *dé*, and has realized the Dao within. He is also called the whole or complete person, as he has united the duality of opposites of *yin* and *yang* within himself. He is a totally integrated human being, in perfect balance.

The sage embraces the One, as the *Daodéjing* explains in Chapter Twenty-two. He contains all the opposites in dynamic union, and thus he is whole. He remains humble, and so he can lead. He does not contend, so no one can contend with him. Those who pursue only one side of opposing views are self-promoting and boastful. The sage is enlightened because he reflects both sides; by not taking either side, the sage finds the solution to the problem. He sees the whole and thus has true perspective.

Therefore the sage embraces the One.
 He becomes the model of the world.
 Not self-seeing, hence he is enlightened.
 Not self-justifying, hence he is outstanding.

Not showing off his deeds,
 hence he is meritorious.
 Not boasting of himself, hence he leads.
 Because he is not contentious,
 Hence no one under heaven
 can contend with him. . . .

What the ancients say:
 “Bent, thus preserved whole” –
 Are these empty words?
 Be preserved whole and return (to the source).⁶⁸

Another passage in *Daodéjing* explains the benefit of being soft and not contending, like the mystic who embodies the principle of *wu-wei*:

The softest thing in the universe
 overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.
 That without substance can enter
 where there is no room.
 Hence I know the value of non-action.
 Teaching without words and work without doing
 Are understood by very few.⁶⁹

Gentleness and yielding are the most powerful forces in the world. They can overpower and conquer the most hard and rigid. “That without substance can enter where there is no room.” In other words, that which is non-existent is stronger than the hardest stone. The empty penetrates the solid. As Professor Ellen Chen writes: “Dao alone is the absolute nothingness that penetrates all beings.”⁷⁰

True Man of Dao

The *Zhuangzi* presents several unusual examples of the sage, or mystic – “the true man of Dao (*zhenren*).” He is able to let go of intellectual analysis and judgment; he becomes childlike, innocent, and spontaneous. He is whole, not fragmented. He can do the impossible because he doesn’t distinguish between what is possible and impossible. Reason doesn’t interfere with his judgment.

The sun can become the moon for him. He can go beyond the realm of form to the formlessness of Dao. His essential inner power comes from the root of Dao, so nothing can stand in his way.

“How does the true man of Dao
Walk through walls without obstruction,
Stand in fire without being burnt?”

Not because of cunning
Or daring;
Not because he has learned,
But because he has unlearned. . . .

What can stand in his way?

He will rest in his eternal place
Which is no-place.
He will be hidden
In his own unfathomable secret.
His nature sinks to its root
In the One.
His vitality, his power
Hide in secret Dao.⁷¹

Like a drunken man, the sage is relaxed and unaware of his surroundings. He is soft, not brittle, so he can adjust to all conditions. He experiences no obstacles. Life and death are the same to him. He is drunk with Dao. And like a drunken man, he can fall out of a wagon and not be injured. Being encompassed by and permeated with Dao, the true, wise, or real man is protected from anything and everything. Dao protects him; he has no cares.

When he is all one,
 There is no flaw in him
 By which a wedge can enter.
 So a drunken man, falling
 Out of a wagon,
 Is bruised but not destroyed.
 His bones are like the bones of other men,
 But his fall is different.

His spirit is entire. He is not aware
 Of getting into a wagon
 Or falling out of one.

Life and death are nothing to him.
 He knows no alarm, he meets obstacles
 Without thought, without care,
 Takes them without knowing they are there.

If there is such security in wine,
 How much more in Dao.
 The wise man is hidden in Dao.
 Nothing can touch him.⁷²

Zhuangzi reviews the characteristics of the “true man of old,” the original Daoists of ancient times. They were courageous in their views and fearless, no matter what perils they had to endure. Their inner realization took them to the spiritual realm of Dao. They embodied *wu-wei* because they were merged in the Dao. They experienced no resistance and did not try to go against the flow of Dao.

What is meant by a “true man”?
 The true men of old were not afraid
 When they stood alone in their views.
 No great exploits. No plans.
 If they failed, no sorrow.
 No self-congratulation in success.
 They scaled cliffs, never dizzy,
 Plunged in water, never wet,
 Walked through fire and were not burnt.
 Thus their knowledge reached all the way
 To Dao.

The true men of old
 Slept without dreams,
 Woke without worries.
 Their food was plain.
 They breathed deep.
 True men breathe from their heels.
 Others breathe with their gullets,
 Half-strangled. In dispute
 They heave up arguments
 Like vomit.

Where the fountains of passion
 Lie deep,
 The heavenly springs
 Are soon dry.

The true men of old
 Knew no lust for life,
 No dread of death.
 Their entrance was without gladness,
 Their exit, yonder,
 Without resistance.
 Easy come, easy go.
 They did not forget where from,
 Nor ask where to,
 Nor drive grimly forward
 Fighting their way through life.
 They took life as it came, gladly;
 Took death as it came, without care;
 And went away, yonder,
 Yonder!

They had no mind to fight Dao.
 They did not try, by their own contriving,
 To help Dao along.
 These are the ones we call true men.

Minds free, thoughts gone,
 Brows clear, faces serene.
 Were they cool? Only cool as autumn.
 Were they hot? No hotter than spring.
 All that came out of them
 Came quiet, like the four seasons.⁷³

The true men, the saints or masters, are natural and soft. They do not contend and do not publicize themselves. They can plunge into water without getting wet, meaning that they live in the world without getting tainted. They have no worries and do not burden their minds with too many thoughts; they live simply, they breathe deeply. Passion dries up our spiritual nature, but sages live without passion; they have neither fear of death nor excessive joy in living. Easy come, easy go: they take life as it comes. They exemplify the principle of *wu-wei* – acting without motive, not investing themselves in their actions.

The true man understands that the Dao is the unity that permeates all, that connects everything and everyone. The person who holds on to the pivot of Dao can maintain his balance. He holds on to his inner spiritual core while acting in the external world, the world of intellect and the myriad things, without being corrupted by it.

And how can he do this? Zhuangzi says: “They wander free and easy in the service of inaction.” Wandering free and easy describes lack of tension, being in tune with their “original nature.” In “service of inaction” means that they are not attached to any action they take; they act without personal motive.

We have seen that Dao is often compared to water, in its flowing, adaptive nature. In the same way, the sage, who embodies the Dao, is like water. He gives generously; his love doesn't discriminate between one person and another; he does not contend but adapts. Following behind rather than leading, he does not seek fame or celebrity; not forcing himself on others, he inspires their loyalty by his humility. To emulate the perfect man, Zhuangzi advises:

Do not be an embodier of fame; do not be a storehouse of schemes; do not be an undertaker of projects;

do not be a proprietor of wisdom. Embody to the fullest what has no end and wander where there is no trail. Hold on to all that you have received from Heaven but do not think you have gotten anything. Be empty – that is all. The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror – going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Therefore he can win out over things and not hurt himself.⁷⁴

The *Huainanzi* uses the metaphor of the handle, the axis or pivot of Dao, to explain how the sage lives – with his attention always in Dao, true to his inner nature while adjusting to the changes that life brings. He is objective and selfless. *Huainanzi* brings a story to illustrate this:

The two kings, the Tai Huang and the Gu Huang,
 Got hold of the handle of *dao*
 And stood at the center.
 In spirit they roamed together
 with the lord of transformation*
 To bring peace to the world.

Hence (working the handles of *dao*), they can:
 Move like the heavens and stay still like the earth.
 Turning like a wheel without flagging,
 Flowing like water without cease,

* The text used the term “demiurge of transformation” – the lord of change – i.e., being, the source of the duality of *yin* and *yang*; the one who brings change in the creation. Being has manifested from non-being, the original emptiness.

They begin and end at the same time
as the myriad things.
Just as when the wind rises, the clouds steam forth,
There was nothing to which they did not respond;
Just as when the thunder crashes, the rain falls,
They are never at a loss in their response. . . .
Like the potter's wheel spinning,
like the hub whirling,
Going full circle they start going round again.

Carved and chiseled,
They return to being an uncarved block.⁷⁵

Holding on to the axis of Dao, wise men can move in the world but still keep their center in Dao. They can stay still like earth, flow like water, turn like a wheel; the axis stays still but the rim keeps rotating. So, they can get “carved and chiseled” in the world, but still return to being the “uncarved block” – a common Daoist metaphor for original nature – innocent, not sophisticated or corrupted.

The axis is timelessness, the “beyond time” of the Dao. When we leave the wheel of worldly activity and involvement, we can return to the axis. It is the sage's source of strength and stillness, the equilibrium that sustains all.

Doing what they did with no ulterior motive, they accorded with Dao; saying what they said with no ulterior motive, they were in communion with *dé*; happy and easy with no sense of self-importance, what they gained was in harmony; though they had a myriad of different manifestations, they yet accorded

with each of these things in their various natures;
 their spirits resided in the tiniest tip of an autumn
 down, and yet were larger than the sum total of
 the cosmos.⁷⁶

The *Huainanzi* portrays the sage as a master charioteer who has his hands firmly on the handles of the Dao. Without fatigue, he can guide his horses to the far ends of the cosmos, to the very gates of heaven. This is because he is not limited by human limits. He easily crosses the division between the physical and spiritual worlds, earth and heaven, to “ramble in the land of the inexhaustible.”

The poet uses the metaphor of the charioteer who knows how to manage his horses to describe how the sage is always appropriate in his actions. The sage knows how to navigate through the heavens and control natural forces. But no matter what he does, however far he goes, even to the four corners of the earth, he always returns to the pivot – the axis or handle of Dao. “Remaining whole, he returns to guard what is within; he manages the four corners of the earth yet always returns to the pivot.” And because he is always in control of himself, he never experiences fatigue. He maintains control because he is strong within, at his center.

He walks his horses when he should walk them,
 He runs them hard when he should run them.
 He gets the god of rain to sprinkle his path
 And the god of wind to sweep away the dust.
 With lightning as his whip
 And thunder as his wheels,
 Above he rambles in the free and roaming vastness.

Below he goes out of the gates of boundlessness.
 Having scanned all around and left nothing out,
 Remaining whole, he returns
 to guard what is within.
 He manages the four corners of the earth,
 Yet always returns to the pivot.

Hence, he travels fast without pitching,
 And travels far without fatigue.
 Without taxing his four limbs,
 And without draining the keenness
 of his hearing and sight,

He knows the lay and the boundaries
 of the various divisions and quadrants
 of the cosmos.
 How is this so?
 It is because he has his hands
 on the control handles of Dao
 and rambles in the land of the inexhaustible.⁷⁷

The sage or mystic embodies *wu-wei*. He adjusts to change and seizes the appropriate moment to act, in accord with the Creator, who brings the material creation into being.

[He] does not allow desire to disturb
 his actual nature.
 He hits the mark without planning,
 His word is trusted without his having to speak,
 He succeeds without deliberating,
 He accomplishes without doing (*wu-wei*).

His purity reaches up to the mansion of the spirits
And he is a comrade of the ruler of change.⁷⁸

The real man can adapt to changing circumstances without forgetting his inner core, never succumbing to danger. The author of *Huainanzi* puts it beautifully: “He stretches and bends along with things, like an echo or a shadow.”

His soul is not agitated
Nor is his spirit troubled. . . .
Up against external things, he is able to respond;
Borne down upon, he is able to move.
Without form and without end,
In his changes he is without visible shape.
He stretches and bends along with things,
Like an echo or a shadow.
Even when looking down over a precipice,
He does not lose what he holds on to;
Traveling amid perils and dangers
He does not forget his dark crutch.⁷⁹

The “dark crutch” is the internal core of his *dé*. It is called dark because its source is internal, receptive. Holding on to the *dé* at his center, the sage can respond to myriad events, even those that are chaotic, without being disturbed.

The sage does not make his person a slave
to external things
Nor does he allow desire to disturb
his inner harmony.

Hence, he is not elated with joy,
Nor downcast with sorrow. . . .

I alone am in great spirits,
and leaving things behind,
Travel along the same path as Dao.⁸⁰

When a person is pulled from within to explore his inner nature, he can do so by cultivating the Dao. He doesn't need to be anywhere special physically, but he has to maintain an internal state where he is not tempted by external enjoyments. If he is longing for material happiness, then even if he rules an entire empire, he will never be happy. But if he gives up attachment to worldly life, he will find joy in everything.

Hence, when a person has the means
to find it in himself,
Even under a tall tree or in an empty cave,
His real nature will be able to find satisfaction.
If he does not have the means to find it in himself,
Even if he has the empire
as his personal possession
And the myriad people as his subjects,
This will not be sufficient
to give his vitality sustenance.

If a man can get to a state in which
there is nothing he enjoys,
there will be nothing he does not enjoy;
when there is nothing he does not enjoy,

he has then reached the extremity
of the highest joy.⁸¹

When our joy doesn't depend on external things or events, our own joyful nature will keep us in a state of bliss. This is why the sage is always happy. His spirit resides in the most-minute part of the creation – the cellular level, as it were – yet it is larger than the cosmos. The sage is empty, so he encompasses everything, like the Dao itself.

The *Huainanzi* advises its readers to give up trying to change the world – just follow what is natural and thus reach the essential destination, the realm of the spirit. The mystic leads others to spiritual realms by his ability to let go of the world and hold on to the handle of Dao. He leads by following Dao. He embodies the principle of *wu-wei*.

Hence, there is nothing you can do about the world.
You can only follow what is natural
 in pushing the myriad things ahead.
There is no getting to the bottom of changes
 they undergo.
You can only grasp the essential destination
 and lead them there.⁸²

The sage's source of strength is sticking to the essential, the axis of the constantly spinning wheel of life's events.

The myriad things have their creator,
Yet he alone knows to abide by the root;
The events of the world have a source
 out of which they come,

Yet he alone knows to abide by the gateway
(to the inner realms).⁸³

The myriad things of the universe have their creator, yet only the sage knows how to live in the realm of non-being, with the Dao. External circumstances and events affect the realm of being, but the sage lives in perfect balance at the inner gateway – the point of transition between being and non-being. He embodies the state of emptiness, the stillness of the Dao.

Zhuangzi summarizes the qualities of the man of Dao, the man of spirit:

The man of spirit . . . hates to see people gather around him. He avoids the crowd. For where there are many men, there are also many opinions and little agreement. There is nothing to be gained from the support of a lot of half-wits who are doomed to end up in a fight with each other.

The man of spirit is neither very intimate with anyone, nor very aloof. He keeps himself interiorly aware, and he maintains his balance so that he is in conflict with nobody. This is your true man! He lets the ants be clever. . . . For his own part, he imitates the fish that swims unconcerned, surrounded by a friendly element, and minding its own business.

The true man sees what the eye sees, and does not add to it something that is not there. He hears what the ears hear, and does not detect imaginary undertones or overtones. He understands things in their obvious interpretation and is not busy with hidden meanings and mysteries. His course is therefore a

straight line. Yet he can change his direction whenever circumstances suggest it.⁸⁴

The man of spirit discourages praise. He keeps a balance. He imitates the fish that swims unconcerned, surrounded by a friendly element (water), minding its own business. He lets other people scurry and argue, like ants. He stays true to his *dé*, his inner nature, following the Dao. Holding on to the center, he is free to change course as circumstance dictates.



CHAPTER FIVE

Cultivating the Dao

Once the human mind dies, the mind of Dao appears.

– MASTER MENG

People look to a master as a guide – someone who can teach them how to live a spiritual life. The master is the living example of the transformation that occurs in a person when he or she cultivates the Dao. By cultivating the Dao, we can live naturally, like the master, following the principle of *wu-wei*. The key to the cultivation of Dao and attaining the state of *wu-wei* is a meditation practice that brings one's consciousness, or awareness, beyond the duality of this material world into unity with the Dao – the primal emptiness.

Many religious traditions and spiritual teachings emphasize the importance of meditation. There are numerous varieties of meditation, including secular practices aimed at calming the mind and creating a sense of well-being, as well as techniques associated with specific religions and spiritual paths. Some people associate breathing practices and silent retreats with meditation;

others adopt periods of stillness and inner contemplation, free of any outward practice or ritual. We seem to be living in an era of global anxiety, in which many individuals are engaged in a search for purpose, balance, and an understanding of life. There is Christian meditation, Jewish meditation, Kabbalah meditation, Buddhist meditation, Daoist meditation.

Different techniques tend to use different words to describe the various stages of the practice, including the necessary preparations. Also, the purpose of different types of meditation varies, depending on the intended result. Some aim to calm the mind and enable practitioners to experience inner peace while coping with the stresses of life. Others aim to enable meditators to become detached from outer circumstances and stay true to their inner compass. For many, the goal of meditation is simply to enhance mental, emotional, and physical health. Meditation is commonly used to expand practitioners' awareness and "mindfulness." And for some, meditation is a method for freeing the soul from the mind's encumbrances, enabling it to come in contact with a divine power and perhaps even unite with it in mystical union.

The more one delves into specific techniques, the more one finds common elements – for example, the need to withdraw from outer and inner distractions; to quiet, control, and concentrate the mind; to sit in stillness; and to experience inner peace.

The meditation practices taught by the Chinese Daoists inevitably share many common elements with practices associated with other spiritual traditions. But what is unique is the vocabulary and conceptual framework the Daoists use to describe their teachings and experiences.

Even so, it is difficult to describe the specifics of Daoist meditation, because neither the masters nor the disciples will share their experiences with others. As Master Meng emphasized to

me when we met in Beijing, each person's practice is individual and can't be copied or adopted by anyone else. It must be taught by a living spiritual master, and it is a secret that is shared solely between master and disciple. However, Master Meng did give some broad hints about what is required to cultivate the Dao. He emphasized that if you bring your attention to the point of concentration, "the mysterious pass," you will see the light within. It will accompany you all the time. Once that threshold is crossed and that state is attained, you will never lose it.

Master Meng gave me some insights into the principles of the practice, even if not the specifics. He said: "Once the human mind dies, the mind of Dao appears." One can experience the Dao only when the individual mind gives up, so to speak, and submits to the Dao. The mind is our obstacle. We have to find a master who can guide us on the path of Dao, and we have to adopt an ascetic, solitary lifestyle, at least at the beginning. According to Master Meng, undergoing physical austerities actually changes the functioning of the body. He said that certain outward ascetic practices also help to refine one's nature and to control and focus the mind.

To repeat a few of his reflections on his inner practice:

Our original nature is connected to immortality, to the formless. It is like a glowing pearl, but through our day to day lives, with all our thoughts and desires, we accumulate dust which covers its original condition. But if we remove this dust, then the pearl will be able to shine again. The term for this method of cultivation is to stabilize our heart and transform our nature (*xiangxin huaxing*). To stabilize our heart means that we stay tranquil. When we stay tranquil

we stop accumulating more dust. And by removing the old dust that we have already accumulated, we transform our nature. So once we've removed all the dust from our heart then our true nature is revealed. And our true nature is Dao. . . .

The purpose of sitting in meditation is to still the mind, because our mind throughout the day is not under our control. The practice is undertaken in order to keep the mind controlled. It takes a long time to get into that state.

Daoists emphasize that in our normal state, our spiritual energy flows outward and downward, dissipating into the world. With meditation we can reverse this outward flow of spiritual energy, and attain inward focus and an awareness of the all-pervading and all-encompassing Dao.

The spiritual light is always shining within – it is our essential nature. Unfortunately, the light of our consciousness is easily spread outside, dissipated through our desires, our sensual and intellectual activity, and interactions with others. We need to “turn the light around,” to reverse its illumination, so that it shines *within* us, awakening our spiritual consciousness, and not allow it to dissipate into the creation. We need to close the inner doorway – the “mysterious pass” – the gate through which the light flows outward and downward into the material world. It is this inner gateway that leads either inward and upward to awareness of the spiritual reality of who we really are or that keeps our focus out in the world. When the doorway is closed, then the light, our attention, stays within and we begin our true spiritual journey. The process of reversing the light is the process of meditation, of cultivation of the Dao.

Another metaphor for realizing our spiritual nature through meditation is “cleansing the dust off the mirror of our heart.” This phrase appears often in Daoist literature, and worldly attachments and involvements are often called the dust of the world. A very early Daoist text called the *Nei-yeh* often makes this reference.

Nei-yeh

The *Nei-yeh* (“Inward Training” or “Inner Cultivation”) is one of the earliest texts that documents Chinese meditation techniques. Originally transmitted orally, *Nei-yeh* was probably written between 350 and 300 BCE. It probably predates even the *Daodéjing*, the most well known of the early Chinese spiritual classics, and may have influenced both the *Daodéjing* and *Zhuangzi*, which were written a century later. *Nei-yeh* was included in a collection of writings called the *Guanzi*, assembled in approximately the second century BCE, but it remained nearly unknown and obscure for many centuries, with few people understanding its significance. It was only in the twentieth century that Chinese and western scholars began to appreciate how important it was.

The *Nei-yeh* focuses almost solely on meditation and does not get involved in philosophical or metaphysical discussions, such as how the creation came about, the principles of *yin* and *yang*, and so forth. This confirms that the foundation of Daoism is its inward-directed meditation practice. Scholars who have translated this work for modern readers have declared that *Nei-yeh* is “the oldest extant expression of a distinctive mystical practice . . . that is the basis for the entire Daoist tradition from its obscure beginnings in ancient times to the *Huainanzi* in the

mid-second century BCE.”⁸⁵ Its text emerged from the experiences of the spiritual masters of antiquity and their disciples, who were engaged in mystical practice. Contemporary Daoist practitioners continue to use its spiritual vocabulary.

The entire book of twenty-six passages describes three types of energy or power:

- The *qi* (*chi*), often translated as vital energy or breath, is the universal force or power that gives life to all things.
- The *jing*, or vital essence, is “the *source* of the vital energy (or *qi*) in human beings . . . the basis of our health, vitality and psychological well-being.”⁸⁶ The *jing* can be understood as a person’s innate and ever-renewing reservoir from where they distill their personal *qi*. It is the energy within the energy, the essence within the essence.* We can think of *jing* as the concentrated form of *qi*, which triggers or empowers it. (On a physical level, *jing* is also used to refer to a person’s sexual and creative power, the “procreative” principle.)
- *Shen*, the spirit or mystical awareness, is the third type of power or energy described by Daoists. It is the spiritual power derived from the divine or heavenly realm and manifested in the human being, a divine or heavenly power that human beings can draw into themselves by being true to their inner power or *dé*. The person whose mind is imbued with *shen* experiences the Dao within himself.

* Verse 8 of the *Nei-yeh* declares: “The vital essence (*jing*): it is the essence of the vital energy (*qi*).” Roth, *Inward Training*, p. 101.

The consciousness of *shen*, once realized in meditation, is profound; it is an inner awareness of one's soul, of the Dao, and cannot be spoken of or described. Verse Fourteen of *Nei-yeh* says: "Within the mind there is yet another mind. That mind within the mind: it is an awareness that precedes words!"

These three types of spiritual energy are essentially one same spiritual power but manifested at different energy centers in the body, and so they are given different names according to the quality at the particular energy centre.* It is assumed that in our ordinary human state, our spiritual energy is scattered throughout our body and is mixed with impurities such as sensual desires, ego, attachments, negativity, and so forth. As we start to refine and withdraw the power or energy towards the higher centers, it becomes purified, shedding all negativity. The energy itself is one and does not change, but the lower in the body that it descends, the more impurities it collects, and so it is described differently.

Daoist teachers have given different names to distinguish between the higher or purer expressions of that energy and their lower or material, physical expression. The meditation practices are intended to collect and withdraw the energy, which is now

* In *Nei-yeh*, the term Dao sometimes was interchanged with *shen* and even *qi*. Ultimately there is one energy or life force experienced at different levels and from different perspectives. As the entry *Neiye* in Wikipedia states: "The ancient *Neiye* . . . is the earliest known text that explains self-cultivation through daily, practiced regulation of a group of life forces; namely, *qi* "vital energy" (the universal force that gives life to all things), *jing* "vital essence" (one's innate reservoir of *qi*), *xin* "heart-mind," *shen* "spirit; spiritual consciousness," *dao* "the Way," and *de* "inner power." These terms later became keywords in Chinese philosophy, but the *Neiye* sometimes used them idiosyncratically, for instance, *dao* was effectively interchangeable with *shen* and *qi*." (Kirkland 2008: 771).

scattered throughout the body. First, as it withdraws to the lower energy centers, it is transformed into *jing*, then further transformed to *qi* at the middle energy center, and then refined further into *shen* at the higher energy center. The same energy becomes increasingly pure as it rises.

So when *jing* is refined and becomes purified, it is transformed into *qi*. When *qi* is refined and becomes purified it is transformed into *shen*. While the Indian mystics speak of withdrawing the attention upwards in meditation from one *chakra* to another, to the eye center and above, the Chinese give the spiritual power or energy a different name at each point in the process. Yet it is basically the same process of withdrawal, of spirit being refined as it withdraws from the physical by reversing the outward flow of the inner light.

Another important term in *Nei-yeh* (and in all Daoist literature) is *xin*, which literally means “heart,” but is more like what we sometimes call “awareness,” “focused mind,” or “concentrated consciousness.” Many modern translators call it the “heart-mind,” to suggest the synthesis of mind, intellect, perception, intuition, ego, and emotion.

How does the *Nei-yeh* refer to meditation? One evocative metaphor is to “clean out the lodging place of the numinous mind.” Verse Thirteen of *Nei-yeh* states:

There is a numinous (mind) naturally residing within;
 One moment it goes, the next it comes,
 And no one is able to conceive of it.
 If you lose it you are inevitably disordered;
 If you attain it you are inevitably well ordered.
 Diligently clean out its lodging place
 And its vital essence will naturally arrive.

Still your attempts to imagine and conceive of it.
 Relax your efforts to reflect on and control it.
 Be reverent and diligent
 And its vital essence will naturally stabilize.
 Grasp it and don't let go.
 Then the eyes and ears won't overflow
 And the mind will have nothing else to seek.
 When a properly aligned mind resides within you,
 The myriad things will be seen
 in their proper perspective.⁸⁷

The *shen*, here called the “numinous mind,” refers to the mind infused with spirit – the layer of the mind directly in touch with the Dao – in other words, the higher consciousness associated with the divine spirit. Similarly, Chapter Ten of the *Daodéjing* says: “In cleansing your mirror of the profound mystery (the dark mirror), can you make it spotless?”* Cleansing the dark mirror means removing the dust of the world and our weaknesses and desires.

The mind is presumed to be inherently pure, but it has gotten covered with dirt. The mind is like a mirror – it reflects (and projects) what is deep inside a person. When there is equanimity within, the *xin*, the mind, is clear and still – like a mirror, or like water that is undisturbed, with no ripples or turbulence. The mystic cautions against effort that is too intense, as that will cause the mind to be disturbed, to lose its balance. Laozi says to “relax your efforts, . . . be reverent and diligent, and its vital essence will naturally stabilize.”

* Translators have used a range of terms. Most compelling are: “profound mirror” (Henricke), “profound insight” (Wing Tsit Chan), “dark mirror” (Red Pine), etc.

Clarity of mind means emptying oneself of the need for outward stimulus and instead finding stillness within – finding the natural balance within oneself and with the external world. When the *xin* is pure, one can act objectively, without ulterior motive or calculation. This objectivity allows one to remain in the constant, timeless present. This is the stillness that occurs when one acts naturally, without engaging the intellect, when a person is in tune with the Dao.

By emptying the mind to make a “lodging place” for the Dao, people can let go of all desires, fears, thoughts, opinions, calculation, and other emotions and attachments. They can then be receptive to the Dao. That is how one attains tranquility and stillness.

Tranquility and stillness are the source of the meditator’s inner power – a power that comes from being imbued with the Dao within. This is stated at the end of Verse Sixteen:

If people can be aligned and tranquil,
 Their skin will be ample and smooth,
 Their ears and eyes will be acute and clear,
 Their muscles will be supple
 and their bones will be strong.
 They will then be able to hold up the Great Circle
 (of the heavens)
 And tread firmly over the Great Square
 (of the earth).
 They will mirror things with great purity
 And will perceive things with great clarity.
 Reverently be aware (of the Dao) and do not waver,
 And you will daily renew your inner power.⁸⁸

Dao is everything and everywhere, permanent and compassionate. As Verse Twenty-two of *Nei-yeh* says:

Of all there is pertaining to Dao,
 It is always full and complete,
 deep and concealed;
 It is always abundant and vast,
 open and expansive;
 It is always indestructible and lasting,
 firm and enduring.
 Guard the perfect Dao and never let it go;
 expel all evil and unkindness.⁸⁹

“Guarding the Dao” is an expression that occurs often in *Nei-yeh*, as a way of advising us to hold on to our inner spiritual core, our center or axis, which will allow us to go through life without losing our balance. To guard the Dao we have to maintain inner stillness, which is the most important aspect of the meditation practice; it is emphasized in almost half of *Nei-yeh*’s twenty-six verses. It is achieved after what is called “fourfold aligning” – aligning the body so that the mind can come to stillness.

Although the various commentaries don’t always agree on what the fourfold aligning specifically refers to, scholars have speculated that it means sitting in a posture with the four limbs aligned to one another, with the *qi* and the mind in control. Verse Eleven explains why the inner aligning is so important, by demonstrating what happens when we are not aligned and are out of balance.

When your body is not aligned,
 The inner power will not come.

When you are not tranquil within,
 Your mind will not be well-ordered.
 Align your body; assist the inner power (*dé*).
 Then it will gradually come on its own.⁹⁰

The *Nei-yeh* has taught for centuries that everything centers on the simple, consistent, daily practice of stilling body and mind, drawing one's attention within oneself, and giving up all thinking.

The more well-known classic, the *Daodéjing*, probably composed in the century after the *Nei-yeh* and attributed to Laozi, urges the Daoist practitioner to seek inner stillness in order to experience communion with the Dao.

Without going out of the door,
 one can know the whole world;
 Without peeping out of the window,
 one can see the Dao of heaven.
 The further one travels,
 the less one knows.

Therefore, the sage
 knows everything without travelling,
 names everything without seeing it,
 accomplishes everything without doing it.⁹¹

Here, the “door” symbolizes the body's openings or sense organs such as nose, mouth, ears, and so forth. The “window” similarly symbolizes the physical eyes. “The further one travels” represents the scattering of a person's thoughts and attention into

the external world. The true sage discovers everything within himself. Likewise,

The five colors blind the eyes of man;
 The five musical notes deafen the ears of man;
 The five flavours dull the taste of man;
 Horse racing, hunting, and chasing (after things)
 madden the mind of man;
 Rare and valuable goods keep their owners awake
 at night.

Therefore, the sage
 provides for the belly (the inner being)
 and not for the eye (the senses).
 He accepts the one and rejects the other.⁹²

Laozi is saying that the external sensual pleasures preoccupy the mind without satisfying it, but the sage, the mystic, nurtures the inner being, the spirit, rather than the senses. Mystically the belly refers to the inner being. The sage withdraws the attention from the senses and focuses it on the inner self.

One Daoist master in the thirteenth century advised prolonged sitting in stillness without thinking, in order to enter the inner passageway. He used an amusing analogy:

Sit in stillness and keep your attention focused, without thought, until the exercise is perfected and becomes continuous, all day long, like a hen sitting on her eggs without moving. Then the one opening of the mysterious pass (*xuanguan*) will automatically

reveal itself – so vast, there is no outside; so minute,
there is no inside.⁹³

The process of stilling the mind and achieving communion with the Dao cannot be accomplished quickly. It is a long and arduous process, relying on daily effort to achieve concentration.

The *Daodéjing* suggests we also adopt such an approach whenever we want to accomplish great tasks:

Regard the small as great,
regard the few as many.
Manage the difficult while they are easy,
manage the great while they are small.
All difficult things start from the easy,
all great things in the world start from the small.

The tree that fills a man's arms
arises from a tender shoot;
A nine-story tower
is raised from a heap of earth;
A thousand miles' journey
begins from the spot under one's feet.⁹⁴

Many centuries later, an anonymous work appeared called *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. Written by an unknown mystic in the seventeenth century, it is based on the teachings of the eighth-century mystic Lu Dongbin, known as Ancestor Lu, who shared poetic insights on the meditation process. It depicts inner illumination as the flowering of the mind, which occurs when the light of awareness is turned inward towards its source. The rather esoteric and symbolic text explains that, once turned

around, this light of awareness becomes the master of the mind as it penetrates through the “mysterious pass” and “ascends nine-skies high,” that is, into the heavens, beyond the influence of worldly conditioning. The innate and natural “spiritual body” then recovers full awareness of its heavenly origin.⁹⁵

The practice of reversing the light (*huiguang*) is entirely related to the method of reversal in order to focus on the inherent mind, which dwells within the sun and moon (between the eyes, at the transition between the physical and the spiritual, in the union of *yin* and *yang*). . . . Confucians call it the “center of emptiness.” Buddhists call it the “plateau of consciousness.” Daoists call it “homeland” (Dao), “yellow court,” “mysterious pass” (*xuanguan*), and “inherent opening.”

The inherent mind is like a house. The light is the master of the house. When the light is reversed (*huiguang*), all the body energies focus and ascend. . . . As long as you focus on reversing the light (*huiguang*), that is the ultimate profound truth.

The light (*guang*) is dynamic and difficult to stabilize. Only after it has been reversed for a long time can the light be concentrated and focused in the natural spiritual body so that the spirit can be focused and can ascend nine-skies high (into the heavens). . . .

The golden flower (*jinhua*) is the same as the gold elixir (*jindan*), transformed into spiritual light (*shenming*) within the mind (*xin*) of the adept (*shi*).⁹⁶

Reversing the flow of *yang* and *yin* (the outward and inward flow) will result in each pole, each extreme, reverting to its

opposite. Thus, one overcomes duality. The Daoist master Liu Yiming (1734–1821) explained that one’s essential, pure, inner nature is known metaphorically as the golden elixir or *jindan*, the elixir of immortality. Gold symbolizes its spiritual purity. He described the transcendent subtlety of the gold elixir, calling it the “true seed of your (original) nature and (true spiritual) life”:

You must understand that the true seed of your (original) nature (*xing*) and (true spiritual) life (*ming*) is nothing other than the inherent one true Energy that arises from the Origin. You are looking at it, but you do not see it. You are listening to it, but you do not hear it. You are trying to grasp it in your hands, but you do not hold it. It is to be found nowhere but within this very body. It is to be sought nowhere outside the body. It is neither apart from the body, nor attached to the body. It is within the undifferentiated abstruseness and indiscernible profundity, hidden in the realm of silent Emptiness (*xuwu*).

Internally, it is true emptiness. Externally, it is this amazing existence. It cannot be taught in words; it cannot be depicted by drawing nor written with a pen. If we must draw an image, it would be a simple circle. If we must give it a name, then the Confucians call it the “Great Ultimate (*taiji*)”; Buddhists call it “complete awareness (*yuanjué*)”; Daoists call it the “gold elixir (*jindan*).”

The Great Ultimate, complete awareness, and the gold elixir – although these are three different names, in essence they are the same one thing. This one thing is the true seed of your (original) nature (*xing*) and

(true spiritual) life (*ming*). To thoroughly investigate the principle is to thoroughly seek this true seed. The meaning of fully developing your (original) nature is to realize fully this true seed. The meaning of attaining (true spiritual) life (*ming*) is to attain this true seed.⁹⁷

Master Liu Yiming wrote that when people experience the spiritual light within, they are experiencing their essential spiritual nature or being, which is also referred to as the “immortal valley spirit,” or inner spiritual depth. This is the same as the gold elixir. Master Liu quotes from an eleventh-century work by Master Zhang Boduan, the *Wuzhen pian* (“Awakening to Reality”): “When you have swallowed a drop of the gold elixir (*jindan*), then you will know that your life (inner being) does not depend on (your outer) destiny.” Master Liu says:

The valley spirit, the true essence, and the spiritual light are one and the same. The only difference is whether or not they are developed. Students should know that these are not three different things.⁹⁸

Master Liu also taught that the true self is the spiritual embryo (*shengtai*) – a metaphor for the essential, original spiritual essence and awareness within oneself and at the heart of all things. This awareness arises from the harmonizing of *yin* and *yang*. The pearl-like “grain of millet” also signifies the initial stages of spiritual enlightenment. Like a seed, the spiritual embryo grows naturally when nurtured.

A Treasury of Mystic Terms explains: “Once the light of awareness has been turned around, the entire life of a practitioner is transformed as he becomes the wisdom-giving light itself. Then a

practitioner recognizes the Dao in everything.”⁹⁹ In other words, once the practitioner experiences the light within himself, then the entire creation (within and without) is experienced as light; he himself is the source of the light. *The Secret of the Golden Flower* is quoted:

The light is neither within the body nor outside the body. Mountains, rivers, the earth, the sun, and the moon are all nothing but this light – so it is not solely within the body. All the functions of intelligence and knowledge are nothing but this light – so it is not solely outside the body. The radiance of heaven and earth pervades the entire creation. The radiance of the body also pervades the body from top to bottom. So when the light is reversed, then everything in creation – heaven and earth, mountains and rivers – all revert (to the light).¹⁰⁰

At this stage, all is one, all is Dao – there is no more duality. The light is a positive power that dispels the intrinsic negativity of the mind and automatically detaches it from outer things. Reversing the light results in the mind becoming so pure that it is freed from duality. When the worldly (negative) *yin* energy is stilled, the spiritual (positive) *yang* energy will manifest. *The Secret of the Golden Flower* states:

When the light is reversed and you contemplate within, you will no longer be pulled out by created things; *yin* energy will be stilled and the radiance of the light will be a concentrated brilliance, which is pure *yang*.¹⁰¹

When an individual reverses the flow of the spiritual energy in meditation, from outward to inward, this mirrors the flow of the Dao itself, which is perpetually vibrating in a reverse pattern. The Dao is the ultimate nothingness, non-being, but as it flows outwards and downwards from the spiritual realm into the lower material realm, it manifests as the myriad things of the creation. Then, reversing its flow, the Dao returns to its source; the many manifestations revert to the one, which ultimately becomes non-being.

Master Liu Yiming wrote that it is only the truly ardent disciple who disciplines his or her mind and enters the gateway. Similarly, several centuries earlier, Master Li Daochun, using the metaphor of internal alchemy, says that both stilling the body and stilling and emptying the mind require determination and a strong will:

Keeping vital essence (*jing*) full can preserve the body. To keep vital essence full, you must first still the body. When the body is still, there is no desire, so vital essence is full.

Keeping life energy (*qi*) full can nurture the mind. To keep energy full, you must first clear and still the mind. When the mind is clear and still, there is no thought, so life energy is full.

Keeping spirit (*shen*) full you can return to the Void. To keep spirit full, you must first have sincere intention. With sincere intention, body and mind merge (*i.e.* inner oneness is attained), and you return to the Void.

Therefore, vital essence (*jing*), life energy (*qi*), and spirit (*shen*) are the three fundamental medicines.

Body, mind, and intention are the three fundamental essentials.

Learning the method of spiritual immortality does not require much. Simply refine the three treasures of vital essence (*jing*), life energy (*qi*), and spirit (*shen*) in order to generate the elixir. When the three treasures are merged in the central palace, the gold elixir (*jindan*) is accomplished. Is this not easy to practice? Those who find it difficult to practice and to learn are confused and deceived by false delusions.¹⁰²

When the practitioner finally manages to enter the mysterious “gateway” by bringing his attention within, spiritual sound and light are experienced. In this way, the poet says, the spirit is restored and returns to emptiness. Master Li Daochun wrote of the ecstasy of spiritual realization:

When the gateway . . . opens,
 then the practice is complete.
 The spirit (*shen*) exits and enters through here –
 revealing and concealing.
 It is restored and returns to emptiness.

From the earth bursts forth a thunderbolt of spring.
 At the burst of the thunderbolt,
 heaven and earth open.
 Out of emptiness bursts forth
 a globe of radiance,
 Round and complete,
 shining on the bamboo hut without lack,
 without surplus.¹⁰³

Reversing the light is just one of the many metaphors Daoists have used to describe the process of cultivating the Dao. They all emphasize the importance of adopting a discipline of sitting in stillness, while emptying the mind of all external and material distractions and thoughts, in order to enter the spiritual realms. A text from the eleventh or twelfth century called this process of meditation “dwelling in emptiness.”

If you can contemplate the inner realms,
spirit (*shen*) will automatically begin
to make itself known.

This is “dwelling in emptiness” and non-being:
the place where you can dwell with the sages.¹⁰⁴

In his *Discourse on Sitting in Forgetfulness*, the eighth-century master Sima Chengzhen wrote that dwelling in this “nothingness” results in an empty state of mind, allowing one to merge with the ultimate emptiness of the Dao:

Dwelling in nothingness,
unattached even to the slightest thing,
you will spontaneously enter the Void.
Thus will the mind (*xin*) merge with the Dao.¹⁰⁵

Daoist teachers have often used the expression *zuowang*, translated as “sitting in oblivion” or “sitting in forgetfulness.” It is a state of deep trance or mental absorption, in which a person transcends the ego and removes the mind from all distractions – both outer and inner – and becomes absorbed in experiencing the Dao. The term was first used in the *Zhuangzi* and is found in many later texts also. It is similar to “fasting of the mind” and simply “quiet sitting.”

Sitting in Forgetfulness (Zuowang)

The writings of Zhuangzi contain the earliest recorded references to *zuowang*. In a humorous, imaginary dialogue between Confucius and his favorite disciple, Yan Hui, the disciple ironically turns the tables on his master by teaching *him* how to “sit and forget.”

Yan Hui said, “I’m improving!”
 Confucius said, “What do you mean by that?”
 “I’ve forgotten benevolence and righteousness!”
 “That’s good. But you still haven’t got it.”

Another day, the two met again, and Yan Hui said,
 “I’m improving!”
 “What do you mean by that?”
 “I’ve forgotten rites and music!”
 “That’s good. But you still haven’t got it.”

Another day, the two met again, and Yan Hui said,
 “I’m improving!”
 “What do you mean by that?”
 “I can sit down and forget everything!”

Confucius looked very startled and said, “What do you mean, sit down and forget everything?”

Yan Hui said, “I smash up my limbs and body,* drive out perception and intellect, cast off my physical form, do away with intellect and understanding, and merge with the Great Thoroughfare (the inner path).”

* Meaning, I become oblivious to my physical body.

This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything.”

Confucius said, “When you’re merged with the universal Oneness, you have no more likes and dislikes! When you’ve been transformed, you are no longer subject to constant change! So this is truly a worthy practice after all! With your permission, I’d like to become your follower.”¹⁰⁶

Once he has overcome his body and mind and merged in the universal oneness of Dao, the practitioner is no longer subject to separation or illusion. When he is spiritually transformed, he is not affected by the changes inherent in the creation. By becoming one with Dao, he becomes eternal.

In another story, Zhuangzi tells us about how a bell stand carver was able to carve the perfect bell stand – by forgetting all distractions and becoming totally immersed in the wood he was carving. When Zhuangzi talks about “fasting” here, he is referring to the fasting of his mind.

Woodworker Qing carved a piece of wood and made a bell stand, and when it was finished, everyone who saw it marveled, for it seemed to be the work of gods or spirits. When the marquis of Lu saw it, he asked, “What art is it you have?”

Qing replied, “I am only a craftsman – how would I have any art? There is one thing, however. When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my energy. I always fast in order to still my mind. When I have fasted for three days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of titles

or stipends. When I have fasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness. And when I have fasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and body. By that time, the ruler and his court no longer exist for me. My skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fade away.

After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the heavenly nature of the trees. If I find one of superlative form, and I can see a bell stand there, I put my hand to the job of carving; if not, I let it go. This way I am simply matching up “Heaven” with “Heaven.” (That is, matching up his innate nature with that of the tree.) That’s probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits.”¹⁰⁷

Daoists emphasize the importance of regular daily meditation practice in the early morning. Then one can act in the world with detachment. The more one turns within (“reversing the light”), the more the mind is freed from the disturbance of thoughts and emotional reactions. To quote from the anonymous *Secret of the Golden Flower*:

As you follow the practice of reversing the light (*huiguang*), do not neglect your duties. One of the ancients said: “Attend to affairs as they come and leave them as they go. See things for what they are as they come along.”

Attend to affairs with an upright attitude, and then the light (*guang*) will not be drawn to things and

will be automatically reversed. This is the practice of reversing the light at all times in order to empty (the mind of) forms. . . .

If, during the day, you can keep turning within (*fanzhao*, “reversing the radiance”) while attending to things, staying completely detached from others and the self, this is reversing the light wherever you are. This is the most sublime aspect of the practice.

It is best to sit in meditation for one to two hours in the early morning in order to clear away all worldly connections. Practice the method of turning within at all times without interruption while dealing with affairs and attending to things. Keep up the practice for two to three months, and then the sages in the heavens will surely appear before you in affirmation.¹⁰⁸

On a practical level, Daoist masters have advised their disciples how to live in the world, in accord with the Dao. For example, Master Ma Yu (also known as Ma Danyang, disciple of Wang Zhe, founder of the *Quanzhen* lineage in the twelfth century) teaches that the practitioner’s daily life should not be regarded as separate from his spiritual training. At the same time, the practitioner’s spiritual training should not be considered separate from his daily life. Rather, a disciplined, integrated approach to both self-cultivation and spiritual realization is essential.¹⁰⁹

Daily practice involves never deceiving or mocking heaven and earth. Always train yourself diligently. Cherish every moment. Do not pass the day in vain. Decrease your sleep, since sleep is something desired by ordinary folk. Rectify your misdeeds, but not only

through seated meditation (*dazuo*). Hold your mind still for long periods of time.

Whether walking, standing, sitting or lying down, follow the Dao. All adepts should cease giving rise to thoughts. Quickly discover your (original) nature (*xing*) and (true spiritual) life (*ming*). If you can just purify the mind and abandon desires, you will become a spirit immortal. Concern yourself with nothing else and stop entertaining doubts! These are true and proper words. You need to be always clear (*qing*) and always pure (*jing*). Practice this diligently.¹¹⁰

In the same discourse, master Ma Yu goes on to emphasize that it is misleading to think that spiritual transformation can be attained solely by internal practice. Self-cultivation involves the constant application of both internal and external practices in the effort to attain complete clarity and stillness.¹¹¹

Every day, do not forget the matter of daily practice. Daily practice is of two kinds: daily external practice and daily internal practice.

Considering daily external practice, you are firmly forbidden to see the faults of others, to boast about your own virtue, to envy the wise and talented, to permit the rise of worldly thoughts, which are the fire of ignorance, to allow feelings of superiority over the masses to arise, to discriminate between self and others or between right and wrong, or to speak of love and hatred.

Considering daily internal practice, give up entertaining thoughts of doubt. Never forget the internal.

Whether moving about or standing or sitting, you should keep the mind pure and discard desire.

Let nothing burden you or stand in your way. Do not become impure and do not cling. In perfect clarity and perfect purity, move about freely, as you wish.

Consistently, throughout the day, contemplate the Dao in the same way that a hungry person thinks of food or a thirsty person thinks of drink. If you become aware of the slightest imbalance (in your mind), you must correct it. If you train yourself in this way, you will become a spiritual immortal.¹¹²

Master Liu Yiming added that spiritual practice does not require complete escape from society. Practicing the path “with your feet firmly on the ground” indicates the significance of refining one’s whole being while leading a normal life. This requires a consistent and all-inclusive approach to self-cultivation – the practice of meditation combined with being a good human being. By living in this way, disciples gear their entire life toward the goal of realizing the Dao:

The path of true eternity is not to avoid the world or run away from life, nor to meditate or stop thoughts. You must tread the path with your feet firmly on the ground (*i.e.*, while living in the world), work hard at putting the practice into action, and cultivate refinement within the great furnace of creation. Only then is it true and eternal.¹¹³

The “100 Character Tablet,” also called *Bai zi bei*, is attributed to the eighth-century Daoist known as Ancestor Lu (Lu

Dongbin). It is a poetic guide to the inner experience of meditation, and takes the reader from the simple practice of sitting in stillness and controlling mind and energy to the point where one recognizes one's true origin as Dao. It refers to the inner ascent on the holy Mount Sumeru, where the nectar flows. The meditator has an inner vision of the "white cloud" and drinks the nectar of immortality. He or she hears "stringless melodies" – the inner music created without instruments – the unstruck sound. The translation below is an amalgam of several translations.

Silently sit and observe, cultivate your energy,
Practice *wu-wei* to calm the mind (*xin*).
Thus in activity or in stillness,
 you become aware of your true origin.
In nothingness, what more there is to seek?

The true self is unchanging, yet you can adapt to all.
And in adapting, do not become infatuated
 with the material world.
When you are not infatuated,
 your inner nature (*xing*) can remain still.

When your inner nature is still, your *qi* energy
 returns to its origin automatically.
When energy returns, the elixir crystallizes on its own.

Apply water and fire in the pot;*
 let *yin* and *yang* rise, alternating over and over,
 until all is transformed into a strike of thunder.

* A metaphor for various energies and elements activated during meditation.

You ascend like a white cloud to the summit.
You shower in sweet nectar from Mount Sumeru.
You drink the nectar of immortality.
Such is the freedom that is understood by no one.

Sit and listen to the stringless melodies.
The secrets of creation and transformation
become clear and understood.
These twenty verses in their entirety
are the true ladder leading to heaven.

道

CHAPTER SIX

I Dreamed I Was a Butterfly

Everything in creation undergoes perpetual change and transformation. That is the nature of life, growth, and death. This process begins with the evolution of the creation from nothingness or void to being and form, and then back to the pre-creation void. This is true right down to human life – we are born, grow up, live, and die. Sometimes we are ill, sometimes we are well. Sometimes we are poor, sometimes we are wealthy. We can go through every type of change with equanimity if we can adapt without anguish or attachment.

An evocative metaphor for the ever-changing events of life is the movement of the river. Another is the dragon, whose serpentine movement represents the fluidity and diversity of life and time; the dragon maneuvers around and through all obstacles. This creature, which sometimes sheds its skin, sometimes swallows others whole, sometimes burrows underground, is the key “generative and transformative symbol of Chinese culture.”¹¹⁴ Its undulating movement mimics the natural landscape and architecture of China. It represents adaptation to change, which is essential to understanding the Chinese attitude to a spiritual life.

Another potent symbol of transformation is the butterfly, which represents not only spiritual transformation but also resurrection in many world religions and cultures. The butterfly develops and changes form in each of its four life stages. It begins as an embryo, then turns into a crawling caterpillar. Later it is encased in a cocoon, and eventually it emerges as the delicate, fluttering insect that has fascinated human beings for aeons, its wings a gemlike palette of brightly colored abstract patterns.

In ancient Greek the word for “butterfly” is *psyche*, which means “mind” or “soul.” It is also said that in early Christianity, the butterfly symbolized the resurrection of the soul, with images of butterflies often carved on gravestones.

But perhaps the most famous use of the symbol of the butterfly – at least in spiritual literature – is an enigmatic anecdote or *koan* in the *Zhuangzi*, which poses the question of what is reality and what is illusion. More specifically, what is our true identity? And what is the difference between life and death as we move from form to form, life to life?

Once upon a time, I, Zhuangzi, dreamed I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly, unaware that I was Zhuangzi. Soon I awakened, and there I was, veritably myself again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and a butterfly there is necessarily a distinction. The transition is called the transformation of material things.¹¹⁵

Who are we? we ask ourselves. Are we truly soul, symbolized by the butterfly, flitting about without consciousness of time and

space, free of body and mind, happy only in our experience as a soul? Or are we physical human beings, very much attached to mind and body, who can only dream of existence as a soul? Can we break out of our cocoon of body and mind, where we are burdened by desires and attachments?

Zhuangzi's story raises the question: Which is the dream and which is the reality? Or are both levels of consciousness actually dreams?

It seems that to find happiness, we need to awaken from the dream that we are living in every day, as well as the dream we dream while we are sleeping. We are not happy here in this world, which is why we dream of being a butterfly – why the soul dreams of being free. Why would we want to live in the dream of this life when we can awaken to the joy of living eternally in the Dao?

In the same chapter as the butterfly dream, Zhuangzi presents the example of people who dream of living in great luxury, yet they awaken to the sorrow of its impermanence. Likewise, those who are dreaming fretfully of sorrow also awaken to the fact that even their sorrow is an illusion; when they awaken, they “join the hunt” – they get engaged in the activities of life. This shows that no human experience is permanent – it is all illusion, a dream. All physical life constantly undergoes transformation. It is as if God is playing a joke on us, because we have no idea of what the reality is. Zhuangzi wrote:

Those who dream of the banquet wake to lamentation and sorrow. Those who dream of lamentation and sorrow wake to join the hunt. While they dream, they do not know that they are dreaming. Some will even interpret the very dream they are dreaming; and only when they awake do they know it was a dream.

By and by comes the Great Awakening, and then we find out that this life is really a great dream. Fools think they are awake now, and flatter themselves they know – this one is a prince, and that one is a shepherd. What narrowness of mind!

Confucius and you are both dreams; and I who say you are dreams – I am but a dream myself. This is a paradox. Tomorrow a sage may arise to explain it; but that tomorrow will not be until ten thousand generations have gone by. Yet you may meet him around the corner.¹¹⁶

Zhuangzi is emphasizing here that you and I, and even Confucius, the great philosopher – we who speak about reality and illusion – even we are illusions. We are all living in the dream. What is the reality? It is a great paradox. And then Zhuangzi says: Perhaps someday a sage or saint will come to explain it; then we will know there is no time or space, that all is an illusion. To express this, he says the saint may not appear for another ten thousand generations, but then we will see he has been with us all the time – “you may meet him around the corner.” This whole discussion is an illusion. The only truth is that all of life is change and transformation.

Transformation Is Inevitable

The *Huainanzi* includes a section that describes the natural order of plants and animals that may not be apparent to others. Everything that exists follows its own intrinsic nature, its *dé* – as it must, because it is inbuilt – it is *ziran* (its own nature). This section is a beautiful ode to the natural order of life.

Floating plants take root in water,
Land plants take root in the soil,
Birds fly by stroking emptiness,
Animals run by treading solidity.
Alligators and dragons make their home
 in water,
Tigers and leopards dwell in the mountains.
This is the nature of the world.

Two pieces of wood
 when rubbed together ignite;
When kept close to fire, metal becomes molten;
Round things normally spin,
Hollow things chiefly float.
It is their natural inclination to do so.

Hence, when the spring winds come,
 they bring the timely rains;
And the myriad things are produced
 and nourished.
Feathered creatures incubate
 and hatch their eggs,
Furred creatures conceive and give birth
 to their young,
Plants and trees bloom, . . .

Without anyone ever seeing the actual doing,
 the deed is accomplished.

And then, when death and rebirth are meant to happen,
everything follows its natural course (its *dé*) in that inevitable
transformation.

When the autumn winds bring the frost,
 Vegetation is injured and snaps.
 Eagles and falcons sweep down on their prey,
 Swarming insects hibernate,
 Plants and trees put down their roots,
 And fishes and turtles make for the deep.
 Without anyone ever seeing the actual doing,
 Things disappear without a trace.

Huainanzi then brings more examples from the lives of human beings and how they adapt to the environment of wherever they live. The myriad created things, from plant to animal to human, follow their own nature, which the translator calls being “so-of-themselves.”

The myriad things have been so-of-themselves
 from the beginning –
 What room is there for interference
 by the sage?¹¹⁷

There is no need to try to change the way people live. The sage respects nature’s *dé* because he is in tune with nature – he follows the Dao. He knows that *dé* is guiding people’s intrinsic nature. He concludes this section by giving an example of how people can adapt to the society and environment of wherever they are, even at their most extreme, and thus live peacefully. In fact, these few lines may be a metaphor for a much deeper meaning – divesting oneself of the mind and entering the realm of the spirit.

Thus, when Yu went to the Country
 of the Naked,

He took off his clothing before entering
and put it on again before departing.
This was basing his actions on local custom.¹¹⁸

Back to Zhuangzi

The *Zhuangzi* recounts a tongue-in-cheek, yet serious discussion among four friends about life and death. It provides an example of how accepting change can bring about detachment. One man saw his body getting old and that amused him. He didn't let it discourage him; rather he saw the humor in his transformation, as he realized it was a natural progression of his form, just as life progresses to death and then begins again.

Master Si, Master Yu, Master Li, and Master Lai were all four talking together. "Who can look on non-being as his head, on life as his back, and on death as his rump?" they said. "Who knows that life and death, existence and annihilation, are all a single body? I will be his friend!"

The four men looked at one another and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts, and so the four of them became friends.

All at once, Master Yu fell ill. Master Si went to ask how he was. "Amazing!" said Master Yu. "The Creator is making me all crooked like this! My back sticks up like a hunchback, and my vital organs are on top of me. My chin is hidden in my navel, my shoulders are up above my head, and my pigtail points at the sky. It must be some dislocation of the yin and yang!"

Yet he seemed calm at heart and unconcerned. Dragging himself haltingly to the well, he looked at his reflection and said, "My, my! So the Creator is making me all crookedy like this!"

"Do you resent it?" asked Master Si.

"Why no, what would I resent? If the process continues, perhaps in time he'll transform my left arm into a rooster. In that case I'll keep watch during the night. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet, and I'll shoot down an owl for roasting. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my buttocks into cartwheels. Then, with my spirit for a horse, I'll climb up and go for a ride. What need will I ever have for a carriage again?"

"I received life because the time had come; I will lose it because the order of things passes on. Be content with this time and dwell in this order, and then neither sorrow nor joy can touch you. In ancient times this was called the 'freeing of the bound.' There are those who cannot free themselves because they are bound by things. But nothing can ever win against Heaven – that's the way it's always been. What would I have to resent?"

Suddenly Master Lai grew ill. Gasping and wheezing, he lay at the point of death. His wife and children gathered round in a circle and began to cry. Master Li, who had come to ask how he was, said, "Shoo! Get back! Don't disturb the process of change!"

Then he leaned against the doorway and talked to Master Lai. "How marvelous the Creator is! What is he going to make out of you next?"

“Where is he going to send you? Will he make you into a rat’s liver? Will he make you into a bug’s arm?”

Master Lai said, “A child, obeying his father and mother, goes wherever he is told, east or west, south or north. And the yin and yang – how much more are they to a man than father or mother! Now that they have brought me to the verge of death, if I should refuse to obey them, how perverse I would be! What fault is it of theirs?”

“The Great Clod (earthly life) burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age, and rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death.

“When a skilled smith is casting metal, if the metal should leap up and say, ‘I insist on being made into a *Moye!*’ (a rare and famous sword), he would surely regard it as very inauspicious metal indeed.

“Now, having had the audacity to take on human form once, if I should say, ‘I don’t want to be anything but a man! Nothing but a man!’ the Creator would surely regard me as a most inauspicious sort of person.

“So now I think of heaven and earth as a great furnace, and the Creator as a skilled smith. Where could he send me that would not be all right? I will go off to sleep peacefully, and then with a start, I will wake up.”¹¹⁹

ENDNOTES

1. *Qingwei sanpin zhenjing*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **chuan, kouchuan, zhenchuan**
2. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, tr. Burton Watson, p. 141
3. Wang Bi, quoted in Ellen M. Chen, tr. *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 121
4. *Daodejing*, ch. 1; tr., Sylvia Xiaowen Shi
5. Ellen M. Chen, tr. *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 161
6. Ellen M. Chen, tr. *The Tao Te Ching*, pp. 60–61
7. Translation by independent scholar, Sylvia Xiaowen Shi
8. *Daodejing*, ch. 6, tr. Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 69
9. Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, pp. 69–71
10. Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 71
11. *Zhuangzi* ch. 22, cf. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 123–124
12. *Ibid*
13. *Zhuangzi* ch. 2, cf. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 38–39 (names converted to Pinyin)
14. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, tr. Burton Watson, pp. 32–33
15. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, pp. 61–63
16. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 103
17. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 103
18. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 103
19. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 105
20. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, cf. p. 105
21. *Daodejing*, ch. 15, in Ellen M. Chen, tr. *The Tao Te Ching*, pp. 90–91 (paraphrase)
22. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 23
23. Louis Komjathy, *Handbooks for Spiritual Practice #1, Inward Training*, p. 23
24. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 8
25. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, cf. p. III
26. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 87

27. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 75
28. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, cf. p. 87
29. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, pp. 111–113
30. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 32
31. *Zhuangzi*, in Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 42–43
32. *Zhuangzi*, in Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, ch. 2, p. 44
33. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 119
34. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 123
35. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 125
36. *Zhuangzi*, in Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 136
37. Liú Yímíng, *Wúdào lù*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part III, entry **wūxīn**
38. Wíng-tsít Chan, tr. *Daodejing* ch. 11, in *The Way of Lao Tzu*, p. 113
39. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, pp. 29–30
40. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, p. 62
41. *Zhuangzi, The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, p. 212
42. *Zhuangzi*, in Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 114
43. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 91
44. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 133
45. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 133–135
46. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 135
47. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, pp. 135–137
48. *Chishū yǔjué jīng* 2; cf. Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience*, p. 98, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **shā, shāshēng**
49. *Lǎojūn shuō yībǎi bāshí jiè* 4, 39–40, 79; cf. Livia Kohn, *Cosmos and Community*; pp. 138–40, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **shā, shāshēng**
50. *Lǎojūn jièjīng*, 6a–b, 14a, 15a–b; cf. Livia Kohn, *Cosmos and Community*; pp. 147–48, 150
51. *Sānyuán pīnjiè* 27, 31, 68–70, DZ456 23b, 25a; cf. Livia Kohn, *Cosmos and Community*; pp. 189–90, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **shā, shāshēng**
52. *Tàishàng Gǎnyìng piān*, in *T'ai-Shang Kan-Ying P'ien: Treatise of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution*, tr. Teitaro Suzuki and Dr. Paul Carus; Open Court, La Salle, 1906; in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **shā, shāshēng**
53. *Lǎojūn jièjīng*, 17b–18a; cf. Livia Kohn, *Cosmos and Community*, p. 48; in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **sùshí, sùshízhě, sùshízhě jièjiǔ, càishí, càishū**

54. *Shí'èr shàngpīn quànjiè*, 9b–10a, cf. Livia Kohn, *Cosmos and Community*, p. 48; in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry *sùshí*, *sùshízhě*, *sùshízhě jièjiǔ*, *càishí*, *càishū*
55. James Miller, *China's Green Religion*, p. 159
56. Bill Porter, *Road to Heaven*, p. 57
57. Bill Porter, *Road to Heaven*, p. 58
58. Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 144
59. Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 167
60. *Daodejing* ch. 48, in Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 168
61. *Daodejing* ch. 37, Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 143
62. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 18
63. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 65
64. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, p. 74
65. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, pp. 87–89
66. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, pp. 77–79
67. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 80–81
68. *Daodejing* ch. 22, Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 110
69. *Daodejing* ch. 43, im Feng & English, *The Tao Te Ching*, no page numbers
70. Ellen M. Chen, *The Tao Te Ching*, p. 161
71. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 105–106
72. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 105–106
73. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 60–61
74. Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, pp. 94–95
75. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 64.
76. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 65
77. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 42
78. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 89
79. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 115
80. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 117
81. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 119
82. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, pp. 71–73
83. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 93
84. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 148–149
85. Harold Roth, *Original Tao*, p. 198
86. Harold Roth, *Original Tao*, p. 42
87. *Nei-yeh*, verse 13, in Roth, *Original Tao*, p. 70
88. *Nei-yeh*, verse 16, in Roth, *Original Tao*, p. 76
89. Translation by independent scholar, Sylvia Xiaowen Shi

90. *Nei-yeh*, verse 11, in Roth, *Original Tao*, p. 135
91. *Dàodé jīng* 47, tr. Ch'ü Ta-Kao, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 62
92. *Dàodé jīng* 12; cf. Wing-Tsit Chan, tr. *The Way of Lao Tzu*, p. 90
93. *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **wúxīn**
94. *Dàodé jīng* 63; Ch'ü Ta-Kao, *Tao Te Ching*, p. 78
95. *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **huíguāng**
96. *Jīnhuá zōngzhǐ* 1 (*Secret of the Golden Flower*), in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **huíguāng**
97. *Líu Yímíng*, *Wúdào lù*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part III, p. 132, entry **xìngmìng**
98. *Líu Yímíng*, *Wúzhēn zhízhǐ*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part III, p. 321, entry **lingguāng**
99. *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **huíguāng**
100. *Jīnhuá zōngzhǐ* 3 (*Secret of the Golden Flower*), in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **huíguāng**
101. *Jīnhuá zōngzhǐ* 8 (*Secret of the Golden Flower*), in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **huíguāng**
102. *Lǐ Dàochún*, *Zhōnghé jí*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **nèidān**
103. *Lǐ Dàochún*, *Zhōnghé jí*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **xuánpìn**, **xuánpìn mén**
104. *Nèi rìyòng jīng*; cf. Komjathy, *Developing Clarity and Stillness*, p. 21; in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **kōng, xū, xūwú**
105. *Sīmǎ Chéngzhēn*, *Zuòwànglùn* 3, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **kōng, xū, xūwú**
106. Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, Section 6, pp. 86–87, augmented by translation from *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **zuòwàng**.
107. Burton Watson, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, Section 19, p. 129
108. *Jīnhuá zōngzhǐ* 7 (*Secret of the Golden Flower*), in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **huíguāng**
109. *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **dǎzuò, jìngzuò, zuò**
110. *Mǎ Yù*, *Dānyáng zhēnrén zhíyán*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **dǎzuò, jìngzuò, zuò**
111. *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **dǎzuò, jìngzuò, zuò**
112. *Mǎ Yù*, *Dānyáng zhēnrén zhíyán*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **dǎzuò, jìngzuò, zuò**
113. *Líu Yímíng*, *Bǎizì bēi zhù*, in *A Treasury of Mystic Terms*, Part IV, entry **dǎzuò, jìngzuò, zuò**

114. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 43.
115. Lin Yutang, ed. *The Wisdom of China and India*, ch. 50.6; p. ccxvii (217)
116. *Teachings and Sayings of Chuang Tzu*, Lionel Giles, tr. & ed.; also available on <https://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/mcm/mcm07.htm>
117. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, pp. 81–83
118. D.C. Lau & Roger Ames, *Yuan Dao*, p. 83
119. *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, tr. & ed. Burton Watson, pp. 80–82

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