

## The Inner Field: Cultivation through Philosophy in Daoism

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### Abstract

This paper elaborates on the philosophical dimensions of the inner field: the sphere of purification, meditation, cultivation and freedom as they were practiced in Daoism<sup>1</sup>. The introspective methods of the Daoist *nei guan* are discussed as the initial step on the path of realization of Voidness. The ontological dimension of the cessation of all thoughts is taken into consideration. The method of *tzuo wang* (sitting and forgetting) introduces the problem of mind/body and its relation with the *soteriic* practices of Buddhism. Various meditative techniques and the methods of achieving unification with the Dao, the field of freedom, must be critically examined with regard to the possible delusive and self-deceptive aspects of cultivation.

### Introduction

The methodological challenge of the topic focuses on the possibilities of a philosophical dialogue in the realms which include spiritual training and the hermeneutic problems of such an undertaking. Since the “meditation” in the Daoist context is something completely different from any form of Cartesian meditation, this poses some additional questions which have to be answered. In the Daoist context meditation is far from being an other-worldly undertaking, but is rather the most here-and-now-ish liberating practice. However, the ontology based on it derives from the possibility of overcoming desires, including the desire for life and to stop the usual thinking process, which in its European context, is connected to life itself. Therefore for some European exegetists, the process of meditation means a threat to the essence of the life process itself, which in its original context is rather a life-attesting than a life-denying dimension.

The paper does not aim at giving some solid arguments but follows one of the ways in which the debate on freedom and a scientific discourse have been cultivated in a non-European, namely the Daoist tradition. Rather, it is a meditation and a self-critical analysis of the state in which we are in developing the tools appropriate for solid dialogues between different cultures, historical and political backgrounds. Why will the Daoist way be taken into consideration? Firstly, because it gives some interesting approaches in which the moment of liberation is introduced into a dialogue, rather than the exclusively rational dimension of persuasion and mastering the other. Secondly, because it introduces contrastive methods in research into the notion of freedom in the various European, as well as Asian philosophical, cultural and historical contexts. The comparative method widely used for approaches to various European philosophical traditions is distinctly a “Western” one and therefore does not assure either neutrality or objectivity, which are both supposed to be two main characteristics of Western science. Therefore we discover a distinctly asymmetrical approach in the so-called dialogue between “East” and “West”, “North” and “South” in the field of philosophy and scientific discourse. We have to acknowledge civilizational and political options and reveal the interests and identities interwoven in the debate on freedom.

The paper is taking the Daoist way as a focus on self-reflection about the possibilities of strategies of achieving freedom and self-awareness in the global context. Even the topic itself and the politics of discourse are exclusively Western scenarios which might also be perceived as parts of the constitutive arrogance of the Western cultural identity. Universalism in the field of philosophy and science can therefore be read as an act of domination carried out by the position of the domineering subject cultivated in the European philosophical and political tradition. The position of the acting subject was a dominant point in the history of European philosophy and should therefore be called into question due to its tendency to domination. The Daoist way and its soteriological dimension of the philosophical and scientific discourse will be presented as a possible way of communication among various scientific communities.

The problem of language in relation to meditation and freedom is also taken into consideration. The statement written in *Zhuang Zi*:

If you talk in a worthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to the Way. But if you talk in an unworthy manner, you can talk all day long and all of it will pertain to mere things. The perfection of the Way and things – neither words nor silence are worthy of expressing it. Not to talk, not to be silent - this is the highest form of debate.<sup>2</sup>

Zhang Zi invites us to a higher level of understanding and experiencing the reality, the level of regenerative consciousness in which the mind encounters the diverse phenomena of the world (not only the mundane world, of course). What remains mysterious, misty, appealing primarily to the reader's feelings and intuition, hence completely renouncing a "clear logical" image, acquires with the apostles of Daoist voidness a less subtle form. A step into a subtler realm of understanding is possible through a shift from rationally-discursive understanding of certain phenomena to intuitive experiencing of them, through direct experiential contacts. When the deeper state of logic-ness and unblemished truth is reached, the state of freedom and ecstatic joy in the land between dreams and waking may be experienced – the experiential truth of the unity with people and nature, the spiritual oasis, the field of one's real inner nature is touched upon. What Zhuang Zi, as well as various Buddhist visualizations teach us is that when the dreams are vivid enough for the dreamer not to realize that he/she is not awake, we must admit that it is possible that our entire experience (including all that we regard as true or real) is nothing but a part of our dreaming imagination. It is an unconscious reservoir for the understanding that we can grasp in the land between sleep and waking and on the basis of extra-logical perception. We create our intimate environment on the basis of our own fears, joys, re-sentiments. In this context of spiritual ecology the problem of how and where to search for the Truth becomes even more vital.

The inner field in Daoism shows the possibilities and limits of various methods for the attainment of regenerative mentality and the ecological conditions that we ourselves very often limit by not-recognizing the treasures of the mysterious union between the human being and the cosmic environment – the field of spiritual quality and freedom.

### **Nature as the field of freedom in Daoism**

"Sitting and forgetting" and "fastening the spirit" are the ways of attaining the salvific powers prescribed by Zhuang Zi. This is the spiritual practice which enables one to attain the mental composure necessary for reaching the universal locus of soteriology which is deep within us. The inner nature is our reservoir of freedom which is also the freedom from all preconceived theories. It encroaches upon the subversive dimensions of the meditative techniques which are to prevent us from developing attachments.

On the other hand, the outer nature is the field where the soteric mode of human experience is realized. By distancing ourselves from the trivial pedantries of society, we may become a part of the transformative process. This, however, is possible only by transcending the self:

Forget things, forget Heaven, and be called a forgetter of self. The man who has forgotten self may be said to have entered Heaven.<sup>3</sup>

The Reality in Daoism is not being but voidness, change. The nature is the polygon of liberating process which is possible in the field of perfect tranquility. The inner nature of man is tranquil. This is the nature which he was endowed with at birth.

The man of ancient times who practiced the Way employed tranquility to cultivate knowledge. Knowledge lived in them, yet they did nothing for its sake. So they may be said to have employed knowledge to cultivate tranquility. Knowledge and tranquility took turns cultivating each others, and harmony and order emerged from the inborn nature.<sup>4</sup>

In Daoism, inner and outer nature are one. The various meditative techniques bring us in contact with the creative forces of the Dao. Detached tranquility is the precondition for manifestation of the supra-conscious and subliminal creative intuition which brings us in contact with the essential spirit of Dao. Freedom is the state without internal constraints, therefore the field of sublime freedom in the form of universal energy of Dao is cultivated in the very core of the human existence liberated from delusions and entanglements to virtue.

Wipe out the delusions of the will, undo the snares of the heart, rid yourself of the entanglements to virtue; open up the roadblocks in the Way. Eminence and wealth, recognition and authority, fame and profit - these six are the delusions of the will. Appearances and carriage, complexion and features, temperament and attitude-these six are the entanglements of virtue. Rejecting and accepting, taking and giving, knowledge and ability - these six are the roadblocks of the Way. When these four sixes no longer seethe within the breast, then you will achieve uprightness; being upright, you will be still; being still, you will be enlightened; being enlightened, you will be empty; and being empty, you will do nothing, and yet there will be nothing that is not done.<sup>5</sup>

The spiritual challenge of the Daoist notion of freedom is its credo that freedom may not necessarily be achieved in the far out retreat from the world but rather in our own spiritual environment. The place of the beginning and the end of the Nature which is the construction of our own thought. This is the inner field of our intellectual, spiritual and supra-physical environment which by the proper techniques can be cleaned of the illusionary dust of the world. The perfect freedom is based on the real understanding of the miracle of life which is the unity, harmonious interconnectedness of physical, mental, spiritual and supra-physical levels of our being. Such understanding is based on the liberation from knowledge. Hence the Daoist demand for abandoning knowledge for the purpose of achieving the true understanding.

Eliminate sageliness, throw away knowledge,  
And the people will benefit a hundredfold.  
Eliminate humanity, throw away righteousness,  
And the people will return to filial piety and compassion.  
Eliminate craftiness, throw away profit,  
Then we will have no robbers and thieves.

These three sayings-  
Regarded as a text are not yet complete.  
Thus, we must see to it that they have the following appended:

Manifest plainness and embrace the genuine;  
Lessen self-interest and make few your desires;  
Eliminate learning and have no undue concern.”<sup>6</sup>

This is the basis on which true awareness is achieved and attachments are overcome. The soteriological techniques and teachings about the transience of everything may prevent us from developing attachments. The dimension of non-attachment is the common ground of Daoism and Buddhism that teach about difference between love and attachment which is the basis of attainment of the true freedom. Everything around and inside us is the expression of supreme consciousness, Dao, you can love it but not develop the attachment. Being attached to supreme consciousness but not to its particular manifestation is the basis of spiritual ecology in Daoism which includes also our imaginary environment. The Daoist does not focus on the elimination of the external obstacles but rather cultivates various techniques of transformation of the ego which could be in conflict with external limitations.

The reason why I have great distress

Is that I have a body.  
 If I had no body, what distress would I have?  
 Therefore, to one who values acting for himself over acting on behalf of the world,  
 You can entrust the world.  
 And to one who in being parsimonious regards his person as equal to the world,  
 You can turn over the world.<sup>7</sup>

The wise person finally reaches the state of egolessness and supreme equanimity which protects him/her against favourable or unfavourable events which are all equally disturbing and experienced as such since one possesses the body as a seat of the ego or consciousness. As long as we acknowledge the body and consciousness and do not cultivate the body-mind unity we experience distresses. Therefore the Daoist does not criticize the environment and demand the expansion of the space in which his will can be realized and his needs satisfied, but he is rather critical of himself and is establishing and cultivating the harmony with one's environment. Limitation and the limited one are therefore interrelated and co-dependent. The individuals' wishes and ambitions define also one's limitations and compulsions. The more one wishes or expects the less free one is since there are more limitations that one has to overcome for the satisfaction of the wishes or realizations of the expectations. There is an obvious link between the ego and its limitations. The ego is not something given by nature but it is rather one's own conception of the Self. By perceiving ourselves as such and such we are becoming like that and also defining our own limitations and entrapments. The Daoist achieving of freedom is therefore protection for the people who might become the victims of their own notions of themselves. The Daoist cultivation of egolessness brings one into harmony with the Dao.

Therefore I say, the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame.<sup>8</sup>

He is unselfish, without personal "identity," he is part of nature and not an individual separated from it. There is no difference between inner and outer realm. To achieve this stage one has to renounce one's own ego by: "fastening one's spirit, sitting and forgetting, forgetting one's self, losing the Self " (Zhuang Zi). This is the birthplace of freedom. The identification with Dao is the renouncement of Ego, self, which does not incorporate a self-repression but rather the forgetting of the self. In this process there is nothing left which could suffer under repression.

The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn't forget where he began; he didn't try to find out where he would end. He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven. This is what I call the True Man.<sup>9</sup>

In the above quoted fragments of the *Dao de jing* and *Zhuang Zi* we can see the main difference between the main concern of the Greek philosophers and the Daoists. While the first have been concentrating on the question what is the freedom, the Chinese Daoist was elaborating on the question of where is the Dao which besides the theoretical reflections included also a certain way of leading one's own life and achieving one's freedom.

In the moment of loss of philosophical centrality, we are facing a radical critique of the long lived dream to attain a foundation of knowledge, certainty and an absolute basis for Truth. The topics discussed above call the rational argumentation itself into question. The obsession about whether or not something could be subsumed under the concept of Truth becomes irrelevant. One of the challenges that we face when approaching the Daoist texts is the problem of language, of the status of words, and of the spheres of silent language and the language of silence in the process of liberation. Language as the indispensable tool of intellect helps to create the distinctions of everything and the borders among the myriad things, which from the viewpoint of the *citta-vrtti-nirodha* are inseparably connected in the One. The word by contrast is a symbol, a sign of something that has been in the thoughts. The meaning itself is, on the other hand, the

symbol of something which is beyond the grasp of logos and is indescribable, inexpressible, certain, since it manifests itself in everything. Here we are dealing with two levels: The surface one, in which reality manifests itself in the form of the ten thousand, myriad things; and the other one, beyond it, the certain one, which is spoken of (or kept silent about) in the sense of the first chapter of the *Dao de jing*.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

The negation of the ontological doctrine of the ego in the Daoist techniques that are supposed to bring one into real connection with the vital sources of the universe by transcending one's limitations, are two notorious ways of liberation in the vast tradition of Asian philosophies. The ways of achieving freedom in Daoist tradition discussed above can teach us about the illusions of the superiority of philosophical speculation as understood in the Judeo-Christian-Greek heritage. The techniques and practices mentioned in the text, are directed to the development and transformation of the mind and personality aiming at the achievement of the wisdom, the precondition for any real salvation. Unlike European philosophy, which has in its history sought for the model of philosophical thinking even in mathematics, Chinese philosophical schools did not introduce demands for mathematical proofs into philosophy. Besides the rigid intellectually logical discourse, they have also nurtured the direct intuitive experience, which is without doubt much richer than rationalizations based on the discipline of analysis and distinctions. The one-dimensionality of rationality has been put into question and can therefore not serve as the sole tool in the "analysis" or "comparison" of the traditions under investigation with the Euro-American streams of thought. The soteriological project of the discussed tradition becomes evident, since knowing necessarily interconnects with becoming. This can mean a certain challenge to the philosophical schools based on the Judeo-Christian-Greek tradition, which have separated the fields of ontology and epistemology, which have in Daoism been cultivated together, inseparably. The metaphysics of subject, and the ontological reductions so well established in the modern European philosophical history, can prove to be unsuitable for the approaches to the Asian philosophies and therefore also call for the re-examination of the foundations of rationality. The question of reality and ego encroaches on the realm of the ineffable (the ineffability) which remains the source of the great creativity in any philosophical tradition.

Lao Tzu said, "Ah-the basic rule of life-preservation. Can you embrace the One? Can you keep from losing it? Can you, without tortoise shell or divining stalks, foretell fortune and misfortune? Do you know where to stop, do you know where to leave off? Do you know how to disregard it in others and instead look for it in yourself? Can you be brisk and unflagging? Can you be rude and unwitting? Can you be a little baby? The baby howls all day, yet its throat never gets hoarse - harmony at its height! The baby makes fists all day, yet its fingers never get cramped - virtue is all it holds to. The baby stares all day without blinking its eyes - it has no preferences in the world of externals. To move without knowing where you are going, to sit at home without knowing what you are doing, traipsing and trailing about with other things, riding along with them on the same wave - this is the basic rule of life-preservation, this and nothing more." /.../ The Perfect Man joins with others in seeking his food from the earth, his pleasures in Heaven. But he does not become embroiled with them in questions of people and things, profit and loss. He does not join them in their shady doings, he does not join them in their plots, he does not join them in their projects. Brisk and unflagging, he goes; rude and unwitting, he comes. This is what is called the basic rule of life-preservation. /.../ The baby acts without knowing what it is doing, moves without knowing where it is going. Its body is like the limb of a withered tree, its mind like dead ashes. Since it is so, no bad fortune will ever touch it, and no good fortune will come to it either. And if it is free from good and bad fortune, then what human suffering can it undergo?"<sup>11</sup>

In the Daoist ecology of mind its approach towards death-life is important. It is the consciousness of our own transience that brings us to the field of action. How to function in our optimal way and still practice the deep awareness of our own impermanence which is the only topos of our absolute freedom. It is enlightened self-interest that enables us to achieve the unity with our inner and outer environment and between mind and body.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> In this paper the Pinyin transcription for Chinese characters has been used, therefore Daoism instead of the older transcription Taoism.
  - <sup>2</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 293.
  - <sup>3</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 132-133.
  - <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.
  - <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.
  - <sup>6</sup> *Lao-Tzu, Te-Tao Ching*, trans. Robert G. Henricks (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 71.
  - <sup>7</sup> *Lao-Tzu, Te-Tao Ching*, trans. Robert G. Henricks (New York: Ballantine, 1989), 65.
  - <sup>8</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 32.
  - <sup>9</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 78.
  - <sup>10</sup> "As for the Way, the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way." Lao-Tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, trans. R. Henricks (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 188.
  - <sup>11</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 253-5.