

THE INNER AND OUTER NATURE IN DAOISM

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1. Introduction

This article elaborates on the philosophical dimensions of the inner field: the sphere of purification, meditation, cultivation, and freedom as they were practised in Daoism.¹ 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 to the soteric practices of Daoism. Various meditative techniques and the methods of achieving unification with the Dao, the field of inner nature and freedom, must be critically examined with regard to the concept of nature as such. The paper does not aim at giving some solid arguments but follows one of the ways in which the debate on nature has 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. It takes the Daoist way as a focus on self-reflection about the possibilities of strategies of achieving inner nature and self-awareness in the global context.

The methodological challenge of the topic focuses on the possibilities of a philosophical dialogue in the realms which include spiritual training and the hermeneutical problems of such an undertaking. Since '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 otherworldly undertaking, but is rather the most here-

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¹In this article, the Pinyin transcription for Chinese characters has been used; therefore, Daoism instead of the older transcription Taoism.

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 exegetes, 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. Such debate on nature 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 subtler realms of understanding is possible through a shift from rationally-discursive understanding of certain phenomena to intuitive experiencing of them, through direct experiential contacts with surrounding nature and one's own inner nature.

When the deeper state of logic 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, and resentments. 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.

2. Body and Inner Nature

Ideas about the human body mirrored (and were themselves mirrored) in ideals about body politics in Greece as well as in China. The analogies between the macrocosm and microcosm were quite usual in the classical philosophical texts like Plato's *Republic* (“healthy state”) as well as in the Chinese texts of the Warring States period (*Lushi Chunqiu*) or in *Huangdi neijing*. Political metaphors of health were never just metaphors, because the ideal political order was almost always understood as the natural order. Reproducing the body politics in the fleshy body was understood not as re-inscribing a set of arbitrary social conventions, but as the quest to embody cosmic design, to align oneself with nature and the divine. Health was, therefore, never entirely an individual affair, since personal order or disorder cannot be isolated from cosmic order or disorder and, therefore, human possibilities are shaped by contexts. In traditional Chinese medicine, sickness was conceived mainly as imbalance or disharmony, discord between macrocosm and microcosm (or as an intrusion from without). The methodology is based on the Daoist notion of *wu-wei* (the absence of intentional action) through which the primal Dao (primal unified energy without name or form) can be reached. This is not accessible through pure human effort. To refine vitality into energy, energy into spirit, spirit into space, and shatter space to merge with the *Dao* is the way of self-cultivation.

As for the “paradox of liberation,” it should be mentioned that the rules of Daoist yoga hygiene are not only all-restrictive, but are few and simple and as such are supposed to be liberating since in the process they should free us from a large number of restrictions we have consciously or unconsciously placed upon ourselves. The self imposed austerities are transcended so that our own power, with which we can be useful and enjoy life, can manifest itself – these two dimensions are compatible from the yogic perspective of the restoration of biochemical balance. It is based on the right body-mind-spirit perspective and on the well-balanced course of physical, mental, moral, and spiritual regime, which is also the basis of the self-cultivation methods in Daoism.

The credo of the Daoists is that we have to take care of our body but should not develop hate or love for it. Much more important is to understand the right way and equanimity towards the body, since this will help us to overcome our ego and to keep centred on the way of liberation, salvation. Body is our supreme cognitive instrument, but if we want to

overcome the troubles, which are inherent to any existence, we have to practise keeping ourselves well-balanced on the spiritual way to salvation and get to know our body in all its dimensions: as a metaphysical force as well as a nexus of paradigmatic energies which enable us to get to know ourselves (inner nature) and our place in the world (outer nature).

They should also not be based on repression but should be open to the methods that can change and redirect the course of emotions on a positive way and enable us to adapt successfully to the varying conditions of life or situations in psychosomatic relationships with ourselves or others and help us to reach a proper evaluation of life situations. This is the supreme wisdom of the *Dao de jing* (chapter 10):

In nourishing the soul and embracing the One /.../
 In concentrating your breath and making it soft /.../
 In cultivating and cleaning your profound mirror /.../
 Give birth to them and nourish them.
 Give birth to them but don't try to own them;
 Help them to grow but don't rule them.²

The final stage of Chinese philosophical cultivation and spiritual pursuits is the unification of human spirit and the natural spirit (*tian ren he yi*). When the individual spirit becomes part of the natural spirit and contaminated human thoughts have been cleansed and purified, it is manifest on the bio-energetic and bio-electrical levels.

3. Spiritual Ecology 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 esoteric 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

²Lao-Tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, trans. Robert G. Henricks, New York: Ballantine, 1989, 62.

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.”³

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

The men of ancient times who practised the Way employed tranquillity 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 tranquillity. Knowledge and tranquillity took turns cultivating each other, and harmony and order emerged from the inborn nature.⁴

In Daoism, inner and outer natures are one. The various meditative techniques bring us in contact with the creative forces of the Dao. Detached tranquillity 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 which is cultivated in the very core of human existence liberated from delusions and entanglements. Virtue, however, is an important inner potency, instrumental for reaching the unity between the humans and the myriad phenomena. Animate and inanimate things, as well as heaven and earth, resonate with the human realm in the interdependence and interconnectedness of everything.

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

³Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968, 132-33.

⁴Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 171.

empty; and being empty, you will do nothing, and yet there will be nothing that is not done.⁵

The spiritual challenge of the Daoist notion of nature and 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. 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 nature and 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.⁶

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 attaining 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 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?

⁵Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 259.

⁶Lao-Tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, 71.

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.⁷

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 individual's 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 become like that and also define our own limitations and entrapments.

The Daoist achievement of freedom is, therefore, a protection for the people who might become victims of their own notions of themselves by losing contact with their innate nature. The Daoist cultivation of egolessness brings one into harmony with the Dao, the interdependence between the inner and the outer nature. “Therefore, I say, the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame.”⁸ 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

⁷Lao-Tzu, *Te-Tao Ching*, 65.

⁸Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, 32.

with Dao is the renouncement of Ego, self, which does not incorporate a self-repression, rather the forgetting of the self. In this process, there is nothing left which could suffer under repression.

4. Conclusion

The topics discussed above might put into contrast various Asian and European ways of approaching the problems of inner and outer nature and embodying them as well. These are also the questions decisive for anyone dealing with different cultures in any way since they show multiple ways of constructing a coherent sense of one's own Selfhood and one's place in the Nature. The quoted texts also bring into focus methods of transcending the Self for the sake of creative living and attitude to others and to oneself. Special emphasis is given on the mind-body continuum in Chinese tradition which does not leave any room for the devaluation of physical, emotional, and mental aspects but understands them necessary in reaching Oneness with the nature and our innermost core.