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TAOISM*

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No civilization is monochrome. In China the classical tones of Confu-cianism have been balanced not only by the spiritual shades of Bud-dhism but also by the romantic hues of Taoism.

The Old Master

According to tradition Taoism (pronounced Dowism) originated with a man named Lao Tzu, said to have been born about 604 B.C. He is a shadowy figure. We know nothing for certain about him and scholars wonder if there ever was such a man. We do not even know his name, for Lao Tzu—which can be translated "the Old Boy," "the Old Fellow," or "the Grand Old Master"—is obviously a title of endearment and respect. All we really have is a mosaic of legends. Some of these are fantastic; that he was conceived by a shooting star, carried in his mother's womb for eighty-two years, and born already a wise old man with white hair. Other parts of the story do not tax our credulity: that he kept the archives in his native western state, and that around this occupation he wove a simple and unassertive life. Inferences concerning his personality derive almost entirely from a single slim volume that is attributed to him. From this some conclude that he was probably a solitary recluse who was absorbed in occult meditations; others picture him as down to earth—a genial neighbor with a lively sense of humor.

The only purportedly contemporary portrait, reported by China's first historian, Ssu-ma Ch'ien, speaks only of the enigmatic impression he left—the sense that he possessed depths of understanding that defied ready comprehension. According to this account Confucius, intrigued by what he had heard of Lao Tzu, once visited him. His description suggests that the strange man baffled him while leaving him respectful. "I know a bird can fly; I know a fish can swim; I know animals can run. Creatures that run can be caught in nets; those that swim can be

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caught in wicker traps; those that fly can be hit by arrows. But the dragon is beyond my knowledge; it ascends into heaven on the clouds and the wind. Today I have seen Lao Tzu, and he is like the dragon!"

The traditional portrait concludes with the report that Lao Tzu, saddened by his people's disinclination to cultivate the natural goodness he advocated and seeking greater personal solitude for his closing years, climbed on a water buffalo and rode westward toward what is now Tibet. At the Hankao Pass a gatekeeper, sensing the unusual character of the truant, tried to persuade him to turn back. Failing this, he asked if the "Old Boy" would not at least leave a record of his beliefs to the civilization he was abandoning. This Lao Tzu consented to do. He retired for three days and returned with a slim volume of five thousand characters titled *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Way and Its Power*. A testament to humanity's at-home-ness in the universe, it can be read in half an hour or a lifetime, and remains to this day the basic text of Taoist thought.

What a curious portrait this is for the supposed founder of a religion. The Old Boy didn't preach. He didn't organize or promote. He wrote a few pages on request, rode off on a water buffalo, and that was it as far as he was concerned. How unlike the Buddha, who trudged the dusty roads of India for forty-five years to make his point. How unlike Confucius, who pestered dukes and princes, trying to gain an administrative foothold (or at least a hearing) for his ideas. Here was a man so little concerned with the success of his surmises, to say nothing of fame and fortune, that he didn't even stay around to answer questions. And yet, whether the story of his life is fact or fiction, it is so true to Taoist attitudes that it will remain a part of Taoism forever. Emperors would claim this shadowy figure as their ancestor, and even scholars—though they do not see the *Tao Te Ching* as having been written by a single hand and do not think it attained the form in which we have it until the second half of the third century B.C.—concede that its ideas cohere to the point where we must posit the existence of *someone* under whose influence the book took shape, and have no objection to our calling him Lao Tzu.

The Three Meanings of Tao

On opening Taoism's bible, the *Tao Te Ching*, we sense at once that everything revolves around the pivotal concept of *Tao* itself. Literally, this word means path, or way. There are three senses, however, in which this "way" can be understood.

First, *Tao* is the *way of ultimate reality*. This *Tao* cannot be perceived or even clearly conceived, for it is too vast for human rationality to fathom. The *Tao Te Ching* announces in its opening line that words are not equal to it: "The *Tao* that can be spoken is not the true *Tao*." Nevertheless, this ineffable and transcendent *Tao* is the ground of all that follows. Above all, behind all, beneath all is the Womb from which all life springs and to which it returns. Awed by the thought of it, the author/editor of the *Tao Te Ching* bursts recurrently into praise, for this primal *Tao* confronts him with life's basic mystery, the mystery of all mysteries. "How clear it is! How quiet it is! It must be something eternally existing!" "Of all great things, surely *Tao* is the greatest." But its ineffability cannot be denied, so we are taunted, time and again, by Taoism's teasing epigram: "Those who know don't say. Those who say don't know."[1]

Though *Tao* is ultimately transcendent, it is also immanent. In this secondary sense it is the *way of the universe*, the norm, the rhythm, the driving power in all nature, the ordering principle behind all life. Behind, but also in the midst of all life, for when *Tao* enters this second mode it "assumes flesh" and informs all things. It "adapts its vivid essence, clarifies its manifold fullness, subdues its resplendent luster, and assumes the likeness of dust." Basically spirit rather than matter, it cannot be exhausted; the more it is drawn upon, the more it flows, for it is "that fountain ever on," as Plotinus said of his counterpart to the *Tao*, his One. There are about it marks of inevitability, for when autumn comes "no leaf is spared because of its beauty, no flower because of its fragrance." Yet, ultimately, it is benign. Graceful instead of abrupt, flowing rather than hesitant, it is infinitely generous. Giving life to all things, it may be called "the Mother of the World." As nature's agent *Tao* in this second form resembles Bergson's *elan vital*, as nature's orderer, it resembles the *lex aeterna* of the Classical West, the eternal law that structures the world. Charles Darwin's colleague, George Romanes, could have been speaking of it when he referred to "the integrating principle of the whole—the Spirit, as it were, of the universe—instinct without contrivance, which flows with purpose."

In its third sense *Tao* refers to *the way of human life* when it meshes with the *Tao* of the universe as just described. Most of what follows in this chapter will detail what the Taoists propose that this way of life

[1] *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 56.

should be. First, however, it is necessary to point out that there have been in China not one but three Taoisms.

Three Approaches to Power and the Taoisms That Follow

Tao Te Ching, the title of Taoism's basic text, has been translated *The Way and Its Power*. We have seen that the first of these substantive terms, the Way, can be taken in three senses. Now we must add that this is also true of the second substantive term, power. Corresponding to the three ways *te* or power can be approached, there have arisen in China three species of Taoism so dissimilar that initially they seem to have no more in common than homonyms, like blew/blue or sun/son, that sound alike but have different meanings. We shall find that this is not the case, but first the three species must be distinguished. Two have standard designations, Philosophical Taoism and Religious Taoism respectively; and because many more people were involved with Religious Taoism it is often called Popular Taoism as well. The third school (which will come second in our order of presentation) is too heterogeneous to have acquired a single title. Its population constitutes an identifiable cluster, however, by virtue of sharing a common objective. All were engaged in vitalizing programs that were intended to facilitate *Tao*'s power, its *te*, as it flows through human beings.

Efficient Power: Philosophical Taoism

Unlike Religious Taoism, which became a full-fledged church, Philosophical Taoism and the "vitalizing Taoisms," as we shall clumsily refer to the second group, remain relatively unorganized. Philosophical Taoism is reflective and the vitalizing programs active, but no more than the Transcendentalist movement in New England or contemporary physical fitness programs are they formally institutionalized.

They share a second similarity in that both are self-help programs. Teachers are involved, but they are better thought of as coaches who train their students—guiding them in what they should understand, in the case of Philosophical Taoism, and in what they should do in the vitalizing regimens. In decided contrast to Religious Taoists, those in these first two camps work primarily on themselves.

The differences between them have to do with their respective stances toward the power of the *Tao* on which life feeds. To put the difference pointedly, Philosophical Taoists try to conserve their *te* by expending it efficiently, whereas "vitality" Taoists work to increase its available supply.

Because Philosophical Taoism is essentially an attitude toward life, it is the most "exportable" Taoism of the three, the one that has the most to say to the world at large, and as such will receive the longest treatment—not until the second half of this chapter, however. Here we shall only identify it to place it in its logical position before proceeding with its two sister Taoisms.

Called School Taoism in China, Philosophical Taoism is associated with the names of Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and the *Tao Te Ching*. We can connect it with power by remembering that philosophy seeks knowledge and, as Bacon told the world pointedly, "knowledge is power"; to know how to repair a car is to have power over it. Obviously, the Taoists' eyes were not on machines; it was life that they wanted to repair. Knowledge that empowers life we call wisdom; and to live wisely, the Taoist philosophers argued, is to live in a way that conserves life's vitality by not expending it in useless, draining ways, the chief of which are friction and conflict. We shall examine Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu's prescriptions for avoiding such dissipations in the second half of this chapter, but we can anticipate a single point here. Their recommendations revolve around the concept of *wu wei*, a phrase that translates literally as inaction but in Taoism means pure effectiveness. Action in the mode of *wu wei* is action in which friction—in interpersonal relationships, in intra-psychic conflict, and in relation to nature—is reduced to the minimum. We turn now to the vitality cults as our second species of Taoism.

Augmented Power: Taoist Hygiene and Yoga

Taoist "adepts"—as we shall call the practitioners of this second kind of Taoism because all were engaged in training programs of some sort, many of them demanding—were not willing to settle for the philosophers' goal of managing their allotments of the *Tao* efficiently. They wanted to go beyond conserving to increasing the quota of the Tao they had to work with. In accounting terms we can say that if Philosophical Taoists worked at increasing net profits by cutting costs (reducing needless energy expenditures), Taoist adepts wanted to increase gross income.

The word *ch'i* cries out to be recognized as the rightful entry to this second school, for though it literally means breath, it actually means vital energy. The Taoists used it to refer to the power of the *Tao* that they experienced coursing through them—or not coursing because it was blocked—and their main object was to further its flow. C*h'i*

fascinated these Taoists. Blake registered their feelings precisely when he exclaimed, "Energy is delight," for energy is the life force and the Taoists loved life. To be alive is good; to be more alive is better; to be always alive is best, hence the Taoist immortality cults. To accomplish their end of maximizing *ch'i*, these Taoists worked with three things: matter, movement, and their minds.

Respecting *matter*, they tried eating things—virtually everything, it would seem—to see if *ch'i* could be augmented nutritionally. In the course of this experimentation, they developed a remarkable pharmacopia of medicinal herbs,[2] but in a way this was incidental. What they really wanted was not cure but increase—increase and extension of the life force, the ultimate guarantor of which would be the much-sought elixir of life that would insure physical immortality.[3] Sexual experiments were also performed. In one such experiment men hypothesized that if they retained their semen during intercourse by pressing the ball of the thumb against the base of the penis at the moment of ejaculation, thereby diverting the semen into their own bodies,[4] they would absorb the *yin* of their female partners without dissipating their own *yang* energy. Breathing exercises were also developed. Working with air, the subtlest form of matter, they sought to draw *ch'i* from the atmosphere.

These efforts to extract *ch'i* from matter in its solid, liquid, and gaseous forms were supplemented by programs of bodily *movement* such as *t'ai chi chuan,* which gathers calisthenics, dance, meditation, *yin/yang* philosophy, and martial art into a synthesis that in this case was designed to draw *ch'i* from the cosmos and dislodge blocks to its internal flow. This last was the object of acupuncture as well.

[2] "Any list of the drugs used by the ancient Chinese doctors, for many of which there is ample historical if not laboratory evidence of efficacy, leaves the entire Western world of medicine open to accusations of negligence and haughtiness" (Richard Selzer, *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987], p. 116).

[3] Immortality had both crude and subtle readings in Taoism. Michael Saso writes that "a Taoist is by definition a man who seeks immortality in the present life," but he goes on to add that for many this immortality "is not so much a longevity whereby man does not die but a state wherein he does not descend to the punishments of a fiery underworld after death" (*Taoism and the Rite of Cosmic Renewal* [Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1989], p. 3).

[4] In actuality the semen then entered the bladder, where it was expelled with the urine, but the Chinese did not know this.

Finally, turning to the *mind* itself, contemplatives, many of them hermits, developed Taoist meditation. This practice involved shutting out distractions and emptying the mind to the point where the power of the *Tao* might bypass bodily filters and enter the self directly.

This third way of increasing *ch'i* is more abstract than the others, so more needs to be said about it. The quickest gateway to understanding meditational Taoism is via Hindu *raja yoga*, the way to God through psychophysical exercises. Whether or not China borrowed from India on this score, the physical postures and concentration techniques of Taoist meditation are so reminiscent of *raja yoga* that sinologists import the Sanskrit term and call it Taoist *yoga*. Still, the Chinese gave their *yoga* a distinctive twist. Their ubiquitous social concern led them to press the possibility that the *ch'i* that *yogi*s accumulated through meditation could be transmitted psychically to the community to enhance its vitality and harmonize its affairs. Side by side with the Confucianists, who were working on the socializing *te* of moral example and ritualized etiquette, Taoist *yogi*s sought to harness the *Tao* directly, drawing it first into their own heart-minds and then beaming it to others. *Yogi*s who managed this feat would for the most part be unnoticed, but their life-giving enterprise did more for the community than the works of other benefactors.

We border on Philosophical Taoism here because animating this yogic Taoism was a dawning fascination in China with the inner as opposed to the outer self. Children do not separate these two sides of their being, and neither did early peoples. Yogic or meditational Taoism arose as the advancing self-consciousness of the Chinese brought subjective experience to full view. Novel, momentous, exciting, this world of the inner self invited exploration. So enthralling did it appear to its early explorers that matter suffered by comparison; it was mere shell and accretion. Still, the inner world housed a problem. Successive deposits of worry and distraction so silted the soul that their deposits had to be removed until "the self as it was meant to be" could surface. Pure consciousness would then appear, and the individual would see not merely "things perceived" but "that by which we perceive."

To arrive at this inwardness it was necessary to reverse all self-seeking and cultivate perfect cleanliness of thought and body. Pure spirit can be known only in a life that is "garnished and swept." Only where all is clean will it reveal itself; therefore "put self aside." Perturbing emotions must likewise be quelled. Ruffling the surface of the mind, they prevent introspection from seeing past them to the

springs of consciousness beneath. (The proximity to Philosophical Taoism is becoming strong.) Desire and revulsion, grief and joy, delight and annoyance—each must subside if the mind is to return to its original purity, for in the end only peace and stillness are good for it. Let anxiety be dispelled and harmony between the mind and its cosmic source will come unsought.

> It is close at hand, stands indeed at our very side; yet is intangible, a thing that by reaching for cannot be got. Remote it seems as the furthest limit of the Infinite. Yet it is not far off, every day we use its power. For the Way of the Vital Spirit fills our whole frames, yet man cannot keep track of it. It goes, yet has not departed. It comes, yet is not here. It is muted, makes no note that can be heard, yet of a sudden we find that it is there in the mind. It is dim and dark, showing no outward form, yet in a great stream it flowed into us at our birth.[5]

Selflessness, cleanliness, and emotional calm are the preliminaries to arriving at full self-knowledge, but they must be climaxed by deep meditation. "Bide in silence, and the radiance of the spirit shall come in and make its home." For this to happen all outward impressions must be stilled and the senses withdrawn to a completely interior point of focus. Postures paralleling the Indian *asana*s were recommended, and the breath must be similarly controlled; it must be as soft and light as that of an infant, or even an embryo in the womb. The result will be a condition of alert waiting known as "sitting with a blank mind."

And when the realization arrives, what then? With it come truth, joy, and power. The climactic insight of meditational Taoism came with the impact of finality, everything at last having fallen into place. The condition could not be described as merely pleasurable. The direct perception of the source of one's awareness as "serene and immovable, like a monarch on a throne," brought joy unlike any hitherto known. The social utility of the condition, however, lay in the extraordinary power it provided over people and things, a power in fact which "could shift Heaven and Earth." "To the mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders." We have spoken of India in connection with this psychic power, but St. John of the Cross offers an identical promise: "Without labor you shall subject the peoples, and things shall be subject to you."

[5] Quoted by Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power*, 1934, reprint (London: Allen & Unwin, 1958), pp. 48-49.

Without lifting a finger overtly, a ruler who was adept in "stillness" could order a whole people with his mystical-moral power. A ruler who is desireless himself and has this much psychic power automatically turns his subjects from their unruly desires. He rules without even being known to rule.

> The sage relies on actionless activity;
> Puts himself in the background; but is always to the fore.
> Remains outside; but is always there.
> Is it not just because he does not strive for any personal end
> That all his personal ends are fulfilled?[6]

The Taoist *yogi*s recognized that they could not hope for much understanding from the masses, and they made no attempt to publicize their position. When they did write their words tended to be veiled and cryptic, open to one interpretation by initiates and another by the general public. Part of the reason they wrote this way doubtless stemmed from their sensitivity to the lampooning that mysticism attracts from the uncongenial. We find even Chuang Tzu burlesquing their breathing exercises, reporting that these people "expel the used air with great energy and inhale the fresh air. Like bears, they climb trees in order to breathe with greater ease." Mencius joined in the fun. He likened those who sought psychic short-cuts to social harmony to impatient farmers who tug gently on their crops each night to speed their growth. Despite such satire Taoist *yoga* had an appreciable core of practitioners. Some sinologists consider it the basic perspective from which the *Tao Te Ching* was written. If this is true it is a testament to the veiled language of the book, for it is usually read in the philosophical way we shall come to. Before we turn to that way, however, we must introduce the third major branch of Taoism, which is religious.

Vicarious Power: Religious Taoism

Philosophical Taoism sought to manage life's normal quotient of the *Tao* efficiently, and energizing Taoism sought to boost its base supply, but something was lacking. Reflection and health programs take time, and the average Chinese lacked that commodity. Yet they too needed help; there were epidemics to be checked, marauding ghosts

[6] *Tao Te Ching*, chapters 2 and 7, Arthur Waley's translation.

to be reckoned with, and rains to be induced or stopped as occasions demanded. Taoists responded to such problems. The measures they devised paralleled many of the doings of freelance soothsayers, psychics, shamans, and faith healers who came by their powers naturally and constituted the unchanging landscape of Chinese folk religion. Religious Taoism institutionalized such activities. Influenced by Buddhism, which entered China around the time of Christ, the Taoist church—in Chinese the *Tao Chiao*, "Church Taoism" or "Taoist Teachings" took shape in the second century A.D. It was anchored in a pantheon whose three originating deities included Lao Tzu. From these divinities sacred texts derived, which (by virtue of their divinely revealed origin) were accepted as true without reservation. The line of "papal" succession in the Taoist church continues down to the present in Taiwan.

Popular, Religious Taoism is a murky affair. Much of it looks—from the outside, we must always keep in mind—like crude superstition; but we must remember that we have little idea what energy is, how it proceeds, or the means by which (and extent to which) it can be augmented. We do know that faith healing can import or release energies, as does faith itself, including faith in oneself. Placebos likewise have effects. When we add to these the energies that magnetic personalities, rabble-rousers, and even pep rallies can generate, to say nothing of mysterious reserves that hypnotists tap into, concerning which we haven't an explanatory clue—if all this is borne in mind, it may temper our superciliousness and allow us to give Religious Taoism a fair hearing. In any case its intent is clear. "The Taoist priesthood made cosmic life-power available for ordinary villagers."[7]

The texts of this school are crammed with descriptions of rituals that, if exactly performed, have magical effects, and the word *magic* here holds the key to sacerdotal, specifically religious, Taoism. The word must be freed, however, from the conventional meaning that has encrusted it. In its modern meaning, magic is trickery; it refers to performers who deceive audiences in ways that create the illusion that preternatural powers are at work. Traditionally, by contrast, magic was highly regarded. Jacob Boehme went so far as to assert that "magic is the best theology, for in it true faith is grounded. He is a fool that reviles it, for he knows it not and is more a juggler than a theologian

[7] Daniel Overmyer, *Religions of China* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), p. 39.

of understanding." Traditionally, magic was understood as the means by which higher, occult powers are tapped for use in the visible world. Proceeding on the assumption that higher powers exist—the subtle rules the dense; energy rules matter, consciousness rules energy, and superconsciousness rules consciousness—magic made these powers available. When a hypnotist tells a subject that when his shoulder is touched his body will become rigid, and that happens—assistants can then place the subject's feet on one chair and his head on another without his body slumping—we come close to magic in the traditional sense, for the hypnotist calls into play powers that are not only astonishing but mysterious. Still, hypnotism falls short of magic in that the hypnotist is neither in an exceptional state of consciousness nor belongs to a sacerdotal order that is believed to be divinely empowered. For a genuine instance of magic in its traditional sense, we must turn to something like Peter's healing of Aeneas as reported in Acts 9:32-34.

> Now as Peter went here and there among all the believers, he came down also to the saints living in Lydia. There he found a man named Aeneas, who had been bedridden for eight years, for he was paralyzed. Peter said to him, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed!" And immediately he got up.

Note that this was not a miracle. It would have been a miracle if Christ had empowered the paralytic Aeneas to climb out of bed without Peter's help, effecting thereby an instance of what clinicians refer to as spontaneous remission. As it was, Peter had a role in the cure, a necessary role we may assume, and we are confronted with magic; sacred magic, as it happens, for if a demon had been invoked for malevolent purposes, sorcery would have been at work.

It was under the rubric of magic as thus traditionally conceived that the Taoist church—dividing the territory with freelance wizards, exorcists, and shamans—devised ways to harness higher powers for humane ends.

The Mingling of the Powers

Philosophical Taoism, vitalizing programs for increasing one's individual *ch'i*, and the Taoist church: the three branches of Taoism, which at first seemed to have little in common, now show their family resemblances. All have the same concern—how to maximize the *Tao*'s animating *te*—and the specifics of their concerns fall on a continuum. The continuum begins with interest in how life's normal allotment of

ch'i can be deployed to best effect (Philosophical Taoism). From there it moves on to ask if that normal quotient can be increased (Taoist vitalizing programs). Finally, it asks if cosmic energies can be gathered, as if by a burning glass, to be deployed vicariously for the welfare of people who need help (popular or Religious Taoism).

The danger in this arrangement is that in the interest of clarity the lines between the three divisions have been drawn too sharply. No solid walls separate them; the three are better regarded as currents in a common river. Throughout history each has interacted with the other two, right down to Taoism in Hong Kong and Taiwan today. John Blofeld, who lived in China for the twenty years preceding the Communist revolution, reported that he had never met a Taoist who was not involved to some degree with all three schools.

We can summarize. To *be* something, to *know* something, and *to be capable of* something is to rise above the superficial. A life has substance to the degree that it incorporates the profundity of mysticism (Taoist *yoga*), the direct wisdom of gnosis (Philosophical Taoism), and the productive power of magic (Religious Taoism). Where these three things come together there is a "school," and in China the school this chapter describes is Taoism. It is now time to return to Philosophical Taoism and give it its due hearing.

Creative Quietude

The object of Philosophical Taoism is to align one's daily life to the *Tao*, to ride its boundless tide and delight in its flow. The basic way to do this, we earlier noted, is to perfect a life of *wu wei*. We have seen that *wu wei* should not be translated as do-nothingness or inaction, for those words suggest a vacant attitude of idleness or abstention. Better renderings are pure effectiveness and creative quietude.

Creative quietude combines within a single individual two seemingly incompatible conditions—supreme activity and supreme relaxation. These seeming incompatibles can coexist because human beings are not self-enclosed entities. They ride an unbounded sea of *Tao* that sustains them, as we would say, through their subliminal minds. One way to create is through following the calculated directives of the conscious mind. The results of this mode of action, however, are seldom impressive; they tend to smack more of sorting and arranging than of inspiration. Genuine creation, as every artist knows, comes when the more abundant resources of the subliminal self are somehow tapped. But for this to happen a certain dissociation from the surface

self is needed. The conscious mind must relax, stop standing in its own light, let go. Only so is it possible to break through the law of reversed effort in which the more we try the more our efforts boomerang.

Wu wei is the supreme action, the precious suppleness, simplicity, and freedom that flows from us, or rather through us, when our private egos and conscious efforts yield to a power not their own. In a way it is virtue approached from a direction diametrically opposite to that of Confucius. Confucius turned every effort to building a pattern of ideal responses that might be consciously imitated. Taoism's approach is the opposite—to get the foundations of the self in tune with *Tao* and let behavior flow spontaneously. Action follows being; new action will follow new being, wiser being, stronger being. The *Tao Te Ching* puts this point without wasting a word. "The way to do," it says, "is to be."

How are we to describe the action that flows from a life that is grounded directly in *Tao*? Nurtured by a force that is infinitely subtle, infinitely intricate, it is a consummate gracefulness born from an abundant vitality that has no need for abruptness or violence. One simply lets the *Tao* flow in and flow out again until all life becomes a dance in which there is neither feverishness nor imbalance. *Wu wei* is life lived above tension:

> Keep stretching a bow
> You repent of the pull,
> A whetted saw
> Grows thin and dull. (ch. 9)[8]

Far from inaction, however, it is the embodiment of suppleness, simplicity, and freedom—a kind of pure effectiveness in which no motion is wasted on bickering or outward show.

> One may move so well that a footprint never shows,
> Speak so well that the tongue never slips,
> Reckon so well that no counter is needed. (ch. 27)

[8] Unless otherwise specified, quotations in this section and the next are from the *Tao Te Ching*. Those from chapters 8, 15, 24, 31, and 78 are from Stephen Mitchell's renderings in his *Tao Te Ching* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988); those from chapters 9, 12, 17, 23, 27, 29, and 30 are from Witter Bynner's *The Way of Life According to Laotzu*, 1944, reprint (New York: Putnam, 1986).

Effectiveness of this order obviously requires an extraordinary skill, a point conveyed in the Taoist story of the fisherman who was able to land enormous fish with a thread because it was so delicately made that it had no weakest point at which to break. But Taoist skill is seldom noticed, for viewed externally *wu wei*—never forcing, never under strain—seems quite effortless. The secret here lies in the way it seeks out the empty spaces in life and nature and moves through these. Chuang Tzu, the greatest popularizer of Philosophical Taoism, makes this point with his story of Prince Wen Hui's cook whose cleaver seemed never to lose its edge. When he cut up an ox, out went a hand, down went a shoulder. He planted a foot, he pressed with a knee, and the ox fell apart with a whisper. The bright cleaver murmured like a gentle wind. Rhythm! Timing! Like a sacred dance. Like "The Mulberry Grove," like ancient harmonies! Pressed for his secret, the cook replied: "There are spaces in the joints; the blade is thin and keen. When this thinness finds that space, there is all the room you need! It goes like a breeze! Hence I have this cleaver nineteen years as if newly sharpened!"[9]

The natural phenomenon that the Taoists saw as bearing the closest resemblance to *Tao* was water. They were struck by the way it would support objects and carry them effortlessly on its tide. The Chinese characters for swimmer, deciphered, mean literally "one who knows the nature of water." Similarly, one who understands the basic life force knows that it will sustain one if one stops thrashing and flailing and trusts oneself to its support.

> Do you have the patience to wait
> till your mud settles and the water is clear?
> Can you remain unmoving
> till the right action arises by itself? (ch. 15)

Water, then, was the closest parallel to the *Tao* in the natural world. But it was also the prototype of *wu wei*. They noticed the way water adapts itself to its surroundings and seeks out the lowest places. So too,

> The supreme good is like water,
> which nourishes all things without trying to.

[9] Adapted from Thomas Merton's translation in his *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), pp. 45-47.

It is content with the low places that people disdain.
Thus it is like the *Tao*. (ch. 8)

Yet despite its accommodation, water holds a power unknown to hard and brittle things. In a stream it follows the stones' sharp edges, only to turn them into pebbles, rounded to conform to its streamlined flow. It works its way past frontiers and under dividing walls. Its gentle current melts rocks and carries away the proud hills we call eternal.

Nothing in the world
is as soft and yielding as water.
Yet for dissolving the hard and inflexible,
nothing can surpass it.
The soft overcomes the hard;
the gentle overcomes the rigid.
Everyone knows this is true,
but few can put it into practice. (ch. 78)

Infinitely supple, yet incomparably strong—these virtues of water are precisely those of *wu wei* as well. The person who embodies this condition, says the *Tao Te Ching*, "works without working." Such a one acts without strain, persuades without argument, is eloquent without flourish, and achieves results without violence, coercion, or pressure. Though the agent may be scarcely noticed, his or her influence is in fact decisive.

A leader is best
When people barely know that he exists.
Of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will say, "We did this ourselves." (ch. 17)

A final characteristic of water that makes it an appropriate analogue to *wu wei* is the clarity it attains through being still. "Muddy water let stand," says the *Tao Te Ching*, "will clear." If you want to study the stars after being in a brightly lit room, you must wait twenty minutes for your eyes to dilate for their new assignment. There must be similar periods of waiting if the focal length of the mind is to readjust, withdrawing from the world's glare to the internal recesses of the soul.

The five colors can blind,
The five tones deafen,

The five tastes cloy.
The race, the hunt, can drive men mad
And their booty leave them no peace.
Therefore a sensible man
Prefers the inner to the outer eye. (ch. 12)

Clarity can come to the inner eye, however, only insofar as life attains a quiet that equals that of a deep and silent pool.

Other Taoist Values

Still following the analogy of water, the Taoists rejected all forms of self-assertiveness and competition. The world is full of people who are determined to be somebody or give trouble. They want to get ahead, to stand out. Taoism has little use for such ambitions. "The ax falls first on the tallest tree."

He who stands on tiptoe
Doesn't stand firm.
He who rushes ahead
Doesn't go far.
He who tries to shine
dims his own light. (ch. 24)

Their almost reverential attitude toward humility led the Taoists to honor hunchbacks and cripples because of the way they typified meekness and self-effacement. They were fond of pointing out that the value of cups, windows, and doorways lies in the parts of them that are not there. "Selfless as melting ice" is one of their descriptive figures. The Taoists' refusal to clamber for position sprang from a profound disinterest in the things the world prizes. The point comes out in the story of Chuang Tzu's visit to the minister of a neighboring state. Someone told the minister that Chuang Tzu was coming in the hope of replacing him. The minister was alarmed. But when Chuang Tzu heard of the rumor he said to the minister:

In the South there is a bird. It is called *yuan-ch'u.* Have you heard of it? This *yuan-ch'u* starts from the southern ocean and flies to the northern ocean. During its whole journey it perches on no tree save the sacred Wo-tung, eats no fruit save that of the Persian Lilac, drinks only at the Magic Well. It happened that an owl that had got hold of the rotting carcass of a rat looked up as this bird flew by, and terrified lest the *yuan-ch'u* should stop and snatch at the succulent morsel, it

screamed, "Shoo! Shoo!" And now I am told that you are trying to "shoo" me off from this precious Ministry of yours.[10]

So it is with most of the world's prides. They are not the true values they are thought to be. What is the point of competition or assertiveness? The *Tao* seems to get along very well without them.

Nature does not have to insist,
Can blow for only half a morning,
Rain for only half a day. (ch. 23)

People should avoid being strident and aggressive not only toward other people but also toward nature. On the whole, the modern Western attitude has been to regard nature as an antagonist, an object to be squared off against, dominated, controlled, conquered. Taoism's attitude is the opposite of this. There is a profound naturalism in Taoist thought, but it is the naturalism of a Rousseau, a Wordsworth, a Thoreau, not that of a Galileo or Bacon.

Those who would take over the earth
And shape it to their will
Never, I notice, succeed.
The earth is like a vessel so sacred
That at the mere approach of the profane
It is marred
And when they reach out their fingers it is gone. (ch. 29)

Nature is to be befriended. When the British scaled earth's highest peak, the exploit was widely hailed as "the conquest of Everest." D. T. Suzuki remarked: "We orientals would have spoken of befriending Everest." The Japanese team that scaled Anapurna, the second highest peak, climbed to within fifty feet of the summit and deliberately stopped, provoking a Western mountaineer to exclaim in disbelief, "That's class!" Taoism seeks attunement with nature, not dominance. Its approach is ecological, a characteristic that led Joseph Needham to point out that despite China's backwardness in scientific theory she early developed "an organic philosophy of nature closely resembling that which modern science has been forced to adopt after

[10] Burton Watson (tr.), *Chuang Tzu: The Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 109-10.

three centuries of mechanical materialism." The ecological approach of Taoism has inspired many Western architects, most notably Frank Lloyd Wright. Taoist temples do not stand out from their surroundings. They nestle against the hills, back under the trees, blending in with the environment. At best, human beings do likewise. Their highest achievement is to identify themselves with the *Tao* and let it work its magic through them.

This Taoist approach to nature deeply affected Chinese art. It is no accident that the greatest periods of Chinese art have coincided with upsurges of Taoist influence. Before assuming brush and silk, painters would go out to nature and lose themselves in it, to become, say, the bamboo that they would paint. They would sit for half a day or fourteen years before making a stroke. The Chinese word for landscape painting is composed of the radicals for mountain and water, one of which suggests vastness and solitude, the other pliability, endurance, and continuous movement. The human part in the vastness is small, so we have to look closely for human beings in the paintings if we find them at all. Usually, they are climbing with their bundles, riding a buffalo, or poling a boat—the self with its journey to make, its burden to carry, its hill to climb, but surrounded by beauty on every side. People are not as formidable as mountains; they do not live as long as the pines. Yet they too belong in the scheme of things as surely as do the birds and the clouds. And through them, as through the rest of the world, flows the everlasting *Tao*.

Taoist naturalism combined with a propensity for naturalness as well. Pomp and extravagance were regarded as silly. When Chuang Tzu's followers asked permission to give him a grand funeral, he replied: "Heaven and earth are my inner and outer coffins. The sun, moon, and stars are my drapery, and the whole creation my funeral procession. What more do I want?" Civilization was ridiculed and the primitive idealized. "Let us have a small country with few inhabitants," Lao Tzu proposed. "Let the people return to the use of knotted cords [for keeping records]. Let them obtain their food sweet, their clothing beautiful, their homes comfortable, their rustic tasks pleasurable." Travel was discouraged as pointless and conducive to idle curiosity. "The neighboring state might be so near at hand that one could hear the cocks crowing in it and dogs barking. But the people would grow old and die without ever having been there."[11]

[11] Fung Yu-lan's translation of the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 80, in his *A Short History of*

It was this preference for naturalness and simplicity that most separated the Taoist from the Confucian. The basic objectives of the two schools did not differ widely, but the Taoists had small patience with the Confucian approach to them. All formalism, show, and ceremony left them cold. What could be hoped for from punctiliousness or the meticulous observance of propriety? The whole approach was artificial, a lacquered surface that was bound to prove brittle and repressive. Confucianism here was but one instance of the human tendency to approach life in regulated mode. All calculated systems, the very attempt to arrange life in shipshape order, is pointless. As different ways of slicing the same reality, none of them amounts to more than Three in the Morning. And what is Three in the Morning? Once, in the state of Sung, hard times forced a keeper of monkeys to reduce their rations. "From now on," he announced, "it will be three in the morning and four in the evening." Faced with howls of rebellion, the keeper agreed to negotiate, and eventually accepted his monkeys' demand that it be four in the morning and three in the evening. The monkeys gloried in their triumph.

Another feature of Taoism is its notion of the relativity of all values and, as its correlative, the identity of opposites. Here Taoism tied in with the traditional Chinese *yin/yang* symbol, which is pictured thus:

This polarity sums up all of life's basic oppositions: good/evil, active/passive, positive/negative, light/dark, summer/winter, male/female. But though the halves are in tension, they are not flatly opposed; they complement and balance each other. Each invades the other's hemisphere and takes up its abode in the deepest recess of its partner's domain. And in the end both find themselves resolved by the circle that surrounds them, the *Tao* in its eternal wholeness. In the context of that wholeness, the opposites appear as no more than phases in an endless cycling process, for each turns incessantly into its opposite, exchanging places with it. Life does not move onward and upward

Chinese Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), p. 20.

toward a fixed pinnacle or pole. It bends back upon itself to come, full circle, to the realization that all is one and all is well.

Those who meditate on this profound symbol, Taoists maintain, will find that it affords better access to the world's secrets than any length of words and discussion. Faithful to its import, Taoism eschews all sharp dichotomies. No perspective in this relative world can be considered as absolute. Who knows when the longest way 'round might not prove to be the shortest way home? Or consider the relativity of dream and wakefulness. Chuang Tzu dreamed that he was a butterfly, and during the dream had no notion that he had ever been anything else. When he awoke, however, he was astonished to find that he was Chuang Tzu. But this left him with a question. Was he really Chuang Tzu who had dreamed that he was a butterfly, or was he a butterfly that was now dreaming that it was Chuang Tzu?

All values and concepts, then, are ultimately relative to the mind that entertains them. When it was suggested to the wren and the cicada that there are birds that fly hundreds of miles without alighting, both quickly agreed that such a thing was impossible. "You and I know very well," they nodded, "that the furthest one can ever get, even by the most tremendous effort, is to that elm tree over there, and even this one cannot be sure of reaching every time. Often one finds oneself dragged back to earth long before one gets there. All these stories about flying hundreds of miles at a stretch are sheer nonsense."

In the Taoist perspective even good and evil are not head-on opposites. The West has tended to dichotomize the two, but Taoists are less categorical. They buttress their reserve with the story of a farmer whose horse ran away. His neighbor commiserated, only to be told, "Who knows what's good or bad?" It was true, for the next day the horse returned, bringing with it a drove of wild horses it had befriended. The neighbor reappeared, this time with congratulations for the windfall. He received the same response: "Who knows what is good or bad?" Again this proved true, for the next day the farmer's son tried to mount one of the wild horses and fell, breaking his leg. More commiserations from the neighbor, which elicited the question: "Who knows what is good or bad?" And for a fourth time the farmer's point prevailed, for the following day soldiers came by commandeering for the army, and the son was exempted because of his injury. If this all sounds very much like Zen, it should; for Buddhism processed through Taoism became Zen.

Taoism follows its principle of relativity to its logical limit by positioning life and death as complementing cycles in the *Tao*'s rhythm. When Chuang Tzu's wife died, his friend Hui-tzu visited him to express his condolences, only to find Chuang Tzu sitting on the ground with his legs spread wide apart, singing away and whacking out a tune on the back of a wooden bowl. "After all," said his friend, "she lived with you devotedly all these years, watched your eldest son grow to manhood, and grew old along with you. For you not to have shed a tear over her remains would have been bad enough, but singing and drumming away on a bowl—this is just too much!" "You misjudge," said Chuang Tzu. "When she died I was in despair, as any man well might be. But then I realized that before she was born she had no body, and it became clear to me that the same process of change that brought her to birth eventually brought her to death. If someone is tired and has gone to lie down, we do not pursue her with hooting and bawling. She whom I have lost has lain down to sleep for a while in the chamber between heaven and earth. To wail and groan while my wife is sleeping would be to deny nature's sovereign law. So I refrain."

Elsewhere Chuang Tzu expressed his confidence in the face of death directly:

> There is the globe,
> The foundation of my bodily existence.
> It wears me out with work and duties,
> It gives me rest in old age,
> It gives me peace in death.
> For the one who supplied me with what I needed in life
> Will also give me what 1 need in death.[12]

It is no surprise to find an outlook as averse to violence as Taoism verging on pacifism. There are passages in the *Tao Te Ching* that read almost like the Sermon on the Mount.

> One who would guide a leader of men in the uses of life
> Will warn him against the use of arms for conquest.
> Even the finest arms are an instrument of evil.
> An army's harvest is a waste of thorns. (ch. 30)

[12] Quoted in K. L. Reichelt's translation of the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* in his *Meditation and Piety in the Far East* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), p. 102.

Weapons are the tools of violence;
all decent men detest them.
Weapons are the tools of fear;
a decent man will avoid them
except in the direst necessity
and, if compelled, will use them
only with the utmost restraint.
Peace is the highest value. . . .
He enters a battle gravely,
with sorrow and with great compassion,
as if he were attending a funeral. (ch. 31)

That in China the scholar ranked at the top of the social scale may have been Confucius' doing, but Taoism is fully as responsible for placing the soldier at the bottom. "The way for a vital person to go is not the way of a soldier." Only one "who recognizes all people as members of his or her own body is qualified to guard them. . . . Heaven arms with compassion those whom she would not see destroyed."

War is a somber matter, and Taoism spoke to life's solemn, somber issues. Yet it always retained a quality of lightness verging on gaiety. There is a sophistication, an urbanity, a charm about the perspective that is infectious. "He who feels punctured," notes the *Tao Te Ching*, "must once have been a bubble." The economy, directness, and good humor in such a statement is typical of its entire outlook. In its freedom from a heavy-booted approach to life, Taoism is at one with the rest of China; but it is also, as we have seen, free of the Confucian tendency toward rigidity and formalism. Taoist literature is full of dialogues with Confucianists in which the latter come off as stuffy and pompous. An instance is the story of the Taoist Chuang Tzu and the Confucian Hui Tzu, who on an afternoon's stroll came to a bridge over the Hao River. "Look how the minnows dart hither and thither at will. Such is the pleasure fish enjoy," Chuang Tzu remarked. "You are not a fish," responded Hui Tzu. "How do you know what gives pleasure to fish?" "You are not I," said Chuang Tzu. "How do you know I don't know what gives pleasure to fish?"

Conclusion

Circling around each other like *yin* and *yang* themselves, Taoism and Confucianism represent the two indigenous poles of the Chinese character. Confucius represents the classical, Lao Tzu the romantic. Confucius stresses social responsibility, Lao Tzu praises spontaneity and naturalness. Confucius' focus is on the human, Lao Tzu's on what

transcends the human. As the Chinese themselves say, Confucius roams within society, Lao Tzu wanders beyond. Something in life reaches out in each of these directions, and Chinese civilization would certainly have been poorer if either had not appeared.

There are books whose first reading casts a spell that is never quite undone, the reason being that they speak to the deepest "me" in the reader. For all who quicken at the thought that anywhere, at every time, the *Tao* is within us, the *Tao Te Ching* is such a book. Mostly it has been so for the Chinese, but an American poet can equally find it "the straightest, most logical explanation as yet advanced for the continuance of life, the most logical use yet advised for enjoying it."[13] Though obviously never practiced to perfection, its lessons of simplicity, openness, and wisdom have been for millions of Chinese a joyful guide.

> There is a being, wonderful, perfect;
> It existed before heaven and earth.
> How quiet it is!
> How spiritual it is!
> It stands alone and it does not change.
> It moves around and around, but does not on this account suffer.
> All life comes from it.
> It wraps everything with its love as in a garment, and
> yet it claims no honor, it does not demand to be Lord.
> I do not know its name, and so I call it Tao, the Way,
> and I rejoice in its power.[14]

"Taoism" by Huston Smith

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[13] Bynner, *The Way of Life*, pp. 12-13.

[14] Adapted from K. L. Reichelt's translation of the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* in his *Meditation and Piety*, 41.