

Early Spring, Guo Xi, 1072

Daoism

The painting, *Early Spring*, by Guo Xi is one of the most famous and important works of art from China and it brilliantly suggests the way, *dao* 道, of the Daoist philosophers. Just as Confucian philosophy might be described as a 'humanism', Daoism may be considered a 'naturalism.' For Confucius the *dao* emerges from human beings, from the capacity of human beings to develop human virtues; but for the Daoist philosophers, this perspective is too narrow. They suggest that human beings need to get a much wider perspective and see human beings within the vastness of 'heaven and earth,' *tiandi* 天地. What this meant for the ancient Chinese might best be rendered as "nature" or "the cosmos," for *tian* 天 did not mean "heaven" in an otherworldly sense, but rather simply, the sky above, especially the night sky, in which the vastness of the universe is opened up. Even within

Earth, *di* 地, the human being, *ren* 人, is very small, barely a recognizable speck in the image of the painting here. Whereas the Confucians look for the *dao* in human civilization, the Daoists recommend attending to nature and its patterns, and trying as best as possible to see what is human in the perspective of the vast, *da* 大.

Like all classical Chinese philosophy, Daoism emerged during the time of the Warring States, when ancient China was divided into states that were constantly at war leading to much death and destruction. The Daoists were concerned to find a way that would allow for a better life. Although they emphasized an acceptance of the inevitability of death, they valued longevity, and thus they recommended a way that would make possible a long and flourishing life. To this end they recommended simplicity, living a life of modest desires, interfering the least with the natural world, and thus living in harmony with the rhythm of 'heaven and earth'.

In the *Yijing*, the ancient *Book of Changes* that influenced the Daoist philosophers, this rhythm involved the oscillation of the polarities of *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. All things, according to this view, are not made of unchanging substances, but rather a vital creative energy-stuff, *qi* 氣, that is always in the process of change from *yin* and *yang* and *yang* back to *yin*. The polarities of *yin* and *yang* are thus phases in the transition of the *qi* 氣 from what is *yin*—receptive, dark, downward, hidden, passive, yielding, cool, soft, empty and feminine, to what is *yang*—creative, bright, upward, active, aggressive, controlling, hot, hard, full and masculine. It is interesting that the Daoist philosophers emphasize the *yin*. Thus, in the *Daodejing*, the first of the texts of Daoist philosophy, the *dao* is suggested in female imagery. The *dao* is like the great mother of the myriad things. It is also like an empty, *wu* 無, vessel. This emphasis on the *yin* is suggested in Chinese landscape painting, as in this painting, where, in stark contrast to Western landscape painting, the landscape emerges out of the emptiness in the background. The *dao* is also suggested to be like flowing water, perhaps especially like the cool mountain streams that make their way downward, softly working their way through the hardness of the rocks on their way to the sea.



Laozi on an Ox, Zhang Lu, Ming Dynasty

There are three important texts of ancient Daoist philosophy, sometimes referred to simply by the name of the supposed authors, the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi*. The first book, the beginning of Daoism, is sometimes called the *Daodejing*, the *Book of the Way* (*dao* 道) and its Power (*de* 德). Its legendary author, Laozi (老子) is depicted in a famous painting riding an ox, holding in his hand a scroll that is the text of the *Daodejing*. The story suggested by the image is a key part of the legend of Laozi. Whereas Confucius emphasized the importance of taking on a responsible role in society, being a ruler or at least holding some office and serving as a role model for the people, Laozi is depicted here riding that ox on his way out of the city. He is about to pass through the gate of the city, and there he will hand the text off to the gatekeeper, and then disappear forever into the mountains. Laozi is mentioned in the later texts, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi*, and it is suggested there that he is an older contemporary of Confucius, which would place him in the sixth century BCE. Most scholars are now convinced that there may not have existed a single person named "Laozi" who wrote the book. The name simply means "Old (*lao*) Master (*zi*)," and was probably just a name given to an anthology of

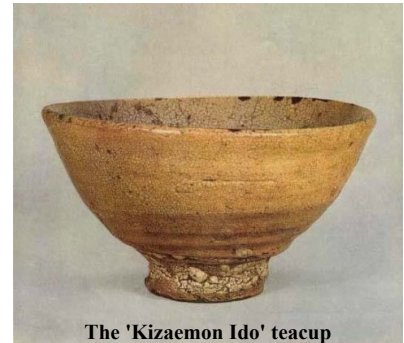
sayings written by a number of individuals who lived in the time just after Confucius. Nevertheless, for convenience it perhaps makes sense to still refer to an author named Laozi.

The *Laozi* puts forth a conception of the *dao* very different from the *dao* of Confucius; and yet it begins with a most puzzling, paradoxical, enigmatic line—the most famous line in all of Chinese philosophy—"the *dao* that can be put into words is not really the *dao*." It is a simple line, but it has been translated many different ways leading to various interpretations of Daoism. Sometimes it is rendered: "the *dao* that can be told, or spoken of, is not the eternal, or constant, *dao*." A common interpretation suggests that Daoism is some kind of mysticism. The book tells of a *dao* that is beyond words, ineffable, and thus knowable, not by the rational intellect, but rather only through intuition. A more pragmatic interpretation suggests that the opening line is perhaps just a warning. Whereas Confucius was quite confident that the *dao* could be put into words, greatly emphasizing the importance of correct terminology or proper naming, *zhengming* 正名, the next line of the *Laozi* says "the name that can be named is not really the name" and the line after that says "the nameless, *wuming* 無名, is the beginning of heaven and earth, *tiandi* 天地." The obvious question raised by the opening line of the text is that if, indeed, the *dao* cannot be put into words, why then did Laozi go on to write the book? Perhaps the book is an attempt to suggest or point to the *dao* in words, and the opening line is just a caution not to take the words that follow as the fixed and final words that forever capture the *dao*.

The yin emphasis of the text is suggested in the imagery of water, the feminine, and the emptiness of a clay vessel, and also in a number of words or concepts, such as the "nameless, *wuming* 無名," which feature the character *wu* 無. By itself, *wu* can mean 'empty', but in conjunction with another character it can express negation, such as in perhaps the most important of these terms, *wuwei* 無為, which is often translated simply as "no action" or "non-action."

Thus, there is also *wuyu* 無欲, meaning 'no desire' or 'without desire', *wuzhi* 無知, meaning 'no knowledge' or 'without cleverness', *wuyong* 無用, meaning 'no use' or 'useless'. Each of these terms require careful attention to the context of the passages in which they occur as well as to the sense of the text as a whole if one does not want to misunderstand what is said in sticking to a too literal translation. Thus *wuwei* is thought not to literally mean 'no action' but to suggest rather a certain kind of action, action that is not forced, forceful or contrived, but natural and spontaneous. A famous verse at the end of chapter 25 reads: "Human beings emulate the earth, the earth emulates the heavens, the heavens emulate the *dao*, and the *dao* emulates what is spontaneously so, *ziran* 自然." The implication of this verse suggests that in order to live more in harmony or in tune with the *dao*, it is necessary to act spontaneously.

As the title *Daodejing* suggests, Laozi's text also is about *de* 德, 'power' or 'potency.' Each person, and indeed every living creature, has a particular power or potency that is expressed in how it lives. It has been suggested that *de* might be understood as "an inner source of power that expands outwardly as a kind of charismatic influence."¹ The intriguing paradox of the *Daodejing* is that it suggests that the most powerful potency or charisma is not the aggressive, male *yang* force, but the passive, female, *yin*. A verse in chapter 28 recommends that one "know the male, but keep to the role of the female." It goes on to suggest that the most powerful *de* comes from being like a "river gorge." This may not make sense unless one considers a verse in chapter 78 that says "there is nothing more soft and weak (*yin* qualities) as water" and yet "nothing more effective in attacking what is hard and strong." This is how the water of the river cuts through the hardness of rock to form a gorge. In chapter 28 Laozi goes on to suggest that in being more *yin*, following the female, and thus being like a river gorge, one returns to a state of a newborn babe or, in another important image, the state of an uncarved or unworked block of wood, *pu* 樸. Both of these images suggest a sense of naturalness, as in a newborn babe that has yet to lose its natural tendencies through cultural conditioning, or the natural simplicity of the uncarved wood. This notion of natural simplicity, *pu* 樸, has had a profound influence on East Asian aesthetics, a nice example of which is a simple teacup, the 'Kizaemon Ido,' that is one of the national treasures of Japan. This cup is not overworked like the baroque teacups of Europe, but instead is made with the slightest touch of the potter's hands, preserving the natural simplicity of a simple clay vessel.



The 'Kizaemon Ido' teacup

One of the most interesting questions regarding Daoist philosophy concerns just why there is such an emphasis on *yin*. How are *yin* and *yang* in a balanced relationship if *yin* is somehow more important? Perhaps the *yin* phase of the changes, the movement toward rest, toward passivity and non-action, is more primordial. Perhaps also, the *yin* emphasis of the *Daodejing* and the later development of Daoism, might be understood as a response to the time of the Warring States. In Chinese medicine all illness can be understood as due to an excess of *yang* or *yin*, when the balance between the two is lost. Thus, if the condition is too *yin*, a *yang* remedy will be prescribed, whereas if the condition is too *yang*, a *yin* remedy is used. Thus, perhaps Daoism may be understood as a *yin* remedy to a time that was out of joint due to an excess of *yang*, which the period of the Warring States surely must have been.

¹ Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 16.

It is interesting to reflect on the possible relevance of Daoist philosophy in our time. Considering the propensity for war and violence in the world today, perhaps our society too suffers from an excess of *yang*. The environmental crisis and the problem of climate change are obviously also due to too much human activity, polluting the waters, the land, and the air we breathe, and burning so much fossil fuel that the Earth's fragile climate system is being thrown out of balance. In responding to the crisis of their time, the Daoist philosophers sought to understand the difference between nature, or 'heaven and earth,' *tiandi* 天地, and human beings *ren* 人. To think about this issue consider a difference between whales and human beings. Marine biologists have come to understand how, just without even trying, by spontaneously doing what they do without even thinking about it, that whales help maintain the health of the oceans and even positively affect the Earth's climate. It turns out that whales fertilize the upper "sunlight" zone of the ocean. Their waste emissions feed the plankton in the "sunlight" zone and this leads to more sea life. Since plankton absorb carbon from the atmosphere, whales actually have a positive impact on the climate. Scientists now think that impact was significant at the height of the whale population. Human beings, in contrast, hunted the whales for food to eat and oil to burn for light resulting in a dramatic decline in whale populations. Most human waste cannot be recycled and absorbed back into the biosphere and this leads to the problem of pollution. There is a very strong consensus, about 97% of climate scientists agree, that human activity is causing the average global temperature to dramatically rise. It is now understood that the Earth's climate is fragile and that a rise in average global temperature of only a few degrees centigrade can lead to a 'tipping point' beyond which there is no return to a stable climate that has enabled the evolution of life on Earth. Scientists are in agreement that we have a problem and that human activity is the cause of the problem, but they still debate just how close we are to the 'tipping point.' It is becoming abundantly clear, however, that human civilization is driving the planet toward extinction. If there is going to be a foreseeable future for human beings and most of life on Earth, it is becoming more and more obvious that modern human civilization must change. Human beings must become more like the whales. Is it possible for human beings to live in a way that will not have a destructive impact on the environment and the climate? Humans evolved for thousands of years without having an impact that threatened the future of life on Earth. It is clear that it has been the development of modern technology and the Industrial Revolution that has led to the imbalance that now exists between human beings and nature. Is the only solution a return to a pre-Industrial civilization, or can there be a development of a modern technological civilization that is truly sustainable, relying on sustainable energy instead of burning fossil fuels, and capable of recycling all of its waste back into the biosystem?



Is Daoism relevant at all for us today? Do we need now perhaps more than ever to move more toward *yin*? What follows are some selections from the *Laozi* or *Daodejing*.

Tim Freeman
Lecture Notes on Daoism
Introduction to Asian Philosophy

道 *Dao*
 德 *De*
 經 *Jing*

1

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.
 A name that can be named is not a constant name.
 Nameless (*wuming*), it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;
 Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures.
 And so,
 Always eliminate desires in order to observe its mysteries;
 Always have desires in order to observe its manifestations.
 These two come forth in unity but diverge in name.
 Their unity is known as an enigma.
 Within this enigma is yet a deeper enigma.
 The gate of all mysteries!

無名
wuming

2

Everyone in the world knows that when the beautiful strives to be beautiful, it is repulsive.
 Everyone knows that when the good strives to be good, it is no good.
 And so,
 To have and to lack generate each other.
 Difficult and easy give form to each other.
 Long and short off-set each other.
 High and low incline into each other.
 Note and rhythm harmonize with each other.
 Before and after follow each other.
 This is why the sages abide in the business of nonaction (*wuwei*),
 and practice the teaching that is without words.
 They work with the myriad creatures and turn none away.
 They produce without possessing,
 They act with no expectation of reward.
 When their work is done, they do not linger,
 And, by not lingering, merit never deserts them.



陽

Yang

male
 brightness
 something
 doing something
 knowledge
 full
 above
 before
 moving
 big
 strong
 hard
 straight

陰

Yin

female
 darkness
 nothing
 doing nothing
 ignorance
 empty
 below
 behind
 still
 small
 weak
 soft
 bent

3

Not paying honor to the worthy leads the people to avoid contention.
 Not showing reverence for precious goods leads them not to steal.
 Not making a display of what is desirable leads their hearts away from chaos.
 This is why sages bring things to order by opening people's hearts (*xin*) and filling their bellies.
 They weaken the people's commitments and strengthen their bones;
 They make sure that the people are without knowledge (*wuzhi*) or desires (*wuyu*);
 And that those with knowledge do not dare to act.
 Sages enact nonaction (*wuwei*) and everything becomes well ordered.

[In the Chinese conception of human beings, there is no distinction between the heart and the mind. Thus *xin* could be rendered "heart-mind."]

4

The Way is like an empty vessel;
 No use could ever fill it up.
 Vast and deep!
 It seems to be the ancestor of the myriad creatures.
 It blunts their sharpness;
 Untangles their tangles;
 Softens their glare;
 Merges with their dust.
 Deep and clear!
 It seems to be there.
 I do not know whose child it is;
 It is the image of what was before the Lord himself.

5

Heaven and earth are not benevolent (*ren*);
 They treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.
 Sages are not benevolent;
 They treat the people as straw dogs.
 Is not the space between Heaven and earth (*tian*) like a bellows?
 Empty yet inexhaustible!
 Work it and more will come forth.
 An excess of speech will lead to exhaustion.
 It is better to hold on to the mean.

["Straw dogs" were used as ceremonial offerings. Before and during the ceremony they were protected and cherished, but as soon as the ceremony ended, they were discarded and defiled. Since benevolence (*ren*) is one of the most important Confucian virtues, the text here challenges Confucianism. Heaven (*tian*) is treated in the *Daodejing* as the impersonal forces of nature or the regular operations of the natural world. *Tian* is often used as an abbreviation for *tiandi* "Heaven and earth."]

6

The spirit of the valley never dies;
 She is called the “Enigmatic Female.”
 The portal of the Enigmatic Female;
 Is called the root of Heaven and earth.
 An unbroken, gossamer thread;
 It seems to be there.
 But use will not unsettle it.

[The valley spirit is called *xuanpin*, from *xuan* (mysterious, profound, secret, dark) and *pin* (woman, mother, womb); thus, the “hidden creator,” or “enigmatic” or “dark female” is the *men tiandi* “gate” of Heaven and Earth. The image of the “portal” or “gateway” of the female is used as an analogy for the source or the “root” of Heaven and earth (or all things).]

7

Heaven is long lasting;
 Earth endures.
 Heaven is able to be long lasting and earth is able to endure,
 because they do not live for themselves.
 And so, they are able to be long lasting and to endure.
 This is why sages put themselves last and yet come out first;
 Treat themselves as unimportant and yet are preserved.
 Is it not because they have no thought of themselves,
 that they are able to perfect themselves?

8

The highest good is like water.
 Water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures, while not contending with them.
 It resides in the places that people find repellent, and so comes close to the Way.
 In a residence, the good lies in location.
 In hearts, the good lies in depth.
 In interactions with others, the good lies in being gentle and kind.
 In words, the good lies in trustworthiness.
 In government, the good lies in orderliness.
 In carrying out one’s business, the good lies in ability.
 In actions, the good lies in timeliness.
 Only by avoiding contention can one avoid blame.

9

To hold the vessel upright in order to fill it is not as good as to stop in time.
 If you make your blade too keen it will not hold its edge.
 When gold and jade fill the hall none can hold on to them.
 To be haughty when wealth and honor come your way is to bring disaster upon yourself.
 To withdraw when the work is done is the Way of Heaven.

10

Embracing your soul and holding on to the One,
 can you keep them from departing.
 Concentrating your *qi*, “vital energies,” and attaining the utmost suppleness,
 can you be a child?
 Cleaning and purifying your enigmatic mirror, can you erase every flaw?
 Caring for the people and ordering the state, can you eliminate all knowledge?
 When the portal of Heaven opens and closes, can you play the part of the feminine?
 Comprehending all within the four directions, can you reside in nonaction (*wuwei*)?
 To produce them!
 To nurture them!
 To produce without possessing;
 To act with no expectation of reward;
 To lead without lording over;
 Such is Enigmatic Virtue (*de*).

氣
Qi

無為
wuwei

11

Thirty spokes are joined in the hub of a wheel.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the carriage.
 By adding and removing clay we form a vessel.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the vessel.
 By carving out doors and windows we make a room.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the room.
 And so, what is there is the basis for profit.
 What is not there is the basis for use.

15

In ancient times, the best and most accomplished scholars;
 Were subtle, mysterious, enigmatic, and far-reaching,
 Their profundity was beyond understanding.
 Because they were beyond understanding, only with difficulty can we try to describe them:
 Poised, like one who must ford a stream in winter.
 Cautious, like one who fears his neighbors on every side.
 Reserved, like a visitor.
 Opening up, like ice about to break.
 Honest, like the unhewn wood (*pu*).
 Broad, like a valley.
 Turbid, like muddy water.

樸
Pu

Who can, through stillness, gradually make muddied water clean?
Who can, through movement, gradually stir to life what has long been still?
Those who preserve this Way do not desire fullness.
And, because they are not full, they have no need for renewal.

18

When the great Way is abandoned, there are benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*).
When wisdom and intelligence come forth, there is great hypocrisy.
When the six familial relationships are out of balance, there are kind parents and filial children.
When the state is in turmoil and chaos, there are loyal ministers.

19

Cut off sageliness, abandon wisdom, and the people will benefit one-hundred-fold.
Cut off benevolence, abandon righteousness, and the people will return to being filial and kind.
Cut off cleverness, abandon profit, and robbers and thieves will be no more.
This might leave the people lacking in culture.
So give them something with which to identify:
 Manifest plainness. Embrace Simplicity.

22

Those who are crooked will be perfected.
Those who are bent will be straight.
Those who are empty will be full.
Those who are worn will be renewed.
Those who have little will gain.
Those who have plenty will be confounded.
This is why the sages embrace the One and serve as models for the whole world.
 They do not make a display of themselves and so are illustrious.
 They do not affirm their own views and so are well-known.
 They do not brag about themselves and so are accorded merit.
 They do not boast about themselves and so are heard of for a long time.
Because they do not contend, no one in the world can contend with them.
The ancient saying “Those who are crooked will be perfect” is not without substance!
Truly the sages are and remain perfect.

23

To be sparing with words is what comes naturally.
And so,

A blustery wind does not last all morning;
 A heavy downpour does not last all day.
 Who produces these?
 Heaven and earth!
 If not even Heaven and earth can keep things going for a long time,
 How much less can human beings?
 This is why one should follow the Way in all that one does.
 One who follows the Way identifies with the Way.
 One who follows loss identifies with loss.
 The Way is pleased to have those who identify with the Way.
 Virtue is pleased to have those who identify with Virtue.
 Loss is pleased to have those who identify with loss.
 Those lacking in trust are not trusted.

25

There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and earth.
 Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging.
 It goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.
 One can regard it as the mother of Heaven and earth.
 I do not know its proper name;
 I have given it the style “the Way.”
 Forced to give it a proper name, I would call it “Great.”
 The Great passes on;
 What passes on extends into the distance;
 What extends into the distance returns to its source.
 And so the Way is great;
 Heaven is great;
 Earth is great;
 And a true king too is great.
 In the universe are four things that are great and the true king is first among them.
 People (*ren*) model themselves on the earth (*di*).
 The earth models itself on Heaven (*tian*).
 Heaven models itself on the Way (*dao*).
 The Way models itself on what is natural (*ziran*).

人
*ren*地
*di*天
*tian*道
*dao*自然
ziran

* * *