

## THE MEANING OF TAO

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According to the Taoist tradition, the fundamental consideration of Tao is not epistemological but ontological. What is Tao itself? The only way we can get an answer is through our inner awareness in which our innermost being interfuses with the ultimate reality of all things. This inexpressible inner experience is illustrated in the analogy in which it is said: "You drink water and you know if it is warm or cold." In other words, Tao is conceived of as self-realization, a process of psychic integration, which, to be properly understood, requires long years of self-cultivation and cannot be conveyed verbally. Therefore, I will not concern myself today with a discussion of Tao as self-realization, but I will instead present to you the basic principles of Tao.

In our daily empirical life we are constantly drawing distinctions between things. They are high or low, long or short, black or white, yin or yang. These polarities are infinite in number. The Taoist would ask whether there is any possibility of finding unity within this diversity, and if so, in what way are these opposites related to each other? Chuang Tzu puts the problem thus: "because a thing is greater than other things, we call it great; therefore all things in the world have an opportunity to be great. Because a thing is smaller than other things, we call it small; therefore all things in the world

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at same time might be called small." How, then, can we call a thing great or small? As a matter of fact, any measurement is relative, temporary, and constantly subject to change. One coin is said to be heavier than another coin, yet lighter than a third. Consequently, in reality the coin possesses the seemingly opposed qualities of heavy and light at the same time.

In his work, in the chapter "On the Identity of All Things," Chuang Tzu devotes himself entirely to expounding the unification and interfusion of all things. Chuang Tzu maintains that Tao is obscured by inadequate understanding, exemplified in the disagreement between the Confucian and Moist schools, each denying what the other affirms and affirming what the other denies. There is no real distinction between affirmation and negation, says Chuang Tzu. He goes on to say that "as soon as there is affirmation, there is negation; as soon as there is negation, there is affirmation. There is nothing which is not this, and there is nothing which is not that." Is there any real distinction between this and that, between affirmation and negation? When this and that are *not* placed in polar positions, we come to the central principle of Tao. Thus, according to Chuang Tzu's idea, if we understand that all measurements are relative and subject to change, and we are not confused by these arbitrary distinctions and determinations, we will then have the absolute freedom necessary to the achievement of Enlightenment.

It is interesting to note that in addition to the ontological concept of this process of identification, as described by Chuang Tzu, there emerges a latent logical process as well. The Taoists maintain that every assertion bears within itself its own opposite, so that when anything is asserted, its opposite necessarily is asserted at the same time. Lao Tzu explained in the second chapter of his book that when beauty is universally recognized as beauty, its opposite, ugliness, emerges. Similarly, when goodness is universally recognized, its opposite, evil, must appear too. Thus, being and non-being, easy and difficult, long and short, high and low, front and back, and other polarities are mutually produced by this logical process of transition. However, this transitional process does not only occur within polarities, but is, rather, a continuous sequence of negation and affirmation. As Chuang Tzu himself expounded in the second chapter of his work: "there is beginning, there is no beginning. There is no

no-beginning. There is being, there is non-being. There is no non-being." This idea of logical transition was later developed in his book into a rough sketch of a theory of biological evolution. In chapter 18 of his work, we have the illustration of constant transition by tracing back the origin of living things from the germ to plants, from plants to animal creatures, with man finally emerging. Whether there is any real scientific contribution to the theory of evolution in his specific observations is not important here, but his illustration does indicate an awareness of the natural development of living things through the constant process of affirmation and negation.

This process of constant interaction was originally conceived by Lao Tzu as a creative net. As he says in chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*: "from the Tao, One is created. From the One, Two; from the Two, Three; from the Three, Ten Thousand Things." The numbers as used here are simply to indicate the creative process of affirmation and negation.

For Taoists, nothing in nature exists isolated by itself. Rather, all things are interdependent. Thus, no phenomenon in nature can be truly understood by separating it from other things. However, the interaction of these things, as we have previously pointed out, is not limited to polar entities. Taoists also expound their organic concept of the unity of multiplicity, or Oneness, as it is often called. In chapter 25 of the work of Chuang Tzu, he says: "when we point to the different parts of the horse's body, we do not thereby have a horse. But when we conceive the integration of all parts of the body, then we have a horse in front of us." This organic concept of unity illustrates the formation of the whole through the interrelation of all the parts, that is, the discordant parts unite together to form a harmonious whole. When all parts unify themselves into an organic whole, each part breaks through its own shell and interfuses with every other part; each identifies itself with every other one. Thus, one is in many and many are in one. In this way, all particularities dissolve into one and all parts of the whole disappear into every other part in the whole. Each individual merges into every other individual; it is through this unity in multiplicity that the interfusion and identification of each individuality serves its function in the creation of the whole. This idea has been illustrated by Lao Tzu in chapter 11 of his book:

Thirty spokes joined at the hub.  
 From their non-being  
 Comes the function of the wheel.

Shape clay into a vessel.  
 From its non-being  
 Comes the function of the vessel.

The wheel is the unity of the spokes, and the vessel is the unity of the clay. In Lao Tzu's sense, the wheel can function as a wheel due to the organic relationships among the spokes. In other words, the interfusion and identification of the parts create a functioning whole.

The Taoists, however, did not stop there. They enlarged their organic concept into more metaphysical insights. As Chuang Tzu once said: "Heaven and Earth and I live together, and therein all things and I are one." This oneness is the product of his ontological awareness, which is invisible and unfathomable. This invisible and unfathomable oneness is called the realm of the Great Infinite. In the realm of the Great Infinite there is neither space nor time. It is, in fact, the realm of non-being which is absolutely free from limitations and distinctions. We have Chuang Tzu's own description of the realm of non-being: "Being is without dwelling place, continuity is without duration. Being without dwelling place is space, continuity without duration is time. There is birth, there is death; there is issuing forth, there is entering in. That through which one passes in and out without seeing its form—that is the Gate of Heaven. The Gate of Heaven is Non-Being. All things sprang from Non-Being." (c. 23) Non-Being is the higher unity of all things. It is the invisible and unfathomable Absolute Reality of all potentialities and possibilities of the universe. So Lao Tzu calls it the Great, which means infinite, boundless, and immeasurable. When we think of this immeasurableness, it gives us some sort of insight into the timelessness of time and the spacelessness of space. It is the absolute moment which opens the secret to the existence of all things, and frees us from previous rational conditioning and limitations. When Lao Tzu called Tao the "Mother of All Things," he referred to the realm of Non-Being as the primordial source of every beginning, the Absolute Reality from which all birth issues forth.

The Taoist organic concept has greatly influenced both Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism. As we know, *I Ching* or the *Book of Changes* is the product of the synthesis of Confucianism, the Yin-Yang school, and Taoist philosophy. The highest stage of "Unimpeded mutual solution" or "Shih Shih Yuan Yung Wu Ai" of the Hua Yen school of seventh century Buddhism has been related to Chuang Tzu's metaphysics by Chinese scholars. And later, the Neo-Confucianism of the eleventh century further developed the theory that "T'ai Chi" or "Ultimate" and "Li" or "Principle" are all related to this organic concept of the early Taoist. The basic organic concept of Taoist philosophy can be illustrated by the notion of creativity and sympathy. When all potentialities of the absolute realm of non-being or the infinite penetrates into every diversity, one embraces all particularities and enters into each. Such a process represents the Great Creativity. On the other hand, when all potentialities of every diversity unite into one, each particularity embraces all other particularities together penetrating into the realm of Non-Being. This process represents the activity of the Great Sympathy. From the point of view of sympathy, we see Tao as the synthesis of infinite possibilities and potentialities. This is the unity of particularities or multiplicities. From the point of view of Creativity, we see Tao as a radiative dispersion into infinite multiplicities and particularities. Thus, Creativity goes in the opposite direction from Sympathy. In short, Sympathy moves from all to One, Creativity moves from One to all. Without Sympathy there is no ground for fulfillment of potentialities to support Creativity. Without Creativity there is no means of actuality to reveal Sympathy. Sympathy and Creativity move together hand in hand. Each represents an aspect of the process between One and all, the fundamental phenomenon of Taoist organic philosophy.

The metaphysical structure of the Sympathy is the realm of Absolute Reality in which everything breaks through the shell of itself and interfuses with every other thing. All the multiplicities and diversities of the universe interpenetrate one another and enter into the realm of Absolute Reality. In the Taoist ideal community, man makes no artificial effort toward morality, but his self is merged with other selves and all other selves are in turn merged into his self. Neither the individual nor the group is consciously aware of or pur-

posefully directed toward this. Chuang Tzu's description of this manner of living appears in chapter 12 of his work: "They loved one another without knowing that to do so was benevolence. They were sincere without knowing that this was loyalty. They kept their promises without knowing that to do so was to be in good faith. Thus their actions left no trace and we have no record of their affairs."

What Chuang Tzu means by "no trace" is an explanation of the character of identification in the realm of Non-Being. Men in the realm of Non-Being are those who did not lose their original nature. As he says further:

in the days of perfect nature, men were quiet in their movements and serene in their looks. They lived together with birds and beasts without distinctions of kind. There was no difference between the gentleman and the common man. Being equally without knowledge, nothing came between them (ch. 9).

This world of perfect nature is a world of free interfusion and unification among men and between men and all things. Between all multiplicities and diversities there existed no boundaries. Men could work with men and all could share spontaneously. Each identified with the other and all lived together as one. Man lived an innocent and primitive life, yet there was no conceit nor selfishness. In this simplicity and purity we see the free movement of the reality of man. This we cannot expect in a world merely moral and intellectual, full of distinctions and differentiations. Only in the world of absolutely free identity does the Great Sympathy exist; the universal force which holds together man and man and all things.

When we regard the realm of Non-Being as the ontological basis for the fulfillment of the Great Sympathy, it is to see Tao as interfusion and identification of infinite potentialities and possibilities. Thus the realm of Non-Being serves as the unit of multiplicities and diversities. But when we approach Tao from the reverse direction, we see Tao as having penetrated into infinite multiplicity and into the manifold diversities of existence. Thus, it is the dispersion of potentialities and possibilities from universality to particularity, and the fulfillment of the process of the Great Creativity. In the process of creativity each particularity reveals the potentiality of all universalities. Kuo Hsiang of fourth century gives us an illustration of this

concept: "a man is born but six feet tall. . . . However insignificant his body may be, it takes a whole universe to support it." To see the unity within multiplicity is to see infinite potentialities manifested in each particularity. This insight is the Taoist contribution to the understanding of creativity.

Chuang Tzu gives us an illustration of this idea in his example of the centipede. From the relative point of view, the insect, of course, does have its hundred or so different legs. But from the higher point of view, there is a unification of multiplicity. The coordinated movement of all the legs is a manifestation of unity. From this unity we see the centipede as a whole. All has penetrated into One. And the movement of all the legs is an interpretation of the One into all.

When One enters into all, One embraces all particularities and enters into each. Such a process represents the Great Creativity, which is supported by all the vitality of Sympathy. When creativity manifests itself, the potentialities of all the infinite particularities enter into each particularity. Lao Tzu says: "obtaining the One, Heaven was made clear. Obtaining the one, Earth was made stable. Obtaining the One, the Gods were made spiritual. Obtaining the One, the valley was made full. Obtaining the One, all things lived and grew." The One which is possessed by Heaven and Earth and Gods and all things is the same One, the Tao. In other words, they all embrace the same One, the Tao, and the same One, the Tao, embraces and pervades them all.

What I have said may seem to indicate that Tao is no different from mysticism. However, we must realize that Tao in its organic concept has been accepted by modern scientists. As Joseph Needham has stated in his work on *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. II: "the unity of nature is the basic assumption of natural science." Alfred North Whitehead speaks of the transition from Newtonian cosmology to the new philosophy of organism, saying that modern physics has abandoned the idea of Hume's "simple location" and considers energy not as localized but pervading time and space. Inorganic atoms as well as living cells turn out to be highly organized centers of ceaseless activity. The influences of each entity stream away even into the utmost recesses of the universe. There is no mysterious underlying substratum. Thus the process of the interrelations of events around us is the primary reality, and all else is derivative

from that. Whitehead clearly stated in his book *Science and the Modern World* that "this reality occurs in the history of thought under many names, the Absolute, Brahman, Order of Heaven . . ." The Order of Heaven is what we called the Tao. With this background in mind I believe we will better understand the essence of Tao.