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[Edited transcript]

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Well, thank you very much. Thank you to Kan Laoshi （阚老师）for inviting me to this talk at Open University and to Xu Laoshi (徐老师) for helping out and to everyone here for joining us today.

Daoism is one of the least understood major world religions; there are so many misconceptions about it, and one of the biggest misconceptions is that there are two different things, T *philosophy* and T *religion*. This mistake between making this one thing, the T tradition, into two different things exists in China as well. This mistake is not the focus of my talk, but I just wanted to get that out there because the root of this mistake goes pretty deep.

Both words, philosophy and religion are Western concepts that don't really map on to Chinese systems of knowledge. They're both mistakes perpetuated by Chinese missionaries, but also by Confucians and communists, and this is a mistake that I've heard from Chinese people as well as Western scholars. Usually this mistake, this mistake devalues T *religion* as being full of gods and superstitions and rituals, and it elevates T *philosophy* as being very mystical and profound, but in fact, the two come from the same source and they have continued hand in hand in China for thousands of years. But this isn't the time to get into that. Today's talk is going to be more about T philosophy, but everything I say would be true to any religious T as well, including people who worship the various T gods and participate in T rituals.

So, Daoism, what is it? It's the indigenous religion of China. It's also considered to be a world religion. But unlike other world religions, it does not present itself as having a clear founding date or founder or doctrine or institution. Many different types of people with little in common with each other have claimed an affiliation to this thing called Daoism over the centuries. But one thing all Ts share is a reverence for Laozi.

Laozi is the supposed author of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, which is the subject of the talk today. We don't know much about Laozi as a historical figure. It is said he was a court archivist. It is

said he was a teacher of Confucian. It is said that he wandered off to the west on the back of a buffalo - as you see here in this famous image rendered on the side of a building - and then when he reached the western gate of the Chinese realm, the gate guardian asked him to transmit his wisdom, and he thus composed 5 000 characters on bamboo sticks, and this is what is preserved as the *Dào Dé Jīng*, and then Laozi disappeared into the mountains of the west. But in fact, everything I just said is myth or lies, if you want to be blunt. Quite possibly, nobody named Laozi ever existed. In fact, his name is a bit of a clue because unlike the name of other ancient Chinese thinkers, Laozi is not a personal name at all. It just means 'the old one' or 'the old master', but it could also be plural. The Chinese language doesn't distinguish between singular and plural, so some scholars have speculated that the author of the *Dào Dé Jīng* is in fact 'the old peoples'. In any case, I'm not going to talk about the author, but about the text itself. So, the book at hand is called the *Dào Dé Jīng*, often translated into English as *The Book of the Way and its Virtue*. This is probably the best known T scripture and it's a text about the 'Dao', which means 'way', which is the ultimate source and law of the cosmos. The book essentially talks about how the Tao operates and how we can live in harmony with it.

How is the *Dào Dé Jīng* written? It was, it's about 2500 years old. It was probably an oral transmission first, much like, for example, *The Odyssey*, and we know this because it contains mnemonic devices, formalistic language: *If A, then B*. The text that we have, the most ancient Chinese text, is probably not the original text. There have probably errors in the transmission of the text because the book has plenty of non-sequiturs and repetitions. Some of the chapters begin with 'therefore', which is not something you'd see in normal classical Chinese. The text as we have it is divided into 81 chapters, but actually some of those chapters, logically, should be split together into two. Others of those chapters should probably be woven into one chapter. So, I think the 81 number is somewhat arbitrary, and it has a sort of a significance in Chinese cosmology as the ultimate *Yang* number: 9 x 9 is 81, and 9 is seen as a 'Yang', in the sense of Yin and Yang numbers.

There's also a legend that Laozi spent 81 years in the womb, and so he was born fully old and wise - which makes me feel sorry for Laozi's mother - and I've also heard that some T rituals are performed on an 81 square grid, a 9 x 9 grid.

So the *Dào Dé Jīng* - sometimes it's also called *The Laozi* or *The Book of Laozi*, is a book that has had thousands and thousands of commentaries written about it from various perspectives, including linguistic analysis, including Marxist perspectives, Christian perspectives. Today, there's perspectives analysing Laozi in the frames of modern business management, anything you can think of.

Besides commentaries, the *Dào Dé Jīng* is also probably the second most translated book in the world, the first, of course, being the Bible. There are new translations in English almost every year. Here are six pretty good ones that I like. The second to last is my favourite, and it's the one that I'll be reading from today as I illustrate wisdom of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. This one [translated by Stephen Addis and Stanley Lombardo] is, I think, very blunt; it feels closest to the Chinese original. There are several translations out there written by authors or poets who don't read Chinese and just kind of cobbled their translation together from other versions and sometimes put their own gloss onto it, including probably the best-selling English translation of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, the one by Stephen Mitchell, which I do not recommend. But really, there are so many translations out there you have to find one that you like. So why is *The Laozi* so popular? Why is it the second most translated book in the

world? Why can you find it in any bookstore in the United States, in the UK, I would imagine? In part, I think because it contains no specific references to people and places, unlike many other Chinese classics, there are no names in there, there's no places, and thus, it really works as a timeless, universal, unchanging wisdom text. It doesn't seem to come from any particular place. It seems to be almost universal. But I want to warn against that reading because the *Dào Dé Jīng*, just like every text out there, is a part of the culture which created it, and in this case, a part of Zhou dynasty Chinese culture, and so when I teach this in my classes to undergraduate students here in South Carolina, I always tell my students to read the *Dào Dé Jīng* twice. The first time I tell them to read it as a form of spiritual meditative practise. I tell them, 'Take some deep breaths.' And I tell them - I'm telling you now while you're listening, you might as well, take a few deep breaths – 'Sit in a relaxed yet alert posture, find somewhere quiet, empty your mind and then read the *Dào Dé Jīng* slowly and try to hear each word in your head.' And then I ask them to report on what affects, if any, does reading it in this kind of spiritual meditative way have on you. Then I say, 'Please read it again'. And it doesn't take that long to read it, t's only about 5 000 words. 'The second time, read it as analytically as possible in a variety of ways.' And here are just a few of the ways that I tell my students that they can look at the *Dao De Jing*. The first one is he way they have already read it, as a personal spiritual devotional text, and this is the way I'm presenting it to you today, but there are a lot of other different ways to read it that are not 'either-or'. These are not 'either-or', these are overlapping readings, and it depends which chapters you emphasise, which type of reading you're going to get. Again, today, I'm really going to focus on the first reading here, because I want this to appeal to a large audience, and I want you to be able to get some kind of personal benefit from the *Dào Dé Jīng*. But I think even in this first reading, I'm trying to be fairly true to the original intention of the text. I'm not going to overlay Western mysticism or Buddhism or any other later interpretation of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. I'm going to read it in a way that I think most Ts in China today would agree with. But please don't forget about the other six ways of reading here, which I'm happy to talk about in the Q&A if anyone is interested.

So, as I go along with these kind of lessons from the *Dào Dé Jīng*, I'm going to be reading from my personal copy of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, my favourite translation. If you happen to have a version of the *Dào Dé Jīng* with you, next to you, please follow along with your favourite copy if you like. I'll just be calling out the chapters and then I'll be reading excerpts from each chapter, not the complete chapter, because that would take too long. So, before we get into these kind of lessons, practical lessons, from the *Dào Dé Jīng* as a personal, spiritual or devotional text, we should dive into the question of what is the Dao itself, this title of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. The word 'Dao' literally means, both in Chinese and English, 'road' or 'way', or 'method'. And what it really designates is the nameless and shapeless ultimate reality that produces all things. And one thing that Daoists make clear is that Dao cannot be described directly. So, the very first words of the *Dào Dé Jīng*, the famous first words from Chapter One, and I'm not going to read Chinese because going to just, but that word that those are so famous, even I know the Chinese words. 道可道，非常道；名可名，非常名: 'The Dao called Dao is not Dao. Names can name no lasting name.' The Dao is often described as being vague and subtle, like water, soft and yielding, but is also strong, helpful, and nourishing, also like water. Another good description is in chapter 25: 'Something unformed and complete before heaven and earth were born, solitary and silent, stands alone and unchanging, pervading all things without limit. It is like the mother of all under

heaven, but I don't know its name. Better call it Dao, better call it great.' So, the Dao is the mother of all things, but it is also the animating or maturing force immanent within them. And this immanent force, it's known as a person's 'Dé', and that's the second word in the title of the book, the *Dào **Dé** Jīng*. So this word 'Dé' is sometimes translated as 'virtue', but it can also be translated as 'power' or 'potential'. I think the relationship between Dao and Dé are well described in Chapter 51, which I'm going to turn to now. I'm just going to read the first few lines: 'Dao bears them, Dao nurses them. Events form them. Energy completes them. Therefore, the 10 000 things honour Dao and respect Dao'. So, one could look at it as Dao being nature and Dé as the natural tendencies implanted in us by the Dao. But by now you're asking yourself, 'Well, how does this help me live my best life? Isn't that the title of the talk? Let's get on to it'. So, what I did last week as I was preparing this talk is made-up six 'commandments' of Daoism. And this is kind of nonsense because the *Dào Dé Jīng* does not *command* us to do anything. This is definitely imposing a kind of Western structure on it, but I thought it was fun, and these allow me to read my favourite chapters of the *Dào Dé Jīng* in a kind of organised way. But this is totally arbitrary. I have divided these 6 'commandments' into three 'Don'ts' - things you shouldn't do - and then three things you should do. So here are the six commandments.

The first is 'Be careful of language'. As we already saw in chapter one, the ultimate Dao cannot be described in words. So, be careful of language, because why? Language creates distinction. Let me illustrate by reading the first few lines of chapter 2: 'Recognise beauty, and ugliness is born. Recognise good, and evil is born. 'Is'and 'isn't' produce each other. In short, language discriminates and thereby fails to convey the oneness, the Dao.'
So, language is a limited tool by means of which we can never really discover what is permanent, the Dao. What we should be doing is discovering the Dao within us, to embrace the Dao, the Dao of the universe and its natural tendencies within us and follow its dictates.

But this usually doesn't happen because we become enamoured with everything that's outside us. We use language to divide things up, and then we look around and see all these divisions, and we are drawn out by our material desires to things outside ourselves, to the sensory world. So, I would say the second commandment here is, 'Be careful of the sensory world.' Be careful of all the things we can see and hear and taste and touch. Let's read together chapter 12 to illustrate this point. 'Five colours darken the eyes. Five tones deaden the ears. Five tastes jade the palette. Hunting and racing madden the heart, exotic goods ensnarl human lives.' One of the most important Daoist messages was the idea of or knowing when one has enough.

I'm going to say my third commandment here, and the third of three kind of 'don'ts' or 'be carefuls' or 'warnings' is, 'Be careful of excess.' It's very important in the *Dào Dé Jīng* and in Daoism in general to know when you have enough. Instead of always seeking more and more external things, one should find contentment with whatever one has. You see this message in many different religions and traditions, of course. Be content with the Dao within you. Let's illustrate this with Chapter 46. 'There is no greater calamity than not knowing what is enough. There is no greater fault than desire for success. Therefore, knowing that enough is enough is always enough.' So, again, we should focus on the tendencies within us, not things outside of us. So, then the question is, 'How do we realise this Dao within us? Now we get to our six positive commandments, if you will.

We realise the Dao within us through several different ways. One of the ways is a type of action, another way is a type of meditation. Paradoxically, though, the type of action that

the *Dào Dé Jīng* advocates is actually ‘non-action’ or ‘not acting’. And here's the famous Daoist concept, *Wu Wei*, literally ‘not doing’ or ‘doing anything’. The idea of becoming one with the Dao through doing nothing, through non-action, would seem like a couch potato's dream. I mean, you can be a Daoist by just lying on the couch, watching TV and eating chips or crisps. But that's not what Wu Wei is about. Wu Wei really means that one acts spontaneously, unconsciously, and without motive. One does what should be done without thinking about how it will profit or harm you.

Chapter 63 is a great illustration: ‘Act without acting’. And in Chinese, that's, ‘wei wu wei‘. Wei wu wei. ‘Act without acting, serve without serving, taste without tasting. Map difficult through easy, approach great through narrow. The most difficult things in the world must be accomplished through the easiest. The greatest things in the world must be accomplished through the smallest. Therefore, the sage never attempts great things and so accomplishes them.’ So, we can see here that Wu Wei is certainly not being passive or being lazy. Instead, one attends to all the necessary and unpleasant acts in advance. By taking care of details, larger goals are accomplished without having to make a huge effort or a big deal and without having to take heroic credit for it. By not consciously looking after his or her interests, the Daoist becomes like the enduring Dao. So, it is not very Daoist to be a hero. Being able to attain the Dao also calls for a form of meditation and throughout Daoist history, including today, Daoists tend to meditate, and this practise is embedded within the *Dào Dé Jīng* itself, but you have to know how to read between the lines. It's a kind of oral one-on-one transmission as a guide to meditation, and the terms that Daoists use for meditation are varied. Sometimes it's called ‘embracing the one’ or ‘fasting of the heart-mind’, or my favourite, ‘sitting in forgetfulness’, where you literally just sit and you forget. So, again, the idea is to cut yourself off from the sensory world, from the world of smell and taste and touch. Just close your eyes, don't listen to outside noises. Just calm your mind, rid yourself of desires, and just concentrate on that which pervades everything, the Dao.

Chapter 56 describes this practise well, I think, so let's turn there: ‘Those who know, don't talk. Those who talk, don't know. Block the passage, bolt the gate, blunt the sharp, untie the knot, blend with the light, become one with the dust. This is called original unity.’ So, again, those commands, ‘block the passage, bolt the gate’, might seem kind of arbitrary or mysterious or just some kind of interesting poetry, but if you can actually understand it as a step-by-step guide to achieving calmness during meditation, that you bolt the gate of your mind, you blunt the sharp edges of your mind, you untie the knot of your mind, you blend with the light around you and become one with the dust, and this is called ‘original unity’. And original unity is one of the names for the process of returning to the Dao. Laozi also calls this process elsewhere, ‘embracing the one’ or even ‘concentrating your *qi*. And like I said, these techniques are still used by Daoists today.

The final commandment is kind of a result of practising Wu Wei and practising meditation, and that is, ‘Be like a baby’, because babies don't seem to really do much, but they're pretty strong and powerful if you've been around babies lately. By harmonising your qi, you actually are making yourself weak and soft like a newborn infant, but they're very powerful. So, let's just turn back one chapter and look at chapter 55: ‘Be filled with Dé’, in other words, be filled with virtue or power. ‘Be filled with Dé, like a baby. Wasps, scorpions, and vipers do not sting it. Fierce tigers do not stalk it. Birds of prey do not attack it. Bones weak, muscles soft, but its grasp is tight. It does not yet know union of male and female, but its sex is formed, its vital essence is complete. It can scream all day and not get hoarse. Its harmony

is complete.' Obviously, someone's observing newborns here and just looking at the paradox of how they can scream all day but not get hoarse.

So, those are the six commandments of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. Again, don't take as authoritative; I literally just made them up last week, and I'm happy to talk more about them, but I'd actually like to spend the next 10 or 15 minutes or so talking about the second most famous Daoist philosophical classic, which again is also part of the Daoist religion. And that is *The Book of Zhuangzi*. And I'm going to show you my favourite copy of the *Zhuangzi* here. This is sometimes, you know, people who don't speak Chinese will call it *ChuangTzŭ*. This is the old Giles system of transliteration. This is an older translation by Burton Watson, but it's my favourite translation, although there are several other good ones. The *Zhuangzi* is much more difficult to translate. It's longer and has a lot of place names and people's names and specific references to Zhou dynasty China, so there are a lot fewer translations of the *Zhuangzi*. to choose from, and it's probably much less popular, but I probably prefer it to the *Dào Dé Jīng*. I first read it for a class as a second-year student in university in the late 80s. It was a class on sacred scripture of the world, and it's really no exaggeration to say that this book changed my life forever. It's really the only sacred scripture I know of that's laugh out loud funny. Why is it funny? Because it's full of jokes and paradoxes and humour and wordplay. I encourage you just to read it, and you can find your own favourites.

The *Dào Dé Jīng* and the *Laozi* talk about the Dao, and they talk about harmonising yourself with the Dao, but they do so in a very different way. Whereas the *Dào Dé Jīng* is a kind of mystical, poetic book, very elusive, very concise - as you got the impression of, since I was just reading it - this book is kind of like a, is an encyclopaedic work. It contains stock characters: Confucius is in this book, Laozi himself is in this book, kings and dukes are in this book, mythological beings, fantastic beasts are in this book. Poetry, prose, history, philosophical analysis. People who have analysed the *Zhuangzi* have called it a work of perspectivism. It's a work that seems to preclude privileging any particular truth claim over any other. It casts doubts on social conventions and our notions of common sense. It claims that all judgments and all claims are conditioned by perspective, including its own perspective. One way to think of it is that it suggests that everything you know is wrong, and that kind of appealed to me as an 18-year-old. I'm like, 'Yeah, nobody knows anything'. In a paper that I wrote, I said the Zhuangzi is 'a deconstruction of consensus reality'. And I thought that was very clever, but, again, I was 19 or something. There's been recent commentaries on the *Zhuangzi* by philosophers that compare it to works by Nietzsche or Derrida, which is sort of above my pay grade. But what makes the *Zhuangzi* much better than Nietzsche or Derrida is that it's incredibly readable. It's not tedious at all. Like I said, it's the most funny of all the great classics of the world.

So, the *Zhuangzi* casts doubt on people's perspective, on conventional reality, on common sense, but the *Zhuangzi* is not nihilistic; it doesn't just throw away everything and not believe in anything. What the *Zhuangzi* values is a joy in spontaneity and a joy in freedom of thought. And the best way to do this, according to the *Zhuangzi*, is to be a real human being. The models in the *Zhuangzi*, the people that you're supposed to listen to, the people who make a lot of sense, are usually workmen: butchers, cobblers, cooks, or sometimes bandits, sometimes convicts, often hermits. And let me just close here by talking about the two most famous stories of the *Zhuangzi*. You may have already heard them before but let me just go through them very quick.

The first, which is the subject of so many works of art and music in Chinese culture is the *Zhuangzi's* butterfly dream. It's short enough that I can just read the whole thing, and then I'll just say a word or two of analysis, and we can talk about it later.

> 'Once, Zhuang Zhou' - and that's Zhuangzi's full name; Zhuangii itself means Master Zhuang, and his personal name was Zhou – so, 'Once, Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself, and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable: Zhang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou, who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zuang Zhou and a butterfly, there must be some distinction. This is called the transformation of things.'

So, this is a beautiful story. I tell my students this sounds a little bit like a late-night dorm session when you're sitting around and you're in college and you're like, 'Whoa, what if we're in a dream right now? What if somebody's dreaming us? Who knows? Is this reality?' That's one level of it, this idea that life may be a dream to the person dreaming it.
And, you know, we may just be in the dream of a butterfly. But there's a deeper level as well, and that is revealed, I think, in the last sentence, 'This is called the transformation of things'. And again, remember, this is Zhuang Zhou dreaming he's a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he's Zhuang Zhou. And Zhuangzhi chose the butterfly as the animal. He could have chosen a dragon or an ox or a rabbit or some other animal from the Chinese zodiac or a panda. But he chose a butterfly for a very specific reason, because a butterfly is an animal of transformation. And so, this isn't just about who knows whether we're living in a dream or not. He says between Zhang Zhou and a butterfly, there is 'some distinction'.
They're not one and the same, but one transforms into another through the process of dreams or dreaming, just like a butterfly transforms from a caterpillar into a butterfly through the chrysalis process. So, I think the message here, the deeper message, isn't just that we don't know whether we're awake or dreaming. There's no difference between any two things. That's not really it. It's really that everything changes all the time and the only thing we can be sure of is change, which again is a message that we see in ancient Greek philosophers as well, but I think *Zhuangzi* illustrates it in such a beautiful, poetic, and humorous way. So, that's the last story in the second chapter of *Zhuangzi*. *Zhuangzi* is divided into seven inner chapters and then a whole bunch of outer chapters, which are generally considered not to be written by Zhuangzi himself, but by his students, but there's still some good stuff in there. But the core are the seven inner chapters, and the butterfly dream is the end of chapter 2.

The beginning of chapter 3 is my other second favourite story from the *Zhuangzi*, another very famous story in Chinese culture, and that's *Cook Ding and the Ox*. The story centres upon a very rich man named Lord Wen Hui, and he learns from his cook, from this lowly guy in his kitchen who's charged with carving up the ox. What the cook does is he can slice his ox, preparing it for the sacrifice without dulling his blade at all, because Cook Ding knows where the joints meet and he can slice apart the ox and it just falls apart naturally. Lord Wen Hui marvels at this and says, 'Wow, I've learned so much from you.' There's so many things we can learn from this brief story and I encourage you to read the story yourself. It's a little bit long, I'm not going to read it here, but you can find it online easily, or please buy, do buy a copy of the *Zhuangzi*.

What we can learn from this story, first of all, is something I mentioned earlier, that Zhuangzi really values the contributions of the working people. Here's a rich lord, an educated man, learning from a cook - or a butcher in some translations. And again, we see people, we see carpenters, we see ex-convicts, we see mutilated people, we see decrepit poor people, all being valued for their wisdom. And that's a place where you can find the Dao, according to Zhuangzi. And then secondly, this illustrates a really important process that a lot of modern philosophers and thinkers have used and that's the idea that you're really in the Dao when you're so concentrated on your work that you enter a state of flow. So, Cook Deng is a real Daoist, not because he meditates or he practises Daoism - and maybe he does, we don't know anything about him - but because he's so skilled, he spent so many years studying ox butchery that when he's in the moment, he's in the flow, his knife slices through the tendons of the ox and it falls apart naturally. He never has to sharpen his blade because his blade is never really hitting meat or gristle or bone, it's just slicing through the spaces in between. And this idea of being in a flow state is something that people have related to Daoism. It's this absorption in a task. When you're good enough at a task, it takes a lot of training, but eventually you can forget all your training and just be in the flow. And of course, there's been whole books written on this idea of flow. A lot of athletic coaches talk about being 'in the flow' when you're on the basketball court or on the soccer field or something. It takes a lot of training and skill, but then you forget it all and you're in the moment. This is really something we could learn from from a religious and philosophical perspective and something I think we can use to benefit our own lives.

There's a lot more I could say about this, but I'd really like to hear from you, I'd really like to get some dialogue and questions. Ask me anything. I think we have about 20 minutes to talk. So, thank you for listening and let's get some great questions going.

KAN Qian

Thank you very much, Elijah. A very interesting talk. I think the best explanation about Wu Wei, non-action I've ever heard, actually. So, I'm going to open up the questions. There's a question about whether there's any online versions because Sebastian says he doesn't live close to a bookshop.

Elijah Siegler

Yeah. There are a lot of online versions, absolutely. [E.g. this one on the Chinese Text Project] There are many versions. There are some websites you can find that have various different translations, kind of face-to-face, you know. There are many translations online. Even this version, I think, has been pirated. You can find this version like online, maybe it's not quite legal or something, but you can find PDF versions. This is the Addis and Lombardo version, but there's lots, there's plenty of free online versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. Oh, wow, we've got lots of good questions coming in. This is great. Thank you.

KAN Qian

Christiana has her hands up actually. Perhaps if we let her ask the question first, then we'll go back.

Elijah Siegler

Yeah, I'd love to hear your voice and see you. You could turn on your camera and then I can speak face-to-face.

Christina

Yeah, hi, thank you. That was a terrific talk. I wanted to ask a little bit about that Cook Ding example that you gave from the *Zhuangzi*, because there are various examples in the *Zhuangzi*, as I remember, of people who are in this kind of flow state. What I wanted to know was, is this an alternative state to the Wu Wei meditation? They are in this flow state, Cook Ding, and I think there is also a swimmer in a river who becomes part of the current. They are obviously doing something active in the material world They're obviously doing something very active in the material world but they're also at one with the Dao, and in that way, have they actually entered into a different cosmic sphere, which is not the world of matter - this is why the knife never gets blunted because they've actually sort of transitioned into a different state of non-materiality while being at one with the material world. Is it something like that?

Elijah Siegler

Wow, yeah, that's pretty deep. I appreciate that. Yeah, maybe so. I can't say for sure whether it is or not. I think it is significant. You see this as a metaphor a lot in Daoism: the empty spaces. I think it's chapter four of the *Dào Dé Jīng* that Laozi talks about the empty vessel. The Dao is empty; its use is never exhausted. So, this idea that it's the space between, it's the space between the spokes of the wheel that make the wheel possible. It's the space in between our bodies, the empty, the air within our bodies where the energy comes out of is a common idea in Daoism. So that idea of a negative space or an empty vessel, that potentiality, so that Cook Ding is taking his knife and he's literally just cutting through empty space. You can read it as entering a different cosmic realm, sure but - you yourself, Christina said that – but you know, one of the things I love about *Zhuangzi* is that he's always focused on the material. He never just says, 'Get out of your body, get out of life'. He always talks about nature. He always talks about actually doing things with your hands. There's a famous line from the *Dào Dé Jīng* where somebody asks, 'Where is the Dao?' And he says, 'It is even in', excuse my language, 'It's even in the piss and the shit. So, the Dao is really even in the lowest of all low material items. So, I think in that Wu Wei state there's really no difference; being in a cosmic sphere, being transcendent, you're also at one. Let me put it this way and then I'll shut up, Christina. I think it's a very Western idea to separate the spiritual and the material. We tend to think, 'Oh, we're getting away from this material world, we're up in the spiritual realm.' Daoism does not make that distinction, right? The spiritual, the transcendent, the cosmic is in our material world itself. So, thank you for that question and for, pointing that out.

Christina

Yeah, thank you for that. Yeah, thank you.

KAN Qian

There are some questions in the chat. Jimmy asks, how does what you discuss relate to Daoist religious practise today with all its deities and rituals?

Elijah Siegler

Yeah, that's a great question. If you go to a Daoist temple in China today, you won't necessarily see Wu Wei being practised. You'll see a lot of chanting, the evening ritual, the *Bugang* being practised. You might see people acting as fortune tellers to people who come in. You'll see people burning incense. You say, 'Well, what does this all have to do with Saoism?' Daoism has been around for 2 500 years so it's changed like any other religion. It's changed over the years. It's divided but you'll still hear Daoist monks in China today chanting the *Dào Dé Jīng*, memorising the *Dào Dé Jīng*, writing the *Dào Dé Jīng* in calligraphy as a kind of religious exercise. So it's still an important book, even though there's many other translations. And the other thing to think about is this idea of the Dao. I kept talking about the Dao in *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi.* Over the years, it's developed, there's been this idea of transmissions of the Dao in the form of various gods or deities, which represent different aspects of the Dao, so when you see deities in a Daoist temple, they often represent different aspects of the Dao, including Laozi himself, one of the main deities of Daoism, 太上老君, tài shàng lǎo jūn, is a kind of physicalization of Laozi, who first came to a man named Zhang Daoling in I think the year 142 CE. in a cave in Sichuan province and that was sort of the beginning of Daoism, our first historic example of Daoism as an organised religion that we have documentation of. But again, it starts with Laozi. It doesn't contradict Daoist philosophy, it's just taking Daoist philosophy and putting it in more material form, something that you can see and venerate in these temples. I hope that answers your question.

KAN Qian

The next one is from Sasha, 'That was fascinating: modern mindfulness from the Ancients. How do you think this religion can help us cope with the stress and speed of modern society?

Elijah Siegler

Hmmm. Yeah. Follow those six commandments, which again, I just kind of invented last week. So don't take them too seriously. There could be many other commandments. But you know, I really think of all of those, maybe the practise of Wu Wei is the most important properly understood, which again, doesn't mean being lazy, but it means sort of going with the flow and using meditation or insight to kind of figure out how reality is working. You can do all the small things before they get too big. Take care of the little things. This is what the Lao says, 'Take care of the little things before they get too big.' I mean, that's a good life skill. Meditation as practised in Daoism and other traditions, of course, Zen Buddhism, which in fact was influenced by Daoism, when Buddhism came to China and became something called Chan Buddhism and then went to Japan as Zen Buddhism. But in other words, practising meditation is a great way to deal with the stresses and speed of modern

society. Daoist meditation is very simple. It doesn't require a lot of training. It's really just sitting and forgetting, sitting in forgetfulness. So those are the those are two things: meditation and Wu Wei.

KAN Qian

Thank you. The next one is to do with language, the translation. Eamon asks, 'What do you think is the difference in experience reading these works in Chinese versus English translations? Do you think reading it from a Western translation changes things, and if so, how to go about that?'

Elijah Siegler

Well, I'll be honest, my Chinese is not very good. I read only these versions, I know some of the phrases of the *Dào Dé Jīng*. I can read some of the major concepts in Chinese, but I have never sat down and read the entire *Dào Dé Jīng* in Chinese. I've read the concordances where you have all the Chinese words and the English, so, I can't really speak to that. I know my wife, for example - who's from China and not an academic and not a Daoist - says she actually understands the *Dào Dé Jīng* more in English than in Chinese because the ancient, the classical Chinese is so different from modern Chinese grammar. The English version puts in more verbs and prepositions, so it's actually easier. That's the best I can do with that question.

KAN Qian

Thank you. The next one from Jen, 'Is Buddhism related to the Dao? You mentioned that they were later versions of the Dao.'

Elijah Siegler

Buddhism came into China around 600 years or so after the *Dào Dé Jīng* was first written down, so around the 1st century CE, right around the same time that Zhang Daoling received, saw a visitation of the deified Laozi and started a kind of organised Daoist community. In the 2000 years since, Daoism and Buddhism have really influenced each other in many ways. Like I said, Zen Buddhism is often seen to be very influenced by Daoism. There's a particular form of Daoism called Lingbao Daoism, which has ideas about reincarnation and karma, which it borrowed from Buddhism. Religions influence each other all the time. In China today, many normal Chinese people don't even necessarily make a distinction between Daoism and Buddhism. They might visit a Daoist temple or a Buddhist temple to light incense, whichever one is closest to them or whichever one they prefer.

There's also a story I told you, the myth of Laozi that he exited China through the Western Gate, right? And before he exited China, he wrote down his wisdom in 5,000 characters. Again, that's a total myth, but there's a later book that says that he exited China through the Western Gate, and then he either met or became Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha himself. And that is a Daoist way, a kind of a polemic, to put down Buddhism, right? It's not a real story, but it says when Buddhism came into China, it was just a garbled form of Daoism. It was just the original Daoism that went to India, got garbled around, and then came back to

China. So that's a way for Daoists to put down Buddhism, and in part because Buddhism offered a real challenge to Daoism and became a much larger religion, more widely practised in China than Daoism is today. So it's a very interesting difference. And throughout Chinese history, there's been debates between Daoists and Buddhists, so it's a long and complicated history. Thanks for that question.

KAN Qian

The next one is again from Sebastian. Do you want to ask it yourself, Sebastian? Because it's about Wu Wei, the concept of Wu Wei, or shall I read it out?

Sebastian

Sure, I can. Maybe it's probably better. I can explain myself a little bit better. I was just wondering about the concept of Wu Wei. I might have completely misunderstood it, in which case, my apologies, but from the way you describe it, it almost sounds dangerous. It seems almost like it's counterintuitive to natural human survival needs. So how does that - if I understood it correctly, - how does that tension work within Doaism?

Elijah Siegler

Yeah, I mean, I guess it depends how you define natural human survival. I think there's this idea that natural human survival is survival of the fittest, it's, you know, fight or flight. It's all these things we learn in evolutionary biology and so forth. I think Daoists also lived in that world. When this book was written 2 500 years ago, there were a lot of wars. In fact, the *Dào Dé Jīng*, like a lot of these classic Chinese textbooks, classic wisdom books, the works of Confucius, were written at a time of great social upheaval in China and great warfare, and so in some ways, this is a reaction against that, what one might call ‘the survival tendency’, and to say, really, you can actually go against that instinct, that fight or flight instinct, or that instinct to accumulate more, that instinct to fight against your neighbours. You may have that instinct, but that's not actually what the Dao, is. You're not actually living in harmony with the Dao. And the Dao is this cosmic process. You're not living in this harmony with how the river flows and how the plants grow. If you can live in harmony with that and practise Wu Wei - again, it doesn't mean being lazy or doing nothing, but it means not putting effort into your action, not putting consciousness into your action, not plotting and planning, but doing what needs to be done in harmony with nature. But I will say that the *Zhuangzi* really does advocate being a hermit in this time of social and political turmoil. Maybe you should just go to the mountains, right? And that's been a big part of Daoism as well, or a part of Daoism for thousands of years, idea of entering the mountains, becoming a hermit, and practising Wu Wei there. Is that against our natural instinct? Maybe that’s a good survival instinct, right? I hope that answers your question. I feel like I've just confused it more.

KAN Qian

Thank you. I think we're running out of time, so I'm allowing just the last question from Xiaoli, who says, ‘Thank you for the talk. I wonder whether engaging with Daoist ideas has value for language learners of Chinese beyond the cultural background.’

Elijah Siegler

I mean, the *Dào Dé Jīng* is very short and concise and there are plenty of versions of the *Dào Dé Jīng* that have all the Chinese characters and that list them in various ways and list all the possible English translations. So, it's a great book to dive into, you know, if you're just starting to learn classical Chinese, I think. From my understanding, like of all these ancient Chinese classics in China, what students often start with is the *Mencius*, the *Mèngzi*, just because it's written so clearly and simply, and it's a good way to learn and to memorise. But again, because I don't teach or really read classical Chinese, I'm not the best person to answer that question.

KAN Qian

Thank you so much. I think we have to stop here. Thank you for a terrific talk and so much information and a lot of food for thought. I just want us to give Elijah a round of applause. You could use the visual applause on the screen. Thank you so much.

Okay, I'd like to take this opportunity for a few minutes just to promote our Chinese modules and our other language modules at the Open University.

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Our next talk is on Friday, 27th of November, we will welcome Paul French to give us a talk entitled The Last Emperor of China: Twilight of the Forbidden City. The Eventbrite page is open for registration is available now.

So once again, thank you so much, Elijah, for delivering the talk today. And thank you for everybody in the room for engaging in the discussion.

[End of transcript]