

## The Way of Eastern Mysticism

Of the two main Chinese trends of thought, Confucianism and Taoism, the latter is the one which is mystically oriented and thus more relevant for our comparison with modern physics. Like Hinduism and Buddhism, Taoism is interested in intuitive wisdom, rather than in rational knowledge. Acknowledging the limitations and the relativity of the world of rational thinking, Taoism is, basically, a way of liberation from this world and is, in this respect, comparable to the ways of Yoga or Vedanta in Hinduism, or to the Eightfold Path of the Buddha. In the context of Chinese culture, the Taoist liberation meant, more specifically, a liberation from the strict rules of convention.

Mistrust of conventional knowledge and reasoning is stronger in Taoism than in any other school of Eastern philosophy. It is based on the firm belief that the human intellect can never comprehend the Tao. In the words of Chuang Tzu:

*The most extensive knowledge does not necessarily know it;  
reasoning will not make men wise in it.  
The sages have decided against both these methods.*

Chuang Tzu's book is full of passages reflecting the Taoist's contempt of reasoning and argumentation. Thus he says:

*A dog is not reckoned good because he barks well,  
and a man is not reckoned wise because he speaks skillfully.  
and  
Disputation is a proof of not seeing clearly.*

Logical reasoning was considered by the Taoists as part of the artificial world of man, together with social etiquette and moral standards. They were not interested in this world at all, but concentrated their attention fully on the observation of nature in order to discern the characteristics of the Tao. Thus they developed an attitude which was essentially scientific and only their deep mistrust in the analytic method prevented them from constructing proper scientific theories. Nevertheless, the careful observation of nature, combined with a strong mystical intuition, led the Taoist sages to profound insights which are confirmed by modern scientific theories.

One of the most important insights of the Taoists was the realization that transformation and change are essential features of nature. A passage in the Chuang-tzu shows clearly how the fundamental importance of change was discerned by observing the organic world:

*In the transformation and growth of all things,  
every bud and feature has its proper form.  
In this we have their gradual maturing and decay,  
the constant flow of transformation and change.*

The Taoists saw all changes in nature as manifestations of the dynamic interplay between the polar opposites yin and yang, and thus they came to believe that any pair of opposites constitutes a polar relationship where each of the two poles is dynamically linked to the other. For the Western mind, this idea of the implicit unity of all opposites is extremely difficult to accept. It seems most paradoxical to us that experiences and values which we had always believed to be contrary should be, after all, aspects of the same thing. In the

East, however, it has always been considered as essential for attaining enlightenment to go 'beyond earthly opposites,' and in China the polar relationship of all opposites lies at the very basis of Taoist thought. Thus Chuang Tzu says:

*The "this" is also "that."  
The "that" is also "this." . . .  
That the "that" and the "this" cease to be opposites  
is the very essence of Tao.  
Only this essence, an axis as it were,  
is the center of the circle responding to the endless changes.*

From the notion that the movements of the Tao are a continuous interplay between opposites, the Taoists deduced two basic rules for human conduct. Whenever you want to achieve anything, they said, you should start with its opposite. Thus Lao Tzu:

*In order to contract a thing, one should surely expand it first.  
In order to weaken, one will surely strengthen first.  
In order to overthrow, one will surely exalt first.  
"In order to take, one will surely give first."  
This is called subtle wisdom.*

On the other hand, whenever you want to retain anything, you should admit in it something of its opposite:

*Be bent, and you will remain straight.  
Be vacant, and you will remain full.  
Be worn, and you will remain new.*

This is the way of life of the sage who has reached a higher point of view, a perspective from which the relativity and polar relationship of all opposites are clearly perceived. These opposites include, first and foremost, the concepts of good and bad which are interrelated in the same way as yin and yang. Recognizing the relativity of good and bad, and thus of all moral standards, the Taoist sage does not strive for the good but rather tries to maintain a dynamic balance between good and bad. Chuang Tzu is very clear on this point:

The sayings, "Shall we not follow and honor the right and have nothing to do with the wrong?" and "Shall we not follow and honor those who secure good government and have nothing to do with those who produce disorder?" show a want of acquaintance with the principles of Heaven and Earth and with the different qualities of things. It is like following and honoring Heaven and taking no account of Earth; it is like following and honoring the yin and taking no account of the yang. It is clear that such a course cannot be pursued.

It is amazing that, at the same time when Lao Tzu and his followers developed their world view, the essential features of this Taoist view were taught also in Greece, by a man whose teachings are known to us only in fragments and who was, and still is, very often misunderstood. This Greek "Taoist" was Heraclitus of Ephesus. He shared with Lao Tzu not only the emphasis on continuous change, which he expressed in his famous saying "Everything flows," but also the notion that all changes are cyclic. He compared the world order to "an ever-living fire, kindling in measures and going out in measures," an image which is indeed very similar to the Chinese idea of the Tao manifesting itself in the cyclic interplay of yin and yang.

It is easy to see how the concept of change as a dynamic interplay of opposites led Heraclitus, like Lao Tzu, to the discovery that all opposites are polar and thus united. "The

way up and down is one and the same," said the Greek, and "God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiety hunger." Like the Taoists, he saw any pair of opposites as a unity and was well aware of the relativity of all such concepts. Again the words of Heraclitus : "Cold things warm themselves, warm cools, moist dries, parched is made wet" remind us strongly of those of Lao Tzu, "Easy gives rise to difficult... resonance harmonizes sound, after follows before." It is surprising that the great similarity between the world views of those two sages of the sixth century B.C. is not generally known. Heraclitus is often mentioned in connection with modern physics, but hardly ever in connection with Taoism. And yet it is this connection which shows best that his world view was that of a mystic and thus, in my opinion, puts the parallels between his ideas and those of modern physics in the right perspective.

When we talk about the Taoist concept of change, it is important to realize that this change is not seen as occurring as a consequence of some force, but rather as a tendency which is innate in all things and situations. The movements of the Tao are not forced upon it, but occur naturally and spontaneously. Spontaneity is the Tao's principle of action, and since human conduct should be modeled on the operation of the Tao, spontaneity should also be characteristic of all human actions. Acting in harmony with nature thus means for the Taoists acting spontaneously and according to one's true nature. It means trusting one's intuitive intelligence, which is innate in the human mind just as the laws of change are innate in all things around us.

The actions of the Taoist sage thus arise out of his intuitive wisdom, spontaneously and in harmony with his environment. He does not need to force himself, or anything around him, but merely adapts his actions to the movements of the Tao. In the words of Huai Nan Tzu:

*Those who follow the natural order flow in the current of the Tao.*

Such a way of acting is called wu-wei in Taoist philosophy; a term which means literally "nonaction," and which Joseph Needham translates as "refraining from activity contrary to nature," justifying this interpretation with a quotation from the Chuang-tzu:

*Nonaction does not mean doing nothing and keeping silent.  
Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does,  
so that its nature will be satisfied.*

If one refrains from acting contrary to nature or, as Needham says, from "going against the grain of things," one is in harmony with the Tao and thus one's actions will be successful. This is the meaning of Lao Tzu's seemingly so puzzling words, "*By nonaction everything can be done.*"

The contrast of yin and yang is not only the basic ordering principle throughout Chinese culture, but is also reflected in the two dominant trends of Chinese thought. Confucianism was rational, masculine, active and dominating. Taoism, on the other hand, emphasized all that was intuitive, feminine, mystical, and yielding. "Not knowing that one knows is best," says Lao Tzu, and "The sage carries on his business without action and gives his teachings without words." The Taoists believed that by displaying the feminine, yielding qualities of human nature, it was easiest to lead a perfectly balanced life in harmony with the Tao.