Chapter 1: What is Dao?

There is no doubt that we are among the most fortunate group of people in the world today. Why is this? Because we have effortlessly received Dao, the most precious gift in the universe. Dao is the ultimate truth that the saints and sages of the past searched for. Let us remember the day we received Dao. For a few hours, we moved out of the chaotic world into the peaceful and harmonious environment of the Dao Temple. For many of us, as we knelt on the kneeling box while the Dien Chuan Shr unlocked our Heavenly Gate, the feelings we experienced were indescribable. There is a Chinese saying:

> “ Only the person who drinks the water can tell how warm or cool it is.

It is the same with receiving Dao. What we received and experienced in the Dao ceremony cannot be communicated in words. After the ceremony, as we listened to the explanation of the three treasures, the essence of the truth gradually revealed itself to us.

The saints and sages of the past received Dao just as we did. The only difference is that they were able to achieve enlightenment through receiving Dao and could therefore begin immediately to save other people and sentient beings. For us it is different. Receiving Dao is just the beginning of cultivation. We need to make an effort to learn and cultivate, otherwise the joy and awe we experienced on the day of the Dao ceremony will fade as time goes by. It would be a great pity for us to waste such a priceless treasure by not putting it to use or not realizing the vast potential we now have within us.

There are many reasons why cultivators in the past were able to reach enlightenment immediately after they received Dao. One of the factors is that, in the past, people had to cultivate for a long time before they could receive Dao. Theirs was a much more difficult path, requiring great dedication, strength and faith. We are very fortunate to be able to receive Dao in such an easy, comfortable way. But this in itself can be a pitfall. Human beings have a tendency to devalue things that come too easily, and so we often fail to cherish the precious gift that has been bestowed upon us. That is why it is so important for us to extend our understanding of Dao and explore its essence further. After all, it takes very little effort compared to the hardships and trials of earlier cultivators. If we don't take advantage of the opportunity to cultivate further, the doubts and problems which arise may begin to obscure the door of our wisdom.

To provide opportunities for us to learn together, Dao Temples provide seminars, talks and various classes. If we are prepared to spend some time participating in these activities, our understanding of the truth will grow and we will be able to fully appreciate the preciousness of the Dao we have received.

In Chapter 25 of the Dao De Jing, Lao Zi tried to explain the origin and nature of Dao. He said:

> There is something that was mysteriously formed.
>
> It was born before the creation of heaven and earth.
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> It is silent and formless, independent and immutable, constantly moving and always harmonious.
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> It is the mother of all the things in the universe.
>
> I do not know its name, so I have simply called it Dao.

Lao Zi gave a very detailed description of Dao, but the essence of Dao is beyond the power of words to define. That is what Lao Zi meant when he said:

> The Dao that can be said is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name.

Other saints and sages also attempted to define and describe the essence of Dao and although their words cannot convey that essence directly, they can give us some guidance and a greater understanding of the truth. Let's look more closely at Lao Zi's description of Dao.

There is something that was mysteriously formed.

The "something" in this statement refers to Dao. "Mysteriously formed" simply means that no one knows how it came into being. All things in the universe have a source. Everything must be created or born. The essence of Dao, however, has no source, because it is itself the source of all things. Dao is not created; it is that which creates.

It was born before the creation of heaven and earth.

Since Dao was not created, it must have been in existence before heaven and earth were formed. In other words, Dao is the essence that gave birth to heaven and earth.

It is silent and formless.

Dao is not a substance or a kind of material. It has no form and makes no sound, so it cannot be seen, heard or grasped through any of our senses.

Independent and immutable.

Dao is self-sustaining. It does not need to rely on anything for its existence. Being immutable means that Dao does not undergo change; it is constant, imperishable and therefore eternal.

Moves constantly and harmoniously.

Dao works ceaselessly. It governs and sustains all things in a harmonious manner so that there is no danger or conflict. As the source and underlying condition of all things, nothing can maintain its existence without Dao. This quality of consistency reflects the great benevolence of the Universe, which works unconditionally and never rests.

It is the mother of all things.

The title of Mother refers to the fact that Dao gave birth to all things. Sometimes we talk about Dao in terms of Mother Nature, who creates and nurtures the things of this world. Since Dao is our source and origin, we are children of the Universe.

I do not know its name.

Because it is impossible to convey the nature of Dao in words, Lao Zi said, "I don't know what it's called."

So, I simply call it Dao.

Although Lao Zi knew that a word could never fully represent Dao, he realized that he would have to give it a name so that he could teach people about it and guide them in their search for spiritual truth. He used the Chinese Dao to represent this essence. Dao simply means "the way, or path." By showing us that Dao is beyond words, and yet still giving it a name, Lao Zi demonstrates both the limitations and the necessity of language. He also shows great compassion in his effort to help us understand the essence of Dao without becoming attached to the forms of representation.

From Lao Zi's description of Dao, we can note the following points:

1. Dao is the source of all things.
2. Dao is the principle that governs all things.
3. Dao is the path that leads us back to our origin.

1. Dao is the source of all things.

As Lao Zi pointed out, Dao existed before the creation of heaven and earth. All living things are created by heaven and earth, and heaven and earth have their origin in Dao. Thus Dao is the mother of all things in the universe. We need to understand that all substances and physical forms come from heaven. Although science and technology have made great advances in recent decades, there is still no scientist who can create life. The things we see around us: the seeds, grasses, trees and flowers, all manifest the essence of growth and the vitality of life. People cannot manufacture this vitality and capacity for growth. It was not possible in the past; it is not possible now, and it will not be possible in the future. This is because the essence of life comes from heaven. Chinese people refer to this as the heavenly essence, while in the west it is more commonly called Mother Nature.

There is a Chinese proverb that says:

> “ Heaven gives birth to us and we are nurtured by the Earth.

It is easy for us to understand that the Earth nurtures us because all the food we eat and the water we drink, in fact all the things we need for our physical survival, come to us directly from the Earth. But why do we say that Heaven gives birth to us? Surely it is our parents who are responsible for us being born? Our parents give birth to our physical body, but the body needs to have the essence that animates it. This essence comes to us from heaven. It is the essence of life without which we cannot exist as living beings.

Seen from the point of view of nature, Dao can be described as the life force that is within all things. In human terms, God has given us life. In the Dao environment, when we speak of God or Heavenly Mother, we are using personalized terminologies for Dao. For us to deviate from the principles of Dao is analogous to children losing their parents and therefore their sense of direction. Put in another way, we all have a heavenly essence within us and this essence comes from our Heavenly Mother. Now, trapped in the karmic cycle of death and rebirth, we are separated from our Heavenly Mother. Receiving Dao reawakens the Heavenly essence within us, while our cultivation helps us to manifest it so that we can ultimately return to our origin.

2. Dao is the principle that governs all things.

In its active aspect, Dao is the law or principle that regulates and governs all phenomena. In the realm of heaven, Dao is the heavenly principle that governs all celestial bodies such as the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars. This heavenly principle also regulates the seasons and the weather patterns of our planet.

Here on earth, Dao is the principle that underlies the geological and geographical structure of the planet, activates the process of evolution and creates sentient life. The phenomena of the physical world all exist in accordance with physical laws. These laws existed long before people discovered them and classified them into fields of study such as physics, chemistry, geology, etc. When we understand the basic, underlying nature of physical phenomena, we can live and work with them more effectively.

Dao is the principle that governs us as humans, too. When we consult our conscience, we are aligning ourselves with this principle. This makes it possible for us to fulfill our role as the link between heaven and earth, and caretaker of all sentient beings.

From Lao Zi's description, we know that Dao is independent and immutable, and that it moves ceaselessly without creating conflict or danger. If all things move in accordance with Dao, their paths will be normal, smooth and harmonious. There will be no danger or trouble. On the other hand, if things go in opposition to the principle of Dao, they become abnormal and chaotic. Dao is the basic principle that all things must abide by. If we live by this principle and always act in accordance with it, we will become great beings between heaven and earth. There is a proverb that says:

> “ Acting in accordance with Heaven brings life.
>
> Acting against Heaven can only lead to destruction.

Heaven and earth abide by the principle of Dao and so they can nurture all things. As human beings who stand between heaven and earth, we have great potential. If we uphold our spiritual principles and work to balance the expression of heaven and earth, we can create a beautiful and harmonious environment. This is the true and ultimate goal of the human race. It is also the original nature of the realm we live in.

Unfortunately, since the decline of humankind, harmony has degenerated into opposition. We have deviated from the path of Dao and, as a consequence, our pure inner nature is contaminated with greed, violence and ignorance. The once harmonious state of heaven and earth has been shattered by the unrighteous behavior that is so common in the present world.

We have now received Dao and found the key to our true self and our inner wisdom. If we cultivate ourselves to remove the obstacles to express this essence of Dao within us, and act in accordance with it, we can surely resolve the negativity in our lives and create a harmonious world.

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3. Dao is the path to Heaven for lost souls.

We said earlier that the essence of growth that allows us to be born as living beings is bestowed on us by Heaven. This means that Heaven is where we truly originate. In the Dao environment we

refer to Heaven as *Wu Ji Li Tien*, the "Heaven of Truth," our home, or origin. Since this is where we came from, it is only natural that this is where we should return. But since the downfall of humankind, the pathway to Heaven has been obscured. For the same reason, the gates of Hell were opened. What this means in terms of human existence is that we are caught on the treadmill of death and rebirth, the karmic cycle of suffering, unable to return to the Heaven that is our true home. When we receive Dao, the gateway to Heaven is unlocked. Jesus Christ once said:

> Enter through the Narrow Gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.
>
> But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.
>
> — *Matthew 7:13*

We know now that we originate in Heaven and ought to return there, but since the downfall of humankind the gateway to Heaven has been obscured by our physical desires. These desires are related to the senses. We desire what the eye sees, what the ears hear, what the nose smells and what the mouth can eat. All of these desires confuse our spiritual heart. Because the world around us offers so many temptations, these four side-gates (the eyes, ears, nose and mouth) are wide open. They are the gates through which we seek physical pleasure, indulge our desires and often act irresponsibly. They are wide open and the path they lead to is easy to walk on. As Jesus said, "wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction." It is not difficult to follow the selfish path of the senses and, as Jesus said, many in the world choose this way.

If we use the gates of the senses and let them stand wide open, they will be the gates that our spirit leaves by, and that too, will be a path of destruction as we continue the cycle of suffering through one incarnation after another.

When we receive Dao our "narrow gate," which we also know as the Heavenly Gate, is opened. This gate leads to the path of heavenly truth. When we begin to act in accordance with heavenly principles, we are likely to find ourselves confronted with all kinds of obstructions. But as long as we persevere on our path of cultivation, we will be able to overcome all obstacles. Most importantly, just as a person must take care when walking on a narrow path, we need to be cautious in our actions. Remember, the road to eternity is narrow, and in all our history, few have lived in accordance with heavenly principles. That is what Jesus meant when he said that those who find it are few.

Now that we have received Dao and our narrow gate is opened, we can cultivate further and live in accordance with our true nature. If we can do this, then, when the time comes for us to depart from this world, our soul will naturally leave through the gate that leads us home. Dao is the path, the way that leads us back to our origin, the Heaven of Truth.

Conclusion

The material that has been presented here is still very superficial, and as Lao Zi said, words are no substitute for the real thing. We know that Dao is the ultimate treasure in the universe. It is an intangible, indescribable essence, which has the capacity to create all things. Many texts mention Dao and many wise teachers in the past have taught us ways to let this essence govern our lives. However, when all is said and done, the only way to truly understand Dao is to experience it in our own heart. We are so fortunate to have received Dao. Now it is time to explore it further.

The essence of Truth will become clearer as we work towards uncovering it. The clearer it becomes, the more it helps us in our cultivation. So the way to really understand the essence of Dao is to cultivate it and act according to its principles in our everyday lives.

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