

The Wonder of Tao: Entering the Primordial Source of Creativity

By Tom Pynn

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the 44th annual meeting of SEC/AAS on January 15, 2005 in Lexington, Kentucky in the panel session “Creativity and Conflict: Religion in China.” It is an expression of an on-going conversation I am enjoying with Roger T. Ames, David Jones, and the Taoist philosophical and literary traditions. My interest in Taoism began in my late teens when I read the *Tao Te Ching* for the first time.

Oftentimes without intentions I see the wonder of *Tao*.

Oftentimes with intention I see its manifestations.

Both of these are the same in origin;

They are distinguished by names after their emergence.

Their identification is called mystery.

From mystery to further mystery there is an entrance to all wonders.¹

--*Tao Te Ching*, trans. Chang Chung-yuan

Those who have achieved an understanding of reality can describe the wonder of things, but those who are ignorant of reality miss the essence of things.²

--Weng Fang-kang

The above passage from *Tao Te Ching* suggests at least six important elements germane to a Taoist conception of creativity: our unintentional (perceptual) experience of *Tao* is of wonder; our intentional (cognitive) experience is of the manifestations of *Tao* (*wanwu*); both of these experiences originate in *Tao*; our discriminatory experience of things is a function of coercive naming, which entails the concealing of the true nature of things; individuation is only half the show: things are also identifiable with *Tao* and one another and that identification is in some sense a mystery; and that to encounter mystery is an unintentional encounter with *Tao*; thus, we return to the beginning of the passage.

The image of return implicit in the above passage indicates an important difference between Western metaphysics and Chinese cosmology. Whereas Western metaphysics conceives of reality as fundamentally circumscribed by binary *oppositions* (good/evil, static/dynamic, inside/outside), Chinese natural cosmology understands reality as the mutually *entailing* of opposites (yin-yang, self-creativity, male-female) that constitute the dynamic flux of the universe. Like so many of the poems in *Tao Te Ching*, the first epigraph suggests a theory of creativity reflective of the mutual entailing of opposites. As David L. Hall has observed, “In the Taoist vision the fundamental characteristics of creativity are freedom and reflexivity, expressed through the self-realization of events.”³ *Tao* is the locus of creative activity and as implied in the *Tao Te Ching*, the creative activity of *Tao* and the creative activity of human beings are mutually entailing.

The second epigraph points out the basic difference between someone who has realized *Tao* and someone who has not. The preeminent way of describing the reality of things in Chinese culture has been poetry. In his seminal work *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry*, Chang Chung-yuan observes, “the creative process of the universe is also the creative process of the poet, who has transformed his ego into self and thus has become part of the universe.”⁴ Poetic activity, then, is linked with creative processes through self-realization. For the Taoist, creativity is an emergent phenomenon of the interfusion of self and world. From the standpoint of the relationship between writer and reader, when we read Taoist philosophy and/or poetry we are able to experience aesthetically what the Taoist practitioner experiences spiritually. A Taoist theory of creativity, therefore, involves both the process of self-transformation and the process of poetic activity; that is to say, the reflective process of self-realization and the unfolding of the poetic event. A two-fold question thus arises: what is the Taoist process of transformation? And how does this process of transformation inform poetic activity?

Chang Chung-yuan writes, “the aim of the Chinese philosophical teachings is to open out what is hidden within.”⁵ For the Chinese, especially the Confucians and the Taoists, opening out what is hidden begins in the cultivation of selfhood, a relational self as opposed to the atomized and adversarial self we are more familiar with in the West. The Taoist relational self is based on a philosophical understanding of Chinese natural cosmology. In Chinese natural cosmology, things as they really are include both *Tao* and the manifestations of *Tao*. The natural cosmology

of Taoism has been summarized by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall as eliciting four philosophical presuppositions: “the reality of time, novelty, and change; the persistence of particularity; the intrinsic, constitutive nature of relationships; and the perspectival nature of experience.”⁶ These four presuppositions constitute the framework for the Taoist’s processual worldview, a cultural orientation that understands self, other, and world as an interpenetrating, dynamic flow. A worldview, however, is an intentional construct and so only reflects one aspect of *Tao*, our mediated (knowing) experience of the ten thousand things. The *Tao Te Ching* suggests that we can have an unmediated experience of *Tao* that is unintentional in the sense of *feeling* (perceptual or ethical) rather than *knowing* (metaphysical or epistemological). For the Taoist, our experience involves the encompassing field of experience not simply the human. To be unintentional is at least in part to forego making distinctions and discriminations among the ten thousand things. As the *Tao Te Ching* puts it, “the highest efficacy is like water. / It is because water benefits everything (*wanwu*) / Yet vies to dwell in places loathed by the crowd / That it comes nearest to proper way-making [*Tao*].”⁷ Thus, From a Taoist point of view, creativity can be understood as a non-differentiating process in which the innermost is brought out effectively and beneficially in the production of novelty.

In an earlier work, Hall and Ames alerted us to the aesthetic sensibility, the “‘life-is-art’ attitude that is the signature of the Chinese tradition.”⁸ An aesthetic sensibility implies that human beings, like artists, creatively construct our lives both within and out of always evolving novel situations. For the Taoists, neither rationality, nor fidelity to the past will play a leading role in this project, as they often appear to do for Confucians. Instead, a Taoist *feels* his/her way into novelty. Feeling one’s way into and through relationships and novel situations is not reducible to sensation or emotion. Rather, relations are established and maintained through deferential activity, and deferential activity is expressed through what Ames and Hall have called *wu*-forms, more than by faith in the power of conventional traditions of language and ritual. Deference is “the central focus of the Daoist way of thinking” and plays “the decisive role in the establishment and preservation of relationships.”⁹

Deference pervades and expresses itself through the practiced range of concrete feeling-structures or *wu*-forms including *wu-wei*, “noncoercive actions in accordance with the *de* (‘particular focus’) of things; *wu-zhi*, unprincipled knowing; *wu-yu*, objectless desire; and *wu-ming*, non-coercive naming. While *wu*-forms pervade the *Tao Te Ching*, these four comprise the

most commonly employed *wu*-forms.¹⁰ Practicing forms of deferential activity in cultivating a relational self, “it is necessary to put oneself in the place of what is to be acted in accordance with, what is to be known, or what is to be desired, and thus incorporate the perspective into one’s own disposition.”¹¹ Thus, to participate in relationships creatively by embodying creative energy through the various *wu*-forms, the cultivation of a relational self entails both self-realization and the communication of what was previously hidden deep in the recesses of *Tao*. The creative practice of poetry uses language to reveal what has been concealed.

As the originator of the Chinese lyric (*shih*), T’ao Ch’ien is also an explicitly Taoist poet. In his poem “Steady Rain, Drinking Alone,” T’ao Ch’ien presents the importance of deferential activity in negotiating change effectively:

Life soon returns to nothing. The ancients
All said it circles away like this. And if

Sung and Ch’iao ever lived in this world
Without dying, where are they now? Still,

My old neighbor swears his wine makes you
Immortal, so I try a little. Soon, those

Hundred feelings grow distant. Another cup
And suddenly I’ve forgotten heaven. O,

How could heaven be anywhere but here?
Stay true to the actual, yielding to all things,

And in a moment, unearthly cloud-cranes
Carrying immortals beyond all eight horizons

Return. Since I first embraced solitude,
I’ve struggled through forty years. And yet,

In this body long since lost to change,
My thoughts remain, quite silent after all.¹²

The poet is disturbed by the fact that “life soon returns to nothing” and in his disturbance fails to see the reality of things, that all things are moving together in what T’ao Ch’ien calls the Great Transformation (*Ta hua*); hence, he can neither perceive the particularity of things, nor can he feel his way into the uniqueness of the moment in which he stands, he cannot attain an interfusion of subject and object. He feels poignantly his own mortality. For T’ao Ch’ien, deference is the key to effective temporality or immortality. Rather than conceiving of immortality as physical continuity, T’ao Ch’ien suggests that immortality is a state of meditative tranquility in which one realizes the actual to be all there is. To attain immortality, one must “stay true to the actual,” to *what is*. One must yield or defer to all things, which is to say one takes one’s place among the ten thousand things moving together. When one stays true to the actual and yields to all things, then “unearthly cloud-cranes . . . / return,” then one attains immortality or interfusion. The deference T’ao refers to as a *yielding-to* is placing one’s self in the position of the other, an interfusion of self and other, so that one’s true nature comes through. Chapter 67 of the *Tao Te Ching* addresses the matter in the following way:

I really have three prized possessions, that I cling to and treasure:
The first of these is compassion,
The second, frugality,
And the third is my reluctance to try to become preeminent
in the world.¹³

As the preeminent form of Taoist emptiness, deference is intentional, non-coercive activity that makes it possible for one’s true nature to emerge. As the *Tao Te Ching* points out in the third stanza of Chapter 67, it is because of these three treasures that one is able to be “courageous,” “generous,” and “able to become chief among all things.”¹⁴ Without deference, enacting these three things “is courting death.”¹⁵

Self-cultivation in Taoism takes many forms: philosophical understanding instantiated by meditation and close study of canonical texts such as *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang-tzu*, breathing exercises (Ch’i Gong), dance, or forms of Taoist yoga such as T’ai Ch’i. Yet, Chang Chung-yuan insists that “the Taoist concept of creativity is of self-realization, which requires no

outward instrumentality to effect its inward processes.”¹⁶ The goal of Taoist self-realization “to be free from the confusion of external conditions, to be rid of the perplexities of life, to be fully charged with primordial creativity, is to attain Tao.”¹⁷ How do we, then, explain the *Tao Te Ching*’s numerous references to breathing techniques? In chapter four of the *Chuang-tzu*, “In the World of Men,” Confucius explains “the fasting mind” to his disciple Yen Hui: “Make your will one! Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but the spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”¹⁸ T’ao Ch’ien explicitly mentions meditation in many of his poems including at the close of “Back Home Again Chant”:

My dream is to walk out all alone into a lovely
Morning—maybe stop to pull weeds in the garden,
Maybe climb East Ridge and chant, settling into
My breath, or sit writing poems beside a clear
Stream. I’ll ride change back to my final home,
Rejoicing in heaven’s way. How can it ever fail me?¹⁹

Cultivating self-realization is for T’ao Ch’ien a multiform practice that includes the activities of a simple life: raising a garden, resting or walking in solitude, chanting, meditating, and composing poetry. The combination of these practices constitutes a way of living that results in seeing things as they really are, the interfusion of self, other, and world.

As in so many of T’ao’s poems, the ending often communicates a sense of joy. “Inner joy,” Chang Chung-yuan writes, “is derived from a subjective interfusion with the objective reality of things”²⁰ “Heaven’s way,” *t’ien* (which Chang translates as “transcendent”), is the final stage in the fourfold process of contemplation or quietude with the other three being “all-embracing” (*jung*), “selfless” (*kung*), and “all-pervading” (*wang*).²¹ Perhaps Chang Chung-yuan’s point, then, about such external practices is that one ought not to rely on them as ends in themselves, but as aids to self-realization. Certainly this seems to be the *Chuang-tzu*’s point in chapter 15: “To pant, to puff, to hail, to sip, to spit out the old breath and draw in the new, practicing bear-hangings and bird-stretchings, longevity his only concern.”²² That one would

engage in breathing and yogic exercises solely in the egocentric desire for extending one's physical life, constitutes an obstacle to the realization of Tao and, thereby, a relational self. The *Chuang-tzu* names four obstacles to self-realization: "preconceptions, predeterminations, obduracy, and egoism."²³ T'ao Ch'ien notices that one particularly virulent form of hindrance is analysis, the primary method of principled knowing. He writes in "Form, Shadow, Spirit": "Listen—it's never-ending analysis that wounds us."²⁴ One presupposition of analysis is that reducing a thing to its constituent parts will yield what the thing is. Chang Chung-yuan argues that analysis doesn't give us "the original inner unity,"²⁵ only the disparateness of parts without seeing the "unity within multiplicity , a wholeness of parts."²⁶ Analysis is appropriate to cause and effect, but can actually harm us by giving us a reduced and unrealistic image of the way things are and their relations with one another.

Analysis refers us not only to the formal procedures of logic, but also, and more importantly, to the way that "people are busy clinging jealously to their lives."²⁷ Cultivating inner tranquility and unprincipled knowing (*wu-zhi*), in contrast to the principled knowing of analysis, enables one to move through the field of experience non-coercively (*wu-wei*) and to see things as they are; hence, creativity arises out of the interfusion of self and world not as cause or effect, but as a response. As a creative act of responsiveness, poetry, such as T'ao Ch'ien's, suggests the correlativity of self, other, and world by emphasizing feeling rather than intellect, compression rather than expansion, the immediate moment rather than the formal occasion. Suggestiveness is a naturally and spontaneously occurring expression of the interpenetration of self and world in which neither the whole of the poet, nor the whole of the world is immediately disclosed because poet, world, and the creative process are neither autonomous things, nor strictly determined by the overly narrow language of cause and effect. Ames and Hall note that "real creativity . . . entails the spontaneous production of novelty, irreducible through causal analysis."²⁸ What is felt inwardly *will* find natural expression in words. From the expressive-affective view of poetic composition, suggestiveness is emphasized while articulateness is deemphasized. For the Taoist, human (intentional) configurations such as poems are correlative manifestations of *Tao*. Thus, poetry is the outside of an inside. Poetry, like philosophy, helps to bring out what is hidden within.

If poetry is to reveal what is hidden, then the activity of poetic composition must be a spontaneous and natural response to things as they are. Poetry, as effective communication of

Tao, must be a deferential activity. The creative process of poetry as a deferential activity is realized through non-coercive naming (*wu-ming*) and non-coercive desire (*wu-yu*). Naming can have the particularly powerful effect of giving one the impression that one is in some sense in control of or in possession of the object. To name is to make a thing one's own. Possession, control, and consumption are forms of power and power is always coercive. Language in the mode of coercive naming obscures the reality of the thing and thereby obstructs an experience of the interfusion of subject and object. The Sung dynasty poet Su Tung-p'o indicates the coercive power of naming in "Traveling at Night, Looking at the Stars" composed in 1060:

Heaven high above, the night air chill,
Ranged stars crowd the sky, all in proper places,
Big stars darting rays back and forth,
Little stars busy as boiling water.
Heaven and humans don't meddle with one another—
What does Heaven do anyway?—
But it's our habit to insist on pointing at things
And one by one assigning them names.
Southern Sieve, Northern Dipper—
What are these but household utensils?
What would Heaven do with their like?
We're the ones who decided to call them that.
Peer at things up close and you may learn their true form,
But guessed at from afar, they seem like something else.
Vastness such as this is beyond comprehension—
All I can do is sigh in endless wonder.²⁹

The ten thousand things are always already "in [their] proper places." The disturbance in the poem comes with *our* "insistence," *our* coercive behavior that always seeks to control and possess the objects in the field of *our* experience: "it's our habit to insist on pointing at things / and one by one assigning them names." Naming, as Su Tung-p'o indicates, is often a function of our own self-interested utility, our own desire to control and possess the objects around us strictly in terms of their usefulness to our narrowly construed projects. In so naming and

controlling we fail to experience the interfusion of subject and object that would enable us to know things as they truly are. Coercive naming and desiring establishes distance between subject and object—“guessed at from afar, they seem like something else”—but non-coercive naming as a function of “peering at things up close,” and allowing them their freedom brings us into contact with the ten thousand things and enables us to experience “endless wonder,” the wonder of *Tao*.

A necessary corollary to non-coercive naming in Chinese poetics is the principle of directness in which subjective ideality is subsumed by the objective reality of the thing. The principle of directness combines an emphasis on parsimony with the brevity of compression. In strict poetic economy the poet attempts to get rid of all traces of subjectivity and uses language that gets at the very thing appearing to consciousness. The point in using only the bare essentials is to reflect things (as they are) not to make things what we want them to be. Reflection in Chinese poetry is analogous to the spontaneity and naturalness (*tzu-jan*) that the Taoist observes in nature. T’ao Ch’ien’s series “Drinking Songs” displays some exquisite examples of Taoist reflection. In the fifth of this series, T’ao writes,

In the east garden, there’s a green pine
Overgrown with brush, it’s beauty shrouded.

When frost comes, killing everything else,
Its majestic, towering branches appear.

No one noticed it among the trees, but now
It stands alone, they’re amazed.³⁰

It is not the intention of the frost to reveal the majestic quality of the green pine, but it’s winter and frost is a natural event at this time of year. When fall gives way to winter, frost appears naturally and spontaneously. Reflection in poetry is correlative with the natural processes taking place in nature. Because the principle of directness calls for parsimony of diction to allow the things to stand out in naturalness and spontaneity, brevity of communication that compresses the imagery into the characteristics of the appearance of the object also naturally follows. The

spontaneous emergence of things in poetry reflects the cosmological event of concrescence in the act of creativity in which the many become one.³¹

The principle of directness is a necessary corollary to non-coercive naming (*wu-ming*) because in order to name effectively we must replace the self that desires control, possession, and consumption—*power*—with a self that is free from power, a self that is capable, in the words of the *Chuang-tzu*, to roam free and easy among the ten thousand things. Here is an important connection between the Taoist practice of self-realization and the art of poetry. In describing things as they appear to consciousness without the obstruction of self-conscious desire—subjectivity or power—things stand forth as they are/appear. “The poetic work,” writes Chang Chung-yuan, “is brought forth from the primordial source of the great self.”³² The great self is Chang’s phrase for the true self or ego-less self. The ego-less self, Chang writes, “sometimes manifests itself as primordial innocence, sometimes as transcendental spirituality. Both are fundamental to poetic expression.”³³ Primordial innocence is revealed by using direct, plainspoken language that seems naïve and unsophisticated, but which actually reveals the object’s “spiritual rhythm” (*shen-yun*). The “spiritual rhythm of an object is “the outcome of an interfusion between the subjectivity of the poet and the objective reality of things.”³⁴ The absence of the poet’s self-interest allows reflection to take place and the poem then arises naturally and spontaneously (*tzu-jan*).

The true self, transformed in the process of self-realization, can freely name things as they are and reflect each thing’s spiritual rhythm. Poems composed in primordial innocence or transcendental spirituality are poems that reveal “the natural flash that leaves no trace.”³⁵ The contrast between the ego-self and the ego-less self is revealed here as well. The ego-self leaves traces in whatever it does: in doing what *I* will, there are ten thousand things *I* do that *I* do not will—in all acts of subjectivity, of power, of coercion, traces are left. When the ego-less self creates, there is only the natural flash of the uniqueness of things (*Tao*). Thus, the process of self-transformation and the process of poetic creativity are mutually informing: “when the artist reveals reality concealed in things, he sets it free and, in turn, he liberates and purifies himself. This invisible process, fundamental to Chinese art, is the action of Tao.”³⁶

Notes

¹Chang Chung-yuan. *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry*. (NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1970). 97. Hereafter cited as *CT*.

²*Ibid*, 196.

³David L. Hall. "Process and anarchy—A Taoist vision of creativity." *Philosophy East and West* 28, no. 3 (July 1978): 274. Hereafter cited as "P and a."

⁴*Ibid*, 174.

⁵*Ibid*, 77.

⁶*Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*. Translation and Commentary by Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall. (NY: Ballantine Books, 2003). 21-22. Hereafter cited as *DDJ*.

⁷*Ibid*, 87.

⁸David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "An Ambiguity of Order: China and the West." In *World Philosophy: A Text with Readings*. Ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995). 31.

⁹*DDJ*, 38.

¹⁰*Ibid*.

¹¹*Ibid*.

¹²T'ao Ch'ien. *The Selected Poems of T'ao Ch'ien*. Trans. David Hinton. (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1993). 62. Hereafter cited as *TC*.

¹³*DDJ*, 183.

¹⁴*Ibid*.

¹⁵*Ibid*.

¹⁶*CT*, 65.

¹⁷*Ibid*, 67.

¹⁸Chuang-tzu. *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzu*. Trans. Burton Watson. (NY:Columbia University Press, 1968). 57-58. Hereafter cited as *CW*.

¹⁹*TC*, 34-35.

²⁰*CT*, 170.

²¹*Ibid*, 127.

²²*CW*, 167.

²³*CT*, 77.

²⁴*TC*, 41-42.

²⁵*CT*, 103.

²⁶*Ibid*, 33.

²⁷*Ibid*, 39.

²⁸*DDJ*, 142.

²⁹Su Tung-p'o. *The Selected Poems of Su Tung-p'o*. Trans. Burton Watson. (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1994). 20.

³⁰*TC*, 54.

³¹“P and a,” 272.

³²*CT*, 182.

³³*Ibid*, 173.

³⁴*Ibid*, 171.

³⁵*Ibid*, 189.

³⁶*Ibid*, 8.