

DAO JING: CHAPTERS 1–3

CHAPTER 1

The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao.
The name that can be called is not the eternal Name.
Nothingness (*wú* 無) is named for the origin of all things.
Essence (*you* 有) is named for the mother of all things.
So, ever free of desire, we can see the subtleties of nothingness.
Ever full of desire, we can see only the manifestations of essence.
These two appear together.
They differ in name, yet are considered the same.
This mystery of mysteries is the gateway to all marvels.

COMMENTS

According to the anthroposophic teacher Rudolf Steiner, *Dao* is the name for the Primal Wisdom. He says, “The wisdom of Atlantis was embodied in the water, in a drop of dew. And the word *dew* [*Tau* in German] is none other than the ancient Atlantean sound.”*

Recall in “An Overview of Anthroposophy,” 4.1, we learn that, during the Atlantean epoch, human beings relied on the guidance of the spiritual world. At that time, the earth was covered with moist air. Ancient human beings felt that wise guidance of the spiritual world came from the moist air, the dew drops. They called the dew drops *Dao* and also referred to this wise guidance as *Dao*.

The Chinese people inherited the Atlantean cultural tradition. However, with the passing of time, this tradition changed greatly. For instance, at the time of Laozi, the word *Dao* (道) encompassed many other meanings, including to guide, to speak, a road, a method, or truth.

* Steiner, *The Secret Stream: Christian Rosenkretz and Rosicrucianism* (collected lectures), p. 36.

Hence, we may also read the first sentence as: “The Dao that can be a road is not the eternal Dao.” The word *Dao* can be a method to talk about or can be a road to walk on, yet neither meaning can convey the full significance of Dao, the Primal Wisdom.



Dao
(regular script)



Dao
(ancient script)



Zou
(left)



Shou
(Right)

Now, let us inspect the word *Dao* (道) in its ancient script style and explore its symbolic meanings. According to the authoritative Chinese dictionary, *Shuo Wen Jie Zi* (說文解字),* in this ancient style, the script (*Dao*, 道) consists of two parts; the left side is the script for the word *go along* (*zou*) and the right side the script for the word *head* (*shou*). (See illustrations.) The script for *go along* (*zou*) means “to walk, to go, or to walk and stop hesitantly.” It consists of an upper part symbolizing three footsteps and a lower part representing a pause. Thus, this script symbolically implies walking and stopping three times. Hence, it can mean “to walk and stop hesitantly.” The script for *head* (*shou*) means “the head, to face toward, or to hesitate.” It probably also indicates hesitating three times, as shown by the three strands of hair (this is my guess). Hence, *go along* (*zou*) and *head* (*shou*) together form the word *Dao* (道) indicating the cautious way to approach Dao, the Primal Wisdom. The way to approach Dao is not by rushing, but by moving forward slowly, yet stopping hesitatingly a few times with aspiring ideals and deep reverence.

Then, the continuing middle passage of the verse discusses the mystery coexistence of the two attributes of Dao, *nothingness* (*wú* 無, spirit) and *essence* (*you* 有, matter). To understand this mystery, let us first recall Steiner’s teaching. He says that the cosmos consists

* See, for instance, <https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E9%81%93>.

of a material world and a spiritual world. The spiritual world is the foundation of the material world, and the material world is the manifestation of the spiritual world. People with physical senses can observe only the material world. People need to do meditation exercises and develop suprasensory spiritual organs to see the spiritual world. Steiner often says that these two worlds always coexist. They are both attributes of the Primal Wisdom, or the Godhead.

Laozi teaches the same doctrine, only he uses the term *nothingness* for the spiritual world, and the term *essence* for the material world. He says, when people calm their mind without desire interfering, they can then see the subtleties of nothingness (the spiritual world). However, if people let desire occupy their mind, they can see just the manifestations of essence (the material world). These two attributes of Dao, essence and nothingness, are like the two sides of a coin, always coexistent. Dao is at the same time showing in essence and disappearing into nothingness. In other words, Dao is always concurrently producing a myriad of things and annulling them.

Buddhism also teaches the coexistence of nothingness and essence, but with different terminologies. Buddhists use the term *prajna* for “Dao,” *emptiness* for “nothingness,” and *form* for “essence.” A famous Buddhist scripture, the Heart Sutra, has a mystical passage on form and emptiness. It says (underlines added):

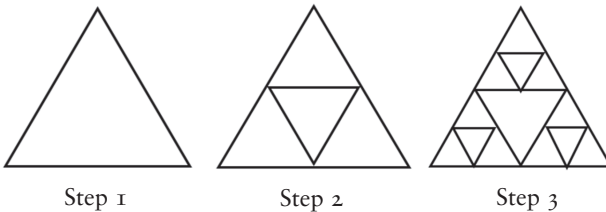
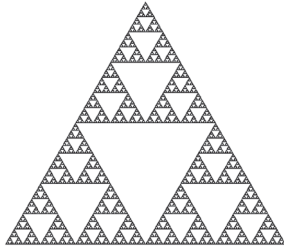
Form is no different from emptiness,
and emptiness is no different from form.
Whatever is form is emptiness,
and whatever is emptiness is form.

In this passage, suppose we replace *form* with *essence*, and *emptiness* with *nothingness*. So, it reads like this instead:

Essence is no different from nothingness,
and nothingness is no different from essence.
Whatever is essence is nothingness
and whatever is nothingness is essence.

With this replacement, we see that Daoism and Buddhism essentially teach the same doctrine. Hence, we may also say that *form* and *emptiness*, as taught in Buddhism, are just like *essence* and *nothingness*, and may be seen as coexisting and arising from the same source. Daoists call the source *Dao*; Buddhists call it *prajna*.

Interestingly, a modern mathematical model, the Sierpinski triangle, sheds light on the mystery of the coexistence of nothingness (emptiness, or spirit) and essence (form, or matter). There are many ways to construct the Sierpinski triangle. We present one particular method that aptly correlates with this teaching.



- Step 1: Draw a blank triangle.
- Step 2: Join the mid points of the triangle's three sides to form a pattern of four smaller triangles: three outer upright triangles and one inner upside down triangle.
- Step 3: Form the same pattern for each upright triangle as in step 2. Keep repeating step 3 for the upright triangles, until the Sierpinski triangle takes shape as shown with a central blank triangle and three outer triangles, each of which has a pattern like the whole figure.*

* In mathematics, such self-similar figures are called fractals.

From this process, we see that a pattern appears in the empty space of a triangle and the empty space of a triangle lets the pattern appear. That is, there is pattern in the empty space; there is empty space within the pattern. Suppose we symbolize the empty space as the unrevealing attribute of Dao in the spiritual world, and the pattern as the revealing attribute of Dao in the material world. Then, this figure clearly illustrates that the material world and the spiritual world arise from the same source and always coexist.

Miraculously, this model can also deepen our comprehension of the last sentence of this verse: “This mystery of mysteries is the gateway to all marvels.” Suppose we regard the central blank triangle in the Sierpinski triangle as the most inner core of our spiritual existence and the three outer triangles as forms of our material appearances. Then, people with well-developed suprasensory spiritual organs can see the central core as clear light. Furthermore, they can see the outer material appearances as light unceasingly changing from emptiness to form and vice versa. However, those with ordinary physical vision can see neither the inner core nor a constant becoming and vanishing of the clear light in the outer. They can see only the outer appearances as a solid, rigid expression of form and emptiness, like the pattern in the whole Sierpinski triangle.

Hence, we see the merit in developing suprasensory spiritual organs. One useful way to develop these organs is to practice meditation. Indeed, the *Daodejing* provides many excellent topics for meditation. Dr. Steiner has taught many meditation exercises. When he teaches a meditation exercise, he would usually recite a verse, show what kind of images are appropriate and explain why there are such words or sounds in the verse. We shall inspect one of his meditation verses (in German) to see how the vowel sounds progressively lead the meditator in approaching the divine.*

* For more details of the whole meditation, see *Esoteric Lessons, 1904–1909*, lesson in Munich, Dec. 5, 1907, pp. 231–238.

NEW DAOISM

In den reinen <u>Strah</u> len des <u>L</u> ichtes.	In pure rays of light
Erg <u>l</u> aenzt die <u>G</u> ottheit der Welt.	Gleams the Godhead of the world.
In der reinen Liebe zu allen Wesen,	In pure love to all beings
Er <u>str</u> ahlt die <u>G</u> o <u>e</u> ttlichkeit meiner Seele,	Radiates the godliness of my soul.
Ich <u>r</u> uhe in der Gottheit der Welt	I rest in the Godhead of the world,
Ich werde mich selbst finden	I will find myself
In der Gottheit der Welt.	In the Godhead of the world.

Steiner says that deep wisdom and lofty divine life are hidden within these (darkened and underlined) vowels of the verse. These vowels signify the state of the meditator's soul. Let us go over them line by line.

- (line 1): [i] strives toward the center of the world,
[ah] stops with reverence;
[i] again strives.
- (line 2): [ae] stops with somewhat weakened reverence, yet
[o] wants to embrace the Godhead at the center of the world.
- (line 3): [i] strives for a third time.
- (line 4): [ah] stops with reverence,
[oe] but still hardly dares to embrace the Godhead.
- (line 5): [u] finally rests in the Godhead.
- (lines 6 and 7): [i] is led ever deeper into the center of the world.

It is not a coincidence that both this meditation verse and the ancient script of the word *Dao* (道) convey a similar attitude toward the divine. On the spiritual path, it is prudent to go forward slowly with awe and reverence. Actually, we can apply this attitude toward all our undertakings. No wonder, there are such famous words of advice: "Think thrice before action" (*san si er hou xing* 三思而後行). Indeed, we can consider all our work as practice to approach Dao.

Steiner also advises his students to handle their daily work with care and respect. He says that whenever we have done something we should not immediately consider it complete. We should let it rest for

a while and then take it up again for improvement. We should repeat three more times and even for another three times—in other words, altogether six more times. Thus, after the fourth time or, even better, after the seventh time, we again inspect how the work appears. Indeed, if after these 7 initial attempts, we are not yet satisfied, we may then repeat a cycle of 7 attempts again and again. For some complicated and important work, we may have to try 4 cycles or even 7 cycles of 7 times. Sometimes we really need to try 28 (4×7) or even 49 (7×7) times to make a task fully satisfactory. Depending on the nature of our work, the time taken to complete a task may be as short as a few minutes or as long as several months or even many years. Yet the principle of not rushing our work is the same.

Thus, we see that both Anthroposophy and Daoism encourage practitioners to execute their work, big or small, with caution and reverence. This attitude in managing affairs is truly the gateway to all marvels.