



EFFORTLESS LIVING

Wu-Wei and the Spontaneous
State of Natural Harmony

無為

JASON GREGORY

Foreword by Damo Mitchell



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Inner Traditions
Rochester, Vermont • Toronto, Canada

*Dedicated to the ancient Chinese master Lao-tzu.
May his wisdom continue to enlighten the world.*

EFFORTLESS LIVING

“Immersing yourself in the origins and underpinnings of this ancient way of thinking and being will definitely help usher you into the Intuition Age with its interconnected, holographic perception. This book is brimming over with gems and overall wisdom. It’s a comprehensive weaving of many threads that makes for a fascinating—and useful—read.”

PENNEY PEIRCE, AUTHOR OF *LEAP OF PERCEPTION* AND *FREQUENCY*

“In the West, people say, ‘where there’s a will there’s a way,’ by imposing your will over nature. More often than not this backfires. In ancient China, the wise ones discovered that the best way is *wu-wei*, ‘doing nothing,’ and thereby getting everything done by letting nature take its course. In this book you’ll learn how that’s not-done.”

DANIEL REID, AUTHOR OF *THE TAO OF HEALTH, SEX, AND LONGEVITY*
AND *THE TAO OF DETOX*

“In *Effortless Living*, Jason Gregory explains in clear and simple terms the Taoist concept of *wu-wei* and reintroduces a model of contemplation much needed in the world today. He describes how *wu-wei* (literally ‘not forcing’ or ‘allowing’) can facilitate communion with the Tao—the timeless flow from which everything else we perceive is but a reflection. I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and I learned so much from it. My humble thanks to Jason Gregory for facilitating my own understanding of the Tao and, in doing so, allowing me to apprehend the inner silence and to listen to its wordless wisdom.”

ANTHONY PEAKE, AUTHOR OF *THE INFINITE MINDFIELD* AND *OPENING THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION* AND COAUTHOR OF *THE IMMORTAL MIND*

“Jason Gregory has tapped into a living stream of wisdom to bring us an antidote to our cultural numbness. By learning how to let things be, rather than interfere and intervene in an unnatural order of life, Gregory forces us to love the world again, by trusting it. This is essential and practical wisdom for a modern social world at its best.”

KINGSLEY L. DENNIS, AUTHOR OF *THE PHOENIX GENERATION AND NEW CONSCIOUSNESS FOR A NEW WORLD*

“*Effortless Living* is a timely book. In a time where absolutist and rigid views are proving to be outmoded if not dangerous, Jason Gregory uses his heart and critical thinking skills to lay bare the essential, irreducible teachings of Lao-tzu. He deconstructs the myths, formulaic thinking, and the business of ritual of Taoism as it is practiced today that obscure and often hinder our innate abilities to have a direct experience of that from which we are never separate.”

ROBERT SACHS, AUTHOR OF *THE PASSIONATE BUDDHA AND THE WISDOM OF THE BUDDHIST MASTERS*

“In *Effortless Living*, Jason Gregory reminds us that a magic still dwells in our world despite the external forces, and psychological habits, that increasingly steer us toward cynicism. Gregory gives not only clear explanations of Taoism and reconciliations of it with Confucianism, but also guidelines for getting in touch with the Tao at the heart of all things. Furthermore, he makes clear why the root of world peace is the inner peace of the individual, which is why—socially and environmentally—this book is so deeply valuable. This is the best book on Taoism as a spiritual path since Alan Watts wrote *Tao: The Watercourse Way* nearly fifty years ago, and so I say, it’s about time.”

DANA SAWYER, PROFESSOR OF RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY AT THE MAINE COLLEGE OF ART AND AUTHOR OF *ALDOUS HUXLEY: A BIOGRAPHY*

“In this work the Tao is alive, expressing through itself, as itself! The words propel us through the labyrinth of mind to point us directly at the profound truths of our being, that mysterious Way which transcends the intellect and filters of the human mind. The book reverberates with the

perennial truth that the great saints and sages of antiquity have taught. With clarity and insight we come to see the place of techniques and practices as well as their limitations. The dismantling of mind is palpable as we are pointed over and over again to the limits of the words themselves and a possibility of an opening, a dawning of that which we always already are but have forgotten.”

DANIEL SCHMIDT, DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKER OF *INNER WORLDS*,
OUTER WORLDS AND *SAMADHI*

“In *Effortless Living*, Gregory portrays beautifully the ideas of hard-and-fast belief colliding with the natural harmony of true living with the flow of our natural state of being. This book also wonderfully explains how our need to control is more of an illusion that creates the very struggles that we see in our modern world; control interrupts the natural flow of life.”

STEVEN L. HAIRFIELD, PHD, AUTHOR OF *A METAPHYSICAL
INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE*

Acknowledgments

I started writing *Effortless Living* back in 2013 in a small apartment in Seoul, South Korea. Since then this book has been on a journey around the world for over three years, from Seoul to Chiang Mai in Thailand to Tiruvannamalai in India on to Pokhara in Nepal and then back to Chiang Mai. It has changed shape many times, including numerous title changes, a stack of edits and reedits, and many additions and subtractions all along the way. There are many people to thank for persisting with me in the unfoldment of this book.

First and foremost, I am forever grateful to my wife, Gayoung. You showed extreme patience and tender care during this extended writing process. When I would let this book rest for months on end you would motivate me to persevere with it and inspire me to continue to overcome the obstacles this book presented. You always said the right thing at the right time to curb my anxiety, leading to insightful guidance. I am beyond fortunate to live a life with someone who embraces the rollercoaster of uncertainty. Our trust in this crazy ride called our life is the trust we have in the love we share with each other. Let's see where this rollercoaster will flip us next.

Secondly, a big hug and humble gratitude to all of the wonderful people at Inner Traditions and Bear & Company. Words cannot describe what you've all done for my work going forward. I am especially thankful to my acquisition editor, Jon Graham. Jon, you steered me through the whole process. You pushed me all the way. You knew this book could be so much more. Back in 2013 when I thought the book was finished, you intuitively knew that I could do better. And this process happened many times because I was too anxious to finish the book without understanding its true potential, which included a massive revision. Without your book industry knowledge and all-around wisdom this book would have remained on my bookshelf. Thank you for giving it wings to fly.

Next I owe a debt of gratitude to my two editors for this book. First of all, a big thank you to my copyeditor, Richard Smoley, for meticulously going over each line to make the text sparkle with clarity. Secondly, heartfelt gratitude to

my project editor, Meghan MacLean. You've been my project editor for my three previous books, and I'm always astounded by your skill and wisdom. But this time you really outdid yourself. For you to be able to focus and do your work with minimal fuss just before and after the birth of your child is a testament to the amazing individual you are.

Effortless Living was extremely fortunate to have a foreword written by Taoist teacher of traditional martial arts Damo Mitchell. It's no surprise that our paths have crossed considering our mutual love for the internal arts and the Eastern mind they came from. Some of my fondest memories are when you and your wife, Roni, visited Chiang Mai. I enjoyed gallivanting around northern Thailand with both of you. It's not common that two authors write a foreword for each other's books, but I'm proud to have written one for you and to have you provide one for *Effortless Living*.

Last but definitely not least, a humble bow to three of the great sages of the Warring States period of China: Lao-tzu, Confucius, and Chuang-tzu. All three were the inspiration behind this book. Though their views may differ, and even though I may appear critical of Confucius in this book, we are truly blessed to have open access to all their wisdom. Now more than ever their wisdom is needed. *Effortless Living* hopes to carry their wisdom into the future.

Contents

[Cover Image](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Epigraph](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[FOREWORD: Shedding Skin to Liberate the Mind by Damo Mitchell](#)

[INTRODUCTION: The Effortless Mind](#)

[THE HEART OF LIFE](#)

[THE FUNDAMENTAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY OF WU-WEI](#)

[THE PARADOX OF LANGUAGE](#)

[PART 1: THE ORIGIN OF THE EFFORTLESS MIND IN THE EAST](#)

[Chapter 1: The Way of Nature Is No Ideology or Theology](#)

[THE TAO OF THE OLD MASTER](#)

[CONFUCIAN MORALITY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF *JU*](#)

[LAO-TZU'S NATURAL INDIVIDUAL VERSUS CONFUCIUS'S SOCIAL ETHICS](#)

[THE PHANTOMS OF CONTROL AND SECURITY](#)

[THE SUPERIOR MAN](#)

[Chapter 2: The Way of Nature Is No Religion or Dogma](#)

[SAVE THE WORLD FROM WHOM?](#)

[CONFUCIAN ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS TAOISM](#)

[THE LOST MEANING OF RITUAL](#)

NATURE'S REBEL IS SOCIETY'S THREAT
FILIAL PIETY AND THE OPPRESSED INDIVIDUAL

Chapter 3: The Way of the Tao Is Harmony

THE ORGANIC PATTERN OF LI
LIVING THE ART OF WU-WEI

PART 2: THE SCIENCE AND PRACTICE OF AN EFFORTLESS MIND

Chapter 4: The Virtue of the Nonvirtuous

VIRTUE OF TE
ALLOWING THE LIGHT OF VIRTUE TO SHINE THROUGH THE DARK CLOUDS OF MIND
PATANJALI'S YOGA OF MUTUALITY
BREAKING FREE OF THE MACHINE THROUGH VIRTUE

Chapter 5: Parasitic Patterns of the Unnatural World

ENTROPY AND DEATH? OR DEATH AND TRANSFORMATION?
CHAOS OF THE LINEAR WORLD
HARMONY OF NONCONFORMITY

Chapter 6: Natural Government Born of Tao

THE NATURALNESS OF TZU-JAN
NATURE'S ANARCHY
TRUST IN PEOPLE IS REAL GOVERNMENT

Chapter 7: Trust Is Unity

TRUST IN LIFE
UNITY, TRUST, AND WU-WEI
TRUST, AND THE UNIVERSE IS YOUR BODY

Chapter 8: The Practice of Yin Cultivation and the Art of the Skillful Craftsman

THE SKILL OF MARTIAL ARTS IS YIN OVER YANG

A YIN-DEFICIENT WORLD

CULTIVATING YIN

PART 3: THE ART OF EFFORTLESS LIVING

Chapter 9: Synchronicity Is the Language of the Effortless Mind

CHANCE OR FATE?

SYNCHRONICITY IS THE SONG OF SPIRIT AND MATTER

THE ORIGIN OF SYNCHRONICITY

Chapter 10: Nothing Is More Useless than Wu-Wei

USELESS SPACE IS USEFUL

SIMPLE LIVING AND THE POWER OF HUMILITY

Chapter 11: Living Wu-Wei in the Tao of a New World

FLOWING AGAINST THE TAO OF LOVE

ENLIGHTENING THE SHADOW THROUGH HARMONIC RELATIONSHIPS

EMBRACING THE WORLD

WU-WEI'S NATURAL FLOW OF TAO

Endnotes

Bibliography

About the Author

About Inner Traditions • Bear & Company

Books of Related Interest

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[Index](#)

Note on the Romanization of Chinese Words

There are two commonly known romanization systems for Chinese words. The older and more familiar one is known as the Wade-Giles, while the new standard and more precise one is the Pinyin romanization. For example, the Chinese word 道 in the Wade-Giles system is Tao, and this is the romanization that many people are familiar with. It is somewhat pleasing aesthetically, but its sound is not quite accurate. On the other hand, the Pinyin romanization of this word is Dao. Many are not familiar with this spelling, nor, may we say, is it as aesthetically pleasing, but its sound is more accurate. In this book I have blended both systems of romanization for Chinese and give the spelling of both when we are first introduced to a significant Chinese word in the text. The romanization I choose for each Chinese word is based on what I believe people are most familiar with and also what I feel is best aesthetically.

FOREWORD

Shedding Skin to Liberate the Mind

Damo Mitchell

As a lifelong devotee of the Tao (道) only one thing has really ever held me back in my practice: a lack of trust. What is it that a true human should trust in?

We should give our trust to our unfolding path in life, which presents itself to us once we learn how to let go. This is both the simplest and most difficult of principles.

What stops a person from letting go and embracing trust in the unfoldment of the universe in their life is the interventions of the intellect. All those who walk the path of Tao will at some point or another realize that it is the machinations of their own minds that are preventing them from attaining the heightened states of consciousness alluded to by the ancient wisdom traditions. The nature of Tao is to flow and let life unfold in a harmonious manner. Those who can tap into this flow will be led toward a state of conscious elevation; those who cannot will generally be led down a path of trivial concerns. This was the underlying ethos of the teachings of the ancient Chinese master Lao-tzu (老子), and for generations since it has been this deceptively difficult challenge that has lain at the heart of the Taoist tradition.

If we look at the majority of modern interpretations of Taoism, we see the hallmarks of a tradition that has sadly lost its way. Obscuring the original tenets are layer upon layer of useless trappings: ritual, hierarchy, worship, and other things generally associated with organized religion. Certainly the contemporary format of Taoism does not follow the teachings of its founders, nor does it serve to do anything but drag its adherents into a mire of trappings.

Having invested a great deal of my time and energy into a study of Taoism, I

can see that my early years were concerned with learning as much as I could. I would study with any teacher I could find, spare no expense to travel to distant parts of Asia, and run myself ragged accumulating more and more information. The intellectual part of my mind thrived on my actions, but one day the realization dawned upon me that I was still no closer to really experiencing the Tao. I could perform no end of exercises, movements, and practices. I could quote classics and speak for hours on the theory of Taoism according to others, but I had no direct knowledge of what Tao meant. It was at this stage in my personal development that I understood that I needed to begin shedding. I needed to unclutter myself from the various trappings of Tao that I had accumulated, as it was these that were holding me back on my journey.

It is interesting for me to see how the majority of travelers within the internal arts go through a similar process. Those that move diligently enough along their path come to similar conclusions, so the process of unloading that which is unnecessary becomes the path itself. Those who never fully come to terms with the nature of Taoism unfortunately miss this important point and instead continue to accumulate.

As this uncluttering takes place, it begins an unfolding process within the mind so that the most sincere practitioners begin to realize the nature of *wu-wei* (無為). Here, within the (non)act of nondoing, lies the heart of the Taoist tradition. Through noninterference in the natural flow of the cosmos, spontaneous truth is realized from within. As the great Taoist teacher Wang Chong (王充) said: "The Way to Heaven is to take no action."

Within *Effortless Living* Jason Gregory eloquently explores the nature of Taoism and the concept of *wu-wei* from the position of somebody who has truly walked the path. This is a great relief to me, as I have grown tired of reading book after book written by pure Taoist theorists who butcher the tradition and in particular the nature of *wu-wei* through analysis from a position of pure intellect. It was like a breath of fresh air to spend time reading a text written by a true follower of the Way. As each chapter unfolds, you can see how Jason Gregory has been through the process of learning how to trust, let go, and manifest *wu-wei* through his very being. It is only when the majority of books on the nature of Tao are once again written by followers of the Way that Taoist literature will stop being so poor!

It also interested me greatly to see how Jason expertly brings the teachings of Taoism through into the modern age. An exploration of the nature of society and how it has developed in direct opposition to the way of Tao is by no means a mere modernism: a discomfort with societal structure has always been present

within Taoism throughout history, but few writers seem to pick up on this. When I engage with the writings of Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu (莊子), or indeed the vast majority of spiritual teachers around the world, I am confronted with radicals, misfits, and rebels. These are not prophets advocating the status quo; these are people who understood that stepping out of the structured nature of religion, society, and government was the only way to find some kind of personal liberation. What I learn from this is that only those who recognize the inherent sickness that pervades our societal structure will ever really be able to free themselves from the shackles of our societal paradigm. We are encouraged to live according to a narrative generated by a group of people who most certainly do not understand the concept of wu-wei, nor do they flow with the force of Tao. Rebellion is the natural inclination of many people who come to these conclusions, but in truth rebellion itself is against the flow of Taoism, because it too is a form of governance based within the acquired aspect of human mind. The real answer lies once again in the simplicity of wu-wei, the act of letting go and the trust that a new and spontaneous way of living will emerge.

Effortless Living is an important book, one that demands a place within anyone's mind, and especially any follower of the Way's library of resources. In putting it together Jason Gregory has undertaken a challenging task. One key reason that writing anything about Taoism is difficult is that the very tradition itself tells us right from early on in its key texts that it is practically impossible to discuss the nature of Taoism! It is a tradition that essentially transcends the limited language of words, and yet at the same time the medium of language is required if the tradition is to be passed on. This is a difficulty I have encountered when writing my own books. Often I am left scratching my head at the problem of putting into the written language a feeling or realization that comes from deep within the center of consciousness—an abstract sense of “knowing” that people have to reach themselves to truly connect with. Despite these difficulties and the experiential nature of the tradition, it is the language of words that points the way and sets a person's intention on the correct path. If I were to sit and consider how I would clearly and accurately put together a text describing the philosophical principle of wu-wei, I would certainly struggle, and yet with this book Jason Gregory has done an outstanding job of doing just that.

In conclusion, I would like to add that I truly believe it is important that any author or teacher within an internal tradition be a sincere adherent of the philosophy. If such a person does not embody the teachings in his own life, then he is simply adding to the watering-down of a timeless tradition as well as leading readers and students into the proverbial wilderness. As my role as head

of an internal arts school has developed, I have found myself in many situations where I am mixing with other teachers and writers. The first thing I am curious about is the level of authenticity I find within these people. In many cases I am saddened to discover that they do not walk the path they are purporting to. Hypocrisy is an ugly human trait, and one that I have come to realize is rife throughout too many walks of life. In Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, I had the opportunity to spend time with Jason Gregory and his wife, Gayoung. Over the course of our conversations it was clear that Jason had explored the meaning and practices within many different systems, and that his journey has truly enabled the teachings of the Eastern traditions to guide his life and release his *xing* (性), his nature. By letting go and putting trust in the nature of wu-wei, Jason has reached a state of being untethered to the restricting state of the world. As such, he has achieved a liberation of spirit that makes him more than qualified to write such a book. I believe that in this book, Jason's study, as well as his ability to put his conclusions into writing, has created an instant classic within the Taoist tradition.

DAMO MITCHELL is a teacher of the internal arts of China and follows the classical threefold path of martial arts, medicine, and meditation. His teachings are based on the philosophy that Dao is to be found when these three areas of study come into harmony with one another. His studies began at the age of four years old and have developed full-time throughout his life to include in-depth cultivation within several traditional lineages. He runs the Lotus Nei Gong International School of Daoist Arts, which has branches across Europe and America, as well as the Xian Tian College of Chinese Medicine, which focuses on both contemporary and classical therapeutic methods. He is the author of a number of books on the Daoist arts and continues to travel extensively and deepen his own studies between teaching events.

PART 1

**THE ORIGIN OF THE
EFFORTLESS MIND IN THE EAST**

The Way of Nature Is No Ideology or Theology

When the word *Taoism* is uttered, many people identify it with a religion. But was Lao-tzu teaching and setting up an organized religion? Similarly we could ask whether the intent of Jesus of Nazareth was to create Christianity or whether Siddhartha Gautama's intent was to create Buddhism. Throughout history we discover that religions are often formed many years after the focal point of a religion's doctrine, in the form of an enlightened sage, has died. The intent of all legendary sages is to liberate the individual from the shackles of separation and suffering.

The legends of Lao-tzu, Krishna, Rama, Gautama the Buddha, and Jesus of Nazareth align with each other through an ineffable mystery that is veiled within their stories. None of these sages mandated that a religion should be organized around a group of precepts. On the contrary, they had no interest in setting up dogmas based around their teachings, because the essence of their teachings is a formless mystery. We invariably create dogmas when we do not understand the depth of the knowledge we are trying to comprehend. As a result, we cloak such knowledge by giving it a name and form in order to try and somehow make sense of it. This appears to be a typical psychological trait that shelters us from the real essence of what we are trying to know.

In many cases, words such as *Tao*, *Brahman*, *Tathata*, *Allah*, *Akasha*, *God*, and so on, conjure up an air of confusion for the average individual because the bulk of humanity do not observe or center themselves upon the source of the world, which is within oneself. Most people are focused on the outside world and are subject to the hypnotic belief that this is where the world exists. As a result, when they hear a word such as *God*, they cannot conceive of "what" it is. They mold its meaning to the world they think they know, which is the world of form and pleasure. Hypnotically, we give anthropomorphic form to that mystery.

This somehow appeases our intellect, and we think we have figured out that God is some sort of Being above us, lording it over everything. Religious wars are waged tirelessly from this absurd monarchical view of God. This tyrannical view is also found in Taoism as a religious notion, which would bring a confused look to the face of Lao-tzu.

THE TAO OF THE OLD MASTER

Out of all the spiritual paths lived by the legendary sages, Taoism would be the least likely to have become a religion. Never did Lao-tzu explain a doctrine that one could follow. He knew that this would wind up in intellectual conjecture. The Taoism of Lao-tzu was about the Way, the Tao, which is something we experience when we are more attentive to our inner and outer worlds. The Tao can be followed and experientially known when we have surrendered our controlled, conditioned identity over to the effortless realm of spontaneity and trust, wu-wei. This effortless realm is why the Tao is usually referred to as “the way of nature,” because when we follow the Way, we can experience the same spontaneity of nature within our own experience; as a result, we trust our path through life. The discovery of this spontaneity in life allows us to sink deeply into the awareness that we *are* nature and not separate from any aspect of it. This revelation of oneness with nature reveals a close relationship between the shamanic traditions of antiquity and the wisdom of Lao-tzu, minus the rites and rituals. In the essential teaching of Lao-tzu we discover small traces of some connection to the ancient shamanic traditions of China going way back into the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE).

But in no way could there be any connection to shamanic practices, ancestral worship, sacrifice, rites, and rituals, because knowing and following the Tao according to Lao-tzu has nothing to do with outward gestures, no matter how dazzling to the eye. All forms of practice and ritual are controlling aspects of the intellect and its repetitive modes rather than natural spontaneity. We could say, however, that in ancient times they were performed because they expressed the concealed mystical truth of Tao. Lao-tzu was not against such activities, but he did become concerned when people viewed them as a form of liberation.

Both the great sages Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu explained that the real Way of Tao is beyond the outward form. Instead of being concerned with the temporality of such things as rituals, we can directly access the depth of our being through the feminine quality of wu-wei. Yet the teachings of Lao-tzu have

been discarded in favor of the shamanic practices, ancestral worship, sacrifice, rites, and rituals that have developed and been embraced by the world since his time. All of this came about from the misinterpretation of Lao-tzu's teachings by the social moralist Confucius and others down the line of history.

CONFUCIAN MORALITY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF *JU*

Confucianism is still the predominant philosophy of East Asia. Aspects of Confucianism are not only found in China but are embedded in many different ideologies around the world. Confucianism is the moral and ethical outgrowth from the Taoist philosophy of Lao-tzu. We could only hazard a guess about whether Lao-tzu and Confucius knew each other.

When we study the mind of Confucius, we discover a man who understood the Taoist Way well and was a key contributor to the classic Taoist oracle the *I Ching*. But when we dissect the moral virtue of Confucius's superior man, we discover that his interpretation of Lao-tzu's wisdom may have only reached an intellectual level. This is because his primary focus was not on the liberation of the individual but on an enlightened society. I am not saying here that an enlightened society is impossible. But it needs to be clear that the foundation of a society comes from what is within the minds of the individuals who live in it. Hence Lao-tzu's insight is that the enlightenment of the individual takes us a step closer to the total liberation of humankind.

This should make complete sense to anybody. Yet we have devised a whole social system of thought based on the concept that it is not the individual pieces that make up the whole, but rather it is the whole that controls the pieces. Surely you can recognize this idiosyncratic view of life within yourself. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said in regard to morality within society, "Morality—the idiosyncrasy of decadents, with the ulterior motive of revenging themselves on life—successfully."¹

This concept has led to the formation of institutional power, which wields its influence over the individual through government, religion, the economy, academia, and other institutions. Confucius's interpretation of Lao-tzu's wisdom contributed heavily to this confused view of reality. Confucianism was not an enhancement of the Taoist Way. On the contrary, it deformed its wisdom into a vehicle that would only suit the morally and ethically "noble" of society. The Confucian way is to try and transform the individual according to the moral

codes and ethics of ju (儒: Wade-Giles *ju*, Pinyin *ru*) philosophy.

Ju philosophy is the heart of Confucius's teachings and the framework of Confucianism. It is constructed around four basic virtues (see figure 1.1). The first of these basic virtues is known in Chinese as *jen* (仁: Wade-Giles *jen*, Pinyin *ren*), which is translated in English as "human-heartedness." This human-heartedness is the compassion and devotional love we have deep down for one another. It is the ability to identify with the suffering and joy of others as if they were our own.

The second virtue is called *yi* (義: Wade-Giles *I*, Pinyin *yi*) in Chinese, which is the sense of justice, responsibility, duty, and obligations to others. We need to be mindful that both *jen* and *yi* are disinterested states: the superior man does not do anything that will please or profit himself, because *jen* and *yi* emanate from an unconditional moral imperative.

The third virtue is the Confucian concept of *li* (禮: Wade-Giles *li*, Pinyin *li*). But this principle is somewhat different from the Taoist *li* (理), which we have briefly mentioned in the introduction and will discuss at length within this book. *Li* in the Confucian *ju* philosophy is the acting out of love and veneration for those relationships that make up the identity of our life—for example, family, one's people, and also heaven and earth. *Li* in this case is the liturgical contemplation of the religious and metaphysical structure of an individual. In the *li* of *ju* philosophy, an individual is grateful to take his place in the social and cosmic order of life.

The fourth and final virtue is *chih* (智: Wade-Giles *chih*, Pinyin *zhi*), which means *wisdom* in Chinese. *Chih* combines the three other virtues into a religious maturity whereby one follows a spontaneous inner obedience toward heaven, rather than being moved by external influences.



Figure 1.1. The four basic virtues of ju philosophy By Dao Stew

Though ju philosophy may sound admirable compared to our modern code of conduct, it is still an artificial construct attempting to make the individual conform to a set of rules and a system of behavior. This fosters social unrest, because the individual loses her naturalness. The Confucian philosophy of ju still dictates a set of standard laws to the individual. As a result it is fundamentally flawed, because it implies that we do not belong to this world, and instead need a doctrine to live by.

LAO-TZU'S NATURAL INDIVIDUAL VERSUS CONFUCIUS'S SOCIAL ETHICS

The Taoism of Lao-tzu emphasizes that if we do not let individuals grow as nature intended, they will lose their naturalness and be drawn into the world of animal drives, desires, attachments, and ultimately suffering. This difference in the depth of understanding between Lao-tzu and Confucius is articulated in an imaginary dialogue created by Chuang-tzu:

“Tell me,” said Lao-tzu, “in what consist charity and duty to one’s neighbour?”

“They consist,” answered Confucius, “in a capacity for rejoicing in all things; in universal love, without the element of self. These are the characteristics of charity and duty to one’s neighbour.”

“What stuff!” cried Lao-tzu. “Does not universal love contradict itself? Is not your elimination of self a positive manifestation of self? Sir, if you would cause the empire not to lose its source of nourishment—there is the universe, its regularity is unceasing; there are the sun and moon, their brightness is unceasing; there are the stars, their groupings never change; there are the birds and beasts, they flock together without varying; there are the trees and shrubs, they grow upwards without exception. Be like these: follow Tao, and you will be perfect. Why then these vain struggles after charity and duty to one’s neighbour, as though beating a drum in search of a fugitive. Alas! Sir, you have brought much confusion into the mind of man.”²



Figure 1.2. Confucius and Lao-tzu in dialogue By Jiwon Kim

In this imaginary dialogue, Lao-tzu reiterates that if we interfere in the natural process of any living organism, it will begin to isolate itself from the complementary parts of the whole. This isolation brings about a disassociation from the whole, so that a lack of trust plagues the mind.

Confucius's ideas of charity and duty to one's neighbor are age-old teachings, which artists, philosophers, and spiritual teachers have contemplated from the dawn of civilization to the present day. On the surface, we may all feel convinced that he is correct in postulating that we have a duty to others. But the Taoist Way of Lao-tzu suggests that in attempting to interfere with others' affairs, no matter how large or small, we are assuming that the natural experience of life is not happening spontaneously; instead we think that life is a series of controlled steps following a predictable and mechanical process. Lao-tzu is not saying that we should abolish duty or charity. He is saying that everything in the universe is integral and symbiotic in nature, and that everything functions harmoniously according to the rhythm of the universe. So, he asks, why would humanity be the exception? The Way of the Tao and our experience of it comes from allowing all aspects of the universe to happen as they will without conscious interference.

This understanding of Tao is a trust in and affirmation of life that cannot be broken. Humanity's superficial differences could be dissolved if each individual

could live by this trust. Yet society and culture have been built on ideologies such as Confucianism, communism, and democracy, which all teach us in some way to impose our will over one another, a goal based on the erroneous idea that we are achieving freedom in this process. To trust the Way of the Tao is the complete backflip to Confucianism or any present-day ideology or theology. Lao-tzu's wisdom exposes humanity's selfish tendency to impose the will of one individual, nation, religion, race, or gender over another. We are always interfering with each other's natural sovereignty. Many people arrogantly and ignorantly do this daily and then proclaim that they know what freedom and love are. How can we listen and help each other if it is merely from our own cultural, social, or religious perspective? If we have a set of beliefs to sell another, then we are surely imposing our idea of life upon her without letting her grow as nature intended.

It is this personal agenda that Lao-tzu reveals. If we interfere unnecessarily with any organism on this planet, we hinder its growth through our attempt to control it. When it is interfered with, an organism finds itself in a struggle to grow into everything it should be. As a result, the organism's natural impulse to grow is met with resistance by another organism, which assumes that it is superior to all life and needs no other organisms to survive. We could say human beings fit perfectly into this category because of the personal agendas we wish to cast upon the world. These agendas could only have developed in a world devoid of trust. Because we live in fear instead of trust, our world is designed so clinically that it resembles not a beautiful garden but a morgue.

The Confucian imperative to dictate a social way of life to the individual builds an identity conditioned by the world of concepts and objects rather than the inner world of emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Yet we should not be critical of the Confucian perspective only, because any ideology or theology, no matter how well intended, is at its foundation strictly a methodology for shaping the individual according to its beliefs. Lao-tzu points to this in the *Tao Te Ching*. He says that humanity is in a perpetual trap in which we seek to change one another or society based on our own belief systems. Because we have not made our inner world conscious, we continue to seek change in the external world of forms, as if the inner world were a construct of the outer. Many theologies and ideologies operate from this perspective. But this is an absurd view for the simple reason that the world is devoid of meaning until the observer gives it meaning according to her beliefs. This should be fundamental to the way we think and perceive the world. But instead we are told that the world is purely material by the teachers of our cultural, social, religious, and educational machine, who

themselves have been indoctrinated.

To cultivate a sane society, we first need to understand that our perception was pure before it was colored by external influences. And all of these external influences are interpreted differently by each individual, which adds to the confusion. Patanjali, the great sage of India and father of yoga, expresses this sentiment in the wisdom of three of his sutras regarding freedom:

People perceive the same object differently, as each person's perception follows a separate path from another's.

But the object is not dependent on either of those perceptions; if it were, what would happen to it when nobody was looking?

*An object is known only by a consciousness it has colored; otherwise it is not known.*³

We have built a world that operates in reverse to the natural order of growth and harmonious living. The world's general view identifies with what colors consciousness rather than with the unbound and limitless pure awareness at the core of our being. Lao-tzu's essential teaching of wu-wei is a medicine for this illness.

But you must understand that wu-wei is not an ideology, theology, or something you need to believe in. On the contrary, wu-wei can only be known through your own experience. Then it simply strengthens your trust in wu-wei. The natural order of growth and harmony depends upon allowing life to take its course without conscious interference. This is how the Tao flows when wu-wei is experienced. Many people resist the very thought of allowing things to take place in life, because from our perspective we can't see how anything could be achieved in that way. But if we are more observant, we discover that each and every attempt to categorically control our life is invariably upended by the spontaneity of natural experience. No human being is above this universal spontaneity. And yet many people seek to control life down to the finest detail, failing to realize that the very things that shaped their identity were beyond their control.

THE PHANTOMS OF CONTROL AND

SECURITY

Pain comes when the control we think we have comes crashing down in the light of reality. We fail to realize that the ability to imagine is a vehicle we use to try and control our future. These future projections may be pleasurable, but usually these pleasurable experiences do not come to fruition. Yet we cringe at the reality of living completely in the here and now.

Control is nothing more than an attempt to bring the past and future under our command. Our personal agendas are secret ways of trying to control the destiny of others based on the memories of our past. The pure, natural awareness of our consciousness is polluted by the illusion that we can control each and every situation in life. Spontaneity is loathed by many people; it conflicts with their incessant control. The transformation of Lao-tzu's Taoism into Confucianism is no different.

Lao-tzu exemplifies the rebel in the truest sense of the word, because, following the effortless grace of wu-wei, he is uninterested in worldly affairs. The Taoist Way is not to lord it over anything or anyone. All aspects of nature are allowed to run their course without interference. Sometimes, however, skillful guidance can be given by those who have realized the Tao and function according to wu-wei. But when we unskillfully attempt to tell another individual what to do, how to think, or how to be, we are in fact destroying that individual. Parents are the best example. They project their own idea of the world onto their children without letting them follow their own interests. Parents in such a state of control do not love their children unconditionally. On the contrary, they want for their children what is acceptable in the eyes of the society and world. In this way, we treat children as meaningless material objects. And yet this model is accepted as parenting par excellence.

This vicious cycle of hypnotic parenting can only manifest in a society and culture that have stripped the trust in life out of people. In one sense, our parents are not to blame. But on the other hand, they *are* to blame, because like everyone else in this world, they are naturally sovereign and have a responsibility to avoid imposing their agendas onto others. In this case a family becomes the microcosm of the society in which it dwells. Parents become hierarchical tyrants who terrorize their children with indoctrination. When an ideology, such as democracy or Confucianism, imposes its idea of life upon our minds, we begin a lifelong journey of suppressing our natural inclinations and the creative expression for freedom. This suppression strangles the innate power that we all

possess. And when we lose our innate power, we seek to project it into avenues that we feel comfortable in controlling.

All types of personal relationships exhibit this constant game of one-upmanship. It's not only evident in parents and children but can be found in intimate relationships, such as those between husband and wife. There is always a constant battle for power; each party is trying to make the other yield to his own idea of how life should be. They are attracted to power because society is based on an artificial system that teaches the individual to chase material comforts and convenience in the belief that this will bring security. Our indoctrination teaches us that the more possessions we have, the more powerful and successful we are, and power lies in what is used to acquire these possessions. The symbol of power in our world is money. Yet money itself is empty and valueless until we give it value. We discover that this is true when we realize that the wealthiest people on this planet are usually the unhappiest.

The impulse to control life is a symptom of the power that we believe we have lost. But true power resides in the mind of one who is liberated from the acquisition of wealth and the control of others. When we give up attempting to control life, we find that we are no longer clinging to or conditioned by any aspect of life. Thus we are freed from its attachments. The most liberated people on this planet have been those who were free in this way, such as the twentieth-century Indian sage Sri Ramana Maharshi.

THE SUPERIOR MAN

Confucius audaciously tried to bring morality and ethics into the consciousness of humanity with his concept of the superior man, known as *junzi* (君子: Wade-Giles *chün-tzu*, Pinyin *junzi*) in Chinese. Keep in mind that although the Taoist perspective uses the term *superior man* to refer to both men and women, this is not the case in Confucianism, because Confucius was not overly confident in women's ability to attain wisdom. *Superior man*, according to Confucius, literally meant *man*. Indeed his view of the superior man is that of a man who acts outwardly in a cultured and learned manner, very much like the English concept of the gentleman. Nevertheless, Confucius did point out that a man of any social class could be a superior man if he cultivates the virtues of *ju* in his character.

Here is where Confucius and Lao-tzu's views of the superior man differ: Confucius believes that we are naturally born with rough edges; we are almost

beastlike. As a result, we need to chisel away at our being to mold it into a human shape. This is his philosophy of “carving and polishing.” Lao-tzu, on the other hand, believed that we are naturally pure; it is the belief systems and social indoctrination of the world that give us a gross character and warp our pure nature. As a result, we need to get back to the raw, intrinsically human, elements of our being. This is known as returning to the “uncarved block” or “unhewn wood.” Lao-tzu’s teaching of wu-wei is not a method of telling the individual how to be *like* the superior man, but instead it gives the individual the knowledge of how to *become* the superior man.

An individual with an effortless mind resulting from the practice of wu-wei travels with the stream to its source, which is the ocean of Tao. When we attempt to control life, we are assuming that we do not belong to the universe, so we begin to drown in the current of change. This lack of trust in the universe comes from the way we orient our perception toward the world. In believing that external influences control life, we have a psychological tendency to worship those influences. We become bound by what comes through our senses. This breeds artificiality, because the individual worships what is conceptual.

The Way of Nature Is No Religion or Dogma

The goal of all spiritual paths is to liberate us from our conditioned perception of things as separate. When we are liberated from this perception of life, we will merge with the one God/Godhead/Tao/Brahman that is found within all of us when we go beyond our conditioned thoughts, feelings, and emotions. The very word *religion* comes from the Latin *religare*, “to bind,” and means union with the ultimate source of consciousness that we have conceptualized as God. Comparable to the word *religion* is *yoga*, which comes from the Sanskrit root word *yuj*. This again means “union” with the ultimate mystery we call God. This union is the metaphysical truth spoken of in all religious doctrine.

SAVE THE WORLD FROM WHOM?

The concept of collective awakening is a New Age phantom created from the illusion that our world somehow needs to be saved. This is exactly the same premise by which dogmatic organized religions were established. The idea that the world needs to be saved is contradicted by the fact that no one can ever explain from whom or what we are saving the world, largely because we are attempting to save the world from ourselves. I am not speaking about the real *you* in this context, as the real *you* is beyond name and form. Rather we are attempting to save the world from our own personality or ego. This ego aspect of oneself is only acquired through the conditioning of life, which binds us to endless desires and suffering that push our civilization, and our planet, piece by piece into devolution.

The idea of saving the world is merely intellectual speculation based on our

own personal agendas. This does not mean that poverty and ecological crisis don't exist. But it does mean that the world begins to suffer, internally and externally, when we identify solely with the ego, which is attracted to constant moving and doing at the expense of stillness and nondoing (yang over yin). The ground of our being at the heart of stillness is untouched by the fluctuations of matter and energy within the physical and mental planes of consciousness. Who we truly are deep down is beyond the constraints of change. Who we truly are at the ground of our being is a resonance with the metaphysical truth that underlies the phenomenal universe. Even though many people yearn to experience union in this life, it is absurd to believe that we will one day undergo some sort of collective awakening. The phenomenal world of change functions in accordance with the rhythm and vibration of consciousness, which differs according to the attunement of the individual components. We are these individual components.

The collective evolution of consciousness into a higher metaphysical state would oppose the constant unfolding of organic life on Earth. For organic life on Earth, it is necessary that all of its components be harmonious with the planetary forces that support nature's growth. Humanity makes up a part of those harmonious components. If the entire human population were to awaken collectively to the formless truth beyond forms, would this benefit organic life or be catastrophic for it? Is it really possible? The Greco-Armenian mystic George Ivanovich Gurdjieff discusses individual and collective evolution in the book *In Search of the Miraculous*, by the Russian mathematician and esotericist P. D. Ouspensky:

The evolution of large masses of humanity is opposed to nature's purposes. The evolution of a certain small percentage may be in accord with nature's purposes. Man contains within him the possibility of evolution. But the evolution of humanity as a whole, that is, the development of these possibilities in all men, or in most of them, or even in a large number of them, is not necessary for the purposes of the earth or of the planetary world in general, and it might, in fact, be injurious or fatal.

But, at the same time, possibilities of evolution exist, and they may be developed in *separate* individuals with the help of appropriate knowledge and methods. Such development can take place only in the interests of the man himself against, so to speak, the interests and forces of the planetary world. The man must understand this: his evolution is necessary only to himself. No one else is interested in it. And no one is

obliged or intends to help him. On the contrary, the forces which oppose the evolution of large masses of humanity also oppose the evolution of individual men. A man must outwit them. And *one* man can outwit them, humanity *cannot*. You will understand later on that all these obstacles are very useful to a man; if they did not exist they would have to be created intentionally, because it is by overcoming obstacles that man develops those qualities he needs.

This is the basis of the correct view of human evolution. There is no compulsory, mechanical evolution. Evolution is the result of conscious struggle. Nature does not need this evolution; it does not want it and struggles against it. Evolution can be necessary only to man himself when he realizes his position, realizes the possibility of changing this position, realizes that he has powers that he does not use, riches that he does not see. And, in the sense of gaining possession of these powers and riches, evolution is possible. But if *all men*, or most of them, realized this and desired to obtain what belongs to them by right of birth, evolution would again become impossible. What is possible for individual man is impossible for the masses.¹

Lao-tzu's Taoist philosophy was not promoting a sort of medicine for the world's ills. He understood that the world's ills are cured only by the liberation, or in other words evolution, of the individual. Lao-tzu was not concerned with a collective awakening but with living in harmony with the universe. In his eyes, awakening does not depend on anything other than your own realization of the metaphysical truth, the irreducible essence, that he called *Tao*.

Because Tao is something we become conscious of from our experience, it is insufficient to try to verbalize or point to Tao categorically, especially for those who have not deepened their awareness within themselves. Because Tao is not bound to a moment of experience, it continues to unfold in those who are centered within their own inner world. This is why ancient Eastern masters regard Tao, or God, as a verb rather than as a noun. From this point of view, Tao gets deeper as one marines one's being more and more in the union with that eternal truth.

The experience of Tao in life is never the same for each individual. The depth of understanding is always expanding. *That* which is the source of Tao is the same within all human beings. Our personality becomes more refined as we explore its depths more and more until the Tao is our complete center of gravity.

The spiritual profundity of Tao is focused on the irreducible essence of the universe within each and every one of us. This irreducible essence is and can only be known by the individual, not the collective. But our world is oriented around the false assumption that the Tao is harnessed, and it is shaped by the belief that the external world influences the internal world of the individual. With such a view, the Taoist Way of Lao-tzu becomes an organized system that one should follow in the hope of becoming enlightened in relation to a social structure. This view of Lao-tzu's Tao was eventually given systemic form by Confucius. In attempting to embed Taoism within society, Confucius largely contributed to Taoism becoming what it is not: a religion.

CONFUCIAN ROOTS OF RELIGIOUS TAOISM

Lao-tzu was not setting out a religion to follow, or an ideology or theology to live by. He understood that the Tao can only be known through experience; it cannot be explained through doctrine, nor can it be invented or induced through a practice. Yet the Taoism that was established after Lao-tzu is commonly known as a religion. If his Way eventually became one of these systems of belief, it must have come down through others who tampered with it or completely misinterpreted it.

This Taoist religion is more Confucian than Taoist. Confucius sought to give form to the formless Tao. This may have been the right thing to do for the society of his time. But even Confucius could not have predicted that the mystery within his ideology could become a form of religion.

Mistaking Taoism for a religion has kept many sincere spiritual seekers away from the depth and freedom of the Way because of its association with religious dogma. Many people who are sincerely exploring their own inner world tend to shy away from organized religion, because many religions lay out a dogmatic path rather than providing the tools for liberation.

Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching* is obviously not a statement of religious doctrine or dogma; rather it is a universal song about the Way/Tao that brings space into the inner world of an individual, aligning her with the universe's nature and evolutionary process. But astonishingly, the *religion* of Taoism elaborated upon Lao-tzu's spiritual text and constructed a whole set of beliefs and dogmas around it. Again, these beliefs and dogmas are more in alignment with Confucianism than with Lao-tzu's original Taoist path. This Taoism is focused on reverencing

ancestors and spirits through rites and rituals. But centering wholeheartedly on the phenomenal world orients an individual toward seeking good fortune in this life instead of following and knowing Tao.

Taoism in this sense is often confused with Chinese folk religion because of their outward similarities, including the veneration of and sometimes communication with ancestors; teachings about energetic streams such as *qi* (Wade-Giles *ch'i*, Pinyin *qi*) or “life energy”; and emphasis on the physical phenomena of the sun, moon, Earth, heaven, stars, and galaxies. Observing both the religion of Taoism and Chinese folk religion, we are dazzled by their colors and their parade of rituals and ceremonies. Indeed the Taoist religion is built around ancestral worship, ritual, and sacrifice.

Yet according to Lao-tzu, these are nothing but mere distractions from the Absolute Tao, which is eternally *now* and is discovered in living a simple life. Even though ancestral spirits and nature spirits may exist, Lao-tzu perceived them as part of the Tao of things, distracting our attention away from establishing harmony with the Absolute Tao. When we focus our attention on ancestors who have long since passed from the body, we are conjuring up emotions of the past and memories that in the end only distract us from the Tao. We can never fully embrace the Tao and be in its flow *now* unless we let the dead rest in peace.

THE LOST MEANING OF RITUAL

In Asia there is an overemphasis on ancestral worship. Once upon a time it may have been a genuine sacred practice, but in the modern day it has turned into dogma. To be constantly looking into the past to worship our ancestors is to cling to the past and, in doing so, to swim against the stream of Tao. To know the Tao means understanding that all life returns to the one source, and so all manifest things, which are from that source, are one. How could we worship ancestors as if they were separate from that source? The argument from traditional Eastern philosophy is that the ancestor we are worshipping is only the ephemeral personality, for which we have affection, rather than the actual Eternal Self that resides in that individual. Our worship, then, is attuned to our personal perception of the ancestors, which is only the idea we have of them, and so it is unfortunately an empty exercise.

The natural Eternal Self is one with the Tao as the Tao. In the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta (*Vedanta* literally means *end of the Vedas* and refers to

teachings based on the three source texts, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Brahma Sutras*, with all three collectively known as *Prasthanatrayi*), the deep down *real you* is the entire universe. The *Atman* (Eternal Self/undifferentiated consciousness) is the *Brahman* (ultimate reality beyond knowing), but we have forgotten that we are Brahman in the same way that we forget where we put our keys. If this is our reality, then our worship could not be divided up according to separate individuals who have died. Lao-tzu's feelings on clinging to the worship of ancestors is best summed up by a conversation between Micayon and Mirdad in *The Book of Mirdad*, the masterpiece by the Lebanese author and poet Mikhail Naimy:

Micayon: Would you not tell us who you are? Perhaps, if we knew your name—your real name—your country and your ancestry we would the better understand you.

Mirdad: Ah, Micayon! As well force an eagle back into the shell out of which he hatched as try to chain Mirdad with your chains and veil him in your veils. What name can ever designate a Man who is no longer “in the shell”? What country can contain a Man in whom an universe is contained? What ancestry can claim a Man whose only ancestor is God?

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Contrary to Lao-tzu, Confucius said that ancestral worship, ritual, and sacrifice are necessary for social harmony. This again takes the focus away from the individual, as the society takes pride of place. But this should be no surprise, as we could describe Confucianism as a sociopolitical doctrine having religious qualities. Even though Lao-tzu's philosophy had a great bearing upon Confucius, Confucius could not embrace it totally, because Confucianism is primarily built on more ancient animistic and shamanic traditions in Chinese culture. Yet the rituals and ceremonies that we still have today from those ancient times have lost their meaning and significance. Both Lao-tzu and Confucius lived during the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BCE), when the rites and rituals, though still the primary focus of worship, lost all meaning. (In the earlier Shang dynasty [1600–1046 BCE], rites and rituals were aimed at the unseen spirit world and toward their own sense of Tao.)

Amazingly, the religion of Taoism continues to practice the ancestral worship, ritual, and sacrifice of Confucianism even though few individuals have a deep understanding of why these rites are practiced in the first place. The

Taoist religion and Confucianism are built tightly around a rigid tradition that has not fundamentally changed its shape since the time of Confucius. As the individual and the world continue to evolve, these traditions lose their significance, as the collective consciousness has evolved far past the epoch of time to which they belonged. (This is not to say that Confucianism has lost its moral and ethical significance in the modern world.)

Lao-tzu's Tao, on the other hand, is a mystery that belongs to no tradition or religion. It is discovered in the depth of our being in the same way that Atman is Brahman in Vedanta. The Tao of Lao-tzu is that eternal principle which we cannot fathom intellectually because it is beyond the mental framework of time and space. Beyond the world of form is the source of Tao, and those who choose to know it by following its synchronistic pull will grow out of the mud into beautiful lotus flowers. These individuals have a relationship with the Tao, and they shine brightly through their creativity and humility, as both virtues have merged in kinship under the universal guidance of Tao.

NATURE'S REBEL IS SOCIETY'S THREAT

The virtuous individual always presents danger to social, religious, and cultural systems that seek to bind humanity with superficial constraints. The individual who knows and follows the Tao is a threat because his way of being is liberated from the shackles of external influence. From the cultural, religious, and social perspective, these individuals are rebels who threaten to disrupt the hypnosis of the status quo. This is why we see the unceremonious killing of such figures who know and follow Tao, such as Jesus of Nazareth (no matter whether you take the story of Jesus to be real or metaphor).

True and eternal freedom is loathed by the tyrants of cultural, ideological, theological, social, and religious dogmas, because when we are liberated by the true freedom that we can only find within us, we cease to conform to the machinations of tyranny. Artists, mystics, philosophers, scientists, and the spiritually inclined all exhibit this exalted state through their own creativity and humility, which often exposes the flaws of a system that seeks to dictate to the masses. The rebellion of Lao-tzu's Taoist Way has always posed a threat to the established order, especially in China. True Taoism was suppressed in the first decades of the People's Republic of China (with people even persecuted during the Cultural Revolution), though it continued to be practiced in Taiwan. Taoism has often been scorned because the essential Taoist teaching of wu-wei is about

surrendering your life into the comforting arms and the Way of the universe rather than conforming to social ethics. The Absolute Tao is the prerogative of the original Taoist. But this sincerity is confusing to any established order, because the Tao of Lao-tzu is as vast as it is vague, and so it escapes conventional thought and behavior.

An authentic Taoist is often thought of as a soothsayer or witch, because our world seeks to find definitions for everything. This absurd definition gives the masses some sort of psychological closure, as if they now somehow understood Tao. But what Lao-tzu and other Taoists knew within themselves is beyond intellectual debate or conjecture. This eternal *truth*, known only by some people, frustrates those who know it not. In the eyes of an established ideology, theology, or organized religion, this experiential truth disrupts the social indoctrination that keeps the masses moving to the beat of someone else's drum. This is one of the main reasons why Lao-tzu's Tao conflicts with Confucius's ideology. Lao-tzu understood that any form of social or cultural hierarchy destroys the awareness of trust in the universe. Confucius could not accept this, because his approach was only for those who governed. He thought if those who governed were liberated and morally noble, society would benefit.

In truth, this view is not oriented toward the freedom of the individual; rather it is a clever system devised to manage society without the people of that society questioning their position. Democracy is similar. The ideology of democracy tries to maintain a society's comfort and convenience based on liberal views, so that the bigger questions of life are never asked of those imposing democracy upon the people. The hierarchical systems of governments, banking, corporations, and royalty end up becoming tyrants rather than servants. Yet according to Lao-tzu, if any system is devised to control anything, then we have ceased to follow the Way of nature. Then control invariably turns into a selfish and corrupting urge to lord it over others. As John Dalberg-Acton, the English Catholic historian, politician, and writer, wrote in 1887, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."³

Selfish power has corrupted the world with the belief that we can control life within a fixed reality that is devoid of spontaneity. Evolution, on the other hand, means pushing the limitations of our minds and the traditional boundaries we have constructed. Confucianism, the religion of Taoism, and other religious traditions are being tested in the modern era. Their dogmas have become exhausted, and the world is becoming attuned to an authentic spirituality, as a new awareness of ourselves in relation to each other, the world, and the universe is developing.

Tradition is not intrinsically bad, and many traditions can be beautiful. But they lose this beauty, and they become psychologically damaging, when they set up dogmas to imprison the mind. We only have to look at modern-day Christianity for an example. The Way of Lao-tzu was to never be attached to any tradition that imprisoned our mind because if we hold our center within, we will move with the evolutionary energies of the universe without resistance. These evolutionary energies materialize as synchronicity on the level of the conscious mind.

Though traditions may come and go, their remnants sometimes linger within the collective consciousness for some time. The continent of Asia is a good example, because even though the ideology of Confucianism is often unacknowledged as a prevailing system of thought, the dogmatic beliefs of that socioeconomic religious ideology still keep people from embracing change. These dogmas are bringing tenseness and frustration into the lives of the common people, because the collective consciousness has evolved past such rigid traditions, much as we are evolving past the vain materialism of the West and its attempts to shove liberalism down everybody's throat. Consciousness is dancing to a new rhythm and vibration, both collectively and individually.

FILIAL PIETY AND THE OPPRESSED INDIVIDUAL

Confucian dogmas promote inequality not only within the society but also within families. Parents following Confucian dogma often become tyrants over their children, as if there should be an unquestionable respect and obedience by children for parents. But is this mode of authority love for one's children? Are we not still lording it over the naturalness of our children? Of course the answer is yes, but Confucian indoctrination blinds one to that fact. This code of conduct is known as "filial piety," *xiao* (孝: Wade-Giles *hsiao*, Pinyin *xiao*) in Chinese.

The Chinese tradition of filial piety existed before both Confucius and Lao-tzu, and it has always been considered a high virtue in Chinese culture. It makes up a large part of Confucius's general teaching of obedience to those who are perceived as superior. The *Classic of Filial Piety*, or *Xiao Jing* in Chinese, attributed to Confucius, has a conversation between him and his student Zeng Zi about the way to set up a moral and ethical society based on the principle of filial piety. Confucius says, "In serving his parents, a filial son reveres them in daily life; he makes them happy while he nourishes them; he takes anxious care of

them in sickness; he shows great sorrow over their death; and he sacrifices to them with solemnity.”⁴

Though this may make it appear that the son has an underlying love for his parents, it is in truth quite the opposite. From the day we are born up until the age of twelve or thirteen, we develop a psychological dependency on our parents and society. Some tribal cultures acknowledge and try to overcome this dependency. In some New Guinea tribes, a child at the age of twelve or thirteen is put into battle against an elder, who is masked as a god. This whole battle symbolizes the child’s breaking free from his chains of dependency with parents and tribe. The child wins the battle, which reveals to him that he has become a complete individual, free from dependency on the past.

Confucius was wrong to assume that subservient children would produce superior people, because their disposition is always taken from the inferior psychological state of dependency. This subservient dependency is especially rife in countries such as China, Japan, Cambodia, North Korea, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam, where Confucian dogmas are still held in high regard. When one is in these nations, one senses an underlying feeling of oppression as a result of Confucian tradition.

By contrast, Lao-tzu believed that our individual and collective oppression was fueled by our sense of inferiority through assumed dependency. This dependency, according to the old master, only benefits the systemic beliefs of any social and cultural ideology because it strengthens their illusory boundaries. Lao-tzu alludes to this paradox in chapter 18 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

*When the great Tao is forgotten,
goodness and piety appear.*

*When the body’s intelligence
declines, cleverness and
knowledge step forth.*

*When there is no peace in the
family, filial piety begins.*

*When the country falls into
chaos, patriotism is born.*⁵

Confucianism thus builds an overly conservative society, always in fear of change and outside influence. The youth of such societies often question the

dogmas they are supposed to uphold, but usually over time the culture wears them down to lifeless entities. Yet some do slip through the cracks and become independent, such as South Korean writer Kim Kyong-il, who wrote the controversial book *Confucius Must Die for the Nation to Live*. He discusses how Confucianism's outdated traditions are causing a bipolar effect within the individual, which leads to a flavorless and suppressed society. He says that government keeps forcing Confucian filial obligations upon families, and as a result no individual ever questions the government's authority, because their sense of filial piety makes them feel inferior.

Filial piety is one-sided and blind. It is a way of maintaining inequality among humanity, as the senior is wrongly assumed to be the superior. But, from an evolutionary perspective, those who are still bound by such traditions are resisting the flow of Tao. Thus they are truly inferior. In this context, the superior individuals must be the youth, because they are challenging tradition in order to change and evolve. Their beliefs have not sunk their roots deep within their mind, and so they are less heavily conditioned.

This type of inequality is not limited to Asia. To different degrees, it is still prevalent all around the world. For example, many cultures imply or state that young people should always respect their elders. Yet doesn't this mentality indoctrinate inferiority? Why shouldn't elders show respect toward the youth? Instead of respecting the young, elders often show an arrogant contempt toward them, as if they do not know what life is about. But what life is about according to the majority of elders is turning the mind into a rigid stone by means of tradition. How could we trust an elder who functions from such a premise?

Contrary to this attitude, in many indigenous tribes we find a reverence expressed by elders for the young. They know that tribal life can only flourish when all people of the tribe are held as equal. Human equality cannot be achieved by any system or individual imposing their will over the natural sovereignty of other individuals.

Inequality of the sexes has been noticeable within many societies, religions, and cultures. Yet over the last hundred years we have seen women prove that this notion of female inferiority is false. Women continue to break free of the traditional prison of filial piety and lead the way out of these dogmas. If we can accept that women are not inferior (as our civilization appears to be doing), why is it so hard to assume that our children should not also have equal status?

The Confucian control of the future and its traditions of the past will always drown in the spontaneous flow of the Tao. Wu-wei is not a way of controlling

the future by projecting the past onto it. On the contrary, it is to live spontaneously *now* so that we know how to live in the future.

The Way of the Tao Is Harmony

The great sage Chuang-tzu, who was absorbed in the wisdom of Lao-tzu, found it quite perplexing to see how the civilization of his time gave name and form to the philosophy of that which is beyond name and form. Chuang-tzu lived in the classical period of Chinese philosophy known as the “Hundred Schools of Thought” (諸子百家), which flourished from the sixth century BCE to 221 BCE, during the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE) and the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) of ancient China. Unlike Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu’s existence can be verified. In that classical period, he was at the heart of an epoch of change that was sweeping across humanity.

This epoch is almost identical to our present day, where unbelievable changes are taking place whether we like it or not. Something is compelling humanity to grow out of a dysfunctional state into a harmonious one. Everything in our current epoch is either decaying or transforming in much the same way as in Chuang-tzu’s time. Ideologies, theologies, religions, and culture all underwent a radical change. The beliefs that were not open to change evaporated like snow on a summer’s day. Chuang-tzu knew that it was the Tao that changes something spontaneously out of its extreme rigidity. The Tao through Chuang-tzu’s eyes is within everything, not just the movements of the bodies or seasons, but also within the transformation of human civilizations and the new patterns of thought that give birth to them. Out of spontaneity an evolutionary burst of energy takes place, because spontaneity is the Way of nature. So evolution in relation to humanity is the spontaneous growth of consciousness.

These bursts of expansive growth within the collective consciousness are scattered all throughout history. If Chuang-tzu could speak to us, he would add that these epochs can be dangerous because of incorrect guidance through misinterpretation. This danger is evident in our present day, as we see how the Tao of Lao-tzu has been deformed by rigid traditions that have lost sight of its inner meaning, not to mention the misinterpretation of Eastern philosophy as

New Age nonsense.

This classical period of Chinese philosophy saw the universal text of the *Tao Te Ching* come into existence to explain the Way, which is discovered by few. But by the time Chuang-tzu was touched by its depth, the *Tao Te Ching* had been molded and shaped into a medicine for the society rather than the individual. Confucian ideals and older animistic and shamanic traditions nurtured and then cloaked the Tao. Chuang-tzu could perceive this, but he met such peculiarities with humor and sarcasm. Being absorbed in the Way of the Tao, he was naturally disinterested in anything culture, religion, or society could offer, and as a result he found great joy in poking fun at its temporality. Similarly, today we discover a multitude of individuals who are waking up to the frivolousness of the society, culture, and religions we have built.

When our consciousness evolves, what we once couldn't perceive or imagine soon becomes perceivable and then becomes direct knowledge. How could this be if we are to accept the conventional model of linear evolution? The mechanical linear model of the universe is the common, indoctrinated perspective on life. But there is no categorical evidence to support this view. The laws of nature do not follow a linear model. All forms of life in nature grow spontaneously into a design of differing distinguished patterns that all fit together. Spontaneity is the essence of patterned structures within nature, which work harmoniously together in a common union. This perspective encompasses Lao-tzu's wisdom that the Tao is the Way of nature.

Nature's constituents are inseparable and arise out of the Tao, which gives the differing aspects of nature their energetic signatures in the form of complex patterns. The Tao dwells deep within the pattern of the form that has spontaneously arisen. Perceiving the Tao in nature is an accomplishment of the enlightened sages. Chuang-tzu once stated, "When there is no more separation between 'this' and 'that,' it is called the still-point of the Tao. At the still-point in the center of the circle one can see the infinite in all things."¹

Chuang-tzu could have only attained this enlightened perception from following the Way of nature. His life was in accord with the Tao. In this alignment the Tao nourishes one who is of its original essence. Chuang-tzu's humor is a testament to his own natural spontaneity. Those who have revealed Lao-tzu's Way of nature in their own lives stand back in awe at the complexity of the linear system we have built in opposition to nature's rhythm. The nonlinear world of natural organisms are harmonious within their own patterned design, even though these patterns conflict with our linear worldview.

THE ORGANIC PATTERN OF LI

There is an organic pattern, or we could say order of the universe, that is a blueprint for nature to express its beauty. In Chinese this is called *li* (理; see figure 3.1), which I briefly mentioned in the introduction. *Li* is usually translated as the markings in jade, grain in wood, and fiber in muscle. It is supposed to signify a definite pattern that originates within an organism as its nature and comes into existence when an organism harmonizes with the Tao. This *li* principle is usually thought of as Neo-Confucian rather than Taoist, because it differs from the Confucian virtue of *li* (禮), which is based on correct understanding and practice of rites and ceremonies. The Confucian concept of *li* has no relevance to the Way of Lao-tzu or to the harmony of nature. Nor is it relevant to *wu-wei*. Nature exhibits the Taoist *li* (理) always, as the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms are not intelligences that could try to disrupt its harmony. The human kingdom, on the other hand, being the highest form of intelligence on this planet, constantly seeks to challenge nature's laws and rhythms.

Humanity has a schizoid sense that we are somehow alien to this planet. Yet we depend on nature for everything that gives us life. Without the food that we eat or the air that we breathe, we would not have evolved out of the lower kingdoms. We feel alienated from all other life because we perceive only a linear world. From this convoluted view, we build our communities on linear systems. The society is a construct of designed systems, such as organized culture, government, politics, and religion, which all oppose natural laws and swim against the current of Tao.

We erroneously uphold these systems because we feel that life would be nothing without them. Yet they are built on the notion that we can control nature's pattern, *li*. The destruction of nature for material gain is a result of these systems' effect on the human mind. We pay more attention to our own indoctrination than to the actual world that gives us life. Nature, being nonlinear, cannot be understood by a humanity shaped by a linear perspective. From this standpoint, we seek to lord it over nature because we do not understand it. Yet according to Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, this is the very problem that will lead us into complete and utter annihilation, because in not understanding nature, we do not understand ourselves.



Figure 3.1. Li—universal organic pattern By Dao Stew

The Tao that Chuang-tzu could perceive in everything does not exclude human life. Human life is an intrinsic part of nature because a human being *is* nature. The fight for control of nature stems from humanity ignoring its own nature, which we do when we adopt external influences that transform us into machines. Our psychology in turn resembles the repetition of a machine rather than the spontaneity of nature.

The mind of the average individual is solely focused on the maintenance and upkeep of a linear system. Such a person is unlikely to allocate any energy toward her own inner world, because that would conflict with her linear habits. But this orientation toward the outer world is going to lead us into the arms of annihilation if we do not realize that all natural growth comes from within the organism. And all of nature's constituents, including human beings, function according to this universal pattern. Nature's harmony can be disturbed but never eradicated, because the Tao courses through the patterns of li. Organisms that challenge this order do not fare well.

We generally ignore the fact that the organic pattern and principle of li are within the human organism too. The organic pattern of li within the ecosystem is the same intelligence that is found in our nerves, senses, and ultimately our

cognitive functions and psychology. This is why those who practice spiritual cultivation usually have a harmonious biological and psychological disposition: they show respect to their bodies and minds by refusing to overstimulate them with excessive consumption. The Taoist philosophy of *li* affirms that anyone can attain a liberated state of harmony with the world, but only if we act in the same way as nature. The ecosystem of nature is nothing like the average modern life of a human being. What, then, would it take for a human to act as nature intended?

Nature's Way is harmonious because each of its components follows its own *li*, its way of harmonizing with other manifestations of Tao. This mutual resonance and interdependence is known as *ying* (應: Wade-Giles *ying*, Pinyin *ying*, see figure 3.2) in Chinese, and is another key aspect of Taoist philosophy. It is an essential principle for understanding the effortless mind. The mutual resonance and harmony of nature are only possible in the way they are as the Tao is.

When we look into nature, we do not see the busyness and complexity of, say, a city. On the contrary, we perceive a simple world in harmony through the stillness of Tao. Chuang-tzu said that from the still point of the Tao in the center of the circle, one can see the infinite in the world of forms. This means that the mind that is completely empty and still can perceive reality as it truly is. The Tao liberates the mind from its linear constraints by enabling it to follow the Way of nature.



Figure 3.2. Ying—mutual resonance and interdependence By Dao Stew

To act according to nature requires becoming receptive to the forces of the cosmos, which can only be received in the complete stilling of the mind. The process of settling the ripples of the mind is known as *nirodha* in Sanskrit, which in Patanjali's classical yoga means "restriction," the process of stopping the "whirls" (*vritti* in Sanskrit) of the mind. This stilling of the mind is the key objective of many forms of meditative practices and Eastern wisdom. Yet, paradoxically, the objective can never be attained if it is thought of as a goal to achieve. This is because the stillness of mind that many people hope to attain is actually our natural state right *here and now* and not at some future destination. But this realization is veiled by the hypnosis that we have acquired from the external world.

Enlightenment right *here and now* is the sage's axiom. A sage would ask us, how could we ever attain or achieve something that is already our true nature? This may look simple for sages to realize, but keep in mind that they were also once on a journey of self-discovery. They too had to undergo the process of thinning out their conditioned personality so that they could ultimately recognize that consciousness is naturally transparent and reflective like water.

Water acts in the same way as mind. When water is disturbed, it is not

transparent or reflective, as the waves and ripples obscure its essence. But when water is completely still, it is in its pure, true state of transparency and reflectivity. The nature of mind is stillness, which is beyond effort. Yet the waves and ripples of conditioning obscure this truth. Emptying your mind of these conditioned habits and latent tendencies, you come face to face, so to speak, with the Tao. The Tao of the Absolute is within our natural stillness, and this natural state is where spontaneity is effortlessly born. Stillness is where the virtue of wu-wei is lived. If we come into contact with the still point of the Tao, then we begin to nourish the rest of existence through the art of living wu-wei.

LIVING THE ART OF WU-WEI

We cannot nourish the rest of existence if we are acting out of our old patterns of conditioning, and if we are trying to provide such nourishment for humanity, it will never be attained. These paradoxes are interwoven into the fabric of the universe. They often confuse us, leaving us to feel completely helpless about the correct way to act or be in this world.

Many people have a deep feeling that the world needs to be saved, but the world doesn't need to be saved. There are always two sides of a coin, something *is* and at the same time *isn't*. We are always determining right or wrong and see the good and bad side to every argument. Exploring this phenomenon deeply, we discover that everything we are discerning in the field of opposites goes according to the conditioning we have been indoctrinated with.

Our personality, then, wants to save the world, to align the world with what is pleasurable according to the personality. But the truth is that the world does *not* need to be saved, or, rather, the one who is attempting to save the world is the one whom the world needs to be saved *from*. We are trying to save the world from ourselves. Our conditioned personality conflicts with the world and with other beings because the hypnosis of one person is not the same as the hypnosis of another, so the possibility of mutual resonance in this state is nil. This leads us to complete helplessness, as all of our striving is a hindrance to our conscious growth.

This recognition of our helpless position, what Hubert Benoit called a *blind alley*, is the key that opens the door to that liberated state known in its various forms in Sanskrit as *samadhi*, *moksha*, and *nirvana*, and as *satori* in Japanese. This helplessness allows you to let go of all preconceived notions of how life is and how others should be. You can realize *samadhi*, *moksha*, *nirvana*, and *satori*

after your personality is deflated and you realize that all your striving, struggling, and suffering are useless, because what you are seeking is already yours.

We play this mental game of striving, struggling, and suffering because this process makes us feel that we are on a path of achievement. This process of achievement abides by a linear model of reality, which has humanity running toward a goal that can never be reached. Assuming that we can achieve any goal this way is a mechanical construct. It is an attempt to control fate, while natural, nonlinear spontaneity always changes our controlled plans for life. The conditioned personality wants to enforce what it associates with pleasure upon the world by attempting to bypass the universal reality of spontaneity. Individual suffering is the result, because we are going against the grain of nature in Tao.

Suffering in life has nothing to do with nature. We suffer because our perception of reality is constantly changing, which conflicts with our rigid beliefs. We cling to a certain concrete template of life and resist change. The definite interpretation we seek in life is always changing according to our conscious growth, as the external world will mirror a different meaning to each individual's inner world. In complete helplessness, we discover that life has no categorical "right" interpretation, as all interpretation is still within the field of a linear model built on opposites. Trying to interpret life is only a way of perpetuating old patterns that need to be transformed. These patterns keep us "seeking" stillness to provide nourishment for the world, as if it were not already in our possession. Aligning with the Tao cannot be sought after, especially from a conditioned mental state. What we are really searching for can only be lived.

Our linear circuitry is a complex web of psychic phenomena that builds the illusion of a separate identity in our minds, eclipsing our nonlinear nature. Living the Tao can only be realized when this linear circuitry is brought into the order of nature. The art of living, as Lao-tzu would put it, is not a step-by-step process of unfoldment, as the linear world would suggest. Instead it is a way of living your own li, which then harmonizes with all other aspects of nature. Our natural patterns can never be realized if our conditioned patterns continue to plague our awareness. The more we cling to life, the more we continue to suffer from these patterns.

Instead of acquiring more, Lao-tzu would suggest less. We take pride in ourselves when we are armed with a lot of intellectual knowledge, yet stillness can never be lived if we have not emptied out our faculties.

Emptying the mind does not mean that we become stupid. On the contrary,

we can only make use of what we have learned in life when what we have learned is not an intellectual attainment. What we learn is merely a set of tools. Problems come when we believe the tools are who we are. To unlearn, as Lao-tzu would suggest, is to not be bound by anything life has to offer. Even the idea of unlearning or emptying the mind should not be thought of as a definite route to spiritual liberation, because such states should come naturally to an individual. It is only when we reach that complete state of helplessness that a real spontaneous growth can sprout within our consciousness. When we realize that there is totally nothing to be done to recognize our true nature, we finally let go of all the limitations and deviations of the mind that held us hostage. The old regime of thinking is transmuted into a higher cognitive state of receptivity, simplicity, and humility.

Loosening the grip of conditioning sometimes requires a lot of inner strength on our part. But it is only from there that the stillness of Tao will speak to our inner ear of intuition. When we are not attached to life, life shines brightly, because our perception has been cleansed.

We believe that the external world endows us with the wisdom of the universe. Yet that concept runs against all principles and laws of nature. As an artist endows a blank canvas with paint, so do we endow the external world with life. A blank canvas remains blank until an artist endows it with what is within him. Art is not produced from without to within; it is the function of nature in the individual. Art is expressed from an individual's li from the inner world to the outer world, no matter whether it is writing, painting, music, filming, or gardening. In our modern world there are not many people who express their own natural art because their organic pattern of li is polluted with linear systems. This is why some of the greatest artists throughout history have lived lives detached from the limits of society, religion, and culture. To be deeply touched by their art is to realize that they were inspired by Tao.

Following our own li allows the Tao to enter the canvas of life. This is exactly the same as the Christian theme of "bringing Heaven to Earth." Inspiration helps others to realize their own innate potential, and, if their conditioning is not deeply rooted, they will begin to explore their own potential li. *Inspiration* means to be "in spirit," but it could also be seen as the space that enters an individual's consciousness when she is inspired. Expressions of art inspire human life and bring it back into harmony with nature.

When one follows one's natural li, the art it produces inspires the world and creates mutual resonance, ying. During this process, the formless Tao enters the world of form. Just like in nature's ecosystem, following one's own li

harmonizes one with everything else in the world, generating a mutual resonance. This is the Way of *real* human nature. It contradicts linear conceptions of forcing and controlling life as a means of gain. Our natural li is only discovered when we cease our search for power.

PART 2

**THE SCIENCE AND PRACTICE
OF AN EFFORTLESS MIND**

Parasitic Patterns of the Unnatural World

It is hard to fathom the experience and life of an organism when it undergoes a cycle of entropy. From a human perspective, we see species come and go almost on a daily basis. Yet we need not be too distressed about this fact. The scientific point of view holds that all organisms will eventually decline, only to bring forth new life, because a fundamental principle of the universe is that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. According to the first law of thermodynamics, we only have transformations of energy. This law states that “energy can be transformed, *i.e.* changed from one form to another, but cannot be created or destroyed. It is usually formulated by stating that the change in the internal energy of a system is equal to the amount of heat supplied to the system, minus the amount of work performed by the system on its surroundings.”¹

The extinction of certain species is usually attributed to human activity. But we cannot be the sole cause of everything that goes through entropy, because this is of a universal nature. We cannot fundamentally explain the cosmic unfolding of Tao, as this is beyond human comprehension. But it would appear that whatever the intelligence of the Tao is, it knows exactly when an organism has exhausted itself and what process of transformation it should go through, like the transformation from a caterpillar into a butterfly, for example. We can never categorically know why such a transformation occurs, although it does happen in the same way that we go through our own sort of transformation at death. But we cannot comprehend what is behind that mysterious door.

ENTROPY AND DEATH? OR DEATH AND
TRANSFORMATION?

Though we know that entropy and transformation are a reality, what does this mean for the human race? From our current position, we would like to think that we are outside of both entropy and transformation. But the reality is that we are blind to what this experience may be like for us in much the same way that we cannot fathom what it is like for other life forms.

The way the world is now, with all of its suffering—could this be how entropy presents itself to human life? Are famine, poverty, greed, cultural hypnosis, and wars the physical and mental advent of entropy? We all feel this suffering, and our instincts are informing us that we are undergoing some sort of process of change. But in many people the “fight or flight” tendency keeps them in fear that the beautiful human race has now begun its descending course. Though this may be the common perception of our current situation, the Way of the Tao moves in a manner that is beyond the intellectual notion of good or bad. If we could step back from such dualistic perspectives, we would discover that the human species is an astonishingly complex system, and we can determine whether it is in our best interest to move on and exist in another direction.

Our fate is the choice we make right now. And our choice becomes clear when we can step out of the analytic detail of life and discover a holistic perception of the human kingdom. From this perspective, it would be absurd to assume that the human race is going through any form of physical annihilation; rather we evolved on this planet in order to transform into something of which we cannot yet conceive. The many civilizations we have produced on Earth are nothing short of breathtaking, especially when we consider that everything we have created on Earth is driven from within the primordial place that we call Tao. Nevertheless, these cosmic vibrations continue to flow through our psyche as spontaneous thoughts that inspire the canvas of life. This cosmic flow of Tao through the human mind is increasing exponentially in the modern era, because we are undergoing the death and transformation of a different kind.

The inspiration of *li*, which harmonizes with the world through many individuals, comes when a monumental choice has to be made. A common trait among all organisms is that when a species is on the precipice of extinction they are somehow compelled to adapt and evolve. The human race has been residing on the precipice of extinction for quite some time, and now it is our turn to go through a death and transformation. According to many ancient cultures, we have been going through this process for thousands of years, but it is only now that we can understand that it is the inner world of the individual that drives either decay or transformation.

The choice to do sincere self-work and contribute to the great work of

eternity is the small change that will transform the whole world piece by piece. We can avoid the decay of our species if we become aware on the physical, mental, and spiritual planes of consciousness. Our transformation does come at a cost, because there does have to be a death, but death does not always take the form of physical decay. Being the complex organisms that we are, death for us is different than it is for other species. The death that we are going through is taking place within the inner landscape of the individual.

In order for both the individual and the collective to transform, we need the parameters of the unnatural world to either change or die. Everything that has brought suffering to us is due to the fact that we believe in the illusion of a linear world, where we can control life to suit our own temperaments. The disharmonic aspects of suffering—famine, poverty, greed, cultural hypnosis, wars, and all forms of conditioning—can all be alleviated if we undergo the death of the linear world and come back into natural harmony. The way of the natural world is the only possible way by which any form of evolution can take place.

As I have mentioned, the natural world is a mysterious expression of a nonlinear spontaneity coming from the depths of the unknowable Tao. The unnatural world is a mental construct built on control, while the natural world is something that grows of itself. Identification with the external world alone causes the majority of humanity to project their insecurities onto the social fabric in a vain attempt to avoid responsibility for their own fears.

Our intellect discerns between pleasurable experiences and those that are viewed as unpleasant from past experience. In this fear of past experience, we discard the very thing we should embrace. When we do not embrace our fears and become responsible, these ignored emotions and feelings become tyrannical and dictatorial. The failure to look within ourselves has made for us a relationship with the world that is rigid and one-dimensional.

The institutions of our society and culture are of the same disposition as the psyche from which they arose: they are based on security and the fear of control. When we perceive only the world of forms, we wrongly assume that this world is built upon a step-by-step process with a linear structure. This is the masculine aspect of perception, which is born in the logic of the left brain. Existing and thinking in such a way leads to an unnatural concept of reality. A good example of this is how many religions erroneously believe that God is an entity bound to the human limitations of form, time, and space.

We are constantly attempting to translate our experience of reality through linear methods. But if nature is nonlinear, how could we interpret it through a

linear process? This unnatural perspective on life must be exposed, both within and without, for us to grow.

CHAOS OF THE LINEAR WORLD

The unnatural world is usually thought of in the superficial sense of man-made structures versus naturally growing organisms. Yet as we have established, nature is the spontaneous receptivity of the nonlinear world as opposed to the control and planning of the linear world. When we inquire into our own lives, we discover that when we try to control or plan our experience, we invariably encounter heightened feelings of anxiety and stress. This occurs because we have overstrained our system in order to try and force the issue, whatever it may be. All of this leads to unbalanced individuals whose vital force is continually spent in trying to appease their own intellectual and social conditioning. The result is constant frustration in our lives.

In giving away our individual responsibility, we have created linear-based institutions and organizations. They are built on the premise that evolution is a straight-ahead, time-bound concept, a view that keeps humanity in a state of hypnotic servitude. Government, politics, banking, religion, and the commercial sector are all constructed on linear rules, regulations, and laws, which make all of them part of an artificial, unnatural system, centered on force, control, and the illusion of lasting success (though the spiritual core of some religions, especially Eastern religions, is based on individual liberation). These institutions are not part of nature because they are designed to control humanity, which in the end makes us feel that we do not belong.

The present-day chaos is fueled by governments, politics, banking, religions, and commerce, because these organizations embed an unnatural way of being and thinking into our psyches. As a result, a fight for control, both individually and collectively, has begun in earnest. For example, these institutions demonize death, as if death is an inherently bad thing that one should ignore and somehow avoid. This linear concept develops a fear of death that allows us to be ruled by society and culture. This is the art of government, which preys on our acquiescence. When we succumb to such systems, we shed our humanity for sheep's clothing.

HARMONY OF NONCONFORMITY

In a linear world, the external order dictates an artificial way of life to the individual, creating a conformist society and forcing us to relinquish our power to a machine that is unnatural and devoid of life. This passive conformity can be traced back to the origins of the Vedic Hindu caste system and the feudal system under medieval Western Christianity. When a settled agrarian culture such as these is born, it tends to build towns, not only to protect people from outside influences, but also to develop a mental framework based on rules and regulations.

The complexity of agrarian culture leads to a division of labor and a division of function. From this division, the ancient Hindus (the Vedic civilization of Dravidians and Aryans) developed a caste system. The Hindu caste system is made up of the Brahmins (priesthood), Kshatriyas (nobility), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and the Shudras (laborers). A direct parallel to the Hindu caste system can be found in medieval Christian society, where we see the priesthood and the church, feudal lords and nobility, farmers and merchants of the commons, and the serfs.

Although we no longer have a caste system, this underlying pattern is still with us today. When we are born into this world, we come out of our mother's womb (nature) and are taught to submit to the rules of society and culture according to our socioeconomic status. This is the crucifixion of the individual; it is the sacrifice we all make. According to the tyranny of the machine, this crucifixion is for the "common good" or "greater good." But there is a stark difference between the Hindu and Christian societies of ancient times.

First of all, the function of the Vedic caste system was an act of surrender to Brahman (ultimate reality/godhead). Individuals would crucify their egos and their desires in favor of the lives they had been given by nature. This means they would not seek another path or to try and control their lives according to their interests. Instead they would abide by the order of society, which helped them diminish their egos so that they could feel the presence of Brahman within themselves. This is dharma as social duty. The second difference is that, once Hindus have fulfilled their social duties in this life, they are allowed to break away from caste and become renunciate sages in the forest, a practice and title known as *vanaprastha* in Sanskrit. (This possibility is loathed by Christian society, because one is thought of as useless if one does not contribute to the social order.) This breakaway from caste is viewed as a return back to nature and could be thought of as a resurrection. A sage is not part of society and does not conform to its rule. Jesus was a sage in this mold. This is why he was not thought of as a particularly good member of society and he was actually put to

death (if we take the story of Jesus to be real). Those who submit invariably lose their natural innocence. Conformity is the result of force. When individuals are forced by society and culture into life situations that are against their will, they give away their natural sovereignty in exchange for comfort and servitude and are psychologically reduced to sheep. We have developed this sheeplike behavior as a result of the belief that the morals and ethics forced upon us by society are avenues to success and freedom. But this notion is absurd inasmuch as the success and freedom of our world are unnatural. These goals are gauged only by finances. But obviously this is not true success or freedom, as money is empty and void of meaning, and it provides no happiness other than that of acquisition. Happiness cannot be contained in anything that we need to force to happen.

As human life is forced into a sheeplike way of being, happiness is reduced to momentary stimulants of excitement. In such a life we can never express our natural divinity, *li*, because we are following the model of someone else's idea of life. Yet conforming to anything other than one's own innate world destroys us physically, mentally, and spiritually, as *te*, the virtue of Tao, cannot come through the organic pattern of the individual, *li*. Anxiety, depression, and stress are so prevalent in this day and age partly because we are forced to live such lives. Wars and social unrest then reflect the individual's anxiety.

Liberated individuals are in alignment with their own nature and with the Tao. They do not benefit the accepted social order and are regarded as useless in the eyes of institutional and organizational power. Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu were treated this way, because they could see the unnaturalness of an artificial society. The Buddha and Jesus of Nazareth were two other such sages who could see through the hypnotic veil. A liberated sage understands that anyone who continues to act out the unnatural patterns of conditioning is contributing to chaos and destruction, either consciously or unconsciously. One who is liberated, on the other hand, begins the yoking process until a crystal-clear perception of the Tao in reality can be experienced. In Richard Wilhelm's translation of the *I Ching*, he states:

Not every man has an obligation to mingle in the affairs of the world. There are some who are developed to such a degree that they are justified in letting the world go its own way and in refusing to enter public life with a view of reforming it. But this does not imply a right to remain idle or to sit back and merely criticize. Such withdrawal is justified only when we strive to realize in ourselves the higher aims of

mankind. For although the sage remains distant from the turmoil of daily life, he creates incomparable human values for the future.²

Evidence for these “incomparable human values” can be found in the legacy that a sage leaves behind. Lao-tzu is a good example. It has been over 2,500 years since he lived, and yet his wisdom still reverberates within our consciousness today. This is the power of te.

As I have mentioned, the virtue of te is only available to those who do not seek power, control, or force. Governments, politics, banking, religions, and commerce, on the other hand, are constantly striving for control by forcing the population to their will. This poses a significant hurdle for humanity to overcome. What would it take to bring the individual and the collective back into harmony with the Tao? How can the natural course of the Tao grow unfettered from these parasitic patterns?

The Practice of Yin Cultivation and the Art of the Skillful Craftsman

Lao-tzu's Taoism led to the unfolding of sciences to understand how the entire universe is our body. The essential premise of these ancient Taoist sciences is how our psychosomatic organism aligns and comes into harmony with the formless realm of the Tao and with the movements of the heavens. As I mentioned, no external form of governance can bring this about, because the fundamental principle of external government is control and force. What is required to achieve harmony with the Tao is a heightened level of self-governance. This level is attained by understanding your mind and body more deeply, which allows you to understand the greater universe more intimately.

It is possible for any of us to achieve the miraculous feats of Thor Heyerdahl, but we have to understand how the macrocosm and microcosm are one and how that union is only achieved from abidance in trust. Yang Zhu's discovery of the body, which I briefly mentioned in the introduction, eventually led to the Taoist sciences and practices of martial arts and traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Both of these sciences are an extension of Lao-tzu's *Tao Te Ching*. They extend his philosophy into a science with practical application for daily life.

But modern-day students and practitioners of martial arts and TCM lose sight of this fact. These misinterpretations have been growing for thousands of years and are at their peak now. It is the result of interpreting Eastern philosophy through Western and New Age filters and also of the growing population of modern Easterners who have lost contact with their traditional roots. (All these and the problem of taking metaphors literally lead to a misunderstanding of key concepts, which then leads to an unintelligent spirituality.) This leads to our

modern cultural habit of embracing control, force, and intellect at the expense of wu-wei. Essentially this means that our world embraces the yang (masculine/Heaven/active/doing/heat) over the yin (feminine/Earth/passive/nondoing/cool), which is slowly but surely destroying the world.

THE SKILL OF MARTIAL ARTS IS YIN OVER YANG

The science and practice of martial arts are based to some degree on the science of TCM. This is evident in the fact that TCM focuses on how our body is a miniature inner universe. When we know and understand this inner universe, we begin to know the greater, outer universe and see how both function the same. Martial arts make use of this idea through movement methods that are supposed to open up the meridian channels of the body. This allows qi to flow freely, so that the mind and body are in harmony with the effortlessness of the heavens. This experiential knowledge attained by martial artists is supposed to transfer over into daily life, as it did with Thor Heyerdahl. Trust, then, is at the heart of martial arts, as they are based on the fundamental Taoist philosophy of wu-wei. The problem with martial arts is, as I have mentioned, that they have been infected with the cultural tendency toward doing, which becomes an intellectual game of striving for a so-called goal. Our whole world is invested in the energy of yang at the expense of yin.

Our modern habits of doing, control, and force are deeply entrenched in both spiritually oriented and combat-oriented martial arts. And yet the core of both methods is the same, as martial arts are about transforming your character to reveal your true nature. This is the spiritual heart of martial arts, but it has been misinterpreted by Westerners and also by numerous people in the East. Many people think that the spiritual transformation in martial arts is about attaining powers or experiencing some altered state of consciousness similar to a psychedelic experience. This way of thinking is the “amateur spirituality” to which Chuang-tzu alluded. Amateur spirituality is the attraction to peacock consciousness, meaning that people still have the yang habit of showing off or telling other people about how peaceful and lucid their state of mind is. The irony of peacock consciousness is you find these people always talking about themselves, to the point where the listener feels ill and exhausted. This is especially true for those people trying to attain supernatural powers, called *siddhis* in Sanskrit.

Such proclamations prove that no real transformation has occurred. All that has occurred is that one has become a well-trained show pony. This show-pony attitude is yang oriented and has nothing to do with the basis of martial arts. As a result martial arts in the modern world are based on the perpetual activity of yang and failing to embrace the nondoing of yin. We discover this yang-over-yin temperament in the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA), which is best-known through the organization of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). The athletes of MMA are well-trained; many of them function at a rate of peak performance, which can be quite a spectacle to watch. But the problem is that many mixed martial artists and spectators believe martial arts are about talking trash and beating the hell out of the opponent. Though this may be entertaining for the spectator, we should not delude ourselves into thinking this has anything to do with martial arts. Rather it is just martial arts on steroids, polluted with the idea of yang over yin, doing over nondoing.

This attitude inclines one toward competition because of its innate characteristics of force and control. If mixed martial artists, or any combat sport athletes, for that matter, were serious about martial arts, they would need to understand and embrace the essential tenet of cooperation. Cooperation in martial arts is evident in the internal practice of pushing hands, known as *tui shou* in Chinese. In the practice of pushing hands, each person is feeling and moving according to the energy of the opposing person. Pushing hands works to undo our natural instinct to resist force with force by teaching the body to yield to force and redirect it. Force does not exist in this practice, because in feeling and moving according to the energy of the other person, we are accessing our receptive yin nature. Yin evokes the art of cooperation. Although it may appear that pushing hands is a form of competition, it instead is a dance, as you essentially need two to tango. Even so, pushing hands, like many other aspects of martial arts, has succumbed to the tendency toward the yang characteristics of competition and peacock consciousness.

In both spiritually oriented and combat-oriented martial arts and MMA, the yin art of cooperation is at the core of all forms of cultivation. For example, if a mixed martial artist is trained properly, he or she will know that there is no opponent other than himself or herself. You are essentially testing yourself against your so-called opponent. The only opponent is yourself, and your perceived opponent is a mirror of where you are in your training. The mirror of the opponent reflects back to you your spiritual development as well as aspects of your character that have not been transformed or cleansed out of your psyche. So no matter what form of martial arts we are talking about—including MMA—

the essential heart of the art is to blunt your sharpness.

Blunting the sharpness is a phrase used by Lao-tzu in the *Tao Te Ching* to describe the softening of one's rigid personality. In martial arts, it is about evoking the yin qualities of humility, compassion, forgiveness, respect, and honor. For thousands of years, martial arts have been mistakenly seen as practices to cultivate the yang, masculine characteristics of power, force, and control. This incorrect perspective has only increased our tendencies toward competition and trying to stand out in the crowd. Martial arts are not based on yang over yin but on yin over yang. They are a practice that mimics life, as the majority of the time we are in the yin of nondoing. When those brief moments of time come for us to act, we are precise and our timing is impeccable.

The nature of our psychosomatic organism is to reside in yin and only activate yang when needed. This is actually the fundamental function of our psyche. Our attempts to reverse this order are causing psychological problems and mental-health issues that contribute to a world gone insane. The natural function of residing in the feminine yin while moderately accessing the masculine yang was explained by Lao-tzu in the *Tao Te Ching* thousands of years ago:

*Know the male,
yet keep to the female:
receive the world in your arms.
If you receive the world,
the Tao will never leave you
and you will be like a little
child.*¹

In the humility of yin we do not seek to be special or to attain superpowers. We go about our life quietly and do not make a noise about the mystery of Tao that we experience within our consciousness, because it is in itself indescribable. This is the elite spirituality of Chuang-tzu. This means we *know* experientially, but it is not intellectually explainable. The experience of Tao/Brahman/Godhead within is beyond knowing logically or finding a conclusion, because it is nonlinear and eternal. Only in the finite realm of existence can we come to logical conclusions and dissect with our intellect. The principal method of the practice of koans in Zen Buddhism is to overcome the intellect, and this is the

prevailing philosophy of the East. In the *Tao Te Ching* Lao-tzu states:

*The tao that can be told is
not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be
named is not the eternal Name.*

*The unnamable is the eternally
real.
Naming is the origin of all
particular things.*²

This wisdom is also found in India in the ancient text of the *Kena Upanishad* from the Vedic era of India:

*Brahman is unknown to those who know It, and is
known to those who do not know It at all.*³

The meaning of this verse is that those who say they know Brahman still have a concept or object of knowledge in their mind. Since Brahman transcends the mind and our thinking, no concept can capture it, and so we cannot say we really know it. The academics and intellectuals who believe they can explain the universe and its mystery by somehow coming to logical conclusions are deluded. They have lost their intrinsic sense of awe and cannot witness beauty without analyzing it.

Many people in the world are in the yang habit of using their intellect as a scalpel to dissect life into pieces so as to analyze the details. Many of us who underwent a formal education had the chance in science class to dissect an animal, usually a frog or toad. When we dissect a frog, it becomes a mess. When our dissection is finished, though we can describe the frog's internal organs, we have lost sight of its beauty. In dissecting the frog, we pulled it apart into discrete pieces, destroying its inclusive totality. When we dissect life, we destroy it. This is occurring right now, as our world is embracing yang over yin, which is against nature's way.

A YIN-DEFICIENT WORLD

The perspective of yang over yin is promoted in our world from the earliest stages of education into adult working life. This perspective becomes so entrenched in our minds that we exhibit it in our ordinary life as well. We begin to anxiously think that we “should” always be doing something. We are made to believe that if we are not doing something, then we are useless and a nuisance to society. This train of thought is supported by the societal mantra “Time is money,” which actually means you had better get moving or you will miss your opportunity to succeed in life. Thinking in this way gives us the illusory belief that we can control every aspect of our lives and become masters of time. Many entrepreneurs have this mindset, and though there is a skill to becoming independently successful, there are also a lot of pitfalls.

We all suffer from these pitfalls when we overemphasize the yang “time is money” attitude. They include anxiety and stress. Though we should all be creatively productive and use this life well, we have to face the fact that we can never truly control life or master time. The whole world has gotten itself into a big rush because we believe the contrary is possible. But this attitude is destroying the world, because what truly nourishes the world is being ignored—the feminine, yin bosom of the universe. As I mentioned, the fundamental function of life and our human organism is to reside mainly in the yin while activating the yang only conservatively.

In embracing only the incessant activity of yang, we are becoming a species that is out of balance and essentially sick, which is affecting all other life on this planet. The clinical diagnosis in TCM for the human race is that it is yin-deficient. In a yin-deficient world we are internally consumed by heat, because we are constantly seeking action, overthinking, and seeking distraction. Yang is the internal heat that is evoked by incessant activity, and yin is the cool of deep rest, relaxation, and nondoing that nourishes all aspects of our mind and body, and which preserves yang. The American Chinese medical doctor Brendan Kelly explains in his work that a yin-deficient humanity contributes to external climate change, because the excessive heat in our internal climate is projected into our external culture.⁴

What we are within becomes our culture. The propensity to always be doing something is a response of heat within, which becomes the heat in the external world. Excessive heat within our organism causes the heightened sense of anxiety and stress that a lot of people feel today and have even become

accustomed to. This comes from being overactive, but it also comes from the yang-laced stimulants we ingest, which cause internal heat and ultimately irritation. Coffee, for example, has no real value for us; it is a super-yang bean that causes extreme levels of anxiety, stress, and jitteriness. Coffee intoxication enhances our tendency toward activity, and this in turn slowly but surely depletes our psychosomatic organism and in turn harms the planet.

To have an organism that is incessantly doing requires a lot of external stimulation, be that either heat-infused food or entertainment. As I have mentioned, in TCM the little picture and big picture are the same picture. So any change within the internal system of the human organism will be reflected in the planetary organism. If we constantly consume coffee, refined sugar, refined flour, and frivolous entertainment, to name just a few things, we will be constantly distracted and as a result will seek more distractions. Ultimately this weighs heavily on the resources of the planet and also destroys the mind. In allowing ourselves no time to rest, relax, or to just be bored, we are destroying our inner and outer world, because we are incessantly in motion and essentially overheated. What happens to any vehicle that is overheated and does not offset this with the required amount of coolant? Engine failure and a complete breakdown is the result, which is usually irreversible. This is what is happening to humanity and the planet. It is up to each of us as individuals to address our yin deficiency. We cannot go on like this for too much longer.

Wu-wei is required to heal our yin deficiency, because it is an aspect of yin. To heal our yin deficiency does not mean we stop being active, though this may be healing and helpful in the beginning. To truly heal, we are trying to find balance. Reestablishing balance requires us to come back in accord with the nondoing, forceless, and effortless mind of wu-wei. This balance of life involves predominantly residing in the yin and conservatively accessing the yang, which, as I've mentioned, is the art of martial arts.

Balance between yin and yang, then, is not about equal shares but rather natural harmony. I often use a chocolate milkshake as an analogy to describe this natural balance. For example, if we were to put 1 cup of milk and 1 cup of cacao powder in a blender we would make a mess that would be unhealthy and sickening to drink. But if we just put enough cacao powder, often a few teaspoons, for the same amount of milk, then we will have a delicious chocolate milkshake. Yang is the cacao powder, and yin is the milk, which is from the feminine bosom of life.

When we transfer this understanding of balance to martial arts, we discover a practice that requires discipline but should not overreach its limits. Many

martial artists tend to overdiscipline themselves. They never alter their routines, and in a lot of cases they add more to their daily practice. This is the yang habit—the more we do, the more we will gain. This is against Lao-tzu’s philosophy of “less is more.” The “time is money” mantra has affected martial arts, transforming them into a predominantly yang activity with a depletion of yin. As a result, many martial artists develop rigid, overdisciplined personalities. They fear to change their habits and routines, which puts them out of sync with the ever-changing Tao. As a result they essentially become prisoners to their discipline.

The martial arts were built on the function and harmony of life, yin over yang, as yin is where the true source of power resides. When we overreach in martial arts from excessive yang we are usually thrown to the ground and defeated. In the highly eclectic Korean martial art Hapkido (extremely similar to the Japanese Aikido), when your opponent overreaches, you only need to feel her energy and movement, which requires no effort. As a result your opponent will fall to the ground without any force or effort on your part. It is the art of avoiding resistance. Residing in yin, you move with your opponent’s movement, which is often full of yang force. Though you may absorb the blow somewhat, you don’t feel it, because you are the pivot of balance between yin and yang in their perpetual dance. Hapkido is focused on yin cultivation. In fact, all martial arts are designed to cultivate yin, but we are often seduced by the power and force we attain from yang.

CULTIVATING YIN

When my brother-in-law Sangue Yoon was a young boy, he practiced Hapkido regularly. He often complained to his sister (my wife) and his parents that all he was learning was how to fall. He was frustrated because he wanted to learn how to throw. This is a common response for anybody who begins to practice Hapkido or for that matter a number of martial arts and spiritual practices. Learning how to fall and how to absorb and move with a blow appears pointless to a world built on the habit of force. As a result, we cannot understand the significance of learning not to be active, and this produces frustration.

A world deficient in yin has no idea how to cultivate it. Often our attempts are laced with yang and only contribute to more deficiency. This is common with martial artists who are attracted only to the yang aspect of the craft. Anyone who is overdisciplined in any craft will have a rigid mind. This rigid mind often

has trouble flowing in conversations and listening deeply to the other person without the yang habit of waiting for their turn to speak (usually about oneself). You feel this distinct tension in this kind of person, not so much in their posture but in their eyes and speech. There is a distinct stiffness in their words that results from being too disciplined. This overuses the analytical mind (the PFC); this mind is stiff. Even the positivity of such people has a stench of fakeness to it. For example, when an overdisciplined, rigid mind speaks, the individual often displays an attitude implying that she is “cool” with everything, even though the other person can sense that she is pretending. Pretending to be OK with everything is a yang habit. It is the analytical intellect assuming that if we practice some form of spiritual cultivation, then we should be good and moral people who are incapable of harming an ant. We should essentially be Goody Two-Shoes.

This is an incorrect perspective because, again, we are dissecting the world into parts that are exclusively good and bad rather than following the natural inclusivity of nature. We are often possessed with the idea of *who I should be* rather than *who I am*. We overdiscipline ourselves to attain who we should be, but this idea is based on social beliefs. To try and reach this destination is an endless journey to nowhere, because it is driven by the yang of the external world. We cannot just be actively doing, doing, doing, in the hope that we will become better people. In fact, we deplete our system with this attitude, which in turn contributes to the destruction of the world.

Cultivating yin requires us to refrain from our yang tendency to always act and to overstimulate our organism. We need to apply my chocolate milkshake analogy if we are to survive. We need to learn how to fall as my brother-in-law did, so to speak. As with my chocolate milkshake, nature resides predominantly in yin. Physically and psychologically we do as well, because we are intrinsic expressions of nature. We need to learn how to truly relax—and I don’t mean sitting in front of a digital device with popcorn, which in actual fact is not resting your mind.

Overdiscipline and overwork puts us at risk of system failure, which presents itself as a host of mental health issues, stress, and anxiety. As I’ve mentioned, being in the nondoing wu-wei of yin actually preserves intellectual life. Essayist and cartoonist Tim Kreider explains how this insight made him better at his job:

Idleness is not just a vacation, an indulgence or a vice; it is as indispensable to the brain as vitamin D is to the body, and deprived of it

we suffer a mental affliction as disfiguring as rickets [. . .] it is, paradoxically, necessary to getting any work done.⁵

Drastic times call for drastic measures, and the best method for cultivating yin is drastic but essential for our well-being. It involves fasting the mind, which I explore in depth in my book *Fasting the Mind*. Essentially it is a practice for starving the mind of any stimulation, external or internal. Methods of fasting the mind are common in the East. Two methods are found in Buddhism; they are known as *vipassana* and open awareness meditation. Vipassana meditation means insight into one's true nature. One form of practice is a strict ten-day silent retreat, which involves complete silence, many hours of sitting meditation, and a vegetarian diet for the entire period. Vipassana meditation often advocates focusing on the sensations within our psychosomatic organism, which takes our awareness deeper and has the potential to purify the mind.

Open awareness, on the other hand, is an objectless meditation in which we engage with a simple, stable posture while trying to empty the mind through focusing on the breath or by fixing the attention on something in the environment.

Advaita Vedanta, a science, philosophy, and spiritual practice originating in the Upanishads and the Vedas, offers a method of fasting the mind whereby we remain in a practice of self-inquiry by focusing on the question "Who am I?" All three methods have a positive effect on mental concentration, reaction time, motor skills, and sensory sensitivity.

Fasting the mind, though, involves more than just these three methods. It is a lifestyle that transforms life from yang-dominant to yin-dominant. This approach is nothing new. The phrase "fasting the mind" is first found in the *Chuang-tzu* text, though its practice is much older. It appears in a story about how to change a corrupt ruler. In the story Confucius is the mouthpiece of Chuang-tzu. He has a disciple named Yen Hui. Yen Hui has heard of a ruler in the Chinese state of Wei who is treating the common people very poorly. Hui has numerous plans to change the ruler, but all of them are shot down by Confucius on the grounds that Yen Hui is intentionally trying to change the ruler according to his own will. In the end Confucius has had enough and tells Yen Hui that he should fast his mind:

Confucius said, "Goodness, how could that do? You have too many policies and plans and you haven't seen what is needed. You will

probably get off without incurring any blame, yes. But that will be as far as it goes. How do you think you can actually convert him? You are still making the mind your teacher!”

Yen Hui said, “I have nothing more to offer. May I ask the proper way?”

“You must fast!” said Confucius. “I will tell you what that means. Do you think it is easy to do anything while you have [a mind]? If you do, Bright Heaven will not sanction you.”

Yen Hui said, “My family is poor. I haven’t drunk wine or eaten any strong foods for several months. So can I be considered as having fasted?”

“That is the fasting one does before a sacrifice, not the fasting of the mind.”

“May I ask what the fasting of the mind is?”

Confucius said, “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 spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”

Yen Hui said, “Before I heard this, I was certain that I was Hui. But now that I have heard it, there is no more Hui. Can this be called emptiness?”

“That’s all there is to it,” said Confucius. “Now I will tell you. You may go and play in his bird cage, but never be moved by fame. If he listens, then sing; if not, keep still. Have no gate, no opening, but make oneness your house and live with what cannot be avoided. Then you will be close to success.”⁶

Fasting the mind thus cultivates yin to bring about lasting balance. It requires us to starve the mind of all external and internal distractions. When we do so, we begin to affect the mind and body at the deep level of the nervous system. There is essentially a war going on in our nervous system from the overuse of yang “doing” at the expense of yin “nondoing.”

The nervous system is the part of an animal’s body that coordinates its voluntary and involuntary actions and also transmits signals to and from different parts of its body. In vertebrate species, such as human beings, the

nervous system contains two parts, the central nervous system (CNS) and the peripheral nervous system (PNS). The central nervous system contains the brain and spinal cord, while the peripheral nervous system consists of mainly nerves, which are enclosed bundles of long fibers, and axons, which are long, slender projections of nerve cells that conduct electrical impulses away from the neuron's cell body. These nerves and axons connect the CNS to every other part of the body.

The PNS is in turn divided into the somatic nervous system (SoNS) and the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS is our central focus when we are doing psychological or spiritual inner work and transformation. It is a control system that largely acts unconsciously and regulates bodily functions such as heart rate, respiratory rate, digestion, pupillary response, urination, and sexual arousal. The ANS in its turn has two branches, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PSNS). The SNS is sometimes considered the “fight or flight” system because in emergencies it is activated to mobilize energy. It is what we activate when we are in motion and are being stimulated through our senses. Without it we could not do anything. The PSNS, on the other hand, is activated when we are in a relaxed state. We activate it when we essentially do nothing. The PSNS is also responsible for stimulation of “rest and digest” and “feed and breed” activities that occur when the body is at rest, especially after eating, including sexual arousal, lacrimation (tears), salivation, urination, digestion, and defecation. The PSNS is what makes us drift off to sleep every night. It is stimulated most when we relax deeply.

The war in our nervous system is essentially the overstimulation of the SNS along with an understimulation of the PSNS. When we stimulate only the former without activating the latter, we increase the probability of chemical imbalances in our brain.

Cultivating yin activates the PSNS, leading to equanimity. Fasting the mind, then, not only transforms and heals the individual but also our culture. Cultivating the cool of yin in the mind and body reduces the yang heat of our world piece by piece. It is not an overnight phenomenon, but rather a gradual process. You realize how addicted you are to distraction, and you understand that it will take time to heal it through fasting the mind. It is the same long and arduous process for the collective.

Cultivating yin and fasting the mind are both essential for understanding the effortless mind of wu-wei, which is enlightened consciousness. Yin cultivation methods affect our nervous system at the root level. In cultivating yin, we diminish the yang effects of intellectual discernment, thinking, and active doing.

Diminishing yang effects also weakens the sense of “I” as a separate person. We tend to think of ourselves as an “I” in the mind, separate from our body, and many of our philosophies and religions reflect this perspective. The sense of the mind-body dualistic split is overcome when the “I” is decreased, leading to an integration of hot and cold cognition where the mind is embodied and the body is mindful.

The idea of the “I” as a ruler of the body is a notion going back to Plato’s analogy, in his *Phaedrus*, of the charioteer and his wild horses that need to be tamed. Plato’s charioteer is a metaphor for our mind as master (cold cognition), while the wild horses represent the untamed, animalistic, and ultimately unconscious body, but at the same time the natural and spontaneous movements of life (hot cognition). The person you think of as yourself (the charioteer), with all these beliefs, desires, and attachments, is only your cold cognition in conflict with the hot cognitive processes, which appear unconscious and untamed when they are not disciplined. This overemphasizes the mind-body split and makes us believe that this is the way a human being is in a yang-oriented world.

We experience embodied cognition, on the other hand, when our psychosomatic organism has reached a state of homeostasis, with perfect balance between yin and yang. When we cultivate yin, the sense of “I” submerges into the hot cognitive process of the body, which evokes *intelligent spontaneity*. This intelligent spontaneity is the skill of the craftsman and the art of wu-wei. The irony with skill, though, is that the cold cognition is required to process the information of any particular skill through intellectual understanding and constant repetition before it becomes ingrained in the hot cognition, becoming second nature. The skill and art of intelligent spontaneity is the consciousness of one who is in the zone.

Being in the zone occurs when we cultivate yin. Accomplished athletes, writers, actors and actresses, artists, and other achievers are adept at cultivating yin in their lives. The master of any craft has embodied his skill to such a heightened state that his actions are essentially effortless and are devoid of thought or even of a sense of a person doing the actions. The embodied skill of a craftsman, where cold and hot cognition have merged to evoke universal intelligence, is a metaphor for the enlightened and effortless mind of wu-wei. This understanding is captured in the story of Cook Ting (also known as Butcher Ding) in the *Chuang-tzu* text. In the story Cook Ting is cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui. Lord Wen-hui is extremely impressed by Cook Ting’s skill at cutting up oxen so effortlessly. Cook Ting explains that he encounters the ox with his spirit and this allows the spiritual energy of the Tao to take over. He states:

What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.⁷

In China, Cook Ting's embodied skill and intelligent spontaneity is known as "seeing from spirit." Seeing from spirit occurs when the sense of "I" has diminished, which essentially means that the cold cognition has decreased its influence so that we can perceive reality from the holistic hot cognition. The Cook Ting passage illustrates how intelligent spontaneity is evoked and realized as our nature when the sense of "someone" "doing" something has disappeared. Even when life is in motion and actions appear to be happening, they are effortless, because the sense of "I" doing it has disappeared. Thus the nondoing of wu-wei evokes effortless action, where the mind is not attached or stuck to any aspect of reality.

Cook Ting's effortless and unstuck mind is a metaphor for the effortless mind in wu-wei *all* the time, which is the enlightened state of a sage. This essentially means that our natural state is to be in the zone all the time, but it has been eclipsed by our intellectual training, which, with its tendency to dissect life, eclipses this reality. The Cook Ting story underscores the fact that when we are in intelligent spontaneity, we are harmonizing with the environment. The cook's skill demonstrates that, when we cultivate yin, evoking intelligent spontaneity, we see that the apparent duality of an inner world isolated from an outer world is an illusion. In the effortless state of intelligent spontaneity, both realities are one and the same. But this perception can only be achieved when yin cultivation has transformed the mind into the natural effortless state.

The effect of intelligent spontaneity occurs because yin cultivation methods bring us in touch with a function of our nervous system that has been suppressed from overdoing the yang. In activating our PSNS through yin cultivation, we get in touch and become more intimate with the enteric nervous system (ENS) located in the gut.

The ENS is a meshlike network of neurons that governs the function of the gastrointestinal system. It is more commonly known as "gut instincts." Our gut

instincts come from the enteric nervous system, and we can tune into them by downregulating the sense of “I.” If we do, we will hear messages from the gut louder and more clearly, and we can act in accord with spontaneous reactions and judgment calls. We begin to move as though we can sense the future that we are about to experience. But all that has really happened is that the ENS is functioning without the hindrance of the prefrontal cortex and, like Cook Ting, is aligned with the environment.

Activating the ENS evokes our natural spontaneity, removing the fog of intellectual discernment. When we cultivate yin, our gut instincts are in sync with the environment and with each situation. This allows us to be natural and effortlessly spontaneous, which are signs of mental authenticity and a pure heart.

Lao-tzu’s teaching of sticking to the yin with a conservative application of yang aligns you with the universal order of Tao. Your entire being becomes an extension of the universe, as the universe has become your entire body. Its magic and splendor come to life as your perception is cleansed and intelligent spontaneity has been evoked, bringing universal harmony to the world through your consciousness. When our being aligns with the universe and its process through intelligent spontaneity, we begin to experience synchronicity without needing to rationalize the experience. This process takes our intellectual discernment from merely seeing coincidence to perceiving synchronicity.

PART 3

**THE ART OF EFFORTLESS
LIVING**

Synchronicity Is the Language of the Effortless Mind

In the logical sphere built around our culture and society, we see the unfolding of life as a matter of mere chance, with no real significance or meaning. This view of ourselves as strangers to this world puts us in a constant battle with the events of life. The art of wu-wei, on the other hand, is an affirmation of life, because wu-wei is a trust in the function of the universe and how it expresses itself through human beings. Chance has no place in this context, because all events are perceived as fate and therefore have deep meaning for us. Sri Ramana Maharshi, the great sage of the twentieth century, expressed his view of the differences between chance and fate in a short note he wrote to his mother, who was pleading with him to break his practice of silence and return home:

The ordainer controls the fate of souls in accordance with their *prarabdha karma* [the karma of past experiences and lives pre-determined and manifested in one's present body/incarnation, *prarabdha* is often translated as destiny]. Whatever is destined not to happen will not happen, try as you may. Whatever is destined to happen will happen, do what you may to prevent it. This is certain. The best course, therefore, is to remain silent.^{[1](#)}

The silence of Sri Ramana Maharshi is the verification that he lived the power of wu-wei. Like Lao-tzu, Ramana Maharshi understood that oneness and unity are only revealed through absolute trust. When we unquestionably trust that there is a path that is guiding our life, it is complemented by a deep inner voice that we hear as our intuition. This phenomenon is commonly known as “divine guidance” or “the voice of God,” even though both these terms have

been deprived of their true meaning by organized religion. Leaving things alone through trust aligns your life with fate.

CHANCE OR FATE?

Chance, on the other hand, arises out of our primal instincts for survival, because we incorrectly believe we are opposed by the events of life. The idea of chance, then, relates to the unnatural, linear perspective on life. This perspective sees the future as having no significance to the way we are in the present or in the past.

Taoist wisdom rejects the idea of chance, because it is a one-dimensional perspective. Being bound to the world of form, chance excludes the inner world. Fate, which takes into account the relationship between our inner and outer worlds, is diametrically opposed to chance. This relationship is of the same essence as the natural, nonlinear world. Fate is nonlinear because it depends on our inner world synchronizing with the external world. This synchronization relates to the deep content and conditioning of our mind, which remains unconscious. The Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung discovered this connection between the unconscious and the material world through his own experience. Jung states, “When an inner situation is not made conscious, it appears outside as fate.”²

Jung postulates that the unconscious and fate conspire against the conscious self to further the growth of the individual. This is one of the main principles for understanding the shadow element of the psyche, as the world we experience will continue to reveal suppressed and unconscious aspects of our minds. Both fate and the unconscious uproot our plans to control life.

Our identity, or ego, is the aspect of ourselves that attempts to control and plan our present and future experience. But as we all know, no matter how hard you try to control life, it somehow has a way of changing those plans. And yet upon self-reflection, you discover that these unexpected events helped to shape your life and allowed it further inner growth. So what we think disturbs our life is actually fate and our unconscious conspiring against our rigid personality for the purpose of our evolution as individuals. As the softness of water slowly wears away at the hardness of rock, so too does fate wear away at the rigidity of our conditioned identity.

Fate relates to the unconscious—those deep aspects of ourselves that need to be made conscious for us to grow. This process has nothing to do with the ego, because the ego is built on conditioned beliefs and thinks it knows what is best

for you. But your ego does not know what is best for you. It is the lazy, distracted aspect of your mind, which believes it is special. What is best for you arises out of fate, which brings to light those aspects of yourself that your ego has suppressed. Being built into the fabric of consciousness, we cannot live exactly how we want according to our identity, because everyone's life would resemble their pleasures and fantasies, and this would put them grossly out of sync with the homeostasis of the planet. This is not freedom.

In the modern era we are audaciously attempting to build a world based on our pleasures and fantasies. But we are slowly learning that nothing can be learned from a world whose chief motive is to avoid pain. You only have to look into your own life to understand that pain has humbled you and has given you the greatest growth.

This striving for control and pleasure is the major difference between organized religion and Lao-tzu's Taoist understanding of fate. The faith of many religions is based on the hope that one day the events of life will turn in favor of our conditioning and pleasures, instead of understanding that to trust fate is to have faith in God.

The Taoism of Lao-tzu says trust and fate are a single thing. Living wu-wei brings trust into harmony with fate, not because events coincide with your individual desires, but because you have let go of these desires. We are out of sync with fate when we plan and strategize about the future; furthermore, we are wasting our time and energy, because these dreams in many cases never come true. Not that it is useless to have imagination—there is nothing wrong with imagination—but the problem occurs when our imagination is linked to our personal agendas, which in turn are based on our conditioning. Imagination in a lot of cases consists of nothing more than dreams of controlling our destiny. This ultimately hurts us, as these dreams are invariably very distant from reality.

These misunderstandings distort the principal truths handed down from the mystics of each religion. Having faith that is separate from fate leads to idiotic dogmas, such as that the individual and God are separate from each other, or that God is not found in the natural world, or that this world is somehow a construct coming from God as if God were an architect and we were mere pawns in a stage show. Faith as seen by many organized religions has no relationship to the external world, because they think of the material world as something we should conquer or try to escape.

The usual notion of causality is the result of such misguided views. Many religions teach that in this world we are opposed by a meaningless cause-and-

effect process, which is constantly uprooting our wishes and desires. The answer to this problem is supposedly to have more faith. Yet if the unconscious and fate are connected, could we say that what plays out as cause and effect has a deeper meaning than we may think? The *I Ching* suggests that all events in life are connected in a way that is beyond intellectual comprehension. In writing about the *I Ching* Jung states:

This assumption involves a certain curious principle that I have termed synchronicity, a concept that formulates a point of view diametrically opposed to that of causality. Since the latter is a merely statistical truth and not absolute, it is a sort of working hypothesis of how events evolve one out of another, whereas synchronicity takes the coincidence of events in space and time as meaning something more than mere chance, namely, a peculiar interdependence of objective events among themselves as well as with the subjective (psychic) states of the observer or observers.³

The *I Ching* explains that all aspects of life have a deeper meaning because of synchronicity, which we experience both collectively and individually. When we trust the unfolding of fate in our lives, we become aware of synchronicity. Synchronicity is the language the Tao uses to offer its miraculous guidance. But the spiritually blind see this guidance merely as coincidence.

Wu-wei, if sincerely understood and followed, harmonizes our inner world with the outer world. This harmony is evident through the synchronicities we experience in our lives. Instead of the idea that fate is against us, synchronicity demonstrates that fate is a teacher that softens our hearts into an honest humility. If we can truly live wu-wei, the magic and miracles of the universe come to life through synchronicity. It is as if the source of Tao is speaking to us directly.

When you trust the workings of the universe, its evolutionary unfolding begins to be mirrored in your own experience. It is as if reality is guiding you and revealing a story about yourself and your place within the cosmic spectrum. Though religions speak of divine intervention, many ignore the fact that this intervention is the by-product of synchronicity. In any event, the idea of divine intervention points out a contradiction in religious belief: If God is separate from the external world, then how could He/She/It intervene in this world?

The Taoist view of the underlying source within all life should not be identified with the Western concept of an immanent, pantheistic God. This view

would reduce the mystery of the Tao to intellectual jargon. Furthermore, the Taoist perspective does not see causation in the Western way, whereby each event is separate and stuck together with other separate events. On the contrary, no events can be connected, because connection in this sense would still imply separation. So the Taoists perceive the universe as one single event, with differing fluctuations in the unified field of Tao, in the way that a wave is distinct from the ocean, but it is still the ocean.

Similarly, the Taoist perspective should not be confused with the pantheistic view of the universe as a mass of distinct things and events working in an unconscious fashion. Taoist wisdom is not saying that the universe is unconscious. It is saying that abiding in what we perceive as the unconsciousness of the universe is an intelligence beyond intellectual speculation. To believe that Tao is just an unconscious energy is as absurd as the notion of a personal God ruling separate from the universe. Becoming aware of synchronicity demonstrates that there is more to the Way of the Tao than meets the eye.

A trust in life and an alignment with synchronicity affirm life on all levels, physical, mental, and spiritual. These metaphysical, psychological, and spiritual profundities are too vast and deep for the average materialist to comprehend. (Average materialists include most members of organized religions, because they are predominantly materialist in thinking and character.) The spiritual adepts of antiquity never thought of the material world as gross matter, because upon deep contemplation nature has a story to tell for those who have come to a place of *nirodha*, stillness, within themselves.

Synchronicity proves that the material world is not mere gross matter but the unconscious intelligence of the Tao playing out through our own being. All forms of matter, whether of a human body or a rock, have the same intelligence within them at different degrees of magnitude. The intelligence of Tao synchronizes with the external world when one follows *wu-wei*. This trust harmonizes both the inner and outer world through the language of synchronicity. Lao-tzu, like practically all sages, revered nature. In contemplating the interconnectedness of nature, the sages have discovered how we fit into and indeed belong to nature. Those who dwell only in the material world have no such spiritual vision. They do not see how everything is interconnected and unfolding into something that at the moment is beyond human comprehension. Many religions are based on the assumption that the world is merely gross matter and that spirit exists only in humans and not in anything else. Those who reside in pure awareness will know that this is absurd.

SYNCHRONICITY IS THE SONG OF SPIRIT AND MATTER

If divine intervention and synchronicity exist, spirit and matter cannot be separate. Sincere contemplation of nature brings this unity of spirit and matter to the forefront of our awareness. This understanding is not found only in Lao-tzu's Taoism, but it is common in the East and at the very core of many spiritual traditions. The spiritual science at the basis of Gnosticism and Hermeticism esoterically explains how spirit and matter can be one. The Hermetic tradition, as set out in a book called *The Kybalion*, explains in seven laws how spirit and matter, or in other words the inner and outer worlds, are in mutual relationship to each other. The laws of vibration and rhythm show how spirit and matter are in a constant dance, made up of subatomic particles, which ebb and flow at varying rates of magnitude according to the harmonic resonance between them:

III. THE PRINCIPLE OF VIBRATION

*Nothing rests; everything moves; everything vibrates.*⁴

V. THE PRINCIPLE OF RHYTHM

*Everything flows, out and in; everything has its tides; all things rise and fall; the pendulum-swing manifests in everything; the measure of the swing to the right is the measure of the swing to the left; rhythm compensates.*⁵

Yet both of these are meaningless if they are not understood in relation to the first principle of Hermeticism, which indicates how there could be any fluctuations of vibration and rhythm in relation to spirit and matter. This principle states:

I. THE PRINCIPLE OF MENTALISM

*THE ALL IS MIND; The Universe is Mental.*⁶

Mind here should not be mistaken for the superficial mind, or ego, which is only an accumulation of conditioning. Rather this mind is consciousness, which is the foundation of the entire universe.

Modern spiritual and scientific understanding are coming to the same conclusion: that everything is a manifestation of a unified field of consciousness. Consciousness, according to the sages, is not isolated within the mind of the human brain, but exists everywhere in three planes, which are defined in the wisdom traditions as the physical, mental, and spiritual planes. The Hindu philosophy of Vedanta is in part based on the deep understanding that what we in the modern era know as the atom is actually a spiritual aspect of the one consciousness of Brahman (irreducible essence/ultimate reality/godhead), which functions like a breath coming from the spiritual plane into the manifestation of the physical plane. The spiritual atom is a product of consciousness and moves according to the focus of conscious awareness. My book *The Science and Practice of Humility* goes into this subject in depth.

Consciousness produces the spiritual atom, which multiplies through the principle of vibration and rhythm until we have the outward form of matter, which in essence is nothing more than a garment of consciousness manifested through the dance of subatomic particles. The physical, mental, and spiritual planes of consciousness are connected by the vibration and rhythm of subatomic particles producing the dance of life. Consciousness dwells in everything, both space and matter, in a cosmic symphony. The individual is part of this symphony, and synchronicity is the harmony that is produced by this dance. Yet only those who trust the universe can perceive this dance with clear eyes.

Synchronicity does exist for everyone, even materialists and nonbelievers. But the ignorant pass such experiences off as coincidence and do not learn or grow from them. One who dwells on the spiritual plane perceives things as they are in holistic truth, while one who is primarily on the mental and physical planes still believes in a material world devoid of spirit. In Confucius's commentary on the *I Ching*, he explains that what we resonate deeply with will affect our experience and, consequently, the synchronicity experienced between the underlying spirit of the individual and the external world:

Things that accord in tone vibrate together. Things that have affinity in their inmost natures seek one another. Water flows to what is wet, fire turns to what is dry. Clouds (the breath of heaven) follow the dragon, wind (the breath of earth) follows the tiger. Thus the sage arises, and all creatures follow him with their eyes. What is born of heaven feels related to what is above. What is born of earth feels related to what is below. Each follows its kind.²

Whatever our mind is focused on will be the world we experience, because perception is molded by life through the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that we hold as important to us. Although the spiritual plane influences both the mental and physical planes, thoughts, feelings, and emotions exist on the mental plane and cannot become pure unless one dwells on the spiritual plane. People who live only in the two lower worlds are driven by their conditioning; they are attracted only to those realms and suffer according to their apparent duality. On the other hand, those very few who live on the spiritual plane can see the one consciousness in harmony playing out in all forms. Chuang-tzu poetically explains this spiritual perception: “When there is no more separation between ‘this’ and ‘that,’ it is called the still-point of the Tao. At the still-point in the center of the circle one can see the infinite in all things.”⁸

The spiritual understanding of consciousness also conflicts with the materialistic scientific perspective. Materialistic science is under the impression that consciousness is a phenomenon limited to the mind, which in turn is believed to be situated inside the brain. From this we can understand why synchronicity has not been given any serious thought in the scientific field outside of psychology and quantum physics.

To regard consciousness as merely the function of the physical anatomy of the brain resembles the religious notion that spirit and matter are separate. From a common-sense point of view, how could anything in life be connected or relate to anything else without consciousness? How could rain nourish plant life and plant life nourish us in turn if there were no underlying consciousness compelling them to do so? All manifestations of consciousness relate to each other in a symbiotic harmony, but usually only a sage can recognize it. Synchronicity brings this awareness to the forefront of our knowledge when our perception has been marinated in a trust in wu-wei and the harmony of Tao.

THE ORIGIN OF SYNCHRONICITY

Although all of this may explain how synchronicity can be experienced in one’s life, it does not give us any indication of the origin of its existence. Questions about the origins of synchronicity arise when we compare the spiritual significance of the evolutionary process of the universe as opposed to the eternally present Self, which is not constricted by time, space, name, and form. People are often in a bind over these two apparently opposing realities. None of this confusion is new, as differing opinions have always arisen on this subject

among the Hindus, Taoists, and Zen Buddhists.

In the Hindu philosophy of Vedanta they would argue that synchronicity is born of the Eternal Self/undifferentiated consciousness (Atman) and that it is only a phenomenon of change, which has no relation to the Eternal Self. The Zen master, for his part, would state that synchronicity appears as a phenomenon when we remain in the stillness of the Void (*sunyata* in Sanskrit) and could be thought of as a temporary illusion. The Taoists would assume that synchronicity is the result of some connection between the inner and outer worlds, but they could never give a definite reason about why it exists. Though all three insights may appear opposed, they are all in essence valid explanations and hint toward a single origin.

Patanjali's yoga of practice complemented by stillness gives us an indication of synchronicity's origins. Patanjali understood that the "doing" of practice is in alignment with the evolutionary unfolding, while the "nondoining" of stillness brings one in resonance with the Eternal Self, which is the source of Tao within us. This is the Vedic wisdom that teaches Atman is Brahman. The aspects of doing and nondoining harmonize with each other and bring forth unity between the changing and the changeless, or in other words, between motion and stillness. This unified harmony, manifested on an individual level, is the origin of synchronicity.

Lao-tzu refers to a "Way" (Tao) that is found by few. The most common understanding of the Way is the course of things, which I've mentioned: if we follow it in life, it will guide us as if we were floating down a stream to the greater ocean. When a stream flows down a mountain, it finds its own path. Similarly, living in harmony with nature is finding your own way: this is the Way of the Tao. Even when we block the stream or resist it, it will find its own way, and we will suffer from swimming against the current.

Consider a fallen leaf that is flowing on a stream. If you, like the leaf, allow the stream to carry you in this fashion, its power becomes yours—*te*. You become one with nature, without clinging, without attachment, and leaving the past behind to live completely in the present moment. The Way in this context is a simple understanding of how one follows the evolutionary energies, or cosmic unfolding, of the universe. But it still does not indicate why it is imperative to follow the Way, nor does it address the reality of our Eternal Self, which is identical to the Tao/Brahman. Every tradition speaks of our eternal and real Self in different ways, but how does that relate to the common perspective of the Way?

The sages of practically all spiritual traditions would suggest that when we follow the Way, it eventually humbles us and softens our hearts, which gives us greater knowledge of the Eternal Self. Conversely, when one sincerely chooses to remain present as the Eternal Self in stillness or self-inquiry, as many Buddhist and Hindu teachers would suggest, one becomes aware of the Way.

So both apparently opposing spiritual perspectives reach the same destination, even though the journey is different. Whether you attempt to remain present in stillness as the Eternal Self or you follow the Way, you will reveal the other, as if they were the same thing. When we look into the Eternal Self we discover the Way, and when we follow the Way we reveal the Eternal Self. This sort of knowledge is only understood by those that Chuang-tzu would call the “spiritual elite.” Only those who are sincere in their own introspection will understand how both the Eternal Self and the Way go together as one. If one does not know the experience of the Way or the Self, then all of this will appear as nothing more than words.

There is no difference between the cosmic unfolding and the Eternal Self, even though many people tend to think so. But they do not understand the wisdom of Lao-tzu because of their incorrect view of separateness between the Eternal Self and the Way. People tend to hold one form over the other while missing Lao-tzu’s point of letting go. The origin and significance of synchronicity are revealed in the mirror of the Self and the Way.

The origin of synchronicity comes from the union of the Way and the Eternal Self. The Eternal Self and the Way go together as one, and this is experienced as synchronicity. Synchronicity is the language of Tao that manifests in an individual’s life as a result of his or her harmony between the Eternal Self and the Way. In Vedanta, as I’ve mentioned, this is known as the connection between Atman (Eternal Self/ undifferentiated consciousness) and Brahman (irreducible essence/ ultimate reality). There is also the movement of energy in the manifest world (prakrti) and the stillness of pure awareness (Purusha) of the yogic philosophy of Patanjali.

One experiences synchronicity when both the Self and the Way are in perfect correspondence. Through the experience of synchronicity one understands that one is in accord with the Tao both within oneself and in the evolutionary unfolding of the universe. This is the “real” Way of the Tao that Lao-tzu and other ancient masters referred to.

The Way of the Tao, then, is the Way of the Self. If you are sincere in exploring yourself, then the peaceful resonance of synchronicity will begin to

bring magic to your life. The Way of the Self, or Tao, is to completely follow the reality of wu-wei into a future that is unknown. Synchronicity is our safe guide into the wilderness of the universe. In this wilderness we discover that the Eternal Self and the Way are like everything else—unified. The essential wisdom of Lao-tzu is that everything goes together, but this truth only dawns on those who follow wu-wei. Sages do not bring Heaven to Earth by building upon what has already been established. On the contrary, they deconstruct what has been built by remaining small through simplicity and the power of uselessness.

Nothing Is More Useless than Wu-Wei

A life of humility, simplicity, and spontaneity is generally thought of as a useless and purposeless approach to living. Yet something as sublime as synchronicity cannot be experienced unless one is faithful to what is taken to be useless. Synchronicity spontaneously emerges out of a void of nothingness, which brings the magic of the universe to life. What we assume to be useless contains the greatest potential within its incomprehensibility. The unconscious is never considered to be a reality of our existence, so it is cast off as a useless preoccupation of the spiritually confused. But that “useless” unconscious conspires with fate in bringing to life the miracle of synchronicity and a relationship with Tao. In investing time and energy only into the physical parts of life, excessively striving to achieve our so-called goals, we discard the ineffable space that holds the universe in its place.

The common human perspective, conditioned and time-bound in the world of form, regards space as nothing to take into consideration. But we see that this perspective is a narrow one when we realize that the universe is predominantly space compared to the infinitely smaller world of matter. We consider space as useless because there is nothing we can do with it. The human mind desires to shape the world according to its personal cravings and beliefs, so it would never conceive the eternal importance of useless space. We can easily contemplate the world of form and continue to explore its depths. But when we take into consideration space and its eternal presence, the mind is brought to a screeching halt. In this confusion, we tend to condemn the unknowable with the label of uselessness.

What we can mold with our hands and influence with our minds is, to many people, the only issue of general importance. Yet we are overlooking the absurdly obvious fact that life emerges out of space, not the other way around.

The outer fringes of the universe, which is the physical world, is what is of least importance to a sage. The essential wisdom of Lao-tzu would suggest that the insignificant in life is the significant. We assume that we have no use for space, but physical and mental existence could not be alive without it. From our narrow perspective, we generally exclude the other side of anything, but a consciousness or spirituality that is not inclusive and integral is destined for failure. Lao-tzu knew this spiritual failure all too well, and this is why he urged individuals simply to follow the Way of the Tao. This nondoing and this unattached mode of consciousness would bring the totality of the universe back into harmony through the wisdom of what is useless.

Space in all of its reality is rarely given any serious thought. Yet when we peek into the useless, we gain a better understanding of the total picture. We cannot understand life by living only in the world of objects. To discard the useless in favor of the useful is a grave mistake. The uselessness of space in our everyday lives is ever-present almost in the same fashion as the unconscious. All aspects of life that we either enjoy or attempt to ignore exist in the vastness of space. Reading these very words can only be possible because space is a reality connecting the world of form. Space in this context is everywhere we look. Whether it be between people or stars, space is there in its so-called useless capacity.

USELESS SPACE IS USEFUL

In Lao-tzu's Taoism, space is still thought of as useless. But the difference is that uselessness is embraced, because it holds the secret of the universe within its unknowability.

From this perspective, Lao-tzu's value system is the polar opposite of what the majority of humanity finds valuable. For example, when we look at something as simple as a cup, what is valuable about it? In many cases, people would believe the cup itself is valuable, but this is merely an illusion. The cup itself has no value, because it is the space within the cup that gives it value. We never consider that if it were not for the space within the cup, we could not enjoy a beverage of any variety. When we perceive space in this way, we find its undiscovered value everywhere in our lives and in the most simple places. We adore our homes, for example, for the craftsmanship and architecture that make us feel comfortable and secure. Yet it is not the walls of the house that give it value; again, it is the space within the walls that allows us to have comfort. The

value comes from the space that is incorrectly deemed as useless.

To understand the metaphorical value of space and uselessness, it is best to turn to the greatest exponent of this wisdom, Chuang-tzu. In the truest essence of Tao, Chuang-tzu would always bring our attention to what we generally ignore. He consistently and skillfully points out the absolute necessity of what is of apparently no use. For Chuang-tzu, what is useless is somehow a parable for knowing the Tao. In Thomas Merton's brilliant book *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, we read: *Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu:*

"All your teaching is centered on what has no use."

Chuang Tzu replied:

*"If you have no appreciation for what has no use
You cannot begin to talk about what can be used.
The earth, for example, is broad and vast
But of all this expanse a man uses only a few inches
Upon which he happens to be standing.
Now suppose you suddenly take away
All that he is not actually using
So that, all round his feet a gulf
Yawns, and he stands in the Void,
With nowhere solid except right under each foot:
How long will he be able to use what he is using?"*

Hui Tzu said: "It would cease to serve any purpose."

Chuang Tzu concluded:

*"This shows
The absolute necessity
Of what has 'no use.'"*¹

Chuang-tzu brings clarity to our distorted view of what should be obvious. Although we usually take into account only that which is "useful," through clarity we realize that everything has value. In this way, Chuang-tzu is subtly

saying that what we do not know or conceive of is actually what has value and what is of most importance. Chuang-tzu valued the so-called ugliness of life. This is why he commended the hunchback, the useless tree, and everything that we assume is vile and uncomfortable in the world. His “useless tree” analogy, found in the *Chuang-tzu* text, encapsulates the depth of wisdom that the useless conceals: Tzu-ch’i of Nan-po was wandering around the Hill of Shang when he saw a huge tree there, different from all the rest. A thousand teams of horses could have taken shelter under it and its shade would have covered them all. Tzu-ch’i said, “What tree is this? It must certainly have some extraordinary usefulness!” But, looking up, he saw that the smaller limbs were gnarled and twisted, unfit for beams or rafters, and looking down, he saw that the trunk was pitted and rotten and could not be used for coffins. He licked one of the leaves and it blistered his mouth and made it sore. He sniffed the odor and it was enough to make a man drunk for three days. “It turns out to be a completely unusable tree,” said Tzu-ch’i, “and so it has been able to grow this big. Aha!—it is this unusableness that the Holy Man makes use of!”²

At first Tzu-ch’i perceived something that was of no use, but then he could step back and see the beauty of what is within the superficially ugly. That useless tree grew big in its flexibility and nourished “all” in doing so. This is the “aha” moment of realization for Tzu-ch’i, because the useless tree is a metaphor for the wisdom that is concealed within a holy individual or sage. The useless space in the holy sage is the emptiness within the psychological faculties and the spiritual nature of consciousness. The nothingness of space corresponds to the nature of our mind, which is emptiness, or nothingness. To a world built on intellectual pursuits and egotistical cravings, an empty mind is a useless mind. Yet because the essence and nature of consciousness is space, when we become as empty as space we have the capacity to contain the entire universe as space does. Pure consciousness, Purusha, is the reflection of eternal space. The useless-tree analogy functions in correspondence to this eternal pure consciousness.

Comparing the useless tree to a sage, we understand that this tree, being useless, can grow to an immensity in size, flexible, with no particular structure, and is able to nourish and give shelter to all who come under it. The sage, by comparison, acknowledges and reveres the useless things in life, both within and without, while living a simple and humble life that many people would regard as small and insignificant. Yet this small and content life allows the light of Tao to grow and shine brightly in a world of ignorance. In this state, a sage is as

receptive as space, because he has no dogma or belief system to restrict his awareness from allowing all experience to happen without resistance. This receptive, feminine, yin trust in the universe nourishes humanity, because people begin to take shelter under the sage's wisdom. In emptying the faculties of conditioning, a sage becomes a beacon of light for the Tao to move through to inspire others with its wisdom, bringing the world back into harmony.

SIMPLE LIVING AND THE POWER OF HUMILITY

To know the Tao is to explore the useless space within ourselves and begin the “yoking” process of what we mistakenly assume is our identity. Our conditioned personality obscures the Way of the Tao, because we believe that if we act within the limitations of our beliefs, we will be useful. Although you may be useful for maintaining the hypnosis of the world, you will be of no use for the Tao to shine through. When we begin to yoke the will of our conditioned personality, the virtuous power of the divine will, begins to reinstate its proper place within us. An honest attitude of receptivity and simple living brings forth a transcendent humility. Although this is small in stature, it transforms the world. This is Lao-tzu's wisdom of seeking the low places: *The supreme good is like water, which nourishes all things without trying to.*

*It is content with the low places that people disdain.
Thus it is like the Tao.*

*In dwelling, live close to the ground.
In thinking, keep to the simple.
In conflict, be fair and generous.
In governing, don't try to control.
In work, do what you enjoy.
In family life, be completely present.*

*When you are content to be simply yourself
and don't compare or compete,
everybody will respect you.³*

This humility results from the power of *te*, the virtue of the divine will, which softens one's rigid personality and enables one to accept the world and everybody else for what and who they are.

Accepting the world and other people is unattainable from within our conditioned personalities. We judge everything according to our beliefs, and as a result we cannot clearly perceive the still point of the Tao. But in the power of sincere humility, a sage meets everybody on common ground and can address any problem, whether physical, mental, or spiritual. A sage can only be a sage if she has this capacity for receptivity and does not shy away from the spiritually ignorant. Residing in the infinite depth of the void of nothingness, a sage is like the useless tree, under whose wisdom people take shelter and are guided on the path to liberation. This becomes a mirror reflection of the Tao. The Tao loves and nourishes all, and so does the sage, because her personality, polluted with petty beliefs, cravings, and desires, has evaporated into thin air, and she naturally exhibits loving traits such as compassion, empathy, and forgiveness.

Sages, appearing useless, are often left alone by the populace to live their lives as they choose. Embracing uselessness gets us closer to liberation and enlightenment. In Taoist wisdom, this is thought of as a formula for longevity, which is true in some sense. Those who are focused on long life can learn a lot from the useless tree of Chuang-tzu. For example, the useless tree was bigger than any other tree, its branches and trunk were all crooked and contorted, its leaves were not nutritious, so this tree was left alone to live out its life, as it was of no use to the crafty and scheming people of the world. A straight and rigid tree, on the other hand, lives a very different life from the useless tree. The straight and rigid tree is thought of as useful because we can use its wood for building houses, boats, tables, and so on. Such a tree is usually cut down in its prime. Furthermore, trees who are trying to stand above the rest are often cut down first. The straight and rigid, useful tree is a metaphor for righteous people, who attempt to change the world according to their belief systems.

We are not here to condemn the righteous, but what we discover in this comparison is that those who are righteous are usually forcing their will over the world, and in some cases they tragically lose their life too early as a result. The wise, who correspond to the useless tree, grow old through not forcing themselves upon anything. Their simple humility secretly transforms the world without any intention to do so.

Now let us consider the useless and useful trees in regard to the psychological and spiritual planes of consciousness. In these contexts, we can see that this straightness and rigidity equates to the concrete conditioning that

we formulate about ourselves throughout life. The tendency toward righteousness and harboring personal agendas is the result of a rigid mind. This rigid mind in turn causes pain, suffering, and conflict at all levels. A world built on such narrowness of mind can use such individuals, but their consciousness will be drained and kept from a connection with Tao. Our admiration for people clothed in the rigid attire of a suit and necktie replicates this narrowness of mind. These mental limitations ensure that we will be accepted by others in a godless world, where materialism and monetary success are king.

The wise sage, on the other hand, grows as big as the useless tree, both psychologically and spiritually, because the immensity of the Tao is moving through his empty, unattached, and effortless mind. What the average individual would assume is useless is precisely what the Tao makes use of. Indeed the Tao can only make use of the useless; as with the empty cup, space is the true value that the Tao uses, and toward which it gravitates. The *Chuang-tzu* text explains, “The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.”⁴

The Tao cannot make use of a useful mind that is filled to the brim, because there is no room for the Tao to shine through. Recognizing how the Tao moves in life, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu admired uselessness. They experienced the stream of the Tao, which moves toward that which has no obstruction.

When the mental plane begins to marinate in the spiritual plane, a lucid openness becomes our prevalent attitude toward life. The trust we have longed for dawns on us when we have become humble in our receptivity to the universe. In general this open state of consciousness is thought of as weak. Yet this nonforcing way of life brings us to the most useless aspect of life.

Nothing is more useless than wu-wei. When we do not force life, we are not being useful in the busy world of doing. A mind full of effort is applauded over an effortless mind. Nondoing is a laughable way of living, according to people in general. It is the most useless way of being that anyone can conceive of. Yet the act of leaving things alone allows the Tao to bring harmony into the world without our personal interference.

The useless teaching of Chuang-tzu is precisely to live wu-wei, it is the only sane solution for all the individual and collective issues in our world. And yet wu-wei should not be thought of as a cure to an illness, because our natural state of consciousness *is* wu-wei; the problem is simply that we have ceased to live it in the modern day. In not living it, we can never truly love, as our deep-seated hatred, the result of our conditioning, activates the deluded mind into a propensity toward doing alone.

The illusion of separation comes from the active side of life, because we do not trust the Way of the Tao. The greatest expression of love is beyond the personal; it is unconditionally and universally beyond concept and form. To leave things alone and let life run its own course is how unconditional love comes into the world. The unity of humankind can be achieved no other way, because any other way is an act of division, being based on force.

As I have mentioned, the unity of oneness, which enlightens our consciousness into nirvana, can only become our reality when we trust. This trust is unconditional love, and a new world can be born when this harmonic resonance between trust and love begins to bear fruit within humanity. To live in any other state than trust is absurd when we realize that the world that you and I live in is the same. When we overcome our hypnotic conditioning, we understand that in unity there can be a sincere love for all in the same sense that Jesus urged us to love thy neighbor. Yet we have to live this love, and this can only be done through trust. We cannot truly love each other without wu-wei.

Living Wu-Wei in the Tao of a New World

One might assume that Lao-tzu's essential wisdom of wu-wei is too lofty and impractical to have any relationship to love or to the unity of humanity. From our usual understanding of life, we cannot fathom how nondoining can benefit us, individually or collectively. We believe that everything we have in this world is the outcome of force and striving. As a result, our perspective on life and love has not transcended our personal agendas. According to Lao-tzu, this is fundamentally obvious, so he searched for an understanding of life that would transmute love from the limitations of the personal into the limitless love of the universal.

Living wu-wei does not mean retreating to a cave or a forest to live life in isolation—something Chuang-tzu understood completely, as he remained in society. Though at the beginning of living wu-wei there is usually a propensity to seek isolation—and in some sense this is necessary—invariably one will yearn to return to the world to continue to live wu-wei, which is a great act of compassion. The essential wisdom of Lao-tzu has no definite form or application. It varies according to the temperament of the individual. One who fully comprehends wu-wei understands that developing healthy relationships with other people is the spiritual adhesive that harmonizes the Tao among humanity.

We cannot learn more about ourselves without others, as they reveal psychological tendencies that we have not dealt with. But this does not mean that we should go seeking to find relationships, as would be the case with a doctrine such as Confucianism. Nor does this mean we should seek an excessive amount of friends. Any relationship we have in life should develop organically and grow of itself. There is no right or wrong method here. One only needs to reveal to oneself the significance of living wu-wei.

FLOWING AGAINST THE TAO OF LOVE

The metaphysical and spiritual depth of the *Tao Te Ching* is not aimed at nondoing for the sake of being lazy and playing no part in the drama of life. On the contrary, living wu-wei truly reveals a unity and universal love for all. But this should not be confused with the universal love of Confucianism, which we are supposed to attempt to induce, as if the Way of the Tao could be coerced by our personal will. The Tao loves and nourishes all without the need for our persuasion. Yet the Way only becomes a subtle reality in the life of one who has begun to purge his consciousness of the psychological attractions and distractions of the external world, which disconnect our mind from the Tao.

In fact, our entire culture is built on distracting the mind away from this connection with the higher intelligence of the universe. Day to day, we primarily focus our attention on the temporal reality rather than the essence of life. Disassociated from eternity, we use nature unthinkingly, like a public toilet, and we treat people in the same way, which causes disharmonic repercussions around the world. We attempt to heal these repercussions from the same temporal outlook, which only causes more damage, rather than letting the situation sort itself out organically so that it can eventually subside.

Real love is a prisoner in this world of temporary delights and can only be freed in the realization of wu-wei. We perceive love only in relation to wife, husband, child, mother, father, brother, sister, and friends. Yet this is a limited understanding of love, as it is only the result of association with people we are familiar and intimate with. This does not mean that the love you have for your family and friends is not love; it is love. But the problem arises when we cannot extend the love we feel for our family and friends beyond those parameters. None of this is inherently the individual's fault, because we have built a divisive society, which is incorrectly assumed to be a community.

This division from one another is the creation of the mindless crowd, who wander around, isolated from everybody else. We are not only divided by religions and nations, but we are also separate from other individuals. Religious, nationalistic, and cultural beliefs keep individuals isolated, as they fear other people who may conflict with their narrow perceptions of the world. Hence many people in our world drop to their knees and bow to the artificial world instead of to the natural world. This is a psychosis developed from identification with artificial constraints.

We become slaves to the unnatural world because we mistake its artificiality

with nature and assume that nation, religion, race, or gender, which are components of the unnatural world, are actually somehow intrinsic to our real self. The Way of the Tao will only be known when we have let go of what corrupts our nature. The value system of our world is corrupt because we believe that a world that is divided is natural and harmonious. Nothing could be further from the truth, especially when we realize that all of the tyranny and bloodshed on this planet is the result of such separation. Indeed the common valuations of success are detrimental to the survival of the human race, because they are based on servitude to a life that is diametrically opposed to nature and to an individual's li.

Success as understood in our current system of values suppresses human nature. We succumb to servitude so we can acquire the material possessions that are supposed to validate success. Yet, as we know, this form of success is ephemeral and fake. We also seek salvation through artificial means, especially technological devices such as televisions, computers, and phones. What we seek through these devices, though, reveals our internal struggle, because our suppressed nature holds a repressed anger, which we stimulate through vicarious violence.

Violence becomes socially accepted when we go against our nature and block the integral universal flow of Tao. The violence we seek through entertainment and the news discloses the frustration we harbor within as a result of our empty, uncreative lives. We are attracted to acts of violence because they reflect our inner turmoil. The senseless brutality and cruelty of wars, genocide, and random acts of violence have all become nothing more than daily entertainment for one to parrot one's opinion about in mindless exchanges with others who are also parroting opinion.

Desensitization has led our species into a psychotic numbness that feels nothing for the bloodshed of our brothers and sisters around the world. How could our love ever become free from the personal if we still dwell within our brutal animal mind? In such a world, violence becomes normal behavior, which we express both physically and mentally. As a result of this attraction to violence, many people cringe at the sight of physical acts of love. The suppression of our li nature has desensitized our whole being not only to acts of hatred but also to those of love.

We need to ask, then, what is more dangerous in our world, hatred or love? We would never want to admit to ourselves that it is far easier to hate life than it is to love life. But this is the behavior of those who are distracted from their union with Tao and its Way. In such a world, physical and mental expressions of

love are far more dangerous than expressions of physical and mental hatred. A society that works on this assumption is insane. It is devoted not to the survival of the human race but to the destruction of life. Alan Watts comments:

Inability to accept the mystic experience is more than an intellectual handicap. Lack of awareness of the basic unity of organism and environment is a serious and dangerous hallucination. For in a civilization equipped with immense technological power, the sense of alienation between man and nature leads to the use of technology in a hostile spirit—to the “conquest” of nature instead of intelligent cooperation with nature.¹

Working against the nature of Tao, both within and without, leaves humanity in a place of desperate survival. We believe we are disconnected from one another. Disharmony on all fronts is the outcome, and as a result many people find themselves only cognizant of time-bound emotional love. Isolating love in this way leads humanity into numerous forms of segregation. The harmony of Tao cannot be a reality within our being and in the world if our love does not move out of the emotional and into the universal. How could we love our neighbors if we are concerned only for those we regard as useful, without any consideration for those we think of as useless? How can we possibly reconnect with the Way of the Tao if we are nothing more than part of a mindless crowd in no real communion with one another?

ENLIGHTENING THE SHADOW THROUGH HARMONIC RELATIONSHIPS

Contrary to popular belief, Lao-tzu’s Taoism is not about escaping from society to abide in isolation away from people. Chuang-tzu exemplifies this best, as he remained in society and did not refrain from auspicious meetings with others. The Tao of Lao-tzu is primarily about the trust of wu-wei, which includes a trust in our relationship and connection with humanity. Feeling and knowing the Tao more through wu-wei means that one is building harmony on all levels, especially within humanity.

Developing a relationship with people outside of our emotional center is the best way to understand our vasanas, the psychological habits and tendencies that

drive our karma and block us from the encompassing transparency of enlightenment. Authentic Taoists know this best, because they have given their lives over to wu-wei and welcome all that unfolds as their experience, especially with relationships. Even though Buddhist and Hindu monks advocate a monastic life as a way of attaining liberation, many Buddhist and Hindu masters will admit that there are some aspects of our being that we cannot work through without being engaged in intimate relationships. While a monastic life has its benefits and will transform your consciousness, it is more medicinal than dietary. To close yourself off permanently from humanity can be viewed as the grossest act of negation and ignorance that one could exhibit, because one is only content in finding God within and so ignores the reality of discovering God in the world.

If we are to expand our consciousness, it is imperative that we experience the fullness of life in a way by which we can learn and grow from these experiences. The escapes of animalistic sex, alcohol, drugs, chronic negativity, and so on, are not in themselves bad, because these addictions reveal deeper aspects about ourselves that they attempt to suppress. Addictions tend to teach us a lot about ourselves. Of course I am not advocating for addictions, but purification is not possible without learning from our cultural tendency to become addicted. Addiction is another paradox of life, and it is something all of us have experienced sometime. Addictions vary only in degree, from alcohol to television, and according to what is socially accepted. Of course the media and other unnatural systems, such as government, do not view television as an addiction, because it keeps people blindly following their agendas.

Addiction at this time—and we can think of all negative emotions as addictions—is still a part of the world, whether we like it or not, and only a sincere individual will weed out any addiction, no matter how subtle. The big problem in monastic life is that any addiction is perceived as faulty and something to be overcome through repetitive practice. For example, certain Buddhist teachers perceive anger as a bad emotion that students should push to the side and not identify with. Yet anger in itself is a healthy, reactive emotion that we acquired through evolution to help us survive, and it will always come into the field of consciousness when circumstances permit.

Buddhism uses mindfulness to cleanse an individual of the habit of falling into aggression. But we also need to keep in mind that when anger is pushed away with no mindfulness, aggression can result. An individual can be angry in a compassionate context, as happens almost every day when one empathizes and sympathizes with another's situation. However our suppression of anger in the

world makes us incapable of love, as the seeds of our anger continue to grow roots deep within us that, unless acknowledged, often turn into unconscious aggression. To be mindful of our anger and to be able to express it to another without being aggressive will transform anger into love.

Psychologically, repressing our anger, or any emotion, without making it mindful has a devastating effect both on the individual and on the collective. Many people who are spiritually inclined tend to suppress dark aspects within themselves, incorrectly assuming that these emotions are illusory, fearful, and negative. Instead of moving through their pain, they store it in the back closet of their minds, where it continues to grow stronger.

This suppression is called “spiritual bypassing,” a term first coined by the American psychotherapist John Welwood back in 1984. Canadian spiritual psychotherapist Robert Augustus Masters explains this problem in his book *Spiritual Bypassing*:

Spiritual bypassing is the use of spiritual practices and beliefs to avoid dealing with our painful feelings, unresolved wounds, and developmental needs. It is much more common than we might think and, in fact, is so pervasive as to go largely unnoticed, except in its more obvious extremes.

Part of the reason for this is that we tend not to have very much tolerance, either personally or collectively, for facing, entering, and working through our pain, strongly preferring pain-numbing “solutions,” regardless of how much suffering such “remedies” may catalyze. Because this preference has so deeply and thoroughly infiltrated our culture that it has become all but normalized, spiritual bypassing fits almost seamlessly into our collective habit of turning away from what is painful, as a kind of higher analgesic with seemingly minimal side effects. It is a spiritualized strategy not only for avoiding pain but also for legitimizing such avoidance, in ways ranging from the blatantly obvious to the extremely subtle.

Spiritual bypassing is a very persistent shadow of spirituality, manifesting in many forms, often without being acknowledged as such. Aspects of spiritual bypassing include exaggerated detachment, emotional numbing and repression, overemphasis on the positive, anger-phobia, blind or overly tolerant compassion, weak or too porous boundaries, lopsided development (cognitive intelligence often being far

ahead of emotional and moral intelligence), debilitating judgment about one's negativity or shadow side, devaluation of the personal relative to the spiritual, and delusions of having arrived at a higher level of being.²

The traits of spiritual bypassing are strongest in those who have practiced spiritual cultivation and followed a spiritual philosophy in an attempt to eliminate karma and the vasanas on the mental and physical planes of consciousness. We discover this in many ashrams, temples, monasteries, synagogues, and churches around the world, where both the student and the master will be very rigid in their beliefs and will be unreceptive to a new perspective. This is why many people who stay in sacred places for some time become aware of the deep-seated bad temper of the master, especially when his authority has been threatened. But one who is truly a master will always listen with an open mind and heart, in a place of neutrality toward all people. Of course, it is sometimes a great act of compassion when a master scolds a layman or disciple for being unconscious in their words, thoughts, and deeds, or even when they misunderstand a philosophical concept or teaching. Only a master in a place of neutrality will know when such actions are beneficial.

Practicing spiritual cultivation in the hope that our psychological pain will somehow disappear is absurd. As we learn from the Eastern perspective, we need to own and understand our pain so we can eventually grow out of it, which is the true meaning of transcendence. Enlightenment depends on a total comprehension of our being, including the functioning of the physical body and the operation of the mind. Spiritual bypassing becomes a reality when we do not deal with that aspect of our consciousness that Carl Jung called the *shadow*, which is that part of ourselves that we deny and avoid seeing. When we are engaged in deep spiritual practice without backing it up with complementary shadow work, we have little chance of growing into an authentic enlightenment.

Those who have only a partially spiritual approach to life often show increasing habits of spiritual pride. This spiritual pride is identical with the pride of many athletes. We often get caught in our own spiritual concepts and build a totally new persona around the means of liberation rather than the end (eating the menu once again). The social harmony Confucius pined for cannot come to fruition if we are not prepared to work through our personal shadow elements. And shadow work cannot be undertaken successfully without connection with other people. Relationships of any variety are the best for bringing the shadow to the light of consciousness. Although many people will avoid uncomfortable relationships, in many cases these are the very things that will be able to mirror

shadow elements that we have not made conscious.

But keep in mind that this does not mean *everything* is about you. Sometimes people are a certain way because they themselves have unresolved psychological problems that are in no way related to you. For example, someone can be violent, cynical, or self-centered. These things may have nothing to do with you, but instead are the flaws in the other individual. Avoiding one's own pain is revealed in relationships on a very deep and subtle level of the psyche. It does not usually take the gross form of people with bad attitudes, so please don't make everything about yourself.

Spiritually inclined people are not exempt from this avoidance. Often they are more susceptible to this than the average individual. Those who live monastic lives often exhibit a lack of shadow work, as they continue to avoid relationships with which they don't personally resonate. But any deep spiritual work should bring into our consciousness a unity and feeling of oneness within that correlates to the world without. We cannot eliminate one from the other if we truly yearn for liberation. If you are intentionally avoiding relationships, you are still bound to fear, no matter who you believe you are. (Keep in mind that I am not advocating that you uphold a relationship with a toxic person who has a track record of bringing you down.)

Accepting yourself and others as they are is one of the greatest expressions of love one can show, and it actually has the power to energetically harmonize any relationship, no matter how broken it may be. Accepting our pain and owning it brings spiritual light into our shadow so we can become that jewel within the lotus flower. But none of this can happen if we continue to spiritually bypass our pain and avoid relationships in fearful isolation. The spiritually mature understand that isolation is only useful when seekers can bring what they have learned about themselves back into humanity.

Much of what our modern spirituality has become is a very self-centered approach to liberation. For example, Advaita Vedanta is probably the most popular and dominant school of Hindu philosophy and practice. The essence of Advaita Vedanta is a practice of abiding as the transcendental Self, Atman, which is undifferentiated pure consciousness, so one can eventually realize the ultimate reality, Brahman, which is also pure consciousness. This is attained, or rediscovered, through sincere self-inquiry into one's nature. Advaita Vedanta, then, is a philosophy of nondualism, the nonduality of Atman and Brahman.

Advaita Vedanta gained public attention through Sri Ramana Maharshi, as he was one individual of modern times who really experienced liberation.

Astonishingly, many followers of this beautiful path parrot Ramana Maharshi or other teachers, and in a lot of cases outwardly mimic the life of Ramana, without realizing that he was unique and so are they. Such parroting and mimicking results in a self-centered inquiry.

To realize the Self, as Ramana did, does not mean to eliminate the world from your reality. To inquire into the nature of your existence does not mean becoming a rigid guardian defending yourself against thoughts, feelings, and emotions. This incorrect approach to self-inquiry has led many individuals around the world to enter a blank, empty state. This is not the spirit of receptivity and humility. Instead it is a state of forcing oneself to be a certain way, in this case, forcing oneself to be empty for the sake of that desire, as if somehow a blank state of consciousness leads one to liberation.

The depths of Advaita Vedanta do not lie only in self-inquiry, a fact that many people misunderstand. The Sanskrit words *vasanas* and *samskaras*, which I have mentioned, both relate to how we deal with the mind and shadow work. *Vasanas* again refers to habitual ways and latent tendencies that one needs to own and work through in order to reach a higher state of consciousness. This in turn will transform our *samskaras*, our subliminal psychological imprints and mental impressions. Facing our *vasanas* and *samskaras*—another term for shadow work—is in no way separate from self-inquiry. If self-inquiry, or any other path, merely meant to attain a blank emotionless state without any capacity to relate to the world, then realizing the Self and liberation would appear pointless. But authentic liberation is not like this, because it comprehends the total sphere of consciousness, including the physical, mental, and spiritual planes of consciousness. Realizing the Eternal Self, Atman, within is not complete until you realize the Eternal Self also in the world. When the Way of the Tao is perceived, then the union of both Self within and the Self underlying the world of things begins to take place.

EMBRACING THE WORLD

The heart of Eastern wisdom teaches you to be naturally in the world without rejecting it. Many spiritual paths condemn and judge the world, as if they were enabling one to move beyond desires. But many fail to realize that they are desiring not to desire (a point that the Buddha understood). Lao-tzu saw all these pursuits of desiring not to desire as nothing more than spiritual pride and a moving away from our human nature. The Taoist perspective is to leave no stone

unturned in an embrace of life and yourself, as exemplified by Chuang-tzu. He dived headfirst into life, bringing his internal harmony into the world and time in which he lived. In the introduction to *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* Burton Watson states:

In Chuang Tzu's view, the man who has freed himself from conventional standards of judgment can no longer be made to suffer, for he refuses to recognize poverty as any less desirable than affluence, to recognize death as any less desirable than life. He does not in any literal sense withdraw and hide from the world—to do so would show that he still passed judgment upon the world. He remains within society but refrains from acting out of the motives that lead ordinary men to struggle for wealth, fame, success, or safety. He maintains a state that Chuang Tzu refers to as *wu-wei*, or inaction, meaning by this term not a forced quietude, but a course of action that is not founded upon any purposeful motives of gain or striving. In such a state, all human actions become as spontaneous and mindless as those of the natural world. Man becomes one with Nature, or Heaven, as Chuang Tzu calls it, and merges himself with Tao, or the Way, the underlying unity that embraces man, Nature, and all that is in the universe.

To describe this mindless, purposeless mode of life, Chuang Tzu turns most often to the analogy of the artist or craftsman. The skilled woodcarver, the skilled butcher, the skilled swimmer does not ponder or ratiocinate on the course of action he should take; his skill has become so much a part of him that he merely acts instinctively and spontaneously and, without knowing why, achieves success. Again, Chuang Tzu employs the metaphor of a totally free and purposeless journey, using the word *yu* ("to wander" or "a wandering") to designate the way in which the enlightened man wanders through all of creation, enjoying its delights without ever becoming attached to any one part of it.³

Chuang-tzu never once condemned the world. Instead he used his insightfully witty humor to shine a light on *wu-wei*, which the world has unceremoniously put away in the closet. The Way of Lao-tzu has nothing to do with transcending desires, as this would be spiritual pride. But he is also not saying one should become lazy or sloppy and succumb to desires. What Lao-tzu

is saying is that when we inquire not only into our own nature but also into the nature of the world, we will come into contact with the nature of the human heart, which is the nature of the universe, and that is love.

This love that is hidden within the heart of Lao-tzu's Taoism is not a love that one discovers and keeps for oneself. It is a love that is shared because, in the Taoist philosophy of li, this love, which transcends any boundary, will bring harmony to the world piece by piece, or perhaps I should say "peace by peace." The Way of Tao that an individual experiences brings this love into the world, and it inspires others, no matter how rigid their beliefs. This love, which all spiritual paths contend is the fruit of an enlightened soul, is not attainable if we do not accept ourselves and the world and gain a total comprehension of our inner and outer worlds.

The complete scope of Lao-tzu's Taoism is hard to fathom, as each individual is unique. But we do know that it is one of the only spiritual paths that has no set doctrine, dogma, or formulas, and this gives it the lucidity to reach every aspect of our consciousness. Lao-tzu's Taoism acknowledges the shadow, especially in the sense that one discovers one's intrinsic relationship to others and the world with no preconceived idea of how they should be, which allows for a great deal of transformation to occur and take us through our repressed pain.

One of the primary purposes of the *I Ching* is to understand the total picture of our psychology, which is why Jung was so attracted by it. When we have worked sincerely within ourselves and made conscious and accepted everything about ourselves, then we have truly become human and are able to sympathize with the pain of others through our humble hearts. Anything other than a true humble heart, in the eyes of Lao-tzu, would be catastrophic to the world. No relationship to another or to the world can be developed if we still own a personal agenda and have not embraced our pain.

Living wu-wei is the medicine for our ills in this world. Trusting and accepting ourselves and others is the remedy for building healthy, harmonious relationships, not only with one another, but also with the natural environment. An agendaless individual, working through the spiritual barriers within her own being, brings the wisdom of Tao into the world. In knowing ourselves, we can relate to other people and feel our integral connection not only to nature but also to the entire universe.

Any relationship we have with an individual, nature, or the cosmos can only be genuine and harmonious if we trust their intrinsic nature. Those who live wu-

wei understand this best, because allowing life to be as it will brings equilibrium to the world, as one reflects the untouched purity, stillness, and aliveness of nature. Only when you understand that your real nature is wu-wei will you be able to have a relationship not only with yourself but with the entire universe in all of its glory.

WU-WEI'S NATURAL FLOW OF TAO

Our greatest relationship becomes a reality when we live wu-wei. This greatest of the great relationships is with the Tao, the Way of nature, which is our nature, Atman, which is Brahman. When we live wu-wei, we become aware of, and experience, ourselves in relation to the Way. No form of scientific study or speculation can ever calculate this reality, yet we know it is real, because we live it and feel it. Living it is being in harmony with that greatest of all relationships. This Way of nature is experienced by living wu-wei, as wu-wei is the essence of the universe.

In the world that we live in now, with ecological destruction for the sake of material possessions and with the divisions among humanity, a return to our wu-wei nature is imperative, or we will face the dire consequences of our ignorant actions. The way we commonly act toward each other and the planet is staggering evidence that we at this moment in time function as nothing more than machines that are hell-bent on destroying anything that conflicts with our greed and yearning for power. This state of deep sleep keeps us in our own private worlds, because we believe that we are constantly in a mode of survival against everything else. This belief unknowingly binds us to the animal kingdom, but if we can let go of this fear, we can finally become human.

The systems we have built perpetuate this isolation. Many religions, for example, eliminate God from the world because a God that is known to be universal, both within and without, conflicts with a lot of religious doctrines, which are built on a kind of political view of the universe, in which God is a king or lord, making people easy to control. This is truly a hypnotic view of reality, because everything in this world, including human beings, is part of nature, so how could God be excluded from anything? We have not even mentioned our relationship to planetary and universal forces that affect our minds, which is the essence of astrology. How could cosmic forces play a part in the consciousness of this planet unless these forces are part of God? The limitations of religion, science, and philosophy are destroying our minds,

because anything built with boundaries, although it may work within those boundaries, in actual fact has nothing to do with the essence of an eternal God.

Bringing back into the awareness that God is both within us and in nature was at the heart of Lao-tzu's Taoism. Working with nature instead of going against it aligns us with the Tao, which allows this higher state of consciousness to produce conditions whereby others will also realize the Tao through their own nature. The English mystical philosopher and writer Aldous Huxley expresses this in his book *The Perennial Philosophy*, where he beautifully explains our ignorance of God in the world through a story from the *Chuang-tzu* text:

The doctrine that God is in the world has an important practical corollary—the sacredness of Nature, and the sinfulness and folly of man's overweening efforts to be her master rather than her intelligently docile collaborator. Sub-human lives and even things are to be treated with respect and understanding, not brutally oppressed to serve our human ends.

The ruler of the Southern Ocean was Shu, the ruler of the Northern Ocean was Hu, and the ruler of the Centre was Chaos. Shu and Hu were continually meeting in the land of Chaos, who treated them very well. They consulted together how they might repay his kindness, and said: "Men all have seven orifices for the purpose of seeing, hearing, eating and breathing, while this ruler alone has not a single one. Let us try to make them for him." Accordingly they dug one orifice in him every day. At the end of seven days Chaos died.—Chuang Tzu

In this delicately comic parable Chaos is Nature in the state of *wu-wei*—non-assertion or equilibrium. Shu and Hu are the living images of those busy persons who thought they would improve on Nature by turning dry prairies into wheat fields, and produced deserts; who proudly proclaimed the Conquest of the Air, and then discovered that they had defeated civilization; who chopped down vast forests to provide the newsprint demanded by that universal literacy which was to make the world safe for intelligence and democracy, and got wholesale erosion, pulp magazines and the organs of Fascist, Communist, capitalist and nationalist propaganda. In brief, Shu and Hu are devotees of the apocalyptic religion of Inevitable Progress, and their creed is that the Kingdom of Heaven is outside you, and in the future. Chuang Tzu, on

the other hand, like all good Taoists, has no desire to bully Nature into subserving ill-considered temporal ends, at variance with the final end of men as formulated in the Perennial Philosophy. His wish is to work with Nature, so as to produce material and social conditions in which individuals may realize Tao on every level from the psychological up to the spiritual.

Compared with that of the Taoists and Far Eastern Buddhists, the Christian attitude towards Nature has been curiously insensitive and often downright domineering and violent. Taking their cue from an unfortunate remark in Genesis, Catholic moralists have regarded animals as mere things which men do right to exploit for their own ends. Like landscape painting, the humanitarian movement in Europe was an almost completely secular affair. In the Far East both were essentially religious.⁴

If we can move beyond dogmas and work with nature, then the right social conditions for everybody to realize Tao will appear. Ironically, the social morality for which Confucius yearned can only be achieved in not trying to achieve it. Social morality depends on trust and the sincere spiritual work the individual undergoes within. No dogma can set the individual, or humanity, free, because all are built on methods to induce Tao, which are methods of force.

Thus if we can be radical enough to live wu-wei, the right social and cultural conditions will emerge that will enable people to realize the Tao, and this will change our world through not striving for change. The act of trying to force change hinders change. Following your own nature is the subtle act of change. It is also the way that love transcends the personal and moves into the universal.

Our love has to exceed our boundaries to include not only our neighbors but also our enemies and the community of animals, plants, and minerals. Working with nature instead of against it is a reflection of wu-wei. Living wu-wei is thought of as one of the most difficult and, at the same time, sublime forms of spirituality that exists. Yet no matter how hard it appears to let go and trust, nothing will reveal your nature, li, more than the Tao of wu-wei. Discovering our li in turn has the power of te to inspire the world, as this is what truly brings harmony to life, Heaven to Earth.

Spiritual isolation is necessary to get to the deepest part of your being. But when your nature is revealed in this introspection, you naturally want to harmonize with the world, which corresponds to the Taoist principle of ying,

mutual resonance. Li moves us out of isolation and into universal harmony, in the same way that the mystical guru of the East leaves the isolation of the cave to go back into the world. But this time the guru is you and the love you share is the love you are. The world as we know it can be anything it chooses to be, but if you do not trust the world, then the world will remain as it is. Such is the paradox of unity and our nature, wu-wei.

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Index

Page numbers in *italics* indicate illustrations.

All page numbers are refer to the print edition of this title.

acceptance, 165
achievement, futility of, 59
acquiring, 60
addictions, 161–62
Advaita Vedanta, 123, 166–67
advice, basic Taoist, 151–52
alienation from life, 54
amateur spirituality, 113
ambition, 64–67
anarchy, 91–92, 96, 108
ancestor veneration, 41–43
anger, 162
Arjuna story, effortless action in,
 11–12
art, produced from within, 60–61
astrology, 171
Atman, 42, 166–67
atom, spiritual, 139–40

balance, in life, 119
being, 104
Benoit, Hubert, 8–9, 58
Bhagavad Gita, effortless action in,
 11–12
blind alley, 58
blunting the sharpness, 115

Book of Mirdad, The, 42–43

Brahman, 42, 116, 166

Buddhism, 14, 65, 161, 162

Campbell, Joseph, 64

caste system, 85–86

causality, 135–37

central nervous system, 125

chance, 132–33

Chaos, 172

charity, 28–30

child-parent relationship, 47–50

Chinese folk religion, Taoism and, 41

choices, fate dependent upon, 83

Christian society, Hindu society and,
85–86

Chuang-tzu, 5–6, 51

his embrace of life, 160–61, 167–68

his perspective and humor, 51–53

on letting the world be, 93

on uselessness, 148–50

working with nature, 173

Chuang-tzu (text), 104–5, 127,
149–50

coffee, 118

cold cognition, 2–3, 126–27

collective awakening, 36–37

Collins, Mabel, 64

Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, The,
167–68

conditioning, 60, 76–77

conformity, 85–87

Confucianism

ancestor veneration in, 43

charity and duty in, 28–30

concept of wu-wei, 10

filial piety in, 47–50

focus on enlightened society, 25

- ideas on social hierarchy, 45–46
- morality in, 25–28
- ongoing influence of, 46–47
- relationship to Taoism, 25–32
- superior man in, 34–35
- on synchronicity, 140–41
- Confucius, 43
- Confucius Must Die . . .*, 49
- consciousness, 72, 74, 100–101, 139–40, 141–42
- control, 15–17, 32–35, 84, 90
- Cook Ting, 127–29
- craftsman, skilled, 1, 3–4, 127, 168
- creation of religious Taoism, 40–44

- Dalberg-Acton, John, 46
- death, 80–83, 85
- defeat, and realization, 9
- democracy, 45
- desensitization, 159
- desire, 167
- dharma, defined, 66
- dialectical thought, 14–15
- discipline, necessity of, 76–77
- distractions, 68, 157
- divine guidance, 133
- dogmas, limitations of, 22–23
- doubt, 98
- duty, Confucian and Taoist views, 28–30

- eating the menu, 9
- effortless living, 1–20, 11, 89, 101, 119. *See also* effortless mind; Taoism; wu-wei
- as core of Chinese philosophy, 10
- defined, 168

is not religion or dogma, 36–50
known through own experience,
 32
as living now, 50
living the art of, 58–61
not an ideology or theology, 22–35
trust as principle of, 18
uselessness of, 146–55
effortless mind, 1–20, 35, 128. *See*
 also effortless living; wu-wei
 origin in the East, 21–61
 science and practice of, 63–129
ego, 37, 134
emptiness, 154
enlightenment, 8–9, 57
enteric nervous system, 128–29
entropy, 80–81
equality, for all, 49–50
evolution, 36–39, 83
extinction, adaptation and, 83
Eye of Horus, 69, 69

faith, 135–36
fall, learning to, 120–21
fate, 83, 133–36
feminine principle (yin), 15
feng-liu, 19
Fibonacci, Leonardo, 19
filial piety, 47–50
first law of thermodynamics, 80
“follow your bliss,” 64
force, 68, 109–10. *See also* control
 futility of, 15–17
Four Invisibles, 103
freedom, as result of trust, 100

Geography of Thought, The, 14–15
goal of spiritual paths, 36

God, 23, 36, 83–84, 101–2, 171–72
 concepts of, 76
 trust in, 98
Golden Ratio, 19
government, 18, 84–85, 108
 Chuang-tzu on letting the world
 be, 93
 natural government born of Tao,
 89–97
 trust as real, 94
grace, and effortlessness, 3
great work of eternity, the, 75–76
Gurdjieff, George Ivanovich, 38–39

Hapkido, 120
harmony, 51–61, 160–61
hatha yoga, 6–7
hatred, 159–60
health, 70, 72
heat, excessive, 118
helplessness, and liberation, 58, 60
here and now, 57, 108
Hermetic tradition, laws of spirit and
 matter, 138–39
Heyerdahl, Thor, 106–9
Hindu society, Christianity and,
 85–86
hot cognition, 2–3, 126–27
hsiang sheng, 74
human life, as part of nature, 55
humility, 66, 151–52
Huxley, Aldous, on God, 171–73

“I,” sense of, 5, 126–27
I Ching, 94–96, 95, 136, 169
identity, illusion of separate, 59
ideology, Taoism is not an, 22–35
idleness, 122

imagination, 135
inequality, 49–50
inner world, versus outer, 31
inspiration, 61
intellect, 14–16
intellectualizing God, 102–3
interference with life, 30, 32
interpretations of life, 59
intuition, as feminine principle, 15
isolation, 156
 spiritual, 173–74

Jesus of Nazareth, 44, 86, 87, 155
Jung, Carl, 133–34, 136, 169
junzi, 34–35
ju philosophy (Confucianism),
 26–28, 27

karma, 70–73
Kelly, Brian, 118
Kena Upanishad, 116
Kim Kyong-il, 49
koans, 104–5, 116
Kon-Tiki, 106–8
Kreider, Tim, 122
Krishna and Arjuna story, 11–12
Krishnamurti, Jiddu, on violence,
 99–100
Kropotkin, Peter, 92

language, paradox of, 12–14
Lao-tzu, 5–6, 10
 dialogue with Confucius, 28–29
 legacy of, 88
Lao-tzu, philosophy of. *See also*
 wu-wei; Taoism
 enlightened individual v.

- enlightened society, 25
- essence of, 19
- interpretation of, 7
- lived by only a few, 5
- leaving life alone, 91
- li (organic pattern of universe),
 - 19–20, 54, 68, 173–74
 - Confucian concept of, 54
 - defined and described, 53–57
 - searching for, 64
- liberation, 20
- life
 - always fundamentally right, 97
 - dissecting, 117
- light of Heaven, 95–96
- Light on the Path*, 64–65
- linear model of universe, 53
- linear world, 84–85
- living, art of, 59–60
- love, 102, 154–55, 156–60, 169, 173
- low places, seeking, 151–52

- martial arts, 4, 7–8, 111–15, 119–20
- masculine principle (yang), 15
- Masters, Robert Augustus, 163
- materialism, 137–38
- matter, spirit and, 138–40
- meaning, is given by observer, 31
- mentalism, principle of, 139
- Merton, Thomas, on wu-wei, 10–11
- Middle Way, 14–15
- mind, 3, 56, 121. *See also* stilling the mind
 - of average individual, 55
 - emptying the, 60
 - fasting the, 71, 122–26
- mindfulness, 162
- Mitchell, Damo, biography, xv–xvi

mixed martial arts, 112–15
moksha, 8, 58–59
monastic life, 161–62
money, as symbol for power, 34
morality, 25–28, 173

Naimy, Mikhail, 42
natural growth, 96
natural world, and evolution, 83
nature, 55, 160, 173–74
nervous system, 124–26
Nietzsche, Friedrich, on morality, 25
nirvana, 58–59
Nisbett, Richard, 14–15
nondoining, 10–12, 74–76, 78
nourishing the world, 58
now moment, 104

oneness, feeling of, 101–4
open awareness, 122–23, 154
opposites, field of, 58
Ouspensky, P. D., 38
oxen, cutting up, 127–29

parasitic patterns, 80–88
parasympathetic nervous system, 125
parenting, 33–34, 47–50
Patanjali, 31–32, 57, 73–75, 78, 142
pattern, and order of the universe, 19
peace, 94, 109
perception, 31–32, 76
perennial philosophy, 101–2
Perennial Philosophy, The, 171–73
peripheral nervous system, 125
planning, 65
Plato, 126
pleasure, pursuit of, 70

positivity, 98–99
power, 34, 46, 61, 68
practice, nondoing and, 74–76
prakrti, 73–74
prayer, 109
precepts on ambition, 64–65
pride, spiritual, 9, 164
Purusha, 73–74, 150
pushing hands, 114

qi, 41
qigong, 6–7, 71

Ramana Maharshi, 34, 132–33, 166
reality, not describable, 13–14
realization, versus attempts toward
it, 8–9
relationships, 157–58, 161, 169–70
greatest relationship (to Tao), 170
religion, 22–24, 36, 101–2, 109
rhythm, principle of, 139–40
rites and rituals, 42–44

sages, 22–23, 57, 86–88, 94, 151–53
reverence for nature of, 138
samadhi, 58–59
samsara, 71–72
samskaras, 70–73, 166–67
Sangue Yoon, 120–21
satori, 8–9, 58–59
saving the world, 36–40, 58
sciences, Taoist, 111–12
security, 32–34
seeing from spirit, 128
seeking, ambition and, 64, 67–68
Self (Eternal), 142–45
self-inquiry, 166–67

senses, philosophy of six, 69
separation, 155
shadow, 134, 164–65, 169
shamanism, relationship to Taoism,
 24
siddhis, 113
simple living, 151–55
Slingerland, Edward, 3
somatic nervous system, 125
space, 146–51
spirit, matter and, 138–40
spiritual bypassing, 162–64, 166
Spiritual Bypassing, 163
spiritual paths, liberation via, 36
spiritual plane, 72
spontaneity, 53, 59
 intelligent, 127–29
stilling the mind, 6–7, 57, 75
still-point of the Tao, 53, 56, 141
striving, uselessness of, 58–59
success, 86–87, 159
suffering, cause of, 59
superior man, Confucian and Taoist
 views of, 34–35
survival, impulse toward, 66–67
synchronicity, 129, 132–46
systems, construction of linear, 54–55

t'ai chi, 6–7, 71
Tao, xi–xii, 17, 23–24, 39, 143, 145
 of the Absolute, 6, 12–13, 57
 perceiving it in nature, 53
 of things, 6, 41
Taoism, xii, 22–24, 40–46, 56
 basic teaching of, 89
 charity and duty in, 28–30
 dependency concepts in, 48
 individual liberation in, 39

not truly a religion, 22–24, 40–44
superior man in, 34–35
Taoist religion, 40–44
Tao Te Ching, 7, 12–13, 16–17, 41,
48, 52
“keep to the female,” 115
“The tao that can be told,” 116
Tao: The Watercourse Way, 19
te, 66–68, 67, 77–78
theology, Taoism is not a, 22–35
threat, Taoism as threat to
 convention, 44–45
time is money, 117
tradition, limitations of, 46
traditional Chinese medicine
 (TCM), 70, 111–12
transformation, 80–83
tree, useless tree story, 149–50,
152–53
trust
 embracing, 18–19, 78–79, 97–110
 fate and, 135
 lack of, xi, 17–18
 versus Confucian approach, 30
trying, not to try, 3
Tung-shan Shou-ch’u, 104
tzu-jan (nature), 90–93, 91, 96–97

uncarved block, returning to, 35
unconscious, 133–34, 146
unity, innateness of, 99–100, 108
universe, and consciousness, 100–101
uselessness, 146–55

value, 148–50
vanaprastha, 86
vasanas, 70–73, 161, 166–67
Vedanta, 42, 72–74, 139–40, 142, 144

vibration, principle of, 139–40
violence, 159
vipassana, 122–23
virtue, 67–68, 93. *See also* te
 four virtues (Confucius), 26–28, 27

wars, and belief, 100
water, as metaphor for mind, 57
Watson, Burton, on Chuang Tzu,
 167–68
Watts, Alan, 19, 103, 160
Way of Chuang Tzu, The, 148–49
Way of Nature. *See also* Taoism;
 wu-wei
 is not an ideology or theology, 22–35
Way of the Tao, as harmony, 51–61
Welwood, John, 162
“What is the Buddha?” 104
who we truly are, 37
women, equality for, 49–50
words, 12–13, 16–17
world
 embracing the, 167–70
 intention to change, 108
 linear world, 84–85
 unnatural world, 80–88, 158–59
wu-wei, 10–16, 11, 89, 101, 119. *See*
 also effortless living;
 effortless
 mind
 as core of Chinese philosophy, 10
 defined, 168
 is not religion or dogma, 36–50
 known through own experience, 32
 as living now, 50
 living the art of, 58–61
 not an ideology or theology, 22–35
 trust as principle of, 18

uselessness of, 146–55

yang, 15, 112

Yang Zhu, 4

Yen Hui, 123–24

yin, 15, 112, 117

cultivating, 113–15, 120–27

ying, 56, 56, 61

yoga, 36, 73, 74, 76

Yoga-Sutras, 73

“you,” as analytical mind, 2

youth, respect toward, 49–50

Zen, 8–9, 76, 104–5, 116, 142

Zen and the Psychology of

Transformation, 8–9

zone, being in the, 1–3, 5, 127–28

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