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**A Brief Discussion of the Way of Harmony
Inspired by the Idea of ‘the Forward Way
Seems Backward’ from the *Daode Jing***

淺探《道德經》「進道若退」的和諧之道

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity Saint David
In fulfilment of the requirements for BA (Hons) in Sinology Degree

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Abstract

Chapter 41 in the *Daode Jing* says, ‘The forward way seems backward.’ Normally it is suggested that only by ‘moving forward’ could things move forward, but in the *Daode Jing*’s perspective, this kind of way of thinking is against nature, which will bring people troubles and miseries. Thus, the *Daode Jing* goes against this inappropriate way to reach the really right way, which is what is said ‘the forward way seems backward’. Accordingly, the ‘backward way’ in ‘the forward way seems backward’ does not simply mean ‘backward’, but rather ‘moving backward is actually moving forward’. Therefore, this kind of ‘backward way’ is done in a returning way. It is going to restore the natural state of human beings with which they have been unfamiliar, so that their self-centre is dissolved, people can be with each other in a win-win situation and the harmony of the world can be achieved.

Key words: forward, backward, restore, nature, harmony

摘 要

《道德經·第四十一章》云：「進道若退。」一般人認為必須要「前進」才能夠「前進」，但是在老子看來，這種思維是背離於自然的，會給人帶來麻煩和痛苦；老子要反此不正之道而行真正的正道，亦即「以退為進」。所以，「進道若退」的「退」並不是單純的退，而是「退即是進」的退。這樣的「進」是還原式的，它要使人類還原回他們本具但已經陌生了的自然狀態，從而化解以自我為中心的剛強，互相能夠和諧共處、包容共生。如此，則世界和諧可致矣。

關鍵詞：前進，退後，恢復，自然，和諧

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1. Introduction

Pursuing what is happy is an instinct of human beings, but if pursuing in an inappropriate way, what is happy may not be perfectly achieved or even become what is unhappy. The real happiness can be achieved only in a proper way, which is 'harmony'. Harmony refers to 'peaceful co-existence', a perfect state of happiness, and this can be reached only by 'dissolving self-centre'. This is because self-centre does not correspond to co-existence. In regard to dissolving self-centre to reach harmony, the *Daode Jing* may be able to provide valuable guidance.

In chapter 41 of the *Daode Jing*, a saying goes, 'The forward way seems backward'.¹ This could be regarded as one of the keys of the text. It is typical of an important idea of the *Daode Jing* which is 'positive expressions seem negative'.² In other words, it is to use negative expressions to convey positive things. From the perspective of the *Daode Jing*, the 'accepted normal ways' are abnormal, which could be thought of as 'the so-called normal way', so it should be converted to the 'truly normal ways'. It is generally suggested that only by moving forward could something goes forward, the 'so-called normal ways', but it is not the case. Actually, Moving backward is also a kind of 'forward way', and it is the 'truly normal ways'. Up to this point, it is important to understand that 'moving backward' does not mean no progress to seek, but means instead to seek progress in another way, a restoring or returning way.

As for what people are going to restore, it is named *Dao* 道. The *Daode Jing* has given much description of what *Dao* is like, and the characteristics of *Dao* can be summarised to be three major aspects: origin, self-so and ineffableness. The characteristics of 'origin' and 'self-so' imply 'everything are opposites as soon as they are interdependent', from which learn how to dissolve 'self-centre'. Although there are descriptions of *Dao*, *Dao* is ineffable in reality as it is out of the boundary of language, as said in chapter one of the *Daode Jing*, 'The *Dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant "*Dao*".'³ This is to mean it is the right way to reach the state

¹ Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249), 'Daode zhenjing zhu' 道德真經註, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collection of The Books on the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011) 1.223.

² Wang Bi, 'Daode zhenjing zhu', in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.234.

³ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *The Annotated Critical Laozi: With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, ed. by Paul J. D'Ambrosio, Xiao Ouyang, trans. by Paul J. D'Ambrosio,

of *Dao* being out of words. Overall, the three characteristics of *Dao* point out what why and how to restore.

In terms of the way of restoring *Dao*, the characteristics of ‘ineffableness’ of *Dao* should be kept in mind at all times. This is to mean that *Dao* can be understood and benefited from only by experiencing it instead of just talking about it. This could be the principle of learning the *Daode Jing* so as to avoid deviating from what the *Daode Jing* conveys. If just focusing on the text and not being able to jump out of the text to experience *Dao*, it is to mistake the finger for the moon. In general, the way of restoring *Dao* is outside words.

While restoring *Dao*, it is also moving forward, which is what is mentioned above, ‘the truly normal way’. This forward way could be defined in two senses: one refers to that the process of restoring *Dao* is also the process of going forward, a forward way towards the natural state of mind with which people become unfamiliar as growing up. Another one is to do with the result of restoring *Dao*. With restoring *Dao*, people achieve the state that breaks opposite to reach absoluteness, so that contradictions are dissolved and harmony is formed, which is what is forward contained in a backward way. In other words, the result of harmony is what the restoration of *Dao* will naturally lead to.

With regard to the points introduced above, the main body of the dissertation will be divided into three parts to talk about them in detail. As for what is the implication of the saying of ‘the forward way seems backward’ and the relationship between the backward way and the forward way, the first part will focus on it. About the backward way or restoring way, there will be two sub-sections under the second part to discuss it, which are about what, why and how to restore. The third part will focus on the forward way which is to do with the result of the restoration of *Dao*, harmony, and talk about it at the individual level and the collective level respectively.

Upon discussing the saying of ‘the forward way seems backward’, the dissertation is expected to provide feasible advice for lessening contradictions and contributing to the harmony of society today.

2. The Implication of ‘The Forward Way Seems Backward’

The saying in chapter 41 of the *Daode Jing*, ‘The forward way seems backward’,⁴ seems at the first glance illogical, but in reality it is just the opposite. To seek the guidance and inspiration of this saying, it is necessary to be clear about first the implication of it.

To understand what it implies, a very important concept claimed by *the Daode Jing* has to be kept in mind, which is ‘the positive expressions seem negative’,⁵ recorded in chapter 78. Just before the saying of ‘the positive expressions seem negative’, a few lines reads, ‘He who bears the humiliation of the country is worthy to be called the king of the country. He who bears the disasters of the country is worthy to be called the ruler of the country.’⁶ With the connection to this discourse, the annotation by Heshang Gong 河上公 on ‘the positive expressions seem negative’ goes, ‘It is the speech that points out the right way, but ordinary people do not understand it and think it contrary to what it right’.⁷ Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039-1112) annotated, ‘The real positive expressions go against what is accepted by ordinary people. This is because ordinary people take bearing a humiliation as a humiliation and bearing disasters as disasters.’⁸ From the annotations, it could be clearly found that ‘negative expressions’ are not negative indeed, they are instead a kind way of speech that converts what is truly wrong, which is accepted by

⁴ Wang Bi, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.223.

⁵ Wang Bi, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.234.

⁶ *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by Wang Rongpei 汪榕培 and Puffenberger, with modification (Shenyang: Liaoning daxue chubanshe, 1996), p. 209. This version adopts some characters and sentences from the *Boshu Laozi* 帛書老子, so it is somewhere different from the most popular one, the version of Wang Bi 王弼. The difference is presented in Chinese. The saying quoted from this version reads, ‘受邦之詬, 是謂社稷之主. 受邦之不祥, 是謂天下之王.’ The version of Wang Bi reads, ‘受國之垢, 是謂社稷主. 受國不祥, 是謂天下王.’ The major difference lies on the characters *gou* 詬 and *gou* 垢. Normally they have different meanings, but in this context both of them can be explained as ‘humiliation’, so there is no difference while being presented in English.

⁷ Heshang Gong 河上公 (unknown dates), ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’ 道德真經註, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collection of The Books on the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011) 1.175.

⁸ Su Zhe 蘇轍 (1039-1112), ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’ 道德真經註, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collection of The Books on the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011) 3.30.

ordinary people, into what is genuinely correct, which is commonly refused. From the perspective of the *Daode Jing*, humiliation should not be taken as humiliation and so are disasters. In reality, it is humiliations and disasters that makes a qualified ruler of a country if the ruler is able to bear what are usually disliked. This is what seems negative is actually positive. Apart from chapter 78, there are other examples representing the idea of ‘the positive expressions seem negative.’ For example, chapter eight of the *Daode Jing* says, ‘The greatest virtue is like water. Water always benefits and never competes with other things. To be in the place that ordinary people refuse to be in, water is closer to the state of *Dao*.’⁹ The place that ordinary people dislike refers to the place low in position, which is what water implies in a metaphorical way. To be low means not to show strength that may harm others, and implies the traits such as modesty and gentleness. In comparison, ordinary people tend to place themselves on high positions such as being arrogant and competitive. Ordinary people will take winning others in a competition as what is worth of being excited about, but the *Daode Jing* says that this is not in accordance with *Dao*. At the end of chapter eight, a saying goes, ‘Because there is no competition, no grudges are brought about.’¹⁰ If one would like to reach the state of *Dao*, he or she can achieve it only by being in low position. If they dislike what is low and feel uncomfortable to be low, they are still ordinary and by no means will they reach the state of *Dao*. From the implication of water, it could be seen that although it seems negative to be low, it is actually positive. This is also to convert ‘the so-called normal way’ into ‘truly normal ways’. To explore other examples representing the concept of ‘the positive expressions seem negative’, they are almost could be found anywhere in the *Daode Jing*. Chapter 47 says, ‘Not leaving the door, knowing all under heaven. Not looking out the window, seeing the *Dao* of heaven. One goes further away, one understands even less.’¹¹ Chapter 76 says, ‘The strong lies below and the soft lies above.’¹² Chapter 81 says, ‘The sages will not take accumulation for themselves. The more they do for others, the more they will have. The more they give to others, the more they will gain.’¹³ From the sayings shown above as examples, it could be found that the concept of

⁹ Wang Bi, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.210.

¹⁰ Wang Bi, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.210.

¹¹ Chen Guying, *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 277.

¹² Wang Bi, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.234.

¹³ Wang Bi, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.235.

‘the positive expressions seem negative’ is a key element of the thought system of the *Daode Jing*. Therefore, during the process of studying the *Daode Jing*, that concept is a very important signpost for understanding what the *Daode Jing* conveys. In general, what the concept of ‘the positive expressions seem negative’ mainly gets across is ‘to convert “the so-called normal way” into “the truly normal way”.’

With the understanding of the concept of ‘the positive expressions seem negative’, it becomes easier to grasp the implication of ‘the forward way seems backward’. The forward way in this context does not refer to ‘the so-called normal way’, but rather ‘the truly normal way’ into which the former one is converted. In regard to what the saying specifically refer to, the annotators have different explanations of it. Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249) annotated with a quotation from chapter seven, ‘Those who back themselves will be the first, and those who let go of themselves will be safe.’¹⁴ Su Zhe annotated, ‘It seems not moving forward, but none will be faster than it.’¹⁵ Fan Yingyuan 范應元 annotated, ‘When *Dao* is in the state of going forward, it does not compete with other things, so it seems as if it is moving backward.’¹⁶ Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (1193-?) annotated, ‘As to what is “the forward way seems backward”, it means that those who can be backward will be forward. In other words, it is “to be forward by being backward”, as Yang Zi 楊子 said.’¹⁷ Yang Qiyuan 楊起元 (1547-1599) annotated with a quotation from chapter 48, ‘The way of practising *Dao* is to be reduced day by day. To be reduced over and over again and finally to reach the state of no-intention (Wuwei 無爲).’¹⁸ From the annotations above, it could be seen that the annotators have a slightly different focus, but their explanations could be said to be adoptable and compatible with one

¹⁴ Wang Bi, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.223.

¹⁵ Su Zhe, ‘Daode zhenjing zhu’, in *Laozi jicheng*, 3.18.

¹⁶ Fan Yingyuan 范應元 (South Song Dynasty), ‘Laozi daode jing guben jizhu’ 老子道德經古本集註, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collection of The Books on the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011) 4.424.

¹⁷ Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (1193-?), ‘Daode zhenjing kouyi’ 道德真經口義, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collection of The Books on the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011) 4.512.

¹⁸ Yang Qiyuan 楊起元 (1547-1599), ‘Daode jing pinjie’ 道德經品節, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collection of The Books on the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011) 7.335.

another as they all grasped the implication of the saying. To summarise the implication of the saying, what Lin Xiyi annotated may be a succinct one, 'To be forward by being backward.'¹⁹ Up to this point, a question arises what 'being backward' aims or what it is for, by which 'the so-called normal way' is converted into 'the truly normal way'.

For the answer to the question, it could be found on the lines in the chapter where the saying of 'the forward way seems backward' comes, which is *Dao*. At the very beginning of chapter 41, a saying goes, 'While being introduced what is *Dao*, the people at high level will practise it earnestly, the ones at middle level will hesitate to practise it, and the ones at low level will laugh at it. If *Dao* is not laughed at, it will not be called *Dao*.'²⁰ From the saying, it could be found that what is *Dao* is completely accepted and fully comprehended by the people at high level, so they can practise it as soon as they hear it, which is why they are at high level. The people at middle level can understand the idea but not completely, so they are not certain whether there is what is called *Dao*. Because of that, they practise *Dao* with hesitation. The people at low level cannot understand what is *Dao*, so they just laugh at it thinking it is ridiculous, which is why they are at low level. In this context, the people at low level refer to ordinary people, representing the ordinary points of view. This is why *Dao* must be laughed at as it cannot be understood in an ordinary perspective. In other words, if *Dao* can be understood with ordinary points of view, it is nothing going beyond them. Therefore, if one would like to fully comprehend *Dao*, he or she has to be outside the limitation of ordinary perspectives. After the saying at the very beginning of chapter 41, there is a group of sayings representing the implication of *Dao*, where the saying of 'the forward way seems backward' is included. This group of sayings goes,

The bright way seems dull; the forward way seems backward; the even way seems rough; the highest virtue is like the valley; the sheerest whiteness seems sullied; ample virtues seems defective; vigorous virtue seems indolent; plain virtue seems soiled; the greatest square has no corners; the greatest vessel will not be made; the greatest note has no sound; the greatest image has no shape; *Dao* conceals itself in being nameless.²¹²²

¹⁹ Lin Xiyi, 'Daode zhenjing kouyi', in *Laozi jicheng*, 4.512.

²⁰ Wang Bi, 'Daode zhenjing zhu', in *Laozi jicheng*, 1.223.

²¹ *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau 劉殿爵, with modification (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), p. 48.

From the ordinary perspective, what these few lines express seems illogical and unacceptable. For example, they may be confused about how ‘the even way’ seems ‘rough’. In general way of thinking, if the even way is rough, it will not be even. Actually, the negative words in the group of sayings, such as ‘dull’, ‘rough’, ‘valley’,²³ ‘sullied’, ‘defective’ and ‘indolent’ among others, are the embodiment of ‘the backward way’. As to ‘the forward way’, it is the positive words in the series of sayings, such as ‘bright’, ‘forward’, ‘even’ and ‘ample’ among others, that represent it. It should be noticed that these positive expressions cannot be understood in a general sense. They are ‘the forward way’ presented by ‘the backward way’ that converts ‘the wrong forward way’ into ‘the right forward way’. This is to embody the idea of ‘to convert “the so-called normal way” into “the truly normal way”’. As for what is ‘the truly normal way’, it is what corresponds to *Dao*. Up to this point, the answer to what ‘being backward’ aims become clear. It is ‘the backward way’ that leads to the state of *Dao*. *Dao* is what is the highest to achieve, which could be realised from the positive expressions in superlative form in the group of sayings, such as ‘the highest’ and ‘the greatest’. Therefore, if one would like to go beyond the ordinary states, he or she must reach the state of *Dao*, which refers to the goal of life. Likewise, if one would like to achieve the state of *Dao*, he or she has to do it in a way outside the limitations of ordinary perspective, which refers to the way of practising *Dao*.

As discussed above, the implication of the saying of ‘the forward way seems backward’ is ‘to convert “the so-called normal way”, accepted by ordinary people, into “the truly normal way”, hardly understood by ordinary people. Therefore, ‘the forward way’ cannot be understood in common perspective, it is a kind of ‘forward way’ driven by ‘backward way’ that converts ‘the wrong forward way’, ‘the so-called normal way’, into ‘the right forward way’, ‘the truly normal way’. In other words, ‘the backward way’ means to turn the wrong into the right, and

²² Dong Lianchi 董蓮池, ‘Laozi daqiwan Cheng ji daqi wu Cheng shuo buzheng’ 《老子》「大器晚成」即「大器無成」說補證 [A Supplement Evidence on the Argument that ‘the Greatest Vessel Takes Long to Complete’ should be Amended to ‘the Greatest Vessel will not be Made’], *Guji zhengli yanjiu xuekan* 古籍整理研究學刊 5 (2000), 19-22. With the reference to this journal article, the translation by D. C. Lau of ‘大器晚成’ is amended. The translation by D. C. Lau reads, ‘The great vessel takes long to complete.’ The amended one reads, ‘The greatest vessel will not be made.’ The modified point based on this journal article is to amend ‘takes long to complete (晚成)’ to ‘will not be made (無成)’.

²³ ‘Valley’ in this context represents the imagery such as lowness and emptiness in a metaphorical way.

‘the forward way’ is both the process and the result of ‘the backward way’. As to what ‘the backward way’ is for, it leads to and represents the state of *Dao*, which is what is the highest to achieve and goes beyond the ordinary points of view. It could be said that ‘being backward’ is the way of reaching the state of *Dao*. With regard to what is *Dao*, why people should achieve the state of *Dao* and how to ‘be backward’ to reach the state of *Dao*, the next part will explain it in detail.

3. The Backward Way: Restoring the State of *Dao*

After the analysis of the implication of ‘the forward way seems backward’, it has been clear that ‘the backward way’ is the way of achieving the *Dao*. Before getting started to ‘be backward’ for achieving the state of *Dao*, it is necessary to figure out first what is *Dao*, why people should correspond to *Dao* and how to ‘be backward’ to reach the state of *Dao*. The following content will discuss the three questions in sections.

3.1. The Characteristics of *Dao*

In regard to what *Dao* is like, there are many descriptions of it in the *Daode Jing*. To summarise the descriptions, there are about three senses, origin, ineffableness and self-so, in which *Dao* is explained.

The first aspect of what *Dao* is like refers to its property of ‘origin’. Chapter 4 in the *Daode Jing* says,

Dao is empty, yet use will not drain it. Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures...Darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there. I know not whose son it is. It images the forefather of God.²⁴

Chapter 25 says,

There is a thing confusedly formed, born before heaven and earth. Silent and void...It is capable of being the mother of the world.²⁵

Chapter 42 says,

With *Dao*, there is oneness; with oneness, there is twoness; with twoness, there is

²⁴ *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 8.

²⁵ *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 30.

threeness; with threeness, there is everything.²⁶

From the description of these three chapters, it could be found that *Dao* is the origin of everything. Here is a point that needs to be careful: this ‘origin’ should not be understood as something that metaphysically goes beyond everything in the world or universe. Just as said in chapter 4, ‘I know not whose son it is. It images the forefather of God.’ Chen Guying 陳鼓應 comments on this chapter, ‘This formless *Dao* is the root and source of everything. Here, Laozi has shattered the conception of divine creation.’²⁷ Although it is understood to be the ‘origin’ or ‘mother’ of everything, it is not separated from everything. Chapter 42’s description seems that *Dao* is where oneness comes, and oneness is where twoness comes and so are the rest. However, it is not the case. Hans-Georg Moeller explains,

This ‘integral’ mathematics shows that what is envisioned here is not really a ‘historical’ process of linear causation or generation, not a diachronic development, but rather a process in which all elements combine into a synchronic order. Oneness, twoness, threeness, and multiplicity do not follow each other in a sequence, they rather go along with each other.²⁸

Therefore, *Dao* and everything are not two parts away from each other, but rather they comes at the same time. Steve Coutinho explains,

A fundamental theme of early Daoist philosophy, the holistic interdependence of opposites, even of something and nothing, existence and nonexistence, suggests a thoroughgoing naturalism: a conception of the world as a self-generating organic whole. It did not have a transcendent origin; both existence and nonexistence are worldly processes that emerge from each other.²⁹

Overall, although *Dao* is referred to the ‘origin’ of everything, it is not a transcendent origin. It is the process in which everything functions and comes. As a supplement explanation, *Dao* it is the process in which not only does everything come, but also disappear. Up to this point, it should be realised another aspect of what *Dao* is like, which is ‘self-so’, meaning that *Dao* is what it

²⁶ Moeller, Hans-Georg, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 40.

²⁷ Chen Guying, *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 71.

²⁸ Moeller, Hans-Georg, *The Philosophy of the Daodejing*, p. 40.

²⁹ Coutinho, Steve, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 23-24.

is or it is self-generated. As mentioned above in the explanation by Steve Coutinho, 'The world as a self-generating organic whole.'³⁰ In regard to the self-so of *Dao*, chapter 25 in the *Daode Jing* describes,

It stands alone and does not change, goes round and does not weary...*Dao* models itself on what it is naturally so.³¹

Dao is what it is naturally so, so there is nothing resembling it, as said in chapter 67,

The whole world says that my *Dao* is vast and resembles nothing. It is because it is vast that it resembles nothing. If it resembled anything, it would, long before now, have become small.³²

As discussed before, *Dao* is the process in which everything emerges, so there will not be anything similar to it. It is just what it is so. However, being self-so does not mean that *Dao* has no 'energy' inside. Otherwise, there will be nothing in the universe, but this is not the case. In the perspective of the *Daode Jing*, 'nothing' is not to be nothing alone, it is the mirror of 'something'. In other words, nothing and something are opposite yet interdependent. Nothing is where something comes, and something is the reflection of nothing. Therefore, the interdependence and the recycling process of opposites are the 'self-generated energy' of *Dao*. Just as chapter 40 says,

Turning back is how *Dao* moves.³³

The 'turning back' in this context refers to two implications. One represents the state of opposites in which two opposite sides go against one another. Another means the recycling process of *Dao*, as discussed above, the interdependence of opposites. Although opposites go against another, simultaneously they are interdependent. In other words, everything is opposite as soon as they are interdependent. Whether being opposite or interdependent, they are the process of *Dao*. Therefore, *Dao* has nowhere to go with distance. It just moves to where it is without start and end, which is the 'self-generated energy' of *Dao*.

After discussing what *Dao* is like in terms of 'origin' and 'self-so', it seems that

³⁰ Coutinho, Steve, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*, p. 24.

³¹ *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 30.

³² *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 74.

³³ *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 47.

Dao is something that can be described in words. It is however not the case. The *Daode Jing* clarifies that *Dao* is beyond the boundary of language, which refers to the characteristics of ineffableness of *Dao*. Chapter one in the *Daode Jing* says,

The *Dao* that can be spoken of is not the constant ‘*Dao*’.³⁴

Chapter 25 says,

I know not its name, so I style it ‘*Dao*’. I give it the makeshift name of ‘the great’.

From this, it could be found that the name of ‘*Dao*’ is a makeshift name. To give it a name is just for the convenience of understanding it. Chapter 14 talks about it further,

What cannot be seen is called evanescent; what cannot be heard is called rarefied; what cannot be touched is called minute. These three cannot be fathomed.

To ‘these three cannot be fathomed’, Venerable Hanshan Deqing annotated, “‘To fathom’ means to think and discuss.”³⁵ Therefore, *Dao* is actually ineffable. This is because *Dao* is what it is, and is what everything it is. Although there has been many descriptions of *Dao*, if people would like to be one with *Dao*, what they are going to focus on is not in the layer of language, but rather what is out of language.

After the discussion of what *Dao* is like, it should be realised why people should set a goal to reach the state of *Dao*. The reason for this could be found in the three characteristics discussed above, and the next part will demonstrate it.

3.2. The Reason for Restoring the State of *Dao*

In regard to the reason for achieving the state of *Dao*, there is going to be first an amendment of the word ‘achieving’ or ‘reaching’ as mentioned before. To be more accurate, ‘achieving’ or ‘reaching’ should be amended to ‘restoring’, which is also what ‘the backward way’ means. Up to this point, the connection between ‘restoring’ and the three characteristics of *Dao* is shown.

As discussed before, in terms of the three characteristics of *Dao*, *Dao* is what it

³⁴ Chen Guying, *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 46.

³⁵ Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546-1623), ‘Laozi daode jing jie’ 老子道德經解, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collection of The Books on the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 and Chen Hongxing 陳紅星 (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2011) 7.403.

is naturally so. It is the state of everything being opposite and interdependent. the process in which everything comes and disappear. Human beings as part of everything, they uncertainly comes and disappear in the process of *Dao*. Therefore, the original state of human beings is the state of *Dao*. By that is means human beings should restore the state of what they are naturally so. For this points, the imagery of infant offered in the *Daode Jing* is a good explanation. The *Daode Jing* refers to infant as a metaphor to point out the original state of human beings and remind human beings to restore it. Infant represents the states such as no separateness, no competition and no self-centred intention. Actually, these states of infant correspond to that of *Dao*. Human beings struggle with unhappiness and miseries as they grow up because they forget their original state. Therefore, if human beings would like live a real happy life, they have to go beyond the factors that cause inharmony: no separateness, no competition and no self-centred intention among others. In general, the core of these states is 'no self-centre'. To dissolve the self-centre, then people can get their states in line with that of *Dao*: the state of everything being opposite as soon as they are interdependent. By this people realise that although everything is different from each other in the aspects such as appearance, size, gender, habit and interest to name but a few, they all comes and disappear in the process of *Dao*. This is to mean that everything is as one together. Realising there is the same origin behind differences and restoring to the state of origin, people can get the consciousness of self-centre away, by which separateness is got away and co-existence is formed. With co-existence, harmony is created, and the real happy life will naturally come.

3.3. The Way of Restoring the State of *Dao*

In regard to the way of restoring the state of *Dao*, it should be clear first that the way is out of language, as implied by the *Daode Jing*.

The *Daode Jing* is written in words and it provides the guidance on restoring the state of *Dao* in language either, but learning it in language is not the goal of learning it. In the process of learning the *Daode Jing*, language serves as a medium for people for acquiring the theory of the *Daode Jing*. It is like a boat that people take it temporarily for getting over a river. Having arriving at the

other side of the bank, the passenger just gets off the boat and has no need to take it all the way for the rest of the trip.³⁶ Therefore, the goal of learning the *Daode Jing* is to put the theory of it into practice so as to live a real happy life. If just focusing on the text of the *Daode Jing* and forget what learning it is really for, then the learner will be off the track and does not benefit from it.

The simile of a boat is just a simile. A boat is left only when the passenger of it arrives at the destination, but learning the *Daode Jing* should jump out of the words of the *Daode Jing* during the process. It does not mean that the learner can put the *Daode Jing* aside after just going through it. It is to mean that the learner should pay a attention to the practice out of the words while paying attention to the words of the text. As to how to practice the theory of the *Daode Jing* for restoring the state of *Dao*, there are a few points discussed below.

To restore the state of *Dao*, the key is to get the mind into the state of tranquility, which means to get the wandering thoughts away from the mind, so that the attitude towards and judgement about things will not be distorted. The guidance on this is provided in chapter 10 of the *Daode Jing*,

Can you polish your mysterious mirror and leave no blemish?³⁷

The blemish here refers to wandering thoughts. It is the thoughts that does not come from the tranquility of the original state of mind, with which people cannot keep on the right path while dealing with things, which brings about inharmony. For example, the concepts of beauty and ugliness is what comes from wandering thoughts. With the concepts, people will have the feelings caused by the concept of distinguishing the difference between two sides. While seeing what is beautiful, people will raise a feeling of liking it, which is 'the so-called normal way'. While seeing what is ugly, people will have a feeling of disliking it. With thinking of this, the ugly side, sometimes is judged subjectively even if it is not ugly objectively, will not be tolerated and harmed, then the conflict and contradiction are generated. With conflict and contradiction, there is not harmony and a real happy life to be. Therefore, it is the key to restoring the state of *Dao* by getting mind as bright and clear as a mirror, which is the way of

³⁶ Kumārajīva trans.鳩摩羅什, 'Jingang boruo boluomi jin' 金剛般若波羅蜜經, in *Dazheng xinxiu dazangjin* 大正新修大藏經 (Tokyo: Yiqie jinkan hanghui, 1934), p. 749. The simile is based on the reference to this sutra.

³⁷ *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 14.

converting ‘the so-called normal way’ into ‘the truly normal way’. Mirror has no consciousness of distinguishing what is good or bad while everything is reflected in the mirror. This is imagery used in the *Daode Jing* to refer to the state of *Dao*: the process in which everything comes and disappears. As the process, *Dao* has no intention to distinguish what is good or bad. However, it does not mean that people will not know what is good or bad. It is to dissolve the attachment to the judgement of right and wrong, so there will not be the feeling of liking one and disliking another, by which co-existence and harmony can be achieved. Co-existence is the embodiment of *Dao* and the majority of people forget it, so they need to get their mind bright and clear to restore the state of *Dao*, and this is to be done without words.

4. The Forward Way: Achieving Real Harmony

With regard to ‘the forward way’, it can be explained in two senses. One is about the process of ‘being backward’, as discussed in the first part, being backward is a kind being forward. Another sense is about the result of ‘being back ward’, which is harmony.

5. Conclusion

To summarise the content above, the saying of ‘the forward way seems backward’ represents the idea of ‘converting “the so-called normal way” into “the truly normal way’’. As to what is ‘the so-called normal way’, it refers to the way accepted by ordinary people, such as competing with others to get what one wants, but this is not the right way. ‘The backward way’ is for converting such wrong way the seems right into the truly right one.

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