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CHAPTER ONE OF THE *TAO TÊ CHING*: A ‘NEW’ INTERPRETATION

The *Tao Tê Ching* is probably the world’s second most translated and annotated book (after the Bible),¹ yet it remains among the most enigmatic. Of its eighty-one chapters, no one denies that the most important is the first, and many scholars (e.g. Wing-tsit Chan, Chang Chung-yuan)² go further to claim that it is the key to the whole work: if it is understood fully, all the rest may be seen to be implied. Unfortunately, the first chapter also happens to be the most ambiguous. But even so, after so much attention can there be anything left to say? It seems to me that an important point has been missed or at least obscured, and that the popularity of certain translations has made this obscurity more prevalent recently. To correct this, I shall offer below a line-by-line explication of this crucial passage. The following interpretation first demonstrates the parallel structure of the first eight lines as signifying two different ways of experiencing: lines one, three, five and seven refer to the experience of Tao, and lines two, four, six and eight to our more usual way of experiencing the world. I shall suggest that the difference between these ways is the difference between our familiar dualistic experience (or understanding of experience) and a much less common nondualistic way of experiencing in which there is no bifurcation between subject and object. Second, we shall see that the parallel structure unfolds dialectically: each succeeding pair of lines elaborates upon the issues that naturally arise in response to the preceding pair. In the process of showing this, I shall take sides on the two main controversies over this chapter: first, whether it should be interpreted cosmologically or ontologically/epistemologically (I have already revealed my preference for the latter), and second, whether lines five and six should be punctuated to translate *yü* as ‘desire/intention’. My main thesis is that the traditional understanding of *yü* as ‘desire’ or ‘intention’ is an essential part of the meaning of the chapter. This is by no means an

¹ According to Wing-tsit Chan, 350 Chinese commentaries are extant, plus some 350 more which have been lost or survive only in fragments. (*A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 1963, p. 137.) The controversy about whether the work is a compilation from many sources or the product of one person is ignored as irrelevant to this paper.

² See Wing-tsit Chan, *The Way of Lao Tzu*, (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), p. 99. ‘This chapter both introduces and summarizes the entire *Tao Tê Ching*. The “five thousand” words of the text are all based on this chapter.’ (Chang Chung-yuan, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*, New York: Harper and Row, 1975, p. 1.)

original claim, but *why* it is so important does not seem to have been noticed before and provides the reason for this paper. Wing-tsit Chan's criticism of such translations, that 'intention interrupts the thought of the chapter',¹ is thus a serious misreading of the text.

But, when dealing with so abbreviated a passage, one must be especially cautious about declaring any interpretation to be 'the correct one'. Of no text are deconstructive qualifications more relevant, and perhaps the best we can ever expect to have are 'strong misreadings'. In justification of what follows I can do no better than cite Heidegger: 'Every interpretation is a dialogue with the work, and with the saying. However, every dialogue becomes halting and fruitless if it confines itself obdurately to nothing but what is directly said.'²

The Tao that can be Tao'd is not the constant Tao
 The name that can be named is not a constant name
 Having-no-name is the source of heaven and earth
 Having-names is the mother of the ten thousand things
 Therefore always do not have intention in order to see the wonder
 Always have intention in order to see the forms
 These two things have the same origin
 Although different in name
 Their sameness is called the mystery
 From mystery to mystery: the gate of all wonder!³

How to translate the term *Tao* is a question which need not detain us, since Chinese thought is familiar enough that one can let the character reverberate untranslated according to its usage in various contexts. Literally, 道 combines the character 首 'head' with the radical 辶 'the way' or 'the path', together becoming 'the Supreme Way'. As one would expect, the earliest sense of 辶 seems to have been a road or path, and only later did the more metaphoric and metaphysical meanings arise, enabling Tao (like its Greek counterpart *logos*) to be translated, although not very well, as Truth, Reason, Nature, etc. The philosophical issue of what the Tao *is* cannot, of course, be evaded, and is discussed below.

A common translation of the first line is: 'The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao.' There are two problems with such a rendering. First, translating the character 常 *ch'ang* as 'eternal' implies a metaphysical bias towards unchanging permanence which is not in the original; such would be a suitable characterization of the Indian *puruṣa* or *Nirguṇa Brahman*, but, given the Chinese emphasis on the reality of changing phenomena, not for the Tao. The word 'constant' (or 'invariable') is preferable as more ambiguous, leaving more possibilities open – for example, that the Tao is to

¹ *The Way of Lao Tzu*, p. 99.

² Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. Fred D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 178.

³ My translation, (with the help of a transliteration), although not very different from many others which render *yü* as 'intention'.

be understood not diachronically but synchronically, as some pattern in the flux of change. This brings us to the second point. To describe the Tao as a metaphysical principle which is ineffable is to exclude another part of the meaning, that the path (here temporal as much as spatial) which can be followed is not the constant path. Putting these two together, we have something like: The Tao which is spoken about/followed is not the real Tao. Why not? Why cannot the Tao be Tao'd? This is answered in the second line, which drives a wedge between the Tao and all attempts to characterize it. Names – it later becomes clear that this means language generally – are not 'constant' in the way that the Tao is; so, conversely, that which can be named isn't the Tao. The namelessness of the Tao, our inability to characterize it, is thus declared to be its primary characteristic¹ – a paradox which is self-stultifying only in so far as we are confined within the bounds of language, whereas the claim is evidently that there is a reality 'outside' language which is inaccessible to it but not necessarily to us.

This issue of the ineffability of the Tao has been much discussed.² It is clear that Lao Tzu is, among other things, denying a representative theory of truth.³ But so, for example, does Wittgenstein, without postulating a spiritual Absolute such as the Tao. So it is necessary to say more to uncover the meaning of Lao Tzu's claim. Given the brevity of this chapter, and the 'pre-philosophical' nature of the whole work, one cannot expect any textual exegesis to reveal a complete metaphysical theory implicit in this passage or in the ones that follow. But here we may benefit from a comparison with other metaphysical systems, both Indian and Chinese, which also emphasize the ineffability of the Absolute and go further to link that ineffability with the nonduality of subject and object – a nonduality which is also found in Taoism, especially in Chuang Tzu, but which is not explicit in the *Tao Tê Ching*. I am thinking in particular of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Advaita Vedānta, and Ch'an (Zen), the last of course much influenced by Taoism. Mādhyamika characterizes (or, more precisely, explains why we cannot characterize) *nirvāṇa* as 'the coming-to-rest of the manifold of named things (*prapañcōpaśama*)',⁴ in which one realizes that our usual way of perceiving the world – as a collection of distinct named things – is just one way of 'taking' it.

¹ That the Tao is unnameable is repeatedly emphasized in subsequent chapters: e.g. 32 ('The constant Tao is unnameable') and 41 ('The Tao, when hidden, has no name').

² For a discussion of what ineffability in the *Tao Tê Ching* does not mean, see Arthur C. Danto, 'Language and the Tao: some reflections on ineffability', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 1 (1973) 45–55. For an argument that the *Tao Tê Ching* is not ineffable, see Dennis M. Ahern, 'Ineffability in the *Lao Tzu*: the taming of a dragon', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 14 (1977), 357–82.

³ See Shigenori Nagatomo, 'An epistemic turn in the *Tao Tê Ching*', *International Philosophical Quarterly*, xxiii (June 1983), 174 ff. Nagatomo also sees the first chapter as referring to two different modes of experience, but in my opinion the subjectivist bias of his phenomenological categories keeps him from being able to illuminate the difference between them. He sees Lao Tzu as rejecting sense-perception and he gives a subjectivist interpretation of meditation, whereas a nondualist account is what is needed.

⁴ Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhamikākārikā* xxv. 24.

Yogacāra Buddhism is more explicit in asserting that the true nature of things is nondual. The apparent bifurcation of subject from object is due to a grasping at phenomena: that-which-is grasped is thus reified into an object, and that-which-grasps becomes the sense of an independent self. Most important for our purposes, the main way of grasping is through language. The object is a creation of thought-construction, which converts the bare *nirvikalpa* sensation into a defined image associated with a name.¹ One may understand Śāṅkara's explanation of *māyā* as *adhyāsa* – 'name and form' superimposed upon Brahman – in the same way. And Ch'an Buddhism is consistent with the above in its assertion of nonduality and its criticism of language as deceptive: 'Reality is right before you, and yet you are apt to translate it into a world of names and forms' (Fa-yen Wen-i). With the exception of Vedānta, all of the above were well-received in China and greatly influenced its thought – largely because the similarities between Buddhism and Taoism were so deep. Ch'an, of course, was a result of their convergence and as a still-living tradition is therefore especially valuable in interpreting Taoism 'after the fact'.

The factor common to all the above schools is that they link the ineffability of the Absolute (however otherwise 'characterized') with its nonduality: that is, the problem with any attempt to describe the nondual Absolute is that it amounts to separating oneself dualistically from it. I have argued elsewhere that the above nondualities are phenomenologically equivalent;² here the important point is that, although we do not find an explicit denial of subject-object duality in the *Tao Tê Ching*, such a claim is also consistent with its statements and is particularly helpful in explicating the first chapter. The Tao can then be understood as the totality of what-is, which is both ontologically and epistemologically prior to any duality that arises within it. Then to give the Tao a name is to try to determine that which is indeterminate, to objectify that which cannot be objectified because it is what there is before any bifurcation into subject and object. If the Taoist goal is to experience that nondual Tao, this also amounts to an indictment of all philosophy, as the following reflections show us. Philosophy originates in the awareness that the apparently objective and unproblematic reality of the world is in fact questionable, and in our uncertainty as to how we relate to it. We realize that our everyday understanding of the world is just an understanding, and philosophy is the resulting search for the correct understanding, an attempt to construct that set of categories which when superimposed upon reality will 'mirror' it. Thought thus distinguishes itself from the world in order to divine its structure – but in the process perpetuates the dualism

¹ See 'Vacaspatimisra on the Buddhist theory of perception', in Th. Stcherbatsky, *Buddhist Logic*, II (New York: Dover Press, 1962), 260–1.

² 'Enlightenment in Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta: are Nirvana and Moksha the same?' *International Philosophical Quarterly*, xxii, 1 (March 1982); 'How many Nondualities are there?', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, xi, (December 1983).

between 'inner' conscious mind and 'outer' objective world, which dualism is the root problem to be overcome, according to the nondual systems mentioned above. The 'spirituality' of the Tao, like the Brahman of Vedānta and the Dharmakāya, etc., of Mahāyāna, arises from the fact that these nondual Absolutes cannot be understood reductively as some material substratum but are the source of all consciousness as well; all of these systems negate self because the individual consciousness which is usually understood to be the essence or property of that self is finally realized to be but an aspect or 'reflection' of an all-encompassing consciousness.

If the first line is understood as 'the Path that can be followed...', the emphasis becomes different. The problem with attempting to follow the Tao is the self-conscious and hence dualistic effort involved. If one is truly harmonized – that is, one – with the nondual Tao, the Way will not be experienced as something external to oneself, as a path which is or is not being followed. Nondual actions performed in harmony with – and hence *by* – the Tao are *wu-wei*, non-action, which, because there is not the sense of a self exerting its will, are best described as effortless activity.¹ From this perspective, the Tao should be understood not as a timeless Absolute but as the natural course of things; and *trying* to follow the natural course of things is to be no longer natural.

In summary, I am suggesting that the first two lines be taken as describing two different ways of experiencing – nondual and dual, respectively. The role of language in the bifurcation of the Tao into subject and object is elaborated in lines three and four:

Having-no-name is the source of heaven and earth
Having-names is the mother of the ten thousand things

Since the Tao is what has no name, these two lines parallel the first two. But they are more controversial: should they be taken cosmologically, as a cosmogonic myth describing the creation of the phenomenal world, or ontologically-epistemologically,² as I have been doing?³ Given the apparently intentional ambiguity of this laconic text, I see no reason to conclude that these interpretations must be mutually exclusive; but the ontological/

¹ For a discussion of this see David Loy, 'Wei-wu-wei: nondual action', *Philosophy East and West* xxxv. 1 (January 1985).

² The latter interpretation is usually described only as 'ontological', but the epistemological and ontological issues here cannot be separated: a difference in experience changes our understanding of what is.

³ An account of these interpretations would encompass the whole history of Taoism. Fung Yu-lan, author of the monumental *History of Chinese Philosophy*, gave an ontological interpretation in *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (1948), but later (probably under pressure from the authorities) changed to a cosmological view in 1964. (For a discussion of Fung's interpretations see David C. Yu, 'The creation myth and its symbolism in classical taoism', *Philosophy East and West*, xxxi, 4 (1981), 487, 497.) According to Charles Wei-hsun Fu, chapter two of *Chuang Tzu* refutes the cosmological interpretation. Fu has used Wang Pi's distinction between origin and function to interpret the first chapter of the *Tao Tê Ching* as distinguishing Tao-as-origin from Tao-as-function. ('Creative hermeneutics: Taoist metaphysics and Heidegger', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, iii (1976), 125 ff.)

epistemological approach does seem more revealing. That the Tao is the source of heaven and earth means that the Tao is everything, a totality which incorporates the entire universe. In contrast, 'having-names' is the mother of 'the ten thousand things', which is the common idiom for all the things *in* the world, that is, the sum-total of all the particulars that exist. At first glance the distinction between the two may not be clear. But if the 'source' of line three is understood in the sense of 'ground' – what heaven and earth really *are* – then the Tao as their source is the universe apprehended as a whole; it is claimed here that this is how the universe may be experienced when we 'take' it without names. In contrast to this, language-acquisition is pointed to as the process which gives birth to our phenomenal world of multiplicity, breaking up the primordial whole into objects – one of which is the subject, since the sense-of-self is also reified in the process – which are then perceived as distinct from each other but as interacting causally *in* space and time. This interpretation is obliquely supported by another term for the Tao which is used in later chapters: 𠄎 *p'o* – 'the Uncarved Block', to use Waley's felicitous expression; chapter 37 refers twice to 'the unnameable *p'o*'. So in lines three and four we find another contrast between nonduality and duality, respectively, although apparently of a different sort than that discussed above: the unity of various objects 'in' the world. But this nonduality also implies the nondifference of subject and object, for 'my' world cannot be a whole unless it incorporates 'my' consciousness as well.¹

This reference to the 'carving' function of language calls for a comparison with the Sanskrit term *prapañca*, mentioned above in the context of Mādhyamika which characterizes *nirvāṇa* (although negatively) as 'the coming-to-rest of *prapañca*'. The exact meaning of *prapañca* is unclear, although it is not only crucial to the Mādhyamika but also plays an important role in Pali Buddhism and Vedānta.² A recent translation of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* defines *prapañca* as 'the world of named things; the visible manifold'.³ It refers to the link between our concepts and our perceptions: that our categories of thinking are somehow responsible for our perceiving 'the visible world' as 'manifold'. And in all systems this relation is viewed negatively, as something to be overcome: so the Buddha, for example, stated that his *dharma* is for those who delight in *nippapañca*, not *papañca*.¹⁹ All of this is consistent with the laconic declarations of chapter one.

¹ The obverse is not true: the world *could* be a plurality of discrete nondual experiences, and this in fact seems to be the Abhidharmika position.

² Nānananda's *Concept and Reality in Early Buddhist Thought* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1971) is devoted to an analysis of the role of *prapañca* (Pali, *papañca*) in the Pali suttas. Etymology yields *pra* + *√pañc*, 'spreading out' in the sense of expansion and manifoldness. Nānananda refers to its primary meaning as 'the tendency towards proliferation in the realm of concepts' (pp. 3–4), but this loses any direct relation to perception, whereas *prapañca* is used in the suttas to describe what happens in the later stages of sense-perception.

³ Mervyn Sprung, trans. and ed., *Lucid Exposition of the Middle Way* (Candrakīrti's *Prasannapadā*), (Boulder: Prajñā Press, 1979), p. 273.

⁴ Nānananda, chapter one.

But why do we name? What motivates us to carve up the Uncarved Block? This is explained in the next pair of lines:

Therefore always do not have intention in order to see the wonder
Always have intention in order to see the forms

More idiomatically: whenever you 'let go' of all intentions, you will experience the wonder; whenever you have intentions, you will see forms. These lines are the heart of the chapter. The parallel structure continues: the first concerns the Tao and the second refers to the manifold phenomenal world. This becomes evident when we clarify the meaning of the key terms. 'Wonder' is 眇 *miao*, also translated as subtlety (Wing-tsit Chan, following Wang Pi), secrets (D. C. Lau), and inner wonders (Charles Fu). What is unquestionable in all cases is that *miao* has connotations of spirituality and holiness; it refers to the 'spiritual' way of apprehending reality, which is the experience of Tao. 'Forms' is 敝 *chiao* which has also been translated in many different ways: outcome (Wing-tsit Chan), manifestations (Chang Chung-yuan), manifest forms (Lin Yutang), outer fringe (Giles), borders (Bodde), ultimate results (Waley), the obvious (Nagatomo). That the original image for *chiao* seems to have been 'edges' is felicitous to my interpretation, for how do we divide up the undifferentiated Tao into multiple forms? We distinguish one thing from another by de-termining it, in the etymological sense of perceiving where it terminates. The edge is where one object comes to an end and another begins. To de-fine something is to differentiate it from another form. But the Tao itself has no edges or borders; the Tao is in-finite and in-determinate, because it is all-encompassing and self-contained. So *miao* is a spiritual experience of the Tao, and *chiao* is the world experienced as a collection of discrete forms.

'Intention', 欲 *yü*, is often translated 'desire', but I think intention is to be preferred as more general and capturing a meaning that 'desire' misses – unless one understands the term broadly, as in 'desiring to do something'. Yet lines five and six are susceptible of an entirely different translation, according to how they are punctuated. If a comma is read between the *wu* and *yü*, rather than after the *yü*, they become:

Therefore let there always be non-being, so one may see the wonder
Let there always be being, so one may see the forms

The former version, using intention/desire, is more traditional, deriving ultimately from Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung. Wing-tsit Chan follows Wang An-shih and Su Ch'ê in preferring the latter: 'I have also departed from tradition because the idea of desires interrupts the thought of the chapter.'¹ But this, I think, misses Lao Tzu's point. As Chang Chung-yuan points out:

Su Ch'ê did not understand that through *wu yü*, or without intention or non-willing, one is freed from conceptualization and released to the total identity of the seer and

¹ *The Way of Lao Tzu*, p. 99.

the seen, which is the highest stage of the mystery of Tao... Then one will achieve what Taoists call '*Wu o chu wang*' or 'both things and myself are forgotten'. Once one is free from both subjectivity and objectivity, one can enter the gate of Tao.¹

Before elaborating on this, it is important to designate the limits of the controversy: *both* readings are possible because both are consistent with other claims made in subsequent chapters. More than consistent, both claims are essential to Lao Tzu's conception of the Tao. For example, chapters 11 and 40 both refer to non-being as in some sense prior to being;² and 'no intention' is emphasized in chapters 34 ('[The Tao] is always *wu yü*') and 37 ('If *yü* stirs, I will pacify it by the unnameable *p'o*'). So the controversy is reduced to the less significant issue of whether, as Wing-tsit Chan claims, the concept of desire/intention disrupts the meaning of *this* chapter. In what follows I am arguing that, on the contrary, *yü* as intention is essential for a full understanding of Lao Tzu's point.

Let me summarize where we are. What is it that keeps me from experiencing the 'wonder' (*miao*) of Tao? Lao Tzu has already pointed to names: in naming, I determine something as a thing, distinguishing it both from its contextual ground and from *me*, its 'grasper'. If the name itself is not part of the thing, but something subjective, then I do not apprehend just the thing, as it is in itself, when I see it *as* 'a pen' or *as* 'a cup'. But why do I name? What is the link between naming and intentions? Because, for one large class of things (or set of language-games), names imply functions. As Wittgenstein has shown, a name should not be understood merely as a label; rather, the meaning of a word is usually to be discovered in how it is used, or what 'form of life' it is part of. 'We may say: only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name.'³ When I see something *as* 'a pen', I am seeing it not merely as long and pointed but as something that can be *used* in a particular way. I understand the meaning of 'door' not by being able to give a verbal definition, but by being able to use it in the appropriate way for going in and coming out. So to understand that *that* (pointing) is a door includes understanding the function of a door, which defines my relationship with 'that'.

In looking about my office, I see many things – books, blackboard, cup, pens, chalk, chair, etc. To experience the room in this way (an effect of

¹ *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*, pp. 3–4.

² However, Lao Tzu's Non-Being should not be taken either in a Parmenidean sense or (what is more likely) as equivalent to the Mahāyāna *śūnyatā*; Nāgārjuna takes pains to distinguish *śūnyatā* from both being and non-being, which as relative to each other are both denied. A more fruitful interpretation of Lao Tzu's Non-Being is to see it as one way of making what Heidegger calls 'the ontological difference' between beings and Being.

³ *Philosophical Investigations* 1. 31. For a more general discussion of the parallels between Wittgenstein and Taoism see Russell Goodman, 'Style, dialectic, and the aim of philosophy in Wittgenstein and the Taoists', *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, III (1976), 145–57.

prapañca) is to perceive it as a set of things ready-to-hand to be used in the appropriate ways. Thus Heidegger's concept of *zuhanden*,¹ 'utensils', is also helpful here. In our usual day-to-day living what we immediately experience are not objects just 'simply there', but utensils available to be used. The full nondual presence of the pen is not perceived as it is in itself because 'I' am busy utilizing 'it' to write these words, and the paper is also not perceived fully but just utilized as something to write on, the desk is used to support the paper, the cup to drink from when I'm thirsty... As soon as I identify something as, for example, 'a piece of chalk', its function – that is, my relation with it, where it fits into my web of intentions – is established, and at that point I will usually put it in its 'place' and then pay no more attention to it until I need to write on the blackboard. Seeing in this way is something we have learned to do, although we are not usually aware of the fact. We are not normally conscious of the difference between that which is actually perceived by the eye, and the functions subjectively implied by the name; the two are experienced as a whole.² Only with the 'wondrous experience' of Tao do I realize that I have been seeing things *as*... rather than as they are in themselves, which is Tao.

Heidegger concludes that we most immediately experience the world as a 'totality of destinations' (purposes) which ultimately refers back to *me*. But it is important not to hypostatize this 'me'. If the Tao is nondual, it is not 'I' that name and intend, but rather the reverse: subjectivity – the sense of a subjective consciousness that is supposedly *doing* the seeing – arises because of the naming and intending. Without those activities – e.g. in Taoist 'mind-fasting' – the self evaporates.

If the above is true, and intentions are 'built into' language, then the concept of intention by no means interrupts the thought of the chapter, as Wing-tsit Chan claims; on the contrary, that becomes the critical point. To ignore this is to miss Lao Tzu's logic. The first two lines distinguish the ineffable Tao from the everyday world of named things; the second pair declare that the Tao is what everything really *is*, but that language splits up this whole by distinguishing one thing from another; the third pair explains *why* we name in connecting language with our web of intentional action, and further claims that we can return to the nondual experience of Tao by 'letting go' of our intentions.³

¹ See *Being and Time*, division one, part III, sections 15–16. In contrast to my use of the distinction, Heidegger views *vorhanden* objects, just 'lying there', as derivative from *zuhanden*; he saw his project in *Being and Time* as an attempt to overcome the error (prevalent since Parmenides) of basing a metaphysics upon *vorhanden*. Whether his later work after the *Kehre* is consistent with this is unclear to me.

² Wittgenstein reserved the term 'seeing... as' for more ambiguous types of seeing (e.g. the duck-rabbit). See *Philosophical Investigations* II. x. 1.

³ Such 'mind-fasting' is discussed in the *Chuang Tzu*, but there are only oblique references to meditation in the *Tao Tê Ching* – e.g. in chapter ten.

Having completed differentiating these two modes of experience, the next two lines emphasize their oneness:

These two things have the same origin
Although different in name

There is no specifiable difference between *nirvāṇa* and the everyday world, said Nāgārjuna; the limits of the one are also the limits of the other.¹ The same is true for the Tao and our world of multiplicity. They are the two ways of apprehending the same reality. To experience the wonder of Tao is to apprehend this reality nondually. To experience the world as we usually do is to perceive that reality fragmented into the ten thousand things, one of which is me, the subject as the first hypostatized object. There are other similarities between the Tao and the nondual Absolutes of Indian philosophy, but we should also notice an important difference. For Vedānta, ultimately only Brahman is real; the changing phenomenal world is eventually sublated as illusory *māyā*. Lao Tzu grants reality to the forms also, since the world of named things is one way the Tao manifests itself *to* – what else? – itself. Indian philosophy generally is more otherworldly in wanting to negate completely the phenomenal world for the sake of a pure Absolute, whereas the more pragmatic Chinese ideal, as in this chapter, is to understand the relation between both ways of experiencing so as to be able to move back and forth freely from one mode to the other.

Yet this very distinction between two modes of experience, and their subsequent identification, may be seen to be valid only from the perspective of one of those modes. That they are different only in name shows this, for names do not apply to the Tao itself. This means that the sage who is harmonized with the Tao will see only the Tao and everything as a manifestation of the Tao. One who has not realized the Tao may feel alienated from it, but from the sage's perspective there is always only the Tao and we have never been apart from it.

Their sameness is called the mystery
From mystery to further mystery: the gate of all wonder!

The relation between these two modes, the nondual Tao and named multiplicity, the fact that reality has two aspects and yet is one, is here declared to be a great mystery. Perhaps there is a hint too that this is an essential mystery which can never be fathomed. For in order to understand it, would we not need to stand outside the relation and see it objectively? And according to this chapter we cannot do that: there is no third mode other than these two.

It is perhaps appropriate here to say something about chapter two, since it may be seen to supplement chapter one. It must be no coincidence that

¹ *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* xxv. 19–20.

the two passages are placed next to each other, for they illuminate each other. Chapter two begins:

When all know beauty in its acting as beauty, then only is there ugliness
 When all know goodness in its acting as goodness, then only is there not goodness
 For being and non-being are produced together
 The difficult and the easy are perfected together
 The long and the short are shaped together... (etc.)¹

To identify something as beautiful implies that there is something else which is ugly and which it is differentiated from. There can be no long without a short, no difficult without an easy, no goodness without a not-good. We can never have one side of a duality without the other.

Chapter one designated naming and intending as that which differentiates the Tao into our everyday world of named things. Chapter two elaborates on that process. It is not only naming, with its implications of function – ‘pen, book, door’ – that is responsible for this differentiation. There is also dualistic thinking which divides those things-which-are-thought-about into two opposed categories. Such distinctions are usually made in order to choose one and dismiss the other, but Lao Tzu’s statements imply that their interdependence means we cannot have the one without being forced to cope with the other. To the degree that I want to be young, successful, and handsome, to that same degree I will fear being old, failing, and being unattractive. Thinking that ‘I’ am alive, I fear death. Yet, to use the Ch’an metaphor, we thus bind ourselves without a rope, for this distinction too is mental and part of our *prapañca*.

To conclude, I have argued that chapter one may be summarized into two categories. Lines one, three, five and seven describe the nameless Tao, the ground of heaven and earth, which is reality apprehended as a ‘spiritual’ whole. This occurs when one has no intentions, which means that there is no self in the usual sense; I have argued that such experience is nondual. Lines two, four, six and eight refer to the everyday world which is perceived as a collection of interacting but discrete things. We experience the world this way because of language and intention, which mental processes are not the activities that a self does but are rather what create and sustain the illusory sense of a self.

Only 59 Chinese characters are used to distinguish these two ways or modes of experiencing. In its combination of succinctness and profundity, I know of no equal to chapter one of the *Tao Tê Ching*.²

¹ My translation, following Chang’s *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*.

² I am grateful to Professor Cheng Hsueh-li, of the University of Hawaii at Hilo, for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. For discussions of other aspects of subject-object nonduality, see ‘The Difference between *samsāra* and *nirvāna*’ *Philosophy East and West* xxxiii. 4 (October 1983); ‘The Paradox of Causality in Madhyamika’ *International Philosophical Quarterly* xxv. 1 (March 1985); ‘The Mahayana Deconstruction of Time’ *Philosophy East and West* xxxvi. 1 (January 1986); and ‘Nondual Thinking’ *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, probably xiii. 2 (June 1986).