

The Art of Internal Observation and Panoramic Knowing: Laozi's *Classic on the Way of Virtues*

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The title of the *Dao De Jing* has been translated into many English versions. The word “*Dao*”(道) appears 74 times in the *Dao De Jing*. However, for this one term, there are different meanings in different sentences or chapters. Sometimes the *Dao* means the “way”, or “talk” or “speaking”; sometimes the *Dao* means the “origin” of everything, or “truth” or “principle” or “natural laws” of development of things or events. Given the content and the emphases of the *Dao De Jing*, the “Way” seems most appropriate for the title. The word “*De*”(德), is usually translated as virtue or moral character, such as kindness, compassion, benevolence, integrity, dignity, and so forth. This moral character, or “*Pin De*”(品德), is the foundation of internal cultivation. The structure of the Chinese character for *De* visually represents fourteen couples standing together with one heart and one mind; thus, the *De* represents the collective power of a team, or a group, or a family, or a corporation, or a community, or a country, and so forth. This oneness and collective power united with the higher consciousness of the universe is called *Xuan De*(玄德). However, according to Laozi’s teaching, any virtues you can have come only from following the *Dao*. Thus, all virtues are called “*Dao De*”(道德). It is impossible to miss the emphasis on virtue. And as “*Jing*” is fairly easy to translate with its English equivalent, “classic,” it seems most appropriate to give the *Dao De Jing* the English title *The Classic on the Way of Virtues*.

The *Dao De Jing* has 81 chapters with about 5,000 Chinese characters. There are two major divisions—the *Dao Jing* (chapters 1-37) and the *De Jing* (chapters 38-81) in the text of the *Dao De Jing*. Actually this division is somewhat arbitrary due to the synchronous functioning and interrelatedness of the *Dao* and the *De*; the *De* is

described in early chapters (such as chapters 10, 21, 24, 28) while the *Dao* is also mentioned in later chapters again and again.

The *De* is central to Laozi's teaching about the Way or the *Dao*, and the core teaching of the *Dao De Jing* is how to understand and follow the *Dao* for establishing virtues; much of the teaching of the *Dao De Jing* has been lost in translation in many versions of the *Dao De Jing* however, since most of its translators have not been, generally, well-versed in the tradition of internal cultivation. In this article, we will elucidate an interpretation of the *Dao De Jing* as a profound guidebook on the internal cultivation process and how the process of internal cultivation deepens, and communion with the *Dao* deepens, as a Way of virtues. In part one of this article we will present the text as a guidebook for internal cultivation; in part two our focus will be on the *Dao De Jing* as a guidebook for the development of virtues, and on how the virtues are the embodiment of realized *Dao*.

Part I The Way of Understanding the *Dao* **—Guidance for Internal Cultivation**

In the beginning of the *Dao De Jing*, Laozi comes straight to the point on the gate of the way in chapter one:

第 1 章 道之門

道，可道也，非恆道也。

名，可名也，非恆名也。

无，名萬物之始也。

有，名萬物之母也。

故恆无，欲也，以觀其眇；恆有，欲也，以觀其所噉。

兩者同出異名，同謂玄之。有玄，眾眇之門。

Translation: Chapter One—The Gate of the Way

*The “Way” (道, Dao or Tao) described here is different from any others
the name it is called here is also unique.*

“Wu” (无)—the state of emptiness (zero) is the beginning of everything;

*“You” (有)—the state of appearance of initial intelligence and thoughts (one) is the
origin of the manifestation of things.*

*The stable state of Wu is required for observing and revealing the secret of creation and
new developments; the stable state of You is required for observing and recognizing the
false and the true.*

*Both states, Wu and You, are called by different names but they both issue from the same
source called “Xuan” (玄)—the state of the golden secret of all life. The stable state of
Xuan (between zero and one) is the gate of internal cultivation and realization, as well as
external recognition and understanding.*

Comment

In the first chapter, Laozi clearly states that it is necessary to understand the importance of quiet sitting and internal observation. He suggests a door to explore in order to guide us to understand the Way during our quiet sitting and internal observation. Laozi emphasizes a unique method of learning and realization, which is to use our own body system inwardly instead of learning from the outside alone. Laozi had found that the dream system or state could be used proactively and consciously during quiet sitting and internal observation practice. The way to use the dream system is to calm down the very busy and chaotic intellectual activities first, and then to empty the thoughts from the mind until nothing's there—so that you are experiencing the state of “Wu.” Once you are experiencing this state of Wu, new thoughts and images will naturally arise in your mind. This appearance of the initial intelligence and thoughts and images in your mind is the state of “You.” At this stage, any thoughts and

images can be the root or the origin of the manifestation of things when a thought or an image lands on your mind powerfully. However, if you are just observing the thoughts and the images as they come and go without being attached to any of them, then more new thoughts or images rise up to the mind again and again and disappear again and again. So you can see many new possibilities and choices. Once your choice is made, the thought or image will be the beginning of the manifestation of things or events; it is also the beginning of the state of “You.” A profound discovery of Laozi was the state between the Wu and the You, called “Xuan.” He called the state of “Xuan” the door of the golden secret of all life, because this state allows the intellectual mind to integrate with the intuitive mind and the dream system. Once you are able to integrate your intellectual mind with the dream system consciously and proactively, you can experience a change in communication style—from local to non-local/ oneness with other people or with animals or with the universe. In other words, it’s like an individual computer getting on the Internet, and you are online with the Qi-net in the universe. Or, perhaps if the technological metaphor doesn’t quite do it justice, you could say that the collective conscious and unconscious become an accessible and experiential reality. In any event, Laozi tells us that we can learn the infinite intelligence by using our own internal energy-information system, as he describes in chapter 5:

第 5 章 守中

天地之間，其猶橐籥與？虛而不瀝，踵而俞出。

多聞數窮，不若守於中。

Translation: Chapter 5—Resting the Mind in Xuanzhong

May not the space between heaven and earth be compared to a bellows? It is empty, yet has not lost its power. The more it is used, the more it produces without limit. Erudite works can be learned through the eyes and the ears, but there are limitations--in both the way of learning as well as limited knowledge. It would be far better to keep the mind in the space of Xuan and to rest the mind in Xuanzhong (the internal bellows—the space

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between stomach and pancreas), to experience the infinite intelligence of heaven and earth and to realize the way of the universe.

Comment

Here Laozi shares his perspective and experience about the limitations of conventional styles of learning. In order to overcome the limitations of ordinary learning styles, you can use a new and unique way of learning—the internal energy-information system. How can you use your internal energy-information system? Laozi states: “Rest your mind on the Xuanzhong and your mind in the space of Xuan.” Where is the location of the Xuanzhong? Its corresponding location in the human body is in the center of the torso, between the pancreas and stomach and behind the acupuncture point R12 (Zhongwan). The space of Xuanzhong is like an internal bellows—it is empty, yet has not lost its power. The more it is used, the more it produces without limit. Once you are able to rest your mind on the Xuanzhong correctly and appropriately, you can log on to the internal energy-information system and integrate your intellectual mind with your intuition and dream system. Then it is possible to experience the infinite intelligence of heaven and earth and to realize the way of the universe, as Laozi relates in chapter 47:

第 47 章 弗爲

不出於戶，以知天下；不窺於牖，以知天道。

其出也遠，其知也少。

是以聖人，不行而知，不見而名，弗爲而成。

Translation: Chapter 47—Wu-Wei

With a unique way of knowing (resting your mind on Xuanzhong and keeping your mind in the state of Xuan), you can know what is happening all over the world without going out of doors; you can also understand the Dao, the natural laws in the universe without looking out of windows. In contrast, using the ordinary way of learning, the further you go the less you know. Thus with the way of quiet sitting and meditation,

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sages know things and events without going out; he or she can understand well without seeing by their eyes; they can have great achievement with “Wu-Wei” —without excess efforts and actions.

Comment

Everyone has natural talents and gifts within. For example some individuals may have strong intellectual power, some individuals may have great artistic ability, some individuals may have both or more. However, no matter what kind of talents and gifts you have within, if you focus only on the external world, you may lose the opportunity to develop and nourish your internal identity and genuine gifts and authentic talents. Laozi points out that if you are learning from the outside only, you might know yourself less and less. The way of intellectual learning is logical and reasonable but has a linear and localized nature. In contrast, the way of intuitive learning is panoramic and has a non-localized nature. Therefore, using the way of intellectual learning only, while you may know one specific area very well, you also may miss many important areas that are vital to you and your life.

Today, the conventional education system is built on academic study by intellectuals. Intellectual individuals are socially accepted and rewarded, but intuitive individuals are socially rejected in general. In other words, the current education style helps intellectuals discover and develop their natural talent. But this system does not generally do the same for intuitive individuals. Even though intellectual individuals are relatively accepted and rewarded by society, nonetheless the whole person lives with an extremely imbalanced and disharmonized condition. Laozi probably observed this phenomenon two thousand years ago. He had found a unique way of internal observation and learning that developed intuitive skills, which in turn balanced and harmonized the intellectual working style described above. His teaching is very inspiring and pertinent for us in our modern society and working environment with their emphasis on productivity and ever-increasing productivity at all costs.

In chapter 47, Laozi reveals his profound concept of “Wu-Wei.” The Chinese character “Wu” means “no or not or don’t.” The Chinese character “Wei” means “to do or to act out.” So “Wu-Wei” does indeed translate as “no action or non-action” as many scholars have rendered it before. However these literal translations do not adequately reflect Laozi’s notion or match his teaching about the way of virtues. In the text of the *Dao De Jing*, Wu-Wei does not mean no action or doing nothing or being totally passive or lazy, but not acting without knowing the natural course of the development of things or events. Wu-Wei is accomplishing the task with necessary effort only, without any excess actions. So, Wu-Wei does not mean being passive or being forceful or being aggressive, but it does mean to get things done skillfully in accordance with the Dao—the natural laws in the universe. Indeed, the meaning of Wu-Wei is a proactive and wise approach that comes of quiet sitting and internal observation and investigation. When you are able to keep still, you can see things clearly around you. For example, Laozi shares his experience in chapter 16:

第16章 觀復

至虛極也；守情表也。萬物旁作，吾以觀其復也。

Translation: Chapter 16—Internal Observation

During quiet sitting and meditation, when I reach the most profound state of tranquility I keep this state stable to observe the natural course of the development of things and events. In the deep state of tranquility, everything rises to the screen of the mind as though they are right beside me. So I can observe these phenomena repeatedly.

Comment

It takes practice and practice and practice to achieve the deep state of tranquility and to keep the state stable. This is a part of internal cultivation. With internal cultivation, practitioners are able to experience a state of peaceful mind and to understand the state of Xuan. Once an individual has experienced the state of Xuan and has been able to keep this state stable, she or he may gain experiential understanding of Wu-Wei. The internal realization of Wu-Wei enables

individuals to observe the natural course of the development of things and events. Thus she or he can understand the causes and roots of things and events—as expressions of the source of everything, the *Dao*, as Laozi describes in the chapters 4 and 21:

第4章 始宗

道沖而用之，有弗盈也；淵呵！始萬物之宗。

銚其兌，解其紛，和其光，同其塵。湛呵！似或存。

吾不知誰子也，象帝之先。

Translation: Chapter 4—The Source

The Dao is like an empty vessel that gives infinite possibilities of creation. Infinitely deep without bottom, it is the source of all things in the universe. The Dao restrains its sharpness and keeps its perfect order without any chaos. The Dao not only unites with the lights but also synchronizes with the vibrations of the body and all materials. How profound and superb the Dao is! The Dao is subtle but always present. I don't know who gave birth to it. It seems that the Dao is the source of everything in the world including the emperor and royal family.

第21章 道恒

道之物，唯恍唯忽。

忽呵恍呵，中有象呵！恍呵忽呵，中有物呵！

幽呵鳴呵！中有請也！其請甚真，其中有信。

自今及古，其名不去，以順眾父。

吾何以知眾父之然？以此。

Translation: Chapter 21—The Eternal Dao

The Dao is vague and subtle; it can be known and observed through the practice of quiet sitting and internal observation. During quiet sitting, it is seemingly vague and dim in

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the beginning, however with depth and progress of quiet sitting not only embodied images can be observed, but also specific things and events can be observed including everything in the universe. In the deep state of tranquility, profound and subtle movements and changes of life force can be observed as well. The movement patterns of life force changes can be trusted and observed repeatedly. From ancient times until today, the Dao has always existed, and it will never disappear. How do I know the roots and the nature of things and events? I just shared the way of knowing as described above.

Comment

The above chapters demonstrate Laozi's achievements in the art of internal observation. Laozi's achievements suggest that potentials of the human body—the intuition and dream system--can be developed with internal cultivation. It seems that these functions of the human body were well-developed in some individuals two thousand years ago. However, in today's world, the internal information system of the human body is not well-developed. Laozi tells us that the mind and the body have deeper and greater functions, and that many individuals would awaken to these functions if she or he would follow his way of practice. By following his way of practice, she or he would not only experience a more fully-functioning body, but also understand all that Laozi reveals in the text of the *Dao De Jing*. In Chapter 56, Laozi shares an important discovery about the way of knowing:

第56章 玄同

知者弗言，言者弗知。

塞其悶，閉其門，和其光，同其塵，

挫其兌而解其紛，是謂玄同。

Translation: Chapter 56—The Oneness

With internal experience, you know even without a word being spoken; without internal experience, you don't know, even when you are told. During quiet sitting, you stop talking, close the disturbance paths of eyes, ears, and nose, and then release the noise of

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your thoughts, calm down your mind and direct the mind inward to unite the inner lights and to synchronize with the signals of the body. This process of quiet sitting is called “Oneness”—“Xuantonng.”

Comment

In this chapter, Laozi describes the profound way of knowing, the state of oneness called “Xuantonng.” It could also be called “synchronicity,” “correspondence,” or “trinity—heaven and earth and human become one unity.” Once you have achieved the state of oneness, how could you *not* know the natural course of the development of things or events? But what does this knowing serve? What is the purpose of internal cultivation? In order to help people understand the importance of internal cultivation, Laozi raises some key questions for internal cultivators as he relates the cultivation process to the development of virtues.

Part II The Way of Establishing Virtues —Guidance for Application of the *Dao*

第10章 玄德

戴營抱一，能毋離乎？搏氣至柔，能嬰兒乎？

脩除玄藍，能毋疵乎？愛民恬國，能毋以知乎？

天門啓闔，能爲雌乎？明白四達，能毋以知乎？

生之、畜之，生而弗有，長而弗宰也，是謂玄德。

Translation: Chapter 10—The Virtue of Oneness

Synchronize your mind with the consciousness of your body until they become an integrated unity. Can you keep this united state stable without falling apart? Can you cultivate yourself with internal Qi as you become supple like a newborn child? Refine your mind and cleanse your body until all is completed. Can you keep this renewed state without blur? Can you love people and lead them in governing a country without

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forcing your will on them? When Heaven gives and takes away can you be content with the outcome like a quiet girl? When you understand all things can you step back from your own understanding? Give birth to life without wanting to possess them; take care of them without intention of controlling. This is called “Xuan De” — the virtue of oneness.

Comment

Laozi points out to internal cultivators that the goal of internal cultivation is not developing special abilities only. The most important aspect of internal cultivation is to establish virtues, and he provides a model of the venerable one who has attained “Xuan De.” But how are the virtues established? Laozi not only states the above in chapter 10, he also emphasizes the relationship between the *Dao* and the *De* in chapter 21:

第21章 唯道

孔德之容，唯道是从。

Translation: Chapter 21—Following the Dao

Any virtues you can have come only from following the Dao.

Comment

At this point, Laozi asserts that the establishment of virtues depends on following the *Dao* only. When you do not know the *Dao*, your actions may not follow the *Dao*; sometimes your act may even oppose the *Dao*. In other words, while you can accumulate virtues by following the *Dao*, you also can accumulate karma by opposing the *Dao*. When you act in accordance with the *Dao*, you accumulate virtues; when you act by opposing the *Dao*, you accumulate karma. Thus the first step in the course of internal cultivation is to achieve the Wu-Wei state. The Wu-Wei state enables you to observe and understand the *Dao*. Thus, in order to establish virtues, it is necessary to understand the *Dao* through internal cultivation. The *Dao* and the *De* nurture and sustain each other, and that is why it is important to establish the virtues, as Laozi reminds us again and again throughout the *Dao De Jing*, here in chapters 55 and 51:

第55章 厚德

含德之厚者，比於赤子。蜂地弗螫，鳥猛獸弗搏。
骨弱筋柔而握固。未知牝牡之合而媵怒，精之至也。
終日號而不嘎，和之至也。和曰常，知常曰明；
益生曰祥，心使氣曰強。
物壯即老，謂之不道，不道早已。

Translation: Chapter 55—Abundant Virtues

One who is filled with virtues is like a newborn child with profound protection: no poisonous insects will sting him or her; no wild beasts or clawing birds will attack him or her. The bones are soft, the tendons flexible, and the grip quite firm and powerful. He or she can cry all day and never become hoarse, because a perfect state of harmony exists within. A stable and well-harmonized inner state is called “Chang”—enduring. Understanding the way of the enduring is called “Ming”—enlightened. A long-lasting harmonized state benefits one’s health and quality of life, and is called “Xiang”—propitious. The mind enabled to direct the internal Qi flow is called “Qiang”—powerful. A little male child doesn’t know about the union of male and female and is without sexual desire, yet his penis can often stand erect without losing his power, because he is full of vital life force within. In contrast, a male adult may experience immediate decline when he reaches his strongest state, this phenomenon is called “Budao”—against the way of longevity. Against the way of longevity causes early aging and death.

第51章 玄德

道生之、德畜之；長之、遂之，亭之、毒之，養之、覆之。
生而弗有也，爲而弗寺也，長而弗宰也。此之謂玄德。

Translation: Chapter 51—The Virtue of Oneness

The Dao gives birth to life, and the De nurtures them, rears them and cultivates them. So,

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the De not only brings life to fruition and maturation, but also cares for them and protects them. The Dao gives them life without wanting to possess them; the De cares for them without expectation in return; nurtures them without intention of controlling. This is called “Xuande” — the virtue of oneness.

Comment

From Laozi’s perspective, the virtues are not only a protective force but also provide the nutrients and power for personal and spiritual growth and development. The Xuan De Laozi describes above would include a veritable catalogue of virtues, or spontaneous expressions of the Dao. One could see the Dao as a river, and the De as the road or path that also, spontaneously, occurs alongside the river.

Or perhaps Xuan De might look like a gemstone with facets labeled “detachment,” “humility,” “benevolence,” “generosity,” “appropriateness” — each expressed at the right moment in the right amount, all in the light of the Dao, with the material and with the knife of the Dao.

And what could be more natural than fostering Xuan De, the virtue of oneness, amongst all the others one is one with? In order to further the establishment of virtue, Laozi declares that the greater virtues may be established by sharing successful cultivation with family members, colleagues and other fellows in order to contribute to a better community. And, ultimately, that transformative power extends its reach, as he suggests in chapter 54:

第54章 修德

修之身，其德乃真；修之家，其德有餘；

修之鄉，其德乃長；修之邦，其德乃豐；

修之天下，其德乃博。

Translation: Chapter 54—The Cultivation of Virtues

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Cultivating the body within and developing the character is the way of building genuine virtues; if the way of the virtues can be practiced in a family, the virtues of its family will be more than sufficient; if the way of the virtues can be practiced in a community, the virtues of its community will be carried on; if the way of the virtues can be practiced in a country, the virtues of its country will flourish; if the way of the virtues can be practiced in the world, the universe will be filled with virtues.

Comment

From the view of internal cultivation, events in the world are the manifestations of the internal world. Similarly, peoples' lives are reflections and manifestations of internal consciousness. The history of China itself is like the transcription of a polygraph, as long periods of war and heavy taxation and social injustice are punctuated by periods of harmony and order and inspired expression in the creative arts. Indeed, when people's hearts are filled with harmony and peace and virtues, where could anger or violence come from? When we are living in a peaceful and harmonized environment, we view others and treat others with greater acceptance, as Laozi reflects in chapter 5:

第5章 不仁

天地不仁，以万物为刍狗；圣人不仁，以百姓为刍狗。

Translation: Chapter 5— No Preference

Heaven and Earth have no preference, but acknowledge the nature and the value of all things without exception; even ritual straw dogs, for example, have value in their application during ritual. Similarly the sages have no preference; they do not apply mere cultural or personal standards, and instead they acknowledge and value the nature and the quality of everyone in and of themselves.

Comment

Using heaven and earth as his example Laozi advises the leaders in the world, pointing out that it is necessary for leaders to recognize and acknowledge the nature and the quality of everyone in and of themselves in order to lead a

community or an organization, and so forth. The group will be vital and successful if everyone is positioned to pursue and express their natural gifts and talents. This will contribute to a happier, more vital and successful group enterprise.

Discussion:

Q: Regarding the relationship between internal cultivation/quiet sitting and the cultivation of virtue—is this something that happens automatically or only for those who have the right “bones,” or only for those who have been preparing for it by laying some sort of foundation for it?

A: It depends on how you look at. In one of many perspectives, everyone has their right “bones” if you want to them to be who they are. On the other hand, many people do not have the right “bones” if you use higher standards to measure them. However, the internal cultivation/quiet sitting and the cultivation of virtue can be a good practice for everyone to build up some sort of foundation. This kind of cultivation, it is not something that happens automatically in most cases except for some extraordinary inborn individuals.

Q: How do you get 14 people to stand together with one mind and one heart? What makes that happen? How does one begin to follow the Tao and accumulate virtue, whether it’s pin de or xuan de?

A: It depends on the people’s common interests and goals. Once you find some higher and noble purpose and goals, and you are able to communicate with people, you can get 14 people to stand together with one mind and one heart easily. The first step is to cultivate oneself to achieve the state of Wu-Wei and then to gain the experiential understanding of the Dao. Without understanding the Dao, people usually are not able to start to follow the Dao and accumulate real virtue consciously. Pin de comes from developing their personal character; xuan de comes from leading and serving the community or group correctly.

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Q: Does one have to be a virtuous person to gain access to the xuanzhong?

A: No. It is not necessary.

Q: How are developing and nourishing your internal identity and genuine gifts related to developing virtues and living in accordance with the Dao? What does this have to do with panoramic knowing? How is this related to acting by knowing the natural course of the development of events? Does one know this because one is virtuous or because one is sharp and clear? Is there a difference?

A: Internal cultivation helps people to recognize their internal identity and genuine gifts first. There are many different levels of Dao in the world and universe. It depends on which levels of Dao they want to follow. Panoramic knowing is very important to help individuals to get out from their intellectual box where they may have been trapped for a while. Intellectual sharpness is complementary with virtuous knowing.

Q: What about people who use internal cultivation for other purposes?

A: The Dao will respond to whatever they try to do. No one can get away from the work of the Dao.

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