

# **The Great Unity: Daoism, Nonhuman Animals, and Human Ethics**

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Save all that wriggles and runs, all the multitude of living beings. Allow them all to reach fulfillment and prevent them from suffering an early death.  
(Great Precepts of the Highest Ranks)

*Abstract:* This article explores Daoist teachings that are friendly toward nonhuman animals, focusing on philosophy and morality, including such central concepts as Dao, ci, jian, bugan wei tianxia xian, and wuwei, as well as Daoist understandings of unity, harmony, and ultimate integrity. Daoism teaches people neither to harm, nor to kill, and therefore anticipates a vegan diet.

## **Introduction**

Religions exist within cultures. Racist, sexist, and speciesist tendencies do not indicate a divine sanction of racism, patriarchy, or the exclusive importance of humans. While scriptural passages have been used to justify each of these practices, the preponderance of the world's great religious teachings speak against exploitation and cruel domination of any kind. This article exposes strongly animal-friendly teachings that lie at the heart of Daoism. This article does not discuss aspects of Daoism that might be considered unfriendly to nonhumans for three reasons. First, these arguments are easy to come by. Most people (whether in China or the U.S.) grow up believing that human exploitation of other creatures is religiously sanctioned. Most people within a given religion can and

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will readily provide a handful of worn-out justifications of the status quo—even of a diet that exploits other creatures—in spite of abundant, nutritionally sound, non-animal food options. I do not present these arguments because others can and will do so. People tend to defend their way of life, *whatever* that might be, even if their religion is rich with teachings to the contrary. Second, Daoist arguments posed in favor of exploiting nohumans—as in any religious tradition—are embarrassingly unconvincing in light of a richer understanding of religious teachings, writings, ideals, and exemplars, as I believe this article demonstrates. Arguments that support nonhuman exploitation tend to be both shallow and specific; they run counter to the deepest moral convictions of a religious tradition. Third, this article is quite long enough.

## **Daoist Philosophy and Morality**

### **Dao**

Daoism postulates no definitive, personal creator, no teleological goal, no intelligent design, and no judge to plan, punish, or even favor one activity over another. Dao simply “abides in all things” (Jochim, 1986: 8). Dao is

the final source and ground of the universe . . . . Dao runs through the whole universe and human life and is both the transcendent and the immanent. Therefore, as the model for human behavior and as the object of the ultimate concern of human beings, Dao is similar to God. The difference is that Dao has nothing to do with will, feelings, and purposes. (Xiaogan , 2001: 322–23)

Dao permeates all that exists. Dao is infinite, eternally changeless, nonbeing (Wu , 1991: 26–27). Dao is ultimate reality (Henricks, 1989: xviii). The Dao (or Way) is that reality, or that level of reality, that exists prior to and gave rise to all other things, the physical universe (Heaven and Earth), and all things in it . . . . The Way in a sense is like a great womb: it is empty and devoid in itself of differentiation, one in essence; yet somehow it contains all things in seed-like or embryo form, and all things “emerge” from the [D]ao . . . as babies emerge from their mothers . . . . But the Way does not simply give birth to all things. Having done so, it continues in some way to be present in each

individual thing as an energy or power, a power that is not static but constantly on the move, inwardly pushing each thing to develop and grow in a certain way, in a way that is in accord with its true nature. (Henricks, 1989: xviii–xix)

According to Zhuangzi, Dao is everywhere: in the ant, in the weeds, in “excrement and urine” (Chan, 1963, 203). Works attributed to Zuangzi note that “The Way [Dao] has never known boundaries” (Watson, 2009). Dao resides in every long-tailed shrike and Chinese sturgeon, every old deer and crested ibis (one of the most endangered birds in the world). Each creature shares Dao—the ultimate reality—and is shaped by Dao, moved by Dao. Dao thereby offers a measure of perfection and perfectibility to everything that exists, every skink and Chinese paddlefish (though apparently now extinct).

## Ci

Daoist philosophy harbors three important moral treasures: *ci* (compassion or deep love), *jian* (restraint or frugality), and *bugan wei tianxia xian* (“not daring to be at the forefront of the world”) (Kirkland, 2001:294; Xiaogan, 2001: 330). All three of these concepts are deeply interconnected, and together they provide powerful protection both for nature generally and for nonhumans specifically.

While the basic meaning of *ci* is love, “*ci* is deeper, gentler, and broader than love” (Xiaogan, 2001: 330). *Ci* manifests as “gentleness, motherly love, commiseration,” and is not limited to one’s own species (Xiaogan, 2001: 330). *Ci* requires “fostering life,” a concept that is central to Daoist morality. Consequently, Daoists ought to avoid harming any living being, even the wriggling worm. Daoism teaches respect for nature, which requires people to maintain habitat, where the channel Catfish and the Chinese water dragon live. The second to the last sentence in the *Daode jing* reminds readers, “The Way of Heaven is to benefit others and not to injure” (Chan , 1963:176).

## **Jian**

*Ci* and *jian* (restraint, frugality), practiced together, help people to live simply out of compassion—so that others can live without being harmed or crowded from the planet. Those who exemplify compassion live simply, avoiding the destruction of habitat, and do not exploit other lives for their purposes.

Daoist philosophy holds that the natural state is the ideal state, and teaches humans to behave in a way that is harmonious with that which is natural (Marshall, 1992: 19). Nature shows us how to live—the preferred way to live. Daoist philosophy discourages people from striving or grasping at material wealth, while encouraging people to live gently on the earth, causing little disturbance, taking our example from nature. To live with great aplomb—to draw attention or make a fuss—is the way of nature, and is not consistent with a long and peaceful life.

Nature says few words.  
For the same reason a whirlwind does not last a whole morning,  
Nor does a rainstorm last a whole day.  
If even Heaven and Earth cannot make them last long,  
How much less can man? (*Lao-Tzu* #23)

Nonhumans teach *jian*. They reveal that which is necessary to existence, and expose that which is superfluous (Anderson, 2001: 278). Zhuangzi criticizes the sacrifice of other animals as superfluous and frivolous, making fun of coveted and much revered Chinese ceremonies, blatantly pointing out that pomp and circumstance are not a fair trade for another creature's life. No amount of ritual balderdash justifies unnecessary killing. Like the sacrifice of other creatures, factory farming is not necessary. Exploiting nonhumans for profit is therefore not consistent with *jian*.

## **Bugan Wei Tianxia Xian**

*Ci* and *jian* stem from *bugan wei tianxia xian*: compassion for other creatures, and a life of restraint and frugality, stem from “not daring to be at the forefront of the world.” When we place ourselves in the forefront, we push other creatures to the back. If we imagine that our needs are more important than the needs of any other species, or any other individual, then our lives become cruel and exploitative. If we imagine ourselves to be superior to other creatures, we are likely to consider other creatures expendable, and exploit them for our purposes. *Bugan wei tianxia xian* helps us to take our humble place in the universe, allowing other creatures to do the same.

## **Transformation**

Daoism holds that no individual is isolated or enduring; everything that exists is part of a great and ongoing transformation (Thompson, 1996: 6). The constant flux of the universe ties each individual to all other beings, binding “all things into one, equalizing all things” (Chan, 1963: 177).

Every aspect of this great cosmos interacts and participates in a self-generating process of ever-fluctuating life (Tu, 1989: 67). Every part “of the entire cosmos belongs to one organic whole” that interacts as “one self-generating life process” (Tu, 1985: 35). No one stands outside of the great process of transformation; all of us are bits and pieces of everything else. “Now a dragon, now a snake, / You transform together with the times, / And never consent to be one thing alone” (Zhuangzi, in Parkes, 1989: 92). Our bodies are recycled back, after death, into the world of matter and life. The “chain of being is never broken,” and a link exists between each entity and every other entity, whether agamid lizard, euploea, human, or red-headed vulture (Tu, 1989:70). All things—all beings—are bound together by this transformation process, by coming and going from the same matter, from one Great Unity (Parkes, 1989: 91).

We may prefer not to see ourselves in nose-picking apes or scrapping children, we may prefer to envision ourselves as civilized, educated, mature, or highly intelligent, but at the end of the day, we are animals, creatures of the earth who decompose to become yet other elements of this ever-transforming cosmos. I am only Lisa Kemmerer for a handful of decades, but like all other beings who exist at this point in time, or who have ever existed, my being is forever part of this ever-transforming universe.

### **Unity of Being**

Ongoing, endless transformation results in Unity of Being. Every link in this web of life is critical to every other link; everything that exists in the universe is “intrinsically related to and thus constitutive of ‘self ’” (Ames, 1989: 120). In the words of Zhuangzi: “Although the myriad things are many, their order is one” (Chan , 1963: 204); “universe and I exist together, and all things and I are one” (Chan, 1963: 186). Humans, and all other aspects of this universe, are part of a much larger whole (Tu, 1989:74–75).

Daoism fosters a sense of self as an intimate part of a larger whole, in which people are of no greater importance than any other species (Thompson, 2006: 6). Everything that exists in this cosmos benefits all else, and no particular species or individual is favored in the impersonal process of transformation (Tu, 1989: 71–73). In the Daoist worldview, humans are “one of the myriad kinds of beings” (Wu , 1991: 37)—*only one* of the myriad kinds of beings. Each bar-tailed tree creeper and black spined toad is necessary to this larger whole, this Great Unity of Being (Tu, 1989: “The Continuity” 71). People and the mountain bamboo-partridge can *only* exist as part of this larger whole. Zhuangzi notes “Heaven and earth are one attribute; the ten thousand things are one horse. . . . For this reason, whether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Hsi-shih, things ribald and shady or things grotesque and strange, the Way [Dao] makes them all into one” (Watson, 2009).

## **Harmony, Ultimate Integrity and Peace**

Harmony is central to Daoism. The Daoist universe is ordered—harmonious—so that “alternating forces and phases” shape “rhythms of life” (Kleeman, 2001: 67). Harmony pervades the cosmos, which *is* union, integration, and synthesis, rather than exclusivity, individuality, and separation. Humans sometimes make the mistake of getting caught up in their individual lives, like a wave tearing across the ocean; Daoism discourages such a shortsighted lifestyle, instead encouraging *bugan wei tianxia xian*—a life harmonious, mindful that our short existence is part of a great and ongoing transformation. Shallow, human disharmony stems from the error of neglecting, or forgetting, our deeper, shared unity with the larger world. In contrast, harmony is envisioned as reaching the depths of quietude on the ocean floor. However much we might behave like an independent wave, we are the ocean, the Great Unity, along with the rest of nature, which functions in harmony. Spiritual advancement requires people to *know* and *act* on this understanding. It is our duty to live “for the fulfillment of the health and harmony of all living things” (Kirkland, 2001: 296). Harmony is the Chinese ideal.

Daoist writings envision a time of harmony, somewhere in the future, when the various communities of varied species will live together in peace. Zhuangzi notes: “Left to their own devices, human beings and animals would form harmonious natural communities” (Mair, 1994b: 80). If people would leave other beings alone, as we ought, we would live in a golden age of “ultimate integrity”—side by side, together and separate. In this world nonhumans would not fear humans, nor would they be domesticated. Writings of Zhuangzi state:

In such an age mountains have no paths or trails, lakes no boats or bridges. The ten thousand things live species by species, one group settled close to another. Birds and beasts form their flocks and herds, grass and trees grow to fullest height. So it happens that you can tie a cord to the birds and beasts and lead them about, or bend down the limb and peer into the nest of the crow and the magpie. In this age of Perfect Virtue men live the same as birds and beasts, group themselves side by side with the ten thousand things . . . . In uncarved simplicity the people attain their true nature. (Watson, 2009)

## **Wuwei**

The Daoist concept of *wuwei* dovetails with *jian* (restraint, frugality), *bugan wei tianxia xian* (not daring to be at the forefront of the world), and the Daoist conception of harmony. *Wei* refers to “human action intending to achieve results,” and more specifically results thought to be “superior to what would result if nature were simply allowed to take its own course” (Kirkland, 2001: 295). *Wu* is a prefix that negates what comes after. Therefore, *wuwei* means “not to engage in human action intending to achieve results superior to those that would naturally occur.” *Wuwei* is generally translated as nonstriving, acting without acting, nonaction, or perhaps most appropriately, “action as non-action” (Xiaogan, 2001: 316).

*Wuwei* “refers to a higher standard of human actions and their results,” instructing practitioners to abandon human intrigue and live “in accordance with nature” without attempting to control or change the surrounding world or other creatures (Xiaogan, 2001: 315–316). *Wuwei* is consistent with our ordinary place in a much larger universe, it is consistent with keeping a low profile and maintaining harmony. In the *Daode jing*, the greatest accomplishment is no accomplishment.

[T]he sage desires to have no desire.  
He does not value rare treasures.  
He learns to be unlearned, and returns to what the multitude has missed  
([D]ao).  
Thus he supports all things in their natural state but does not take any action.  
(*Lao-Tzu* #64)

Dao functions by *wuwei*; to practice *wuwei* is therefore to behave according to Dao (Xiaogan, 2001: 323). The *Daode jing* reminds Daoists to keep “hands off the processes at work in the world” because the world is a “spiritual vessel, and one cannot act upon it; one who acts upon it destroys it” (Kirkland, 2001: 296). “[D]ao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone” (Henricks, 1989:37).



*Wuwei* advocates living “in harmony with . . . all other creatures” (Kinsley, 2001: 79). Acting without action embodies “the spirit of naturalness,” which coincides with harmony and is “directed toward the realization of natural harmony both among human societies and between humans and nature” (Xiaogan, 2001: 321).

Dao represents forever the unknown final reason of the world surrounding us, reminding human beings of their limitations. As average members of the . . . universe, humans have no power to do what they wish without facing unexpected consequences. Therefore, prudent behavior and action, namely [*wuwei*] are important and beneficial. (Xiaogan, 2001: 232–34)

Humans are not to dominate or control. Zhuangzi writes:

“What do you mean by Nature and what do you mean by man?” . . .

“A horse or a cow has four feet. That is Nature. Put a halter around the horse’s head and put a string through the cow’s nose, that is man. Therefore it is said, “Do not let man destroy Nature.” (Chan, 1963: 207)

In this great sage’s view, training horses is an interference that turns happy equines into “brigands” and ultimately destroys their lives (Mair, 1994b: 82):

Horses’ hooves are made for treading frost and snow, their coats for keeping out wind and cold. To munch grass, drink from the stream, lift up their feet and gallop this is the true nature of horses. Though they might possess great terraces and fine halls, they would have no use for them.

Then along comes Po Lo.

“I’m good at handling horses!” he announces, and proceeds to singe them, shave them, pare them, brand them, bind them with martingale and crupper, tie them up in stable and stall. By this time two or three out of ten horses have died. He goes on to starve them, make them go thirsty, race them, prance them, pull them into line, force them to run side by side, in front of them the worry of bit and rein, behind them the terror of whip and crop. By this time over half the horses have died. (Watson, 2009)

*Wuwei* reminds that nature requires no changes or refinements, and that any such attempts will only lead to ruin (Kinsley, 1995: 80). The *Daode jing* notes that “Racing and hunting cause one’s mind to be mad” (#12) and that “Fish should not be taken away from the water” (#36) (Chan , 1963: 145, 157). Breeding to acquire fatter cattle, debeaking, artificial insemination, and genetic manipulation are all examples of *wei*—“human action intending to achieve results,” thought to be “superior to what would result if nature were simply allowed to take its own course” (Kirkland, 2001: 295). The Daoist practitioner allows for the ongoing harmonious unfolding of the universe, where “everything develops or is accomplished naturally” (Xiaogan, 2001: 321). Daoist traditions teach that what is natural is ideal. Other creatures (like people) are best left in their natural state (Anderson, 2001: 279).

Humans sometimes imagine that wild critters are better off in human care, where food and water are abundant. Of this, Zhuangzi writes that the “swamp pheasant has to walk ten paces for one peck and a hundred paces for one drink, but it doesn't want to be kept in a cage. Though you treat it like a king, its spirit won't be content” (Watson, 2009). Though the wild pheasant must work for water and food, such menial tasks are natural—they are the pheasant’s life, the pheasant’s *te*, the pheasant’s Dao. The wilds are where such fowl belong, and in Daoist philosophy, where the pheasant will always prefer to remain. Even if we imagine that we improve the lives of other animals, our meddling in their lives is harmful.

*Wuwei* speaks against development and meddling with natural wild populations to benefit human interests, such as the interests of hunters or ranchers. *Wuwei* requires human beings to leave other creatures alone (Kinsley, 1995: 79), and *wuwei* reminds people that the only “wise and beneficent behavior” for humans—the only way to achieve harmony—is *bugan wei tianxia xian* and *jian*, “humble and enlightened self-restraint” (*jian*) (Kirkland, 2001: 296). Daoist wisdom reminds people of their limitations, and instructs people to be mindful (if not leery) of factory farming and other meddling with the planet and nonhumans (Xiaogan, 2001: 232). What do we know of the unfolding of

the universe? How often have humans discovered too late the ill effects of their manipulations?

### **Daoist Precepts—Do Not Kill or Harm**

Daoism speaks clearly against killing, and provides a “universalistic ethic” that extends “not only to all humanity, but to the wider domain of all living things” (Kirkland, 2001: 284). Daoist precepts specifically promote “compassion, empathy, and kindness” toward other creatures (Kohn, 2004: 71). For example, the *Record of Purgations of Precepts* (8<sup>th</sup> century) teaches Daoists to be compassionate, nurturing, caring, and selfless “for the sake of all beings” (Kohn, 2004: 68). The first precept of *The Scripture of the Ten Precepts* (5<sup>th</sup> century) requires Daoists to be “always be mindful of the host of living beings” (Kohn, 2004: 185). Nonhumans are explicitly protected by a multitude of Daoist precepts, lists of rules which define “who Daoists [are] and where they fit into the greater network of society, world, and cosmos” (Kohn, 2004: 135).

The many lists of Daoist precepts are generally very similar, usually containing five foundational precepts, the first of which is an injunction not to kill (Kohn, 2004: 67). For example, *The 180 Precepts of Lord Lao (Yibaibashijie, 5<sup>th</sup> century)* is one of the oldest Daoist compositions and remains foundational to Daoism; other “extensive community codes recapitulate its rules in one form or another” (Kohn, 2004: 137). The Daoist injunction against killing is repeated frequently in *The 180 Precepts* in varied forms, warning against “killing in general, killing birds, killing animals, eating meat, [and] eating animal flesh” (Kohn, 2004: 136). Additionally, *The 180 Precepts* warn against harming other creatures, whether insects, birds, or mammals, whether by disrupting their homes, destroying their families, or abuse and overwork (Schipper, 2001: 84–85):

1. Do not keep many animals . . . .
4. Do not kill or harm any being . . . .
8. Do not raise pigs or sheep . . . .
24. Do not . . . eat meat . . . .
39. Do not engage in killing . . . .

- 40. Do not encourage others to kill . . . .
- 49. Do not step on or kick . . . domestic animals . . . .
- 79. Do not fish or hunt and thereby harm and kill the host of living beings. .
- 95. Do not in winter dig up insects hibernating in the earth . . . .
- 97. Do not wantonly climb trees or plunder nests and destroy birds' eggs . . .
- 98. Do not catch birds or beasts in cages or nets.
- 129. Do not wantonly whip the six domestic animals.
- 130. Do not ride a horse or drive a carriage without good reason . . . .
- 132. Do not startle birds or beasts . . . .
- 142. Always be mindful of purity and remember the divine law, honor the pure and wise, and [sparingly] eat like a deer and drink like cattle . . . .
- 150. Always diligently avoid being cruel . . . .
- 172. If someone kills birds and beasts, fish or other living beings for you, do not eat them.
- 173. If something has been killed for food, do not eat it . . . .
- 176. To be able to cut out all meat of living beings and the six domestic animals is best; without doing this, you will violate the precepts.
- 180. Practice these precepts without violation, and if you violate one make sure you repent properly. Then change your behavior . . . . [W]idely pursue the salvation of all beings. (Kohn, 2004: 137-144)

Interestingly, *The 180 Precepts* “specifies particular situations in which killing might be indicated but should not be pursued” (Kohn, 2004: 36). For example, #172 and #173 indicate that eating flesh is inadmissible *even if*, as a guest, one is served the wings of a hen or part of a pig’s leg. To eat flesh is to “violate the precepts” (Kohn, 2004: 144).

Similarly, *Precepts of the Highest Lord Lao* (sixth century) state: “The precept to abstain from killing means that you must not kill any living being, . . . be it flying or merely wriggling” (Kohn, 2004: 148). *The Precepts of the Three Primes* (medieval) specifically denounces slaughtering domestic beasts and also forbids killing any living beings (#68), shooting wild beasts and birds (#69) setting traps to catch fish (#71), and setting fires to hunt (#70) (Kohn, 2004: 137-144).

*Great Precepts of Self-Observation* (sixth century) also forbid harming nonhumans, including harm caused by raising “domestic animals” (#33), destroying small creatures by burning (#39), riding horses or using carriages (#138), startling nonhumans or digging them out of the earth (#146), or capturing wild beasts or birds and putting them in cages

(#153) (Kohn, 2004: 205-211). This same text contains equally clear prohibitions against harming wild lands—habitat.

Chinese precepts tend to be stated in the form of prohibitions, but *The Great Precepts of the Highest Ranks* (5<sup>th</sup> century) offers a list of affirmative actions under the title of “The Highest Precepts of Wisdom for the Salvation of All Living Beings.” Three out of six of these precepts focus on *munificence* in our interactions with nonhumans:

Precept 4. Give wisely to the birds and beasts, to all species of living creatures. Take from your own mouth to feed them, let there be none left unloved or not cherished. May they be full and satisfied generation after generation. May they always be born in the realm of blessedness.

Precept 5. Save all that wriggles and runs, all the multitude of living beings. Allow them all to reach fulfillment and prevent them from suffering an early death. May they all have lives in prosperity and plenty. May they never step into the multiple adversities.

Precept 6. Always practice compassion in your heart, commiserating with all. Liberate living beings from captivity and rescue them from danger. (Kohn 175)

The explicit goal of these precepts is to “help all living beings realize the Dao” (Kohn, 2004: 168). The previously mentioned *Great Precepts of Self-Observation* also require adherents to “place the myriad beings first and not . . . attain the Dao only for” oneself (Kohn, 2004: 215).

The Daoist school of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen) gained state sanction under the rule of the Mongol, Genghis Khan, in the thirteenth century, and soon became the leading branch of Daoism. Complete Perfection has remained China’s “major monastic organization” ever since (Kohn, 2004: 134). This Daoist order maintains “strong continuity” with earlier “Daoist ethics and behavior models” and exemplifies core Daoist teachings, nourishing and protecting all that exists in the larger world (Kohn, 2004: 134).

Wang Konyang (1622-1680), of the Complete Perfection branch of Daoism, compiled manuals and precepts that remain “an indispensable means to enlightenment and an important element in the education of the Daoist clergy” in contemporary society (Kohn, 2004: 253). In traditional Daoist style, the initial precept in his *Precepts of Initial Perfection* require that members “not kill any living being” (Kohn, 2004: 255). The precepts that follow reiterate this primary law: “Do not kill or harm anything that lives in order to satisfy your own appetites [22a]. Always behave with compassion and grace to all, even insects and worms” (Kohn, 2004: 255, 256).

## **Diet**

The Ten Precepts of Initial Perfection forbid monks from partaking of flesh (Kohn, 2004: 256). In *The Great Precepts of Self-Observation*, among thoughts that one ought to cultivate, the first is a commitment to vegetarian food (Kohn, 2004: 214). Ko Hung (fourth century) wrote that adherents ought to “entirely abstain from flesh” (Thompson, 1996: 85). Given the above precepts, many of which explicitly denounce eating flesh under any circumstances, it is not surprising that Daoist monks continue to enjoy a peaceful life fueled by a fleshless diet.

Monastic practice forbids violence of any kind, including killing and the taking of flesh (Kohn, 2004: 50). Monastery meals consist “largely of rice, wheat, and barley, combined with various vegetables and tofu. In Daoist religious literature, meat is not even mentioned among the five main food groups” (Kohn, 2004: 51). Members and leaders of the school of Complete Perfection continue to live in wild places, embracing Daoist simplicity and celibacy, and maintaining a vegan diet (Komjathy, 2009 *forthcoming*).

Generally speaking, the dishes tend to be simple combinations of vegetables with minimal amounts of seasoning, supplemented with rice, millet, or *mantou* (steamed buns). At times, one also finds *doufu* (tofu). Generally speaking, monastic meals go beyond modern conceptions of “vegetarianism”; they are vegan (no eggs or dairy products).

Historically speaking, dairy products have always been scant in China, so the avoidance of eggs is most noteworthy. (Komjathy, 2009 *forthcoming*)

Daoist ritual purity also “requires the avoidance of animal slaughter and blood sacrifice”—not just on the altar, but on the kitchen counter (Komjathy2009 *forthcoming*). Daoists stand before the universe as a sacred vessel filled with the numinous presence of the Dao; ritually-informed Daoist vegetarianism extends Daoist views of cosmic harmony and “salvation” to include all sentient beings. In such a place of reverence and realization, one discovers that the altar is simultaneously temple platform, celestial locale, mountain peak, and internal center . . . . The altar is simultaneously in the world and in the self. (Komjathy,2009 *forthcoming*)

If bloodshed is spiritually impure, spiritual impurities *within* our bodies, the bodies in which we live and express our spiritual lives, prevent eating of flesh, or other body products inevitably linked with slaughter in Western markets, such as dairy and eggs. Daoism teaches of a “subtle body” an “energetic ‘body’ within the body,” which requires “attentiveness to what one ingests and circulates” (Komjathy2009 *forthcoming*).

This Daoist view has clear implications for sentient beings through vegetarianism: what one ingests is what one is. To consume the meat of slaughtered animals is to make suffering, injury, and violent death part of oneself. Such is not the practice of priest or immortal; such is not the practice of “adepts *of* the Dao” or realized beings. (Komjathy2009 *forthcoming*) Louis Komjathy, a contemporary Daoist scholar and practitioner, practicing for fifteen years, is ordained in the order of Complete Perfection, and is also an academic who focuses on the subject of Daoism. He notes that:

“(F)or *anyone* who claims to have ecological commitments or environmental concerns, vegetarianism is a *minimal requirement*” and that “‘animal industries’ should be systematically undermined and eventually extinguished through a shift in consumption habits” (Komjathy2009 *forthcoming*):

Anyone who understands the realities of modern slaughterhouses (“meat-packing plants”) and still has access to the core goodness of innate nature, the Dao made manifest in/as/through us, will accept the responsibility of vegetarianism . . . . The consumption of meat enmeshes one in an interconnected system of suffering, exploitation, and murder. One’s lack of direct killing does not lessen one’s karmic involvement in slaughter. The actual, personal consequences of that involvement will differ for each person, but the consequences for the animals involved (human and non-human), for society, and for the world, are clear.

One consequence is suffering. This suffering is clearly audible, as is the inner call to relieve suffering. The choice of compassion for sentient beings, especially those who are unheard and unseen, has other effects: one begins to free oneself from karma; one becomes part of a different community, lineage, and reality, a community in which reverence, sacred presence, and energetic aliveness are nourished and expressed. One’s decision to rectify detrimental patterns and to cultivate beneficial patterns may also exert a transformative effect on one’s family, community, and society. (Komjathy, 2009 *forthcoming*)

Komjathy views “all of life as a ‘ritual process,’ as a form of *communitas* and as an expression of reverence for the sacred” (Komjathy 2009 *forthcoming*). By choosing what he eats, he frees not only nonhumans who are confined and prematurely killed, but also those who confine and kill such creatures. Komjathy views this as a spiritual process:

Liberating oneself from a context of violence liberates those who inflict violence, those upon whom the violence is inflicted, and every being entangled in this pattern of distortion. Such are the perils of domination and domestication. Through dietary shifts, one becomes less material and more rarified. Through a process of cosmicization, a state of trans-personal interconnection develops; one abides in the primordial undifferentiation of the Dao in which personal selfhood and selfish desires disappear, and beings are able to abide in their own natural places. (Komjathy, 2009 *forthcoming*)



## **Kinship and Community**

Daoism teaches that all creatures share “the numinous presence of the Dao” (Komjathy 2009 *forthcoming*). We are one community in Dao, which “abides in all” (Jochim, 1986 8). Of “Daoist Truths,” Wang Chong wrote in the first century CE, “Man is a creature . . . ; his nature cannot be different from that of other creatures” (Mair, 1994a 65–66). Daoist traditions do not envision a “barrier between people and animals, or, more generally, between humanity and nature . . . . In a deep and basic sense, *Dao* unites humans and animals, and teaches us to treat them with respect” (Anderson, 1989: 286). In the Daoist worldview, human beings “experience nature from within” (Tu, 1989: 77).

Zhuangzi understood that nonhumans, while unique individuals, are also our kin; they share consciousness, and experience life similarly to how we experience life. There is a specific experience in being a butterfly, according to Zhuangzi, and also in being human. There is also *shared* experience between the different species, and constant transformation provides a certain ambiguity about individual existence that might keep us guessing who we are at any one moment.

Zhuangzi’s writing indicates that there is enough commonality between species to have a strong sense of what other creatures prefer (Anderson, 2001: 278). A love of freedom, and life itself, reaches across species, and this shared interest in life is an excellent guide for understanding the preferences of others. While we cannot assume that a bird likes music, we can be absolutely certain that a bird prefers life to death, freedom to confinement, and health and welfare to injury and illness. Northern snakehead fish, human beings, hill mynas, and water deer share a preference for remaining alive, free from pain, and in a state that is natural to their species—to their *te*. Subduing or training other beings is inherently harmful and cruel. Freedom—the ability to live one’s life without disturbance or the control of another—is understood to be no less ideal for horses than it is for human beings (Anderson, 2001: 278). If “taming” other creatures doesn’t turn them into brigands, Zhuangzi suggests, it will kill them. In our love of freedom and

autonomy, we are kin. Each creature prefers to be what he or she is born to be—what is natural, to follow Dao—and not to be exploited for the purposes of others.

Zhuangzi expresses this viewpoint with characteristic humor, explaining how he refused an invitation to become a powerful administrator, which he recognized would bring fame and notoriety, but not happiness. He responds to the invitation by comparing himself to a long dead but much venerated tortoise:

"(w)ithout turning his head, [Zhuangzi] said "I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Ch'u that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honored? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud?"

It would rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud," said the two officials. [Zhuangzi] said, "Go away! I'll drag my tail in the mud!" (Watson, 2009)

Zhuangzi understood that animals—human and otherwise—share fundamental qualities, but he also understood that no two species are identical, and that even within one species, no two individuals are identical. All living beings share the quality of individual uniqueness within the larger community. Zhuangzi takes this wonderful ambiguity of kinship and difference yet one step further in a story where he and a disciple are standing on the bridge over the river Hao, observing the fishes:

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Chuang Tzu said, "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!"

Hui Tzu said, "You're not a fish - how do you know what fish enjoy?"  
Chuang Tzu said, "You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?"

Hui Tzu said, "I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish - so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!"

Chuang Tzu said, “Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy - so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao.” (Watson, 2009)

In this beautiful and tricky bit of writing, Zhuangzi indicates “that people and fish share enough basic similarity that humans can understand them” (Anderson, 2001: 278). In this story, Zhuangzi highlights shared creatureliness (Anderson, 2001:278). Zhuangzi’s fleeting interaction over the river Hao leaves readers aware that there is something questionable about challenging anything so obvious as another person’s ability to understand or relate to shared creatureliness in a fish or any other nonhuman. Indeed, writings attributed to Zhuangzi encourage people to take the point of view of others, including the point of view of nonhumans. Zhuangzi also indicates that to lack this ability, or to doubt this ability, is a spiritual failure.

Other creatures play an important role in Daoist literature, where they are understood to be similar enough to humans for great spiritual adepts to draw meaningful parallels across species (Anderson, 2001: 165–66). All beings share the Dao, which abides in all beings (Komjathy, 2009 *forthcoming*).

## **Conclusion**

Daoism encourages people to love deeply and live compassionately (*ci*), to exercise restraint and frugality (*jian*), to seek harmony, and practice *wuwei*. Daoist philosophy teaches that the great transformation brings about a Great Unity, in which all things are part of one organic whole. Zhuangzi highlights basic similarities between humans and nonhumans, and encourages people to treat other beings thoughtfully. Daoist precepts speak often and strongly against harming living beings, whether by disturbing their homes or eating their bodies.

In a world in which religious leaders and the bulk of religious adherents overwhelmingly support the status quo – institutionalized exploitation of nonhumans – it is remarkable

that more animal activists do not look deeply into their religious traditions to discover animal friendly teachings. The world's largest religions, at their heart, encourage adherents to live gently, and to understand their place in the world not as exploiters, but as a small and humble part of much larger, and more important, spiritual whole. Daoism is but one example of strong animal-friendly tendencies in the world's great religions.

### **Key Authors and Texts**

There are two key authors/texts that are critical to studying Daoism. In each case the author and the text share a name, and the author is merely assumed, and not certain:

The most important author is the pseudo-historical Laozi (sixth century BCE), considered the founder of Daoism, and assumed author of the text which has been given his name, *Lao-Tzu*. Zhuangzi was a Daoist mystic, second only to Laozi in importance, and the assumed author of the *Zhuangzi* (fourth century BCE).

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