

Deqing Explains the Daode jing

Chapter 1

This section explains the form and utility of the Dao, as well as the techniques for entering into the Dao. Laozi's learning is all poured forth here. Although there are over 5000 words, what he wants to lay out is laid out here.

“The Dao that can be named is not the eternal name” means that the eternal Dao has neither form nor name and cannot be spoken. “The names which can be spoken are not eternal names” means that which can be explained is not the eternal Dao. Now, since the Dao has no name, we are forced to name it the Dao. From this we know that all that can be named takes only false, borrowed names. These two lines give the form of the Dao.

But the formless, nameless Dao, though its form is complete emptiness, issues forth heaven and earth through transformation. Thus he writes “The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth.” Thus the formless, nameless Dao fully forms the formed and named – heaven and earth. Moreover, all existence is born from heaven and earth, yin and yang. Thus “one gives birth to two; two gives birth to three; three gives birth to the ten-thousand things,” thus “the named is the mother of the ten-thousand things.” These two lines explain the utility of the Dao.

The next two lines give the techniques for entering into the Dao. Laozi proclaims: “Daily [=commonly] I let my heart/mind rest in nothingness, wanting thereby to observe the wondrous aspects of the Dao.¹ Daily I let my mind rest in existence, wanting thereby to observe the limits of the Dao's actions.” This means that, since the completely vacant, empty Dao forms the named things of the world, the whole body of the Dao exists in every single thing. It is truly said that each thing is the Grand Ultimate. Thus by daily using what is before us – each thing and each event – we can see the actuality of the Dao. Nothing we meet will lack the Dao. Thus Zhuangzi said: “The Dao is in the grass and weeds; the Dao is in the piss and shit.” If one observes deeply in this way, one observes the wondrousness of the Dao.

The double use of the word “observe” is of extreme importance. That the action is the same in both instances dissolves our doubts and reveals the wondrous. But Laozi feared that later students would think that the two “observations” (of nothingness and of existence) are two opposite extremes and so he wrote “these two are one.” What he means is that when I observe nothingness, I do not only observe nothingness but also observe the wondrousness within this nothingness that creates and gives birth to things. And, when I observe existence, I do not only observe existence, but also observe the wondrous principles of the Dao that hover over the appearance of existence. This is why observing nothingness and observing existence are the same thing.

But Laozi also feared that later students would think that, since the two are the same, it is useless to give them two distinct names. This is why he explains with the words “once they come forth, they differ.” What he means is that the empty and vacant Dao gives birth to heaven, earth, and the ten-thousand things. Being cannot give birth to being; only nothingness can give birth to being. And nothingness cannot issue from nonbeing; being is needed to manifest nothingness. Because of these two truths, we know that being and nothingness give birth to each other. They thus need two names.

Then, Laozi feared that later people, having the opposition of being and nothingness that do not form one body, would wonder how we can call them the “wondrous Dao.” Thus, he

¹¹¹¹¹ The ancient Chinese believed that the heart was the center of cognition, emotion, and desire. I will below translate “mind” since Deqing seems most interested in mental states.

explained that “together, we call them a mystery.” He means that heaven and earth have the same root; the ten thousand things share the same body. Having examined to this extent, does one not observe the wondrous?

Laozi finally feared that later students would not be able to cleanse their mystical vision, thus he urged them on by saying “make it mysterious and again mysterious.” What he meant was that even though one achieved equal observation of nothingness and being, if one cannot forget the mind and obliterate its traces, one could not reach the ultimate wondrousness. They would thus never know that the body of the Dao not only transcends the names of being and nothingness, it even transcends traces of its mysterious wondrousness. When one’s meditative skill reaches this level, one forgets thought and sinks into things, achieving wondrousness no matter where one goes. This is called “the gate of the myriad wonders.” This is the ultimate in the pursuit of the Dao. How is it something that those who mince words could ever achieve? To put it simply: One must complete the delicate work and only then can one see the wondrousness in it.

Chapter 3

This chapter speaks of how worldly people struggle to engage in purposeful activity. Valuing fame and profit, they suffer injury brought on by desire. This chapter teaches the ruler a method for governing them as a way of demonstrating the real efficacy of practicing undirected activity and spreading the wordless teaching. “Valuing the worthy” means delighting in fame. Fame is the beginning of struggle, thus the saying “struggling for fame in the court.” So, if his highness did not value fame, people would certainly not struggle. “Valuing goods that are difficult to obtain” means valuing profit. Profit is what summons the robber. If his highness did not value profit, the people would naturally not become robbers. This is because those who value fame and profit do so because these are things that cause desire, disturbing their minds and causing them to struggle and strive. If his highness would see fame and profit as undesirable, then the people would find new enterprises and their minds would be untroubled. This is the meaning of “if they do not see that which is desired, their minds will be untroubled.”

However, what we call profit attaches falsely to things. Even though people held the Sui gem to be of extreme value, they threw it at the sparrow, the sparrow flew off, and they lost it.² Sexual attraction is just bewitchment. Xi Shi was praised by men as a beauty and the musk deer gathered around when she approached.³ Fame is nothing but empty praise. People honored him and gave him a fine name, but Xu You fled from them.⁴ Cuisine is only fine flavor. People regard the sacrifice of grand pen animals (ox, sheep, and pig) as excellent fare, but the seabird hated them.⁵ From this we know that profit, sexual attraction, fame, and fine food really are not desirable. They are only produced by the wild thoughts, worries, and cogitations of the mind. This is why the sage ruler should first teach people to cut off the mind that produces fantasies and worries. This is to eradicate the problem at its root. Thus the text says “empty their minds.”

² The reference is to a saying—“throwing the Sui gem at a sparrow.” As Ge Hong put it “a smart person wouldn’t do it!”

³ The gathering deer were actually familiars of an earlier beauty—Mao Qiang—but the legend obviously attached to Xi Shi as well.

⁴ Xu You aided the sage-king Yao with valuable advice, but fled into the wilds when Yao tried to grant him an official position.

⁵ The Duke of Lu considered it a good omen when a seabird landed on his earth altar, so he feasted it with wine and the grand pen animals, as one would the gods. The bird died.

After this, one can cause the people to be content with their full bellies and with what they have, with no outside desires in their minds. This is what it means by “fill their bellies.”

But people’s minds are obdurate, prone to struggle, and easily enticed by outside things. In this way their minds give rise to rash, competitive impulses. Thus the small men get up at cock crow and rush forth in pursuit of personal profit; the gentlemen get up at break of dawn and rush forth in pursuit of fame. This is a very strong impulse. But once people are content with their full bellies and with what they own and their rulers govern themselves with purity and stillness, then sounds and sensuality, goods and profit will no longer trouble their hearts from outside. The people will, on their own, cut off greed and desire and will not be prone to struggle. Weakening their own wills in this way is what the text means by “weaken their wills.”

Once the people have no desires, you may have them drill wells to drink, plant crops for food, and be content with what their labor produces. This is what it means by “strengthen their bones.”

If one can, in this fashion, cause the people to entirely lack knowledge, they will be completely unaware of fine sounds, sights, goods, and profit. They will then naturally be without desires. This is why the text says “cause the people to be without knowledge and without desire.”

If there happens to be one or two deceivers among the people, even though they know the desirability of merit and profit, they still will not think of wildly snatching these for themselves. That is why the text says “Cause those with knowledge to not dare act.”

As explained above, this text expounds wordless teaching and purposeless action. Thus, if the ruler will embody this and use it to rule all under heaven, then all will be well governed. Thus Laozi ends the passage with the words “perform purposeless action and all will be governed.”

Laozi’s diction is extremely archaic, but when one looks into the subtle meaning of his prose, one finds that his writing is expository in style. Sometimes he explains how to act and sometimes he explains the meanings of his vocabulary. An example is “perform purposeless action and all will be governed” which explains how sagely rulers of antiquity acted. The crux of each section is the final words, which give the main intent of the whole passage. If the reader understands this, then he will understand over half of what Laozi wanted to convey.

Chapter 10

This chapter teaches the method of drawing near to the Dao. One must first reach “forgetfulness of knowledge” and obliterate all traces, and only then can one join tallies with the mysterious wondrousness.

A person’s cloudsouls and whitesouls move about wildly, causing their minds to be full of worries and fantasies. This is why they cannot “maintain unity.” Thus the *Lankāvatāra sūtra* says: “The spirits, the cloudsouls and whitesouls, all depart and join again by turns.” Now maintaining unity means to control the cloudsouls and whitesouls so that they cannot depart. If they are joined, then one can move in constant stillness and nothing will harry you. If they are joined, then one can be still in constant movement, so that one will not sink into black obscurity. If reaches the Dao like this, then stillness is no different than movement. Laozi thus queries his students, asking if they can achieve this.

“Can you control your *qi* to achieve suppleness?” People rely on *qi* to live, but some wildly collect *qi* within and falsely call it their “heart/mind.” *Qi* follows the movement of their mind, thus their mind becomes increasingly active and the *qi* ever stronger. Strong *qi* moves the

mind even more. This evil cycle is what we call “oneness of mind that moves the will.” The method of studying the Dao requires that one first control one’s *qi* so that it cannot move wildly and fan the flames of the mind; then control one’s mind so that it cannot drum up one’s *qi*. Once the mind is pacified, the *qi* will reach suppleness. If one’s technique reaches this point, then anger will emerge from lack-of-anger, just like an infant crying out without bawling. Thus Laozi inquires whether or not his students can master this technique.

“Cleanse and purify your mystic gaze.” The “mystic gaze” refers to the aforementioned holding to the One and concentrating the *qi*. If one becomes adept at this, one can reach the regions of mysterious wonder. If one observes these regions of mysterious wonder within the breast and holds onto them without changing, this is, contrary to what one imagines, the “sickness of the ultimate Dao.” One needs to cleanse and purify this as well, so that not a trace is left and one reaches the state of forgetfulness and tracelessness. This is, in fact, the ultimate in the pursuit of the Dao. Laozi thus asks his followers whether or not they are able to accomplish this.

The above three sentences elucidate the method for entering the Dao as well as the substance of what it means to gain the Dao. Laozi means to convey that though the substance of the Dao is pure and one cannot fathom its utility, yet if one follows the traceless in utilizing it, one can achieve its wondrousness. Now he questions its utility for lesser things. An ancillary use of the Dao is to cherish the people and rule the kingdom. The main use of the Dao is to govern the body; its ancillary, secondary use is for the kingdom. Thus the sage possesses the realm but does not give himself to it. He cherishes the people and rules the kingdom through lack of purposive action. Thus Laozi asks whether he is able to act without acting. If he is not able to act without conscious purpose, he certainly will not be traceless, and thus, though seemingly wondrous, he will lack wondrousness.

“Heaven’s gate” is the trigger of heaven. “Open and shut” means to use it to go in and out. “Feminine” means the opposite of masculine, the receptive yin to yang’s outflowing. Thus here it connotes stagnation. The emptiness within the human mind is where we encounter things and affairs. All things come through this trigger of heaven. Thus, when common people encounter things, the things stagnate in their minds and the light of their wisdom is blocked, all because their minds are not empty. But the sage’s mind is like a mirror, neither pursuing nor inviting. Nothing that enters sticks to it and nothing that departs leaves a trace. This is what it means to “be without the feminine as heaven’s gate opens and closes.” Laozi inquires of the practitioner whether or not she can be like this.

“Brightness illuminating the four quarters” means that one’s wisdom illumines everything. When commoners even have knowledge, they dazzle themselves when they try to use it toward outer things. The knowledge of the sagely encompasses heaven and earth, but they do not hold this knowledge to themselves. Thus all things outside them shine within them. This is what it means to “have brightness illuminating the four quarters but be without knowledge.” Laozi asks if you are able to accomplish this.

Chapter 16

This chapter continues the preceding in requiring people to accomplish cessation meditation practices. Here it instructs in the methods for this meditation. To “reach” means to exhaust. “Emptiness” means that external things at base do not exist. “Stillness” means that the heart/mind should not move. Mortals are not aware that external things do not exist and so they

maintain the delusion that they are real. Their minds pursue these “things”: and move about in agitation, racing about and never returning. They destroy their bodies when they see profit and lose perfection when they see gain. Endlessly striving, they cannot maintain this Way. Now, if you want to learn the practices of this Way, you must first exhaust the true nature of the things before your eyes, seeing that they fundamentally do not exist. You must realize that all sounds, forms, goods, and benefits are empty and immaterial. Exhaustively understanding them in this way, you will see that though they exist they are also non-existing. If everything is empty and false, then there is no aspect that can be desired. If there is nothing to be desired, your mind will naturally be untroubled and you may eternally abandon the search for gain. When your mind is untroubled, you may maintain stillness and this is to be “urged on.” Thus the text says “Exhaust emptiness to the limit; urge yourself on in maintaining emptiness.”

Laozi urges people to follow this method, but fears they will not believe him. He thus expresses his own understanding with the words “My practice is just this: When the ten-thousand things rise in concert, I watch their return, that’s all.” “Rise in concert” means to appear before his eyes. But, since all things do not really exist, it is nothingness giving birth to being. Though there are a myriad forms and shapes, I see that their proper form is entirely non-existent. Thus he writes “When the myriad things rise in concert, I watch their return.” “Return” here means that his mind does not move wildly.