

Dao gives birth to One
One gives birth to Two
Two give birth to Three
Three give birth to ten-thousand things
The ten-thousand things carry yin and embrace yang
They mix these energies to enact harmony

People dislike being poor, abandoned and alone
Yet this is how kings and nobles consider themselves
For by decreasing things we increase them
And by increasing things we decrease them

That which others teach I also teach
One who forces things will not have a proper death
I shall take this as the father of my teaching

Commentary

In this chapter Laozi presents the cosmogony of Dao (道) – how things come into existence. It is interesting to note the numerical quality of the first section – it does not contain any emotional references that imply great meaning or purpose, as in the Judeo-Christian genesis myth. It is not myth at all; it is simply a matter-of-fact distillation of the process of emergence and transformation.

Dao gives birth to One

Dao gives birth to wuji (無極) - nothingness/infinity, a great field of cosmic energy, which Laozi refers to here as “One” or “unity” (一). Also referred to as “Pre-Heaven” (先天) or the unmanifest state before birth, wuji is traditionally symbolized by an empty circle.

One gives birth to Two

From wuji, mysteriously taiji (太極) appears. One pure qi divides into yin (陰) & yang (陽) – polar opposites, referred to here as “Two” (二). Laozi does not bother to speculate as to why this happens. Maybe Adam gets lonely so God takes a rib to create Eve. Laozi offers no creation myth, nor any great meaning. Simply, One gives birth to, or “lives as” (sheng, 生), Two. Cosmic unity (singular qi) cannot help but manifest as light & dark, male & female, movement & stillness, etc. Taiji literally translates as “supreme extremity”, but it means “unified dynamic polarity”. This polarity is traditionally symbolized by the taiji double-fish diagram, or in the Yijing as a solid line (—, yang) and a broken line (- -, yin).

Two give birth to Three

Yang & yin are respectively Heaven (tian, 天) and Earth (di, 地). In the middle we have living beings (ren, 人), a combination of Heaven & Earth, spirit & matter. Heaven, Earth, and Life are the Three (三). The Three represent yin & yang and the mixture of yin & yang – the dynamic quality of yin & yang combining and transforming into one another. The taiji double-fish diagram simultaneously represents the One (outer circle), the Two (white & black), and the Three (implied movement and flow/alteration).

In terms of internal alchemy (neidan, 内丹), the Three are jing (精), qi (氣), and shen (神). Jing is the basic substance of life, the tendency of qi to embody itself as form; it is associated with yin, Earth, and water. Shen is spirit, the tendency of qi to be aware; it is associated with yang, Heaven, and fire. Jing & shen are the yin & yang of human qi.

Three give birth to ten-thousand things

Jing, qi, & shen combine in infinite variations, becoming the myriad things (wanwu, 万物). And so we have the world of phenomena - manifestation and differentiation - also referred to as “Post-Heaven” (後天), or the state after birth.

Dao thus lives as One, Two, Three, and the ten-thousand things. One is the root; ten-thousand things are the branches. Dao is both unity & differentiation. Although One is defined as being “before” the ten-thousand things, it is important to understand that it is also after and during – the birth of yin & yang and the ten-thousand things do not negate the unborn. Wuji & taiji co-exist.

The ten-thousand things carry yin and embrace yang
They mix these energies to enact harmony

How do the ten-thousand things relate to Dao? By mixing yin & yang. When egg & sperm unite, new life is born; this is the ancestral procession of qi.

Qi-cultivation is likewise all about mixing yin & yang. When we settle into our posture, relaxing everything into a stable base (yin), we naturally discover a light, buoyant quality (yang) filling our body. Our mind becomes calm and quiet (yin), yet open and vast (yang). We breathe in and out, mixing yin & yang. When yin & yang are in harmony, then there is a free and unobstructed flow of qi – we have proper taiji. This is manifest as health & well-being - pure delight.

What does it mean to carry yin and embrace yang? Yang is what beings wish to obtain (embrace/inhale); yin is what beings wish to release (carry/exhale). Yang represents freshness and life; yin represents staleness and death. Because yang turns to yin, if living beings only embrace yang, they actually draw forth yin, dooming themselves to staleness and death. But if we accept both light & dark, then we nourish yang with yin and establish harmony. One example of

this is that if we only enjoy leisure (laziness, excessive ease), then we will inevitably come to experience discomfort, whereas if we “eat bitter” (cultivate discipline), then we can come to experience sustained comfort and ease.

In neidan we want to refine ourselves into pure qi; we do this by bringing the shen (yang) & jing (yin) together, uniting fire & water. In Zuowang, Laozi’s natural neidan practice, we relax everything and let the heat of the heart sink down into the lower belly. Our spirit pervades the entire body, bringing the yang of Heaven down into the yin of Earth. When we feel the body dissolve, this means that the shen has united with the jing.

At this point, then not only have we achieved taiji, but we may also experience the spontaneous revelation of wuji. Mixing yin & yang together is returning to the non-dual root. The purpose of Daoist cultivation is not only to create a good and harmonious situation for ourselves. It is to reveal the backdrop – what is there in both harmony and disharmony? Without harmony, we lose our comfort and then tend to fall into deviant ways. Therefore Daoist cultivation fosters harmony. But harmony is not the sole goal; it is a means to non-dual revelation.

When we mix yin & yang externally we generate new life; when we mix them internally we re-generate our own life. The path of neidan is thus modeled on reversing the creation process, reverting the adept from one of the ten-thousand things back into the Three, the Two, and the One, returning to the source by blending yin & yang together to revert to wuji.

But Laozi does not stop at returning to wuji! Dao perpetually continues to generate new phenomena – it does not only remain as One, so neither does the adept. Realizing that Dao has both unborn root and phenomenal branches, Laozi’s adepts relax their entanglements with the branches yet do not cling to the root. Thusly relaxing all dualistic preferences, we merge with and embody the non-dual Dao. In this way, we not only experience Grand Unity, but also delight in the diversity of the ten-thousand things...and don’t see them as separate. This experience can truly be called Dao-De (道德).

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Yet this is how kings and nobles consider themselves
For by decreasing things we increase them
And by increasing things we decrease them

This section may appear to be a non-sequeter, but it elaborates on carrying yin and embracing yang and mixing them together to enact harmony. Poor, abandoned, and alone – this is not what people desire (yin). Kings and nobles – this is desirable high status (yang).

How often do we see politicians accentuating their humble origins? This is decreasing their status in order to increase it. Whereas when people boast, others resent them. This is increasing their status, just to find it decreased. So

when our status rises upward we are advised to cultivate humility – indeed mixing high with low to create harmony. If we see our status rise, in order to enact harmony, we need to embody even greater humility. This is cultivating yin to nourish yang.

On a mystical level, Laozi is perhaps advising us to mix that which is desirable (sweet fruits of practice, noble states of meditation) with that which is not desirable (mundane everyday mind, eating the bitter taste of discipline, etc.).

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How does this section relate to the theme of the chapter? It infers wuwei (無為) – not forcing things. In terms of neidan, this implies that if we try to force the mixing of yin & yang we will not only fail but may seriously harm ourselves (harm jing, qi, & shen). This is an admonition to let our cultivation be natural.

This chapter therefore lays out the cosmogony of existence (Dao, One, Two, Three, ten-thousand things), presents the essence of alchemy (mixing yin & yang) and then finishes by telling us to relax. What are we to do? There is an implication of ziran (自照) – yin & yang mix together of themselves. This supports Zuowang practice as a means for alchemy. Sitting, forgetting, not forcing anything, just letting yin & yang do their thing...trusting the natural process. The final fruit of practice is nothing more or less than dying a proper death.

What is death for Laozi? Dao alone is unborn and undying. The process of birth & death continues ceaselessly as yin & yang intermingle, jing, qi, & shen transform, and the ten-thousand things rise & fall...but wuji remains. If we can go straight to the backdrop of wuji, as we do in Zuowang, then death is not an issue. Whatever appears, dies. What is it that does not appear? Clouds are constantly appearing, transforming, and disappearing; the sky is wide open.

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