

The Wisdom of the Unsayable in the Chinese Tradition

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Concerning Eastern teachings such as Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, there is often widespread confusion about how these are to be classified—as religion or as philosophy. This problem, however, is culturally homemade: the distinction between religion and philosophy based on European cultural traditions often does not apply when we leave our culture behind. Thus, the Eastern teachings, which are often referred to as “wisdom religions” (e.g. by Hans Küng), are either religion *and* philosophy or *neither* religion *nor* philosophy; whichever way you prefer ideologically.

As is well known, there is a certain “family resemblance” (as Wittgenstein would put it) between Daoism and Buddhism. There is, however, very little that connects these Asian philosophies and religions with the European tradition emanating from Greco-Roman and Christian thought. This does not mean that their philosophemes would be fundamentally alien to the Europeans: at most they do not belong to the European mainstream. So the family resemblance could certainly be extended to certain European philosophers and schools: There is in Europe a tradition—from the pre-Socratics through the apophatic theology and mysticism of the Middle Ages to existentialism and philosophy of language of modernity—that has very much in common with Daoism and Buddhism. Hence, a blend of selected passages from Heraclitus (cf. Wohlfart 1998: 24–39), Neo-Pythagoreanism, Sextus Empiricus, Gnosticism, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Nicholas of Cusa, Meister Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, Montaigne, Hegel (cf. Wohlfart 1998: 24–39), Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Derrida, et al. could result in a little book that, in the essence of its central texts, would differ very little from the Far Eastern tradition.

The concepts of God in Eastern teachings, however, are hardly comparable with those of the Abrahamic religions; that is, speaking about God is not an issue. In Confucianism, which forms a tradition oriented towards secular and social ethics in China, a metaphysical connection to a transcendent “Heaven” (*tian* 天), responsible for the ethical functioning of the universe, does play a role. But Confucius explicitly refrained from discoursing on this topic;¹ hence we find little in Confucian literature that discusses the nature of Heaven. In recent, neo-Confucian, discourse, the topic “immanent transcendence” (*neizai chaoyue* 内在超越) appears to have become an issue (cf. Xin and Ren 1992), but this should be understood quite differently from its treatment in modern Western philosophy, for example, from that of Jaspers (Sarin 2009: 208). Rather, the idea behind it is this: although there is a supreme good in Confucianism (attributed to a transcendent Heaven as the metaphysical origin of a fundamentally ethically good human nature), this highest good is not considered to lie outside the ways of man, but is instead believed to be immanent. That is, it manifests itself in the fulfilment of interpersonal obligations or in the practice of the virtue of “humanity” (*ren* 仁).

Daoism and Buddhism in some ways form complementary teachings of wisdom to the Confucian tradition. In contrast to Confucianism, of which it is often said that its teachings lead “into the world” (*ru shi* 入世), Daoism and Buddhism follow entirely different interests, and thus it is said of both that they are leading “out of the world” (*chu shi* 出世). In addition, Daoism holds the view—in stark contrast to Confucianism—that the “Way” (*dao* 道) of the universe (“Heaven and Earth”) is not an ethical one. As the author (or authors) known as Laozi puts it (Chan 1969: §5): “Heaven and earth are not humane. They regard all things as straw dogs.”²

Whereas Confucianism as a philosophy is concerned with worldly wisdom in the moral and ethical sense, Daoism is much more an art of life—as living in harmony with nature—or even an art of survival. Buddhism, however, which has—by an adaptation of Confucian structures and Daoist thought—found a specific character in China, is marked by a combination of knowledge and wisdom. Some schools of Buddhism, especially popular in China, take the so-called “Wisdom Sutras” (*Prajnaparamita Sutras*) as their base; they show, among other things, that all phenomena (*dharma*s) arise in dependence upon multiple causes and conditions (“dependent co-arising”). Thus, in a logically coherent argument, they point out their relativity and hence their ultimate “emptiness”.

If one were to look for an overarching commonality of these Far Eastern teachings, it would be, in the first place, their orientation on action. They are,

to echo the well-known title of a book by Pierre Hadot called *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, “ways of life” or exercises in worldly wisdom. In other words, they are less concerned with knowledge and more with action or, in the words of the famous Chinese Neo-Confucian Wang Yangming (1472–1529 CE), with the “unity of knowledge and action” (*zhi xing he yi* 知行合一). This unity had once existed also in ancient European philosophy, but in the Western philosophical tradition it was lost, as Hadot has convincingly shown, when the Christian religion in the Middle Ages carried over from ancient philosophy the practice of spiritual exercise.

Where the focus is on doing, it means less talking, because—as is well known—people have always been measured not by their words but by their actions. And thus there is the popular saying that the true philosopher, namely the wise, excels less by talking than by action, or even by silence: As the proverb says, speech is silver but silence is golden. Confucius is known, moreover, for not wanting to talk too much: “The Master [Confucius] said, ‘I would prefer not speaking.’ Zi Gong said, ‘If you, Master, do not speak, what shall we, your disciples, have to record?’ The Master said, ‘Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being produced, but does Heaven say anything?’” (Legge 2006: *An.* 17:19).³

Or think of the snappy response that Boethius (c 475–525 CE) gave once to the question of a would-be philosopher, who asked him, “Do you now recognize that I am a philosopher?”: “I would have known it if you had kept silent” (*Intellexeram, si tacuisses*). This has led to the saying, still used to confront a foolish person who disqualifies himself by speaking: “If you had been silent, you would have remained a philosopher” (*Si tacuisses, philosophus mansisses*). And, concerning the significance of knowledge in philosophy, Socrates, the greatest sage of the Western tradition, with his dictum “I know that I know nothing” has set standards which even today—remember the flood of writings of our philosophers—are still being missed by miles. At best, only the sceptics, Pyrrho of Elis, Sextus Empiricus, or—in modern times—Wittgenstein have come to comparable realizations. Thus, Wittgenstein says towards the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: “We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer” (1922: §6.52). And he concludes the treatise with the sentence: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (1922: §7).

Socrates’ dictum, at the end of the Middle Ages, resonates with Nicholas of Cusa’s “learned ignorance” (*docta ignorantia*), which is in the tradition of

apophatic theology, that is, the medieval Christian School, which assumes that God cannot be spoken of in a positive way. As we will see, there are “family resemblances” between this teaching of non-speaking to the one found in the Chinese tradition of wisdom.

Below, some basic principles of Daoism and Buddhism will be presented, notably concerning the title of this essay: the saying of the unsayable. Subjects for discussion include emptiness, relativity, paradoxes, namelessness or knowledge of ignorance. Buddhism will be discussed mainly in the form of one particular school, known as Madhyamaka, which leads back to the Indian philosopher Nagarjuna in the second century CE. As there is already a well-known study by Karl Jaspers which compares Daoism (via Laozi) with Nagarjuna (Jaspers 1978), here, related texts will be discussed, for example the Buddhist “Wisdom Sutras” (*Prajnaparamita*) (referred to above), which were highly influential in China and are attributed also to the school of Nagarjuna. The author’s approach is less that of a philosopher so much as that of a philologically inclined historian of culture. If it were to be consistently philosophical, in the sense of the teachings presented here, the essay would consist of a blank sheet of paper.

1 Daoism

The following remarks will deal first, in detail, with the philosophy of Daoism (not the Daoist religion): its basic features will be presented, such as negative action, that is, non-doing (*wu wei* 無為), as well as the knowledge of not-knowing. There is discussion also of related topics, such as emptiness, paradox, and relativity.

The central classical texts of Daoism, which will be referred to below, are, first, the *Daodejing*,⁴ attributed to the legendary Laozi (composed possibly between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE). This consists of sayings, divided into eighty-one chapters (which, however, offer no coherence of system or argument). It is considered, worldwide, to be the most important of the philosophical books of Daoism, and, after the Bible, the work translated into the greatest number of languages. Second, at some point between the fourth and third centuries BCE, we have the book, *Zhuangzi*, which is attributed (at least in certain parts) to its eponymous author. The two texts differ less in their content than in their manner of speaking. Whereas the *Daodejing* is a highly condensed and poetically suggestive text, the *Zhuangzi* is a compendium of stories, parables, and dialogues, which, in their imagery, are as entertaining as they are profound and cryptic.

a) Laozi

One of the central (and initial) statements of the book, *Daodejing*, (and of Daoism in general) is that the *Dao*—the underlying reason of being, which is called the Way—in its unfathomable totality of realizations is not accessible to cognition. We may get an inkling of its working in the world, but it remains hidden from access by language, understanding and knowledge. The beginning of the *Daodejing* reads, accordingly: “The *Dao* that can be told is not the eternal *Dao* (*Dao ke dao, fei chang dao* 道可道 非常道).”

In the original Chinese, this sentence offers interesting facets of understanding that are not present in translation. The character *dao* not only means “Way” but carries the additional meaning “to speak.” It thus occurs in this sentence not twice (as in the translation), but three times. In addition, there is no discernible distinction between nouns and verbs in classical Chinese; in other words, a word/character can usually be used as either a verb or a noun. (This linguistic non-distinction between things and actions can, incidentally, offer deeper conceptualization in philosophy of language, inasmuch as objects become events, suggesting a non-material interpretation, that is, a process understanding, of the world.) The character *dao* can thus also be read in a verbal sense, that is, not only as “to speak” (its second meaning) but also from its basic meaning as “way.” So the initial sentence of this classic can be understood thus: “The Way that can be trodden as the Way is not the eternal Way.” Or: “The *Dao* that can be taken to be the *Dao* is not the eternal *Dao*.” Seen from this linguistic perspective, the first sentence gives the book an opening with manifold meaning and indeterminacy that could correspond to a basic intention. One has to add, however, that seen from a historical perspective, this terse sentence may originally have had quite another intention, as a criticism of other philosophical schools, such as Confucians or Mohists, who also spoke of the *Dao* as of their Way, and who knew how to explicate this eloquently. Hence, it would be wise (remaining with our topic) to keep to historical grounds, even with the revered classics, and not to use inappropriate mystification.

When the Way cannot be fixed as the *Dao*, either with words or in any other manner, what remains are only circumlocutions, approximations, or paradoxes (such as in the “learned ignorance”—*docta ignorantia*—of Nicolas of Cusa). Thus, it is said of the wise man who has managed to approach the Way:

A wise man has no extensive knowledge; He who has extensive knowledge is not a wise man. (Chan 1969: §81)

He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know. (Chan 1969: §56)

Therefore the sage desires to have no desire, he does not value rare treasures. He learns to be unlearned. (Chan 1969: §64)

To know and yet (think) we do not know is the highest (attainment); not to know (and yet think) we do know is a disease.

To know that you do not know is the best. To pretend to know when you do not know is a disease. Only when one recognizes this disease as a disease can one be free from the disease.

The sage is free from the disease. Because he recognizes this disease to be disease, he is free from it. (Chan 1969: §71)

Whereas in normal life knowledge lies in higher esteem than ignorance, in the passage above this hierarchy is turned upside down: The wise man knows that he knows nothing. If ignorance, however, is considered to be the ultimate state, then this evaluation can be verbalized only in paradoxes—that is, not according to common-sense reason—or in approximations.

One of the, few, approximations characterizes the “Way” as “being by itself so” (*ziran* 自然) as it is; it functions—like the course of nature—by itself. Thus, in a central chapter of the *Daodejing* we read:

There was something undifferentiated and yet complete, which existed before heaven and earth. Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing and does not change. It operates everywhere and is free from danger. It may be considered the mother of the universe. I do not know its name; I call it *Dao*. If forced to give it a name, I shall call it Great. Now being great means functioning everywhere. Functioning everywhere means far-reaching. Being far-reaching means returning to the original point.

Therefore *Dao* is great. Heaven is great. Earth is great. And the king is also great. Man models himself after Earth. Earth models itself after Heaven. Heaven models itself after *Dao*. And *Dao* models itself after Nature (*ziran*). (Chan 1969: §25)

Here, first of all, we have again the consideration that the *Dao* cannot be told or pinpointed. The crucial statement, however, is at the end of the passage: whereas man, earth, and Heaven are ruled, or modeled, by a higher instance, the model/rule (*fa* 法) of the *Dao* is nature, that is, “being by itself so” (*ziran*). What does this mean? The *Dao* reveals itself in spontaneous, natural action. It happens by itself just like the changing of the four seasons, the growing of plants, the

blowing of the wind and the drifting of the clouds. The consequence for human beings, who achieve insight into this “by itself so” functioning of the *Dao*, is: “no action” (*wu wei*). This means not complete passivity but avoiding any attempt to stir the course of things too deliberately with self-interest. Instead, one should let things go, living in accordance with the spontaneous and unfathomable workings of nature and adapting to its constant changes. Hence, the book recommends—with paradox formulations—a strategy of diminishment in leading one’s life:

The pursuit of learning is to increase day after day. The pursuit of *Dao* is to decrease day after day.

It is to decrease and further decrease until one reaches the point of taking no action. No action is undertaken, and yet nothing is left undone. (Chan 1969 §48)

There is a further approximation to the *Dao*, which is called “reversion” (*fan* 反). Reversion can be observed in the tendency of the Way to turn around the course of things—at least in the long run—and to achieve, in this way, a balance between extreme possibilities. Hence, it is said in the *Daodejing*: “Reversion is the action of the *Dao*. Weakness is the function of the *Dao*” (Chan 1969: §40).

A reversion usually takes place when things have reached an extreme point—be it in the course of the sun after it has reached its zenith, or in the course of the four seasons after summer or winter. As one orients oneself along this principle of nature, the unbalanced parts in one’s life will be straightened out naturally.

A further insight into the working of the *Dao* can be achieved by realizing the basic relativity of all being—another important topic in the *Daodejing*. The phenomena of the world are manifested in binary structures. Hence, we perceive things always within the framework of their basic relativity—just as light and dark, sound and silence condition one another:

When all the people of the world know beauty as beauty, there arises the recognition of ugliness.

When they all know the good as good, there arises the recognition of evil. Therefore: Being and non-being produce each other; difficult and easy complete each other; long and short contrast each other; high and low distinguish each other; sound and voice harmonize each other; front and behind accompany each other.

Therefore the sage manages affairs without action and spreads doctrines without words.

All things arise, and he does not turn away from them. He produces them but does not take possession of them. He acts but does not rely on his own ability. He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it. It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him. (Chan 1969: §2)

Since opposites condition one another, it would be wrong to demand only one of them, because, whether we want it or not, we will get the other as part of the binary structure. A *Daoist* wise view on reality would therefore be: to understand this basic duality and relativity of things as manifestations of the *Dao* and to transcend this relativity by abiding in a realm beyond the opposites.

A final central topic in the *Daodejing* is “emptiness,” or “void.” One could say that emptiness is more essential than fullness as it has an infinite potential; and it dwells beyond any categorization. (Emptiness is also an important concept in Buddhism, there, however, more in the form of a tactical or logical concept. See below.) In the book, *Laozi*, emptiness is illustrated metaphorically: for example, the essence of a pot of clay is the empty space with which it can contain things; in a wheel it is the emptiness of the hub:

Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends.

Clay is moulded to form a utensil, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends.

Doors and windows are cut out to make a room, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends.

Therefore turn being into advantage, and turn non-being into utility. (Chan 1969: §11)

Summarizing, one could characterize the *Daodejing* as attempting to circumvent the unsayable in its workings, that is, in approximations such as “being itself so” or “reversion.” Apart from this, we encounter a largely negative strategy, as common-sense theses will be turned around. When there is no room for any positive proposition about the *Dao*, there will be in the end—if one would not rather remain silent—only paradoxes or images.

b) Zhuangzi

The inability to talk about the *Dao* is a central theme, also, in the second Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*. The book is popular because of its many parables and witty dialogues, including the following two:

Knowledge wandered north to the banks of the Black Waters, climbed the Knoll of Hidden Heights, and there by chance came upon Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing. Knowledge said to Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing, “There are some things I’d like to ask you. What sort of pondering, what sort of cogitation does it take to know the Way? What sort of surroundings, what sort of practices does it take to find rest in the Way? What sort of path, what sort of procedure will get me to the Way?”

Three questions he asked, but Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing didn’t answer. It wasn’t that he just didn’t answer—he didn’t know how to answer!

Knowledge, failing to get any answer, returned to the White Waters of the south, climbed the summit of Dubiety Dismissed, and there caught sight of Wild-and-Witless. Knowledge put the same questions to Wild-and-Witless. “Ah—I know!” said Wild-and-Witless. “And I’m going to tell you.” But just as he was about to say something, he forgot what it was he was about to say.

Knowledge, failing to get any answer, returned to the imperial palace, where he was received in audience by the Yellow Emperor, and posed his questions. The Yellow Emperor said, “Only when there is no pondering and no cogitation will you get to know the Way. Only when you have no surroundings and follow no practices will you find rest in the Way. Only when there is no path and no procedure can you get to the Way.”

Knowledge said to the Yellow Emperor, “You and I know, but those other two that I asked didn’t know. Which of us is right, I wonder?”

The Yellow Emperor said, “Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing—he’s the one who is truly right. Wild-and-Witless appears to be so. But you and I in the end are nowhere near it. Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know. Therefore the sage practices the teaching that has no words. The Way (*Dao*) cannot be brought to light; its virtue cannot be forced to come. [...] So it is said, He who practices the Way does less every day, does less and goes on doing less, until he reaches the point where he does nothing, does nothing and yet there is nothing that is not done.” [...]

Knowledge said to the Yellow Emperor, “I asked Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing and he didn’t reply to me. It wasn’t that he merely didn’t reply to me—he didn’t know how to reply to me. I asked Wild-and-Witless and he was about to explain to me, though he didn’t explain anything. It wasn’t that he wouldn’t explain to me—but when he was about to explain, he forgot what it was. Now I have asked you and you know the answer. Why then do you say that you are nowhere near being right?”

The Yellow Emperor said, “Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing is the one who is truly right—because he doesn’t know. Wild-and-Witless appears to be so—because he forgets. But you and I in the end are nowhere near it—because we know.”

Wild-and-Witless heard of the incident and concluded that the Yellow Emperor knew what he was talking about. (Watson 1968: §22)

Here, again, it is significant that the normal order of things is turned upside down. As to questions that apply to the nature of the *Dao*, ignorance and forgetfulness appear more appropriate answers than alleged knowledge. That is, in the words of the *Daodejing*, the speaker turns out to be not knowing and the knower as not speaking. The second dialogue addresses a similar theme:

Master Dongguo asked Zhuangzi, “This thing called the Way—where does it exist?”

Zhuangzi said, “There’s no place it doesn’t exist.”

“Come,” said Master Dongguo, “you must be more specific!”

“It is in the ant.”

“As low a thing as that?”

“It is in the panic grass.”

“But that’s lower still!”

“It is in the tiles and shards.”

“How can it be so low?”

“It is in the piss and shit!”

Master Dongguo made no reply.

Zhuangzi said, “Sir, your questions simply don’t get at the substance of the matter. When Inspector Huo asked the superintendent of the market how to test the fatness of a pig by pressing it with the foot, he was told that the lower down on the pig you press, the nearer you come to the truth. But you must not expect to find the Way in any particular place—there is no thing that escapes its presence! Such is the Perfect Way, and so too are the truly great words. ‘Complete,’ ‘universal,’ ‘all-inclusive’—these three are different words with the same meaning. All point to a single reality.” [...]

“That which treats things as things is not limited by things. Things have their limits—the so-called limits of things. The unlimited moves to the realm of

limits; the limited moves to the unlimited realm. We speak of the filling and emptying, the withering and decay of things. [The Way] makes them full and empty without itself filling or emptying; it makes them wither and decay without itself withering or decaying. It establishes root and branch but knows no root and branch itself; it determines when to store up or scatter but knows no storing or scattering itself.” (Watson 1968: §22)

Between the *Dao* as the ground of reality and the manifest things of the world no line can be drawn; consequently, in its workings, there is no difference between high and low, between ants and excrement. This seems to be simply pantheism, but Zhuangzi would probably respond to it as above; namely that it misses the point of the matter: If you try to narrow the “Way” with the drawing of any line—for example with terms such as pantheism—there is no escape from things.

Zhuangzi’s aim, like that of the *Daodejing*, is to show the unity of opposites. The following parable illuminates the consequences of not recognizing this unity. People who do not understand this principle live like the monkeys in the story called “Three in the Morning”:

To wear out your brain trying to make things into one without realizing that they are all the same—this is called “three in the morning.” What do I mean by “three in the morning”? When the monkey trainer was handing out acorns, he said, “You get three in the morning and four at night.” This made all the monkeys furious. “Well, then,” he said, “you get four in the morning and three at night.” The monkeys were all delighted. There was no change in the reality behind the words, and yet the monkeys responded with joy and anger. Let them, if they want to. So the sage harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in Heaven the Equalizer. This is called walking two roads. (Watson 1968: §2)

A quintessence of this thinking is to accept both positions (walking two roads), that is, even seemingly incompatible positions. This means recognizing the relativity of all things—even life and death—and to achieve a freedom beyond the thinking in opposites. So, Zhuangzi says about life and death:

The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back in without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. (Watson 1968: §6)⁵

To know the conditional nature of all things and concepts in view of their respective opposites includes insight into the relativity of one’s own standpoint, that is, to see things *sub specie aeternitatis*:

Everything has its “that,” everything has its “this.” From the point of view of “that” you cannot see it, but through understanding you can know it. So I say, “that” comes out of “this” and “this” depends on “that”—which is to say that “this” and “that” give birth to each other. [...] Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He too recognizes a “this,” but a “this” which is also “that,” a “that” which is also “this.” His “that” has both a right and a wrong in it; his “this” too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a “this” and “that”? Or does he in fact no longer have a “this” and “that”? A state in which “this” and “that” no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way. (Watson 1968: §2)

It is the subjective relativity of all knowledge that leads to different perspectives, and thus also to misperceptions and misunderstandings. Given this condition—and since everyone insists on his perspective and his mistakes—Zhuangzi arrives at sceptical positions concerning language in general:

Therefore I say, we must have no-words! With words that are no-words, you may speak all your life long and you will never have said anything. Or you may go through your whole life without speaking them, in which case you will never have stopped speaking. (Watson 1968: §27)

Since the essence is unsayable, it is his goal “to get along without words,” and hence Zhuangzi says, again with one of his paradoxical formulations: “Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?” (Watson 1968: §26).

The transcending of relative positions is also the theme of the following story. After first exemplifying with a gnarled tree how to prolong one’s life by uselessness, namely to escape the ax of a carpenter, Zhuangzi indicates that this again is relative, because uselessness can also sometimes cost one one’s head. Hence, the best position is beyond the usual polarities such as usefulness and uselessness:

Zhuangzi was walking in the mountains when he saw a huge tree, its branches and leaves thick and lush. A woodcutter paused by its side but made no move to cut it down. When Zhuangzi asked the reason, he replied, “There’s nothing it could be used for!” Zhuangzi said, “Because of its worthlessness, this tree is able to live out the years Heaven gave it.”

Down from the mountain, the Master stopped for a night at the house of an old friend. The friend, delighted, ordered his son to kill a goose and prepare it. “One of the geese can cackle and the other can’t,” said the son. “May I ask, please, which I should kill?”

“Kill the one that can’t cackle,” said the host.

The next day Zhuangzi's disciples questioned him. "Yesterday there was a tree on the mountain that gets to live out the years Heaven gave it because of its worthlessness. Now there's our host's goose that gets killed because of its worthlessness. What position would you take in such a case, Master?"

Zhuangzi laughed and said, "I'd probably take a position halfway between worth and worthlessness. But halfway between worth and worthlessness, though it might seem to be a good place, really isn't—you'll never get away from trouble there. It would be very different, though, if you were to climb up on the Way and its Virtue and go drifting and wandering, neither praised nor damned, now a dragon, now a snake, shifting with the times, never willing to hold to one course only. Now up, now down, taking harmony for your measure, drifting and wandering with the ancestor of the ten thousand things, treating things as things but not letting them treat you as a thing—then how could you get into any trouble?" (Watson 1968: §20)

Central, here, is the idea of holding the mean between extremes, that is, to rise above thinking in opposites and to look at things as from the perspective of eternity (we will encounter a similar strategy later in this essay, when discussing Nagarjuna and his doctrine of the Middle Way). Also central to the above story is the passage "treating things as things but not letting them treat you as a thing". The "self-cultivation" of the Daoist sage aims precisely at the nurturing of this inner freedom and detachment, namely, as above, he "rests in Heaven the Equalizer" (Watson 1968: §2).

Summarizing, we find in Daoism patterns of reasoning and figures of thought exemplifying the following content: (1) The unity behind the diversity of the objective world; (2) the relativity of all existence, as well as the relativity of points of view; and (3) the impossibility of having knowledge of the fundamental reality (the "Way") and therefore the impossibility of speaking about it. The ultimate truth is thus, in the end, a non-truth; and the method of achieving the goals of Daoism, that is, to recognize this non-truth, is a non-method: on the one hand, non-action (*wu wei*), letting things go with non-intervention; on the other hand, speaking in absurdities, paradoxes, and in images and parables, in order to convey an inkling of the unsayable for the non-wise. Since the essence cannot be expressed in words, Zhuangzi's attempts to say the unsayable are—and his book is full of it—nothing but parables, allegories, and images (*yuyan* 寓言, translated below as "imputed words"). In his own writing:

These imputed words which make up nine tenths of it (i.e. my words) are like persons brought in from outside for the purpose of exposition. [...] It is the fault

of other men, not mine [that I must resort to such a device, for if I were to speak in my own words], then men would respond only to what agrees with their own views and reject what does not, would pronounce “right” what agrees with their own views and “wrong” what does not. (Watson 1968: §27)

However, speaking in images is popular not only among the Daoists: one can easily find this preference in other instances in the Chinese history of ideas. So it is said in the “Great Commentary” (I.12) to the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), one of the most revered classics of the Confucian tradition (which, however, also contains a lot of Daoist thought and is the source of *Yin-Yang*-thought):

The Master said: “Writing does not exhaust words, and words do not exhaust ideas. If this is so, does this mean that the ideas of the sages cannot be discerned?” The Master said: “The sages established images in order to express their ideas exhaustively.” (Lynn 1994: *Xici Zhuan* I.12)

Although the term images here refers to the relatively abstract “images” (hexagrams) of the *Book of Changes*, the above passage with its core content of language scepticism has nevertheless made a great impact on Chinese philosophy, and aesthetics in general, because it emphasizes that images are stronger and more meaningful than writing or purely discursive words.

2 Buddhism

In Buddhism, there are patterns of thought and reasoning that in many ways resemble those of Daoism. This applies to all schools of Buddhism, schools true to their Indian origin as well as those that emerged in China through a fusion with Daoism, especially Chan (Japanese: Zen) Buddhism.

Virtually all religions try to answer the question of how good and bad deeds are repaid during or after life. The explanation given by Buddhism is that man, through good and evil deeds, creates “*karma*” (deed, work) that determines his further existence in a perpetual cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). Good *karma* leads to new life, on a higher level, bad *karma*, correspondingly, to life on a lower level. This cycle can be broken only by the realization of “four noble truths”: (1) Life is suffering; (2) this suffering is due to ignorance and the “thirst” for life with all its sensual pleasures; (3) there is a way out of this vale of tears; (4) the resort is located in the “eightfold path,” offered by Buddhism as a way of practice. The “eightfold path” represents a mixture of ethical life, right knowledge, and spiritual contemplation.

Fundamental to the success of Buddhism in China was a development originating in India during the two centuries before the Christian era: the transition from Hinayana (Small Vehicle) to Mahayana Buddhism (Great Vehicle). This change had significant consequences: whereas Hinayana offered salvation from *samsara* only to those who were willing to “tread” the eightfold path through an ascetic monastic life, Mahayana Buddhism (as a great vehicle) offered salvation to all human beings—including the laity—through the knowledge that all are already enlightened, and possess Buddhahood, although they do not recognize it. The ideal figure was now no longer the ascetic and austere *Arhat* (Chinese: *luohan* 羅漢), but the Bodhisattva, an aspirant to Buddhahood who renounces admission into *nirvana* (the extinction of the walks through all existences of *samsara*) in order to devote himself to the salvation of all suffering beings.

a) Madhyamaka—the “Middle Way”

For the development of Buddhism in China, a special direction of Mahayana Buddhism was important: the school of the “Middle Way,” which originated in India around Nagarjuna in the second century CE. The school’s aim was to reach—through a logical chain of refutations of any position and its counter-position—a view of reality by which nothing can be attributed a substance in the world. Nagarjuna’s systematic “empty logic” (cf. Cheng 1984) is based on two assumptions that are fundamental to the spirit of original Buddhism: (1) the relativity of all phenomena (*dharma*) in the world; and (2) dependent co-arising. The former means (similarly to the discussion in the context of Daoism above) that all *dharma*s can be defined only in relation to others (life is not death, joy is not pain, and so on); the latter means that all things arise in dependence upon various causes and conditions and that, consequently, none of the countless manifestations of the world possesses a definitive or absolute reality: they are empty (*shunyata*) of inherent existence. It also includes a concept that can be found already in Hinayana, namely the illusory nature of the “self”: What we call our “self,” according to the Buddhist point of view, is just a convention or, more precisely, a random composition of different physical and mental factors of existence (*skandhas*). Hence, while we can observe in the European tradition a historical trend toward development of the self to self-expression and self-realization (as it surely culminates in the modern era), we find in the context of Buddhism (with all due caution against such generalizations) something of an inclination toward emptying the self, or to self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness. In Mahayana, and especially in Nagarjuna, we find this view of

the insubstantiality of the self extended to all forms of existence. This is the topic of the so-called “Wisdom Sutras” (*Prajnaparamita*), from which Nagarjuna has emerged as commentator and systematizer.

As the perception of the world is bound to conventions—definitions based on opposites—and as all conceptual thinking is relative, Nagarjuna is pulling the rug out from under our way of conceptual thinking, and attempting, in a manner of speaking, “to stop the world.” His method is a so-called tetralemma of “Fourfold Negation” (*catuskoti*, or in Chinese, *siju* 四句—“four set”), that is, negating: (1) being, (2) non-being, (3) both being and non-being, and (4) neither being nor non-being (Cheng 1984: 67).⁶ As to the question of substance or non-substance of any phenomenon, according to Nagarjuna none of the four positions applies. So it seems that at the end of this logic the “emptiness” (*sunyata*, Chin.: *kong* 空) of the world appears. “Empty” does not mean, however, that the world does not exist, but that nothing exists by itself, that all existence is attributable only to the fickle interaction and mutual causality between factors of existence. In other words, nothing has permanence by itself, and there is nothing “substantial” that we can rely on. Thus, in the end, this doctrine holds a hovering position between affirmation and negation of the world; that is, a “middle way” (Chinese: *zhongdao* 中道) between these binary positions.

The logic of relativity is, however, also true to *nirvana*: it can be spoken of only in contrast to *samsara*. To this extent, *nirvana* is not only not something “substantial,” which one could rely on, but, ultimately, also, “empty.” Thus, Madhyamika Buddhism comes to the conclusion that one cannot distinguish between *samsara* (the world of forms) and *nirvana* (the void): rather, that both are identical. To put it in the words of the influential “Heart Sutra” (*Prajnaparamita-Hridaya Sutra*), the shortest (the “heart” in the title stands for the core of the wisdom teachings) but the most famous of the Wisdom Sutras:

Form is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from form.

Form itself is emptiness, and emptiness itself is form. (cf. Suzuki 1985: 222–38)

This position has become known in Chinese Buddhism as that of “non-duality” (*bu er* 不二). It is a point of view which—similar to the views in Daoism—eludes further elaboration.

b) The “Vimalkirti Sutra”—entering the gate of non-duality

Next to the Heart Sutra, the Vimalakirti Sutra contains the best-known illustration of the idea of “non-duality” (interestingly, the topic is not “unity”).

This sutra, highly popular in Tang China (from the seventh to tenth centuries CE), describes a dispute between Buddhist saints and the layman Vimalakirti, in which the layman proves to be better versed in the Buddhist “doctrine of emptiness” than the Buddhist representatives. The highlight of the sutras is a dialogue between Vimalakirti and Manjusri (a disciple of the Buddha and Bodhisattva of wisdom) on entry into the “gate of non-duality.” After the other Bodhisattvas have given their opinion on the subject, they turn to Manjusri as the most honorable among them, and ask him for his opinion. Initially, he criticizes the contributions of the previous speakers as insufficient; then he elaborates eloquently on the subject:

After the various bodhisattvas had thus each made their explanations, [Vimalakirti] asked Manjusri, “How does the bodhisattva enter the Dharma gate of non-duality?” Manjusri said, “As I understand it, it is to be without words and without explanation with regard to all the *dharma*s—without manifestation, without consciousness, and transcending all questions and answers. This is to enter the Dharma gate of non-duality.”

Manjusri then asked Vimalakirti, “We have each made our own explanations. Sir, you should explain how the bodhisattva enters the Dharma gate of non-duality.”

At this point Vimalakirti was silent, saying nothing.

Manjusri exclaimed, “Excellent, excellent! Not to even have words or speech is the true entrance into the Dharma gate of non-duality.” (McRae 2004: IX 148)

While Manjusri is still wordy, trying to say the unsayable, Vimalakirti reacts in the only possible way: in the cultural history of China, it has become known as the “thundering silence of Vimalakirti”. The episode can be found on numerous murals of Buddhist caves, and the legendary wisdom of the layman Vimalakirti—and the popularity of the Sutra with the same name—has certainly contributed to promoting a kind of Buddhism not only in the province of monks (and nuns), who were supposed to leave their families, but compatible with Chinese (Confucian) family values.

c) Jizang and his strategy of double truths

A tactical means of achieving a non-dual view of reality was already laid out by Nagarjuna, that is to speak of “double truths.” By this, Nagarjuna means to say that one may talk in a generally intelligible way about mundane things in everyday contexts: he calls this “worldly truth” (Chinese: *sudi* 俗諦). But while

people on the whole tend to have an approving attitude to the world, the Buddhist tendency is initially rather the reverse. In this respect, the “real/absolute truth” (Chinese: *zhendi* 真諦) is the view from the standpoint of “emptiness.” In the so-called Chinese Sanlun School (“Three Treatises”),⁷ the Chinese Buddhist Jizang further elaborated this idea—already laid out in the “Fourfold Negation.” Following Nagarjuna’s structure of double truths, he developed a system of repeated denials with which he finally arrives at emptiness or the insubstantiality of all things and beings. He treats these two categories of truth to the question of substance or emptiness on three levels, as follows:

<i>Worldly:</i>	<i>Absolute:</i>
1. Substance	1. Emptiness
2. Duality (Substance <i>and</i> Emptiness)	2. Non-Duality (neither Substance nor Emptiness)
3. Duality and Non-Duality	3. Neither Duality nor Non-Duality

That is to say: While looking at the world from the viewpoint of worldly truth, one commonly speaks on the first level of substance, whereas the Buddhist point of view, as an absolute truth, sees only emptiness as the ultimate reality. However, if we hold fast to an absolute truth of “emptiness,” as a contrast to “substance,” it will, on the second level, turn again into a worldly truth, namely that of a duality between two extremes: substance and emptiness. Thus, the absolute truth, seen on this second level, is non-duality (neither substance nor emptiness). On the third level, however, adherence to these two alternatives would lead again to a worldly point of view, that is, the affirmation of a new “duality”: the distinction between (the extremes) duality and non-duality. The absolute and final truth on the third level, accordingly, is the negation of this new “duality”: neither to affirm nor to deny this antithesis of duality and non-duality. Lastly, therefore, the position of “non-duality” also has to be dismissed as relative only; in other words, one can confront it, as Vimalakirti impressively demonstrated, only by remaining silent. And so Jizang, in the end, holds a middle way between affirmation and negation of the world (cf. Fung 1983: vol. ii, 296).⁸ In the wake of Nagarjuna, he wants to show that, seen from a Buddhist perspective, things or reality are insubstantial or “empty”—they have no existence, and if we ascribe to them a being, it is so only on a worldly level.

That which is true regarding the notions of *nirvana* and “non-duality” (that they are only relative) applies also to the basic concept of “emptiness.” Although for the Buddhist the world is empty, he, also, must, in the end, depart from the concept of “emptiness,” because it exists only in the context

of and in opposition to “substance” or “fullness” (cf. Fung 1983: vol. ii, 295–7). To keep clinging to the notion of emptiness would mean not only to remain attached to thinking in dual or opposite terms but even to attribute a (metaphysical) “substance” to emptiness. Moreover, according to this dialectic, a seemingly “correct” view of things, if you try to hold on to it, will turn into a one-sided and therefore “wrong” view; hence, one must give up this view, also, in order to reach an enlightened state of consciousness: that of non-attachment.

Without regard being given to this background, the Madhyamaka school is often accused of nihilism; however, this would indeed mean not only to attribute a “substance” to the concept of “emptiness” but even to raise it to an absolute level. Instead, it should be emphasized that the “empty logic” is seen as being merely a tactical tool used ultimately to disclose attachment to unrealities (delusion, greed, etc.) as the cause of all suffering and, therefore, to liberate man from this attachment. True to its analogy of Buddhist teaching’s being a raft that you can leave safely when the river is crossed (see below), both the concept of “emptiness” and the Buddhist doctrine have to be left behind once the state of non-attachment is reached. Thus, we find in the Mahayana tradition a tendency to relate to the unsayable, or the conceptually elusive reality that transcends all relativity—Buddha nature—as “suchness” (*tathata*, Chinese: *zhenru* 真如), and to denote the Buddha, accordingly, as the “One-who-has-thus-come,” or “Thus-gone” (*tathagata*, Chinese: *rulai* 如來). Especially in the notion of “suchness,” there is a parallel to Daoism, namely the approximation to the ineffable *Dao* as that which is “from-itself-so” (*ziran*).

d) The Diamond Sutra

Next to the short “Heart Sutra” (from which the key sentence on non-duality is quoted above) the “Diamond Sutra”—*Vajracchedika Prajnaparamita Sutra*, literally “The diamond that cuts through the illusion”—is one of the most influential Wisdom Sutras dealing with the topic of saying the unsayable. Although “emptiness” is never explicitly mentioned in the text, it is implicit at the center of this sutra (Lehnert 1999: 91). Here, we also regularly find paradoxical formulations whose aim is to break intellectual habits and common-sense logic.

A theme of this sutra is the question of what we observe in reality: the things themselves, or only their outward signs, which can be deceptive. For example, which signs characterize a true Buddha? (Traditionally, a Buddha possessed

thirty-two signs by which he could be recognized.) To this question of his disciple, Subhūti, the Buddha replies:

The mortal possession of signs is in every case vacant and delusive. If one sees that the signs are not signs, then one sees the Tathagata (i.e. Buddha). (Patton n.d.: §5)

In this context, the “sign” stands for all manifestations (*dharmas*) which have no independent substantial presence but refer only to something else, in an endless chain. The signs or names of manifestations are thus, like language in general, nothing but conventions of relativity—one has to see through this relativity and recognize its “signlessness” (emptiness). In pursuit of this recognition, a paradoxical reasoning pattern is used consistently in the “Diamond Sutra” which says: *A* is not *A*, and therefore it is called *A*. So, also, in the following example:

The Buddha addressed Subhuti: “This sermon’s name is the Diamond Perfection of Wisdom (*Vajra Prajnaparamita*). By way of the words of this title, you should receive and uphold it. For what reason? Subhuti, the Buddha says that it is the perfection of wisdom, so it is not the perfection of wisdom.” (Patton n.d.: §13)

Perfect wisdom is, as you might say, its dissolution as non-wisdom. Thus, there is no doctrine of emptiness to hold onto or to be conveyed. In an afterthought to the sentence just quoted, the Buddha says, therefore: “The Tathagata has nothing to teach.” Elsewhere, this idea is elaborated further by the analogy referred to above, that the teaching of the Buddha is like a raft, which serves to get people to the other side but must then be discarded:

You monks! Know that my expounded Dharma is like the bamboo raft. The honoured Dharma must be relinquished, how much more so what is not the Dharma? (Patton n.d.: §6)

However, this statement is also meant to be understood only on a “worldly” level. So the Buddha says later:

Subhuti, what do you think? Do you say that the Tathagata composes this thought: “I shall save the sentient beings”? Subhuti, do not compose that thought. What is the reason? Really, there are no sentient beings the Tathagata saves. If there were beings the Tathagata saved, the Tathagata then would have a self, a personage, beings, and a soul. Subhuti, the Tathagata has explained that an existent self is then not a self. Mortal men regard their persons as being a self. Subhuti, mortal men, the Tathagata has explained, then, are not mortal men. They are called “mortal men.” (Patton n.d.: §25)

Here the Buddha confirms the above-mentioned (section 2.a) view of the illusory nature of the self in Buddhism. Significantly, he finishes his teaching with a verse (*gatha*) that captures its essence as non-teaching:

All of the existent, conditioned *dharmas*
 Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows;
 Like dew and also like lightning:
 Thus should they be contemplated. (Patton n.d.: §32)

Thus, the best means to speak about the unsayable and the doctrine of emptiness—as before with Laozi and Zhuangzi—is the poetic mode, that is, to speak of it through similes and parables.

The meaning of the sutra, then, is to “cut through the illusion of our thinking,” namely to develop a consciousness that is attached to nothing and which does not take its perceptions and experiences as an indication of the actual existence of the signs and forms (and this includes all *dharmas*, including *nirvana*, etc.). Emptiness as an issue manifests itself in the structure of reasoning by which it is shown that each argument is relative and thus empty. In more general terms, the philosophical *and* religious aim of the Wisdom Sutras is therefore—similar to Zhuangzi—to understand the subjective conditioning of all knowledge. It is this conditioning which leads to misconceptions of reality, which in turn causes the suffering of existence. Hence, the cessation of suffering as the ultimate goal of Buddhism happens by “cutting through the illusions of our thoughts.”

e) Chan (Zen) Buddhism

The development that took place in China through the reception of Madhyamaka Buddhism (such as the *Sanlun* School of Jizang), the “thundering silence” of Vimalakirti and the prevalence of the Wisdom Sutras, culminated to a certain extent in the emergence of the most typical school of Buddhism in China: Chan Buddhism. It flourished in China during the period from the eighth century through to the thirteenth century. Now known as the “Zen” school in Japan, this form of Buddhism goes back, in practice and methodology (as in meditation), to those basics that developed in China; it took, however, a significantly different path of development in Japan. The original Chan is characterized by its converting into practice the most radical of the insights presented above, so consistently remaining silent on the issues raised. This feature is already present in its founding legend. The Chan-tradition is said to have begun when the Gautama Buddha, in a sermon, once held up a flower in his fingers without

saying a word. All disciples looked blank; allegedly only Kasyapa responded, with an understanding smile (cf. Suzuki 1933: 87); for this reason, he is regarded as the first patriarch of Chan. While this story is likely to be a legend, it was certainly invented for a specific purpose (and has exerted a considerable significance throughout its history of being heard), namely, to illustrate the essence of conveying a message beyond verbal or doctrinal mediation.

Seen from this background, for a Chan Buddhist it would be illusory to seek *nirvana* or Buddhahood; in fact, searching for it (as blind attachment) would actually impede the endeavor. An enlightened view of reality, thus, cannot be gained by means of special exercises, for example meditation, but through pure mindfulness in the present moment, that is, in the living here and now (including all its ordinariness). For this purpose, Chan Buddhism again developed special methods, such as seeking answers to questions that cannot be solved intellectually (Chinese: *gongan* 公案, Japanese: *koan*; for example, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” [cf. Watts 1957: 174f]).⁹ In this way, the adepts are led by their masters, not only spiritually but also existentially, into a crisis from which, then, a “sudden enlightenment” can arise.

Enlightenment, however, can also be described as a negative experience, like the emptying of a bucket containing virtually all collected knowledge and effort when suddenly its bottom is broken through. And so, again, on the one hand, the experience of emptiness cannot be understood conceptually, but at best through images; on the other hand, the strategy of a Chan Buddhist master is similar to that of the book, *Zhuangzi*, that is, to respond to questions about the nature of Buddhism (in the so-called anecdotes known in Chinese as *wenda* 問答, or “Question and Answer,” and in Japanese as *mondo*) with absurdities, irrationalities and ultimately silence—or with caning. Such is also a well-known answer to the question of the essence of the Buddha: that he is like a pail of water from which the bottom is broken through (Suzuki 1985: 236).

Entirely foreign to Chan Buddhism is the idea of a divinity of the Buddha.¹⁰ While the Buddha was worshiped in both the Hinayana and Mahayana traditions, Chan is characterized by a complete lack of respect for him. As the legend goes, the historical Gautama Buddha is said to have declared after his birth: “Above me the sky, and below me the sky. I alone am the Venerable One.” This story was commented on as follows by the Chan master Yunmen (d. 966): “If I had been with him at the moment as he said this, I would have killed him with one stroke and would have thrown his body into the mouth of a hungry dog” (Suzuki 1985: 60). Another example is: “If you meet the Buddha, kill him.” But these are only guidelines to ward off being dazzled by conceptualizations of the world or empty words.

Thus, one could say that nothing is sacred for the Chan Buddhists, but this, also, would miss the point, because, in Chan, just as in Confucianism and Daoism, the everyday occurrences represent the holy and transcendent: “Carrying water and chopping firewood—all this is none other than the wonderful ‘Path’” (Fung 1983: vol. ii, 402ff.). One might therefore describe Chan Buddhism as the “Path” (*dao*) of “transcendent everyday life.” In any case, the way to Buddhahood leads no longer to the long road of self-sacrifice or a life behind monastery walls. To be a Buddha means: just not to try to become a Buddha. Instead, it is important to keep an attentive non-attached mind in daily life, which is not the same as leading a normal everyday life. From these basics, one can see the close relationship to Daoism. In fact, much Chinese Chan Buddhism is nothing but Daoist philosophy in Buddhist guise.

3 Conclusion

Let us, finally, highlight again the differences between Laozi/Zhuangzi and Nagarjuna (and the Madhyamaka School as presented with the corresponding sutras). In Nagarjuna we have not only a theory of knowledge but also a strict logic, which, however, is not easy to follow, in all its implications, with an everyday mind. Here we may see a parallel with European thinking, and this is certainly no coincidence, since language, grammar, and thought patterns in India have more in common with their counterparts in Europe than they do in China. Thus Nagarjuna’s concept of “emptiness” (*sunyata*) is a logical concept that requires explanation. It bears witness to thinking in conditional, instead of substantial, terms (Yuan 1998: 37). Moreover, Nagarjuna’s logic is tied to a premise that must be accepted in the first instance: conditioned co-arising. Like Derrida,¹¹ who arrives at logical *aporias* since he does not, ultimately, deconstruct his own system of deconstruction, Nagarjuna, operating his system consistently, would find himself in similar problem areas, since “conditioned co-arising” is also a convention of relative naming (namely, to “un-conditioned co-arising”).¹² However, Nagarjuna is certainly able to lead those who want to follow him into dizzying heights of thought, only to let them then fall into an abyss, which, however, in his paradoxical language, is seen as enlightenment.

By contrast, the thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi is more playful, and their ways of expression are more poetic. They speak in metaphors and parables or cavort consciously in absurdities. Additionally, their philosophy is neither epistemology nor ontology nor logic; rather it represents a philosophy of life,

or, better, an art of living that delights in the contradictions of life, rather than trying to squeeze a logical durable sense out of the world. If, for example, Laozi speaks of emptiness, he does not do this, as would Nagarjuna, in a logical way, but instead with an image (a hub of a wheel, a window in the wall, etc.), where the images are not without a brightening effect. And, finally, questioning the reasonableness of it all, the answer would be: silence—and possibly speaking in paradoxes, or, better yet, in striking poetic images. In Chan Buddhism, as a specific synthesis of Chinese Buddhism and Daoism, the playfully anarchic Daoist train of thought continues to live on in a number of ways.

Thus, in China and Japan it remained essentially reserved to the realms of poetry and art (for example, Zen paintings) to raise sensitivities for the unsayable. For this reason, the chapter concludes with a poem by the poet-hermit Tao Yuanming (365–427 CE)—one of the most famous poets in Chinese literary history. In a few simple, but famous, lines, Tao Yuanming shows how one can succeed from the first to preserve a non-attached and Daoist serene attitude to life, that is, a spiritual freedom everywhere (specifically, by keeping a distance from the world in the heart/mind). This is the previously mentioned art of life of Daoism. In addition, the poem ends, like Wittgenstein, with a philosophical silence, and thus on a very Daoist note—the knowledge of the inexpressibility and inscrutability of the nature of things, that is, with an allusion to the above-mentioned opening sentence of the *Daodejing*: We can get an inkling of the true sense of the world, but we cannot put it into words.

I built my hut beside a travelled road
 Yet hear no noise of passing carts and horses.
 You would like to know how it is done?
 With the mind detached, one's place becomes remote.
 Picking chrysanthemums by the eastern hedge
 I catch sight of the distant southern hills:
 The mountain air is lovely as the sun sets
 And flocks of flying birds return together.
 In these things is a fundamental truth
 I would like to tell, but lack the words.

(“Twenty Poems After Drinking Wine” in Hightower 1970: 130)

Notes

- 1 “Zi Gong said, ‘The Master’s personal displays of his principles and ordinary descriptions of them may be heard. His discourses about man’s nature, and the way of Heaven, cannot be heard’” (Legge 2006: 5.13).
- 2 All translations from the *Daodejing* are taken from Chan 1969. John Gray uses Laozi’s image of “straw dogs” for a general critique of Western style civilization: Gray, 2002.
- 3 Throughout the text I abbreviate *Analects* as “An.” so as to distinguish it from the other Confucian texts included in Legge’s book.
- 4 Richard John Lynn has translated the title into English as “The Classic of the Way and Virtue.”
- 5 See also Pohl 2004.
- 6 For Nagarjuna see also Ramanan 1966 and Streng 1967.
- 7 These are Nagarjuna’s “Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way” (*Zhonglun*), Nagarjuna’s “Treatise on the Twelve Gates” (*Shièrmenlun*) as well as Aryadeva’s (Nagarjuna’s student) “Hundred-Verse Treatise” (*Bailun*).
- 8 Regarding Jizang, see also Cheng 1984: 50ff.
- 9 A Chinese version of the Diamond Sutra is the oldest printed book (868 AD). It was found in Dunhuang and is now in the British Museum in London.
- 10 A well-known collection of *gongan* is Huikai n.d.: *Wumenguan* (Gateless Gate).
- 11 Nagarjuna also treats the question about God as meaningless and futile (unanswerable). Hence, by dismissing both positions as correlative, he holds a middle between theism and atheism. Cheng, 1984: 89, 94f.
- 12 The similarities in the strategies of post-structuralism (deconstruction) and the Madhyamaka School are striking. One could mark the difference between the two (at least in their effects or intentions) in that post-structuralism has opened a new philosophical discourse in its attack on essentialist thinking. It led to an extensive critique of political, social, and aesthetic ideas (also to questioning all hierarchies), revealing or liberating what was previously obscured or subordinated. Intentionally or unintentionally, the results of this endeavor have become not only liberation and plurality, but also mannerism and arbitrariness. The concern of the Madhyamaka School, on the other hand, is fundamentally religious: liberating man from the attachments and entanglements of life as the cause of all suffering. The purpose of its strategy of denial, when consistently carried out, should lead to a state of spiritual non-attachment. For a comparison between Derrida and Madhyamaka see Cai 1993a: 183–95 (this article also explicates Jizang’s “double truths”); Cai 1993b: 389–404. A comparison between Zhuangzi and Deconstruction can be found in Allison 2003: 487–500.
- 13 As to a critique of Nagarjuna by the Yogacara school see Cheng 1984: 25.

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