

Chapter 5

“Names Are the Guest of Reality”: Apophasis, Mysticism, and Soteriology in Daoist Perspective

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Abstract How does one speak the unspeakable, say the unsayable, name the unnamable? How does one subvert the human tendency to become mired in intellectual constructs, philosophical rumination, and psychological confusion, especially with respect to matters of ultimate concern? This chapter examines Daoist uses of “apophatic discourse” and “grammars of ineffability,” or the way in which (apparent) negation is central to Daoist approaches. In addition to providing a foundational introduction to Daoism in general and the *Zhuangzi* (Book of Master Zhuang) in particular, I explore Daoist meditation and mystical experience, with attentiveness to representative modes of expression and description. In the process, I suggest that one must understand Daoist contemplative practice and mystical experience as the root of “Daoist philosophy.” Daoist apophatic discourse *presupposes* a contemplative and mystical perspective on being and sacrality. It is a praxis-based and experiential perspective. Daoist views of language in turn reveal alternative uses of linguistic expression, beyond mere communication and description. We may begin to imagine “soteriological linguistics.”

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5.1 (Dis)Orientations

可不謂有大揚摧乎!闔不亦問是已,奚惑然為!以不惑解惑,復於不惑,是尚大不惑。

We may say that there is a great goal, may we not? Why not inquire about it? Why act in such perplexity? If we use unperplexity to dispel perplexity and return to non-perplexity, this will be the greatest non-perplexity. (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 24)¹

For some, reading this passage may itself have initiated an altered state of consciousness, or at least a moment of linguistic subversiveness and cognitive dissonance. As in the case of much Daoist discourse on “ultimate things,” this passage apparently utilizes a series of negations. The way to overcome *huo* 惑 (“perplexity” and/or “delusion”) involves being *buhuo* 不惑 (“not perplexed”). However, in terms of the projected process of spiritual transformation, one moves beyond not being perplexed to a state of *buhuo* 不惑, here translated as “non-perplexity.” That is, although it appears to be negative in terms of linguistic analysis, on an ontological and soteriological level, especially in terms of Daoist religious praxis, “non-perplexity” is beyond negation. The “great goal” mentioned above is, in turn, mystical union with the Dao (Tao; Way) attained through classical Daoist apophatic meditation, which has the additional benefit of cosmological attunement and spiritual clarity, or “non-perplexity” as expressed in the above passage.

The title of this chapter is, in turn, an allusion to Chap. 1 of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (*Chuang-tzu*; Book of Master Zhuang), which is a central text of classical Daoism and one of the most influential scriptures in the Daoist tradition. It expresses the foundational Daoist view that each and every name and conception is limited. Names, and knowing and thinking by extension, are ultimately unable to encompass experience and “reality.” For Daoists, actual practice and experience are primary; in the case of classical Daoism, this centers on apophatic meditation aimed at mystical union with the Dao.

In this chapter, I focus on apophatic (negational) discourse, mysticism (experiences of the sacred), and soteriology (ultimate purpose of human existence). In the process, in keeping with the theme of comparative grammars of ineffability, I give particular attention to the actual linguistic dimensions of Daoism.

5.2 The Joy of Fish

Let us begin with a famous and influential story from the *Book of Master Zhuang*.

Master Zhuang and Master Hui were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Master Zhuang said, “See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That’s what fish really like!”

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. The standard translations of the *Book of Master Zhuang* include those of A.C. Graham (partial), Victor Mair (complete), and Burton Watson (complete). I have relied on Watson.

Master Hui said, “You’re not a fish, so how do you know what fish like?”

Master Zhuang said, “You’re not me, so how do you know I don’t know what fish like?”

Master Hui 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 like!”

Master Zhuang said, “Let’s go back to your original question. You asked me *how* I know what fish like—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao River.” (ch. 17; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 188–9)

This passage derives from Chap. 17, which is titled “Autumn Floods.” It is a dialogic exchange between Zhuangzi 莊子 (Chuang-tzu; Master Zhuang), an elder of classical Daoism (*dao**jia* 道家), and Huizi 惠子 (Master Hui), a representative of the Terminologist or Logician school (*ming**jia* 名家), with the latter interested in philosophical debates especially concerning terminology and conceptualization (see Schwartz 1985; Graham 1989).² The conversation draws our attention to the central Daoist concern for being and experiencing, over knowing and thinking. In the language of philosophy, there is a greater concern for ontology than epistemology. Rooted in a participatory model of existence (see Ferrer and Sherman 2008), the primary aspiration centers on a radically different way of perceiving and acting, or “non-acting” in keeping with Daoist views. As with many other sections of the *Book of Master Zhuang*, this passage is often interpreted in terms of “philosophy,” specifically as (disembodied) “ideas” or “thought” extracted from a larger Daoist worldview and corresponding practices and experiences. It is read as a philosophical debate, rather than as a non-debate about direct, participatory experience (Fig. 5.1).

Like fish playing among sunlight and shadows, Master Zhuang, who also represents accomplished Daoist practitioners (*shi* 士), participates in the transformative process of the Dao through his own “carefree wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊) and “making all things equal” (*qiwu* 齊物) (see Roth 2000). In this way, this passage supports my primary interpretation of the text, namely, that it expresses a contem-



Fig. 5.1 Detail of *Yule tu* (The Joy of Fish; dat. 1291) by Zhou Dongqing (fl. 1280–1300), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (The image of the painting is used with permission from Artstor and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It is contained in the Met Collection of A. W. Bahr, Purchase, Fletcher Fund, 1947. Accession number: 47.18.10. ID number: 7621)

²Huizi is the philosophical foil for Zhuangzi throughout the text. See, e.g., chs. 1, 5, 18, 24, 26, and 27.

plative and mystical perspective that becomes a source of confusion or argumentation for non-contemplatives and non-mystics. In this way, the text is “subversive” with respect to conventional philosophical perspectives, which are based in intellectualism and rationality, and “soteriological” with respect to Daoist approaches to being.

5.3 The Tradition of the Dao

Before moving into the specifics of the present chapter, some foundational background information on Daoism in general as well as on classical Daoism and the *Book of Master Zhuang* in particular may be helpful. Daoism (Taoism), or the tradition of the Dao (Tao),³ is an indigenous Chinese religion deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Daoism began as a religious community, specifically a series of master-disciple communities (“inner cultivation lineages”) in the Warring States period (480–222 BCE) and early Han dynasty (202 BCE–9 CE) (LaFargue 1992; Roth 1999; Komjathy 2013). While there are various misconceptions about the Daoist tradition, including an outdated and inaccurate distinction between so-called “philosophical Daoism” and so-called “religious Daoism,” Daoism is best understood as a unified religious tradition, albeit one characterized by complexity and diversity (Komjathy 2011a, b, 2013, 2014). This statement of course requires one to investigate the defining characteristics of “religion” and of Daoism, including the ways in which *Daoists* have demarcated and continue to express “tradition.” The Western name “Daoism” approximates various indigenous Chinese designations, including *daojia* 道家 (Family of the Dao), *daojiao* 道教 (Teachings of the Dao), and *xuanfeng* 玄風 (Mysterious Movement), with *xuan* 玄 being an adjective used to describe the Dao. Daoists are those who are part of the “tradition of the Dao” (*daotong* 道統) and who endeavor to “transmit the Dao” (*chuandao* 傳道).

In my periodization of Daoist history (Komjathy 2013), we may speak of Daoism in terms of the “seven periods” and “four divisions,” with the latter most relevant here. The four divisions include the following: (1) classical Daoism, (2) early organized Daoism, (3) later organized Daoism, and (4) modern Daoism. Classical Daoism is referred to as so-called “philosophical Daoism” in outdated and inaccurate studies, while the other three divisions are referred to as so-called “religious Daoism” in outdated and inaccurate studies. Modern Daoism includes the emergence of “global Daoism,” which is rooted in “Chinese Daoism” as source-tradition, but which is characterized by cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and national diversity. Like Zen Buddhism before it, Daoism is also the object of various Western fictions, fabrications, and fantasies, which are rooted in European colonialism, Christian mis-

³Dao, Daoism, Daoist derive from the Pinyin Romanization system, while Tao, Taoism, Taoist derive from the earlier Wade-Giles system. Nonetheless, they are still pronounced with a “d” sound. In Wade-Giles, a “t” without an apostrophe is pronounced with a “d” sound, while a “t” with an apostrophe is pronounced with a “t” sound.

Fig. 5.2 Ancient seal script of *Dao*



sionization, and Orientalism (Komjathy 2011b, 2013). The present chapter focuses on classical Daoism, the earliest Daoist religious community, which established some of the foundational views, practices, goals, and ideals of the later tradition.

The Dao, translatable as “the Way” and “a way,” is the sacred and ultimate concern of Daoists. Daoist theology, or discourse on the sacred, centers on the Dao (Fig. 5.2). It is, first and foremost, a Chinese character as well as a Daoist cosmological and theological concept. Etymologically speaking, the character *dao* 道, probably pronounced something like *d’ôg in archaic and ancient Chinese (Karlgrén 1964, 272), consists of *chuo* 辵 (“to walk”) and *shou* 首 (“head”). It is a road that one travels, and a religious or existential path by extension. *Dao* may thus mean “path,” “way,” “to walk,” and “to speak.” Like *qi* 氣 and *yin-yang* 陰陽, Dao is best left untranslated, though it has been rendered as “Way.” Here it is important to recognize that *dao* was part of the shared intellectual and conceptual repertoire of ancient China (see Schwartz 1985; Graham 1989). In that context, various individuals and movements discoursed on *dao*. However, more often than not, such individuals meant their specific “way” or “path.” In contrast, the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism elevated the concept of *dao* to designate that which is ultimately real (“the Way”), that which transcends and encompasses all of the small *dao* (“ways”).

One of the most well-known and influential Daoist descriptions appears in Chap. 1 of the *Laozi* 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters),⁴ also known as the *Daode jing* 道德經 (*Tao-te ching*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power).

The dao that can be spoken is not the constant Dao.
The name that can be named is not the constant name.
Nameless—the beginning of the heavens and earth.

⁴Although conventionally attributed to Laozi (Lao-tzu; Master Lao) and thus translated as the *Book of Master Lao*, the *Laozi* is, in fact, a multi-vocal anthology with a variety of historical and textual layers. I thus translate the title as the *Book of Venerable Masters* in order to indicate that it contains diverse teachings from various elders of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. See LaFargue 1992; Komjathy 2008, v. 2, 2013. Laozi, who is often misidentified as the “founder” of Daoism, is pseudo-historical, with his personage being an amalgam of various stories. See Graham 1998.

Named—the mother of the ten thousand beings.
 Thus, constantly desireless, one may observe its subtlety.
 Constantly desiring, one may observe its boundaries.
 These two emerge from sameness, but differ in name.
 This sameness is called “mysterious.”
 Mysterious and again more mysterious—
 The gateway to all that is wondrous.

A crib/trot of the first line literally reads as follows:

道	dao	—
可	ke	can
道	dao	—
非	fei	not
常	chang	constant
道	dao	—

As mentioned, the character *dao* can mean “way,” “path,” “to walk,” and “to speak.” One might, in turn, read this line in the following way: “Dao made into ‘Dao’ is not the abiding Dao.” That is, Dao as Dao [human name and construct] is not the actual Dao [sacred mystery beyond names]. In keeping with the present volume and as discussed more fully below, this classical and foundational Daoist theological view suggests that “Dao” is simply a place-holder for [],⁵ or that which is ultimately real. This reading finds additional support in Chap. 25: “Forced to name it, we call it ‘Dao’.” One might, in turn, suggest that the Dao (Way) made into a personal *dao* (way) obscures the Dao in its own suchness (*ziran* 自然); personal belief, identity, attachments, and so forth inhibit one’s ability to experience and live through the Dao. For present purposes, the chapter is also significant for its use and implicit view of language. The Dao is described as “nameless” (lit., “without name”; *wuming* 無名), while spiritual realization is characterized by the parallel state of being “desireless” (lit., “without desire”; *wuyu* 無欲). In addition, the last line reads as follows:

玄	xuan	dark
之	zhi	of
又	you	again
玄	xuan	dark
眾	zhong	all
妙	miao	subtle
之	zhi	of
門	men	gate

⁵How does one express the inexpressible and represent the unrepresentable? Like “silence” and “darkness,” these brackets are a placeholder for that which encompasses and transcends all names. However, as a contemplative and mystical (non)expression, perhaps the brackets inspire deeper inquiry: Which direction should the brackets face? I will return to this theological view in a subsequent section.

The character *xuan* may mean “dark,” “darkness,” “mystery,” “mysterious,” “mysteriousness,” and so forth. Read literally, the Dao is an “even more mysteriousness of mystery.” It is mysteriousness within mysteriousness, a mystery beyond “mystery.” This line actually inspired a late medieval Daoist hermeneutical movement known as Chongxuan 重玄 (Twofold Mystery) (Kohn 1991). One might also read this line as “darkness within darkness.” In any case, disappearing into darkness, mysteriousness and namelessness is a “gate” to the subtle presence that pervades all of existence. Recognizing parallels with the relationship between “namelessness” and “desirelessness,”⁶ one might also connect these lines to those in Chap. 48: “In the pursuit of learning, one increases each day. In the practice of the Dao, one decreases each day. Decreasing and again decreasing (*sun zhi you sun* 損之又損), one eventually arrives at non-action (*wuwei* 無為). Through non-action, nothing is left undone.” By decreasing desires, emotions, thoughts, and the like, one eventually realizes and merges with the twofold mystery of the Dao. That is, once again there is a specific practice that leads to a specific state (see below). Here we might also compare this Daoist “dark mysticism” and the corresponding emphasis on listening with a contrasting “light mysticism” and the corresponding emphasis on vision.⁷

From a Daoist cosmogonic, cosmological, and theological perspective, the Dao has four characteristics: (1) Source of existence (*yuan* 元); (2) unnamable mystery (*xuan* 玄); (3) all-pervading sacred presence (*ling* 靈), with some connection to the concept of *qi* 氣 (“vital breath” or “energy”); and (4) universe as transformative process (*hua* 化), with some approximation to Nature (*ziran* 自然) as a whole (Komjathy 2013). From a foundational Daoist theological perspective, everything comes from the Dao, and, to a certain extent, everything is an expression of the Dao. However, there are various degrees of connection and presence. Specifically, Daoists tend to have an energetic view of existence, with an understanding that everything is *qi*, from the most substantial (rocks, for example) to the most subtle (gods, for example). Along these lines, there are “purer” and “more refined” expressions of energetic presence and mystical attunement. This is fundamentally important for understanding Daoist views, practices, and experiences, especially related to contemplative practice and mystical experience.

In keeping with one of our central topics, ineffability or “unspeaking,” veneration of the Dao and commitment to realizing the Dao involves both recognition of the character as a place-holder for [] and reflection on Daoist theological views. To mistake “Dao” for [] is either idolatry or a mistaken view. Thus,

⁶Interestingly, “desirelessness” as well as various other principles derived from the *Book of Venerable Masters* became the basis for the “Nine Practices” of the early Tianshi 天師 (Celestial Masters) movement. This reveals an important connective strand between the earliest Daoist religious community and the earliest Daoist religious organization. See Komjathy 2013.

⁷From a comparative and cross-cultural perspective, there are examples of both forms of mysticism in different religious traditions. In terms of intra-religious diversity, “dark mysticism” characterizes classical Daoism, while one finds an example of “light mysticism” in early organized Daoism, specifically in the Shangqing 上清 (Highest Clarity) movement. See Robinet 1989, 1993; Miller 2008. One may, in turn, profitably analyze religious traditions based on the specific form of sensory perception that they emphasize.

even the Daoist theological concept of “Dao” points beyond itself. I will return to this centrally important Daoist view shortly.

Another key aspect of the Daoist views related to contemplative practice, mystical experience, and apophatic discourse centers on cosmogony, or the origins of the universe. The primary Daoist cosmogony involves an impersonal and spontaneous process of manifestation and emanation. One dimension of the Dao manifests in and as the universe as cosmological process (“Nature”). Generally speaking, Daoists do not believe in intentionality, agency, or inherent and transcendent meaning in the cosmos as a whole. That is, in contrast to many monotheists, Daoists believe in neither a creator god nor “creation” as such. The foundational Daoist cosmogony involves a spontaneous transformation that led from primordial nondifferentiation to differentiation. Within the larger contours of the Daoist tradition, the foundational and primary cosmogonic account, the movement from nondifferentiated

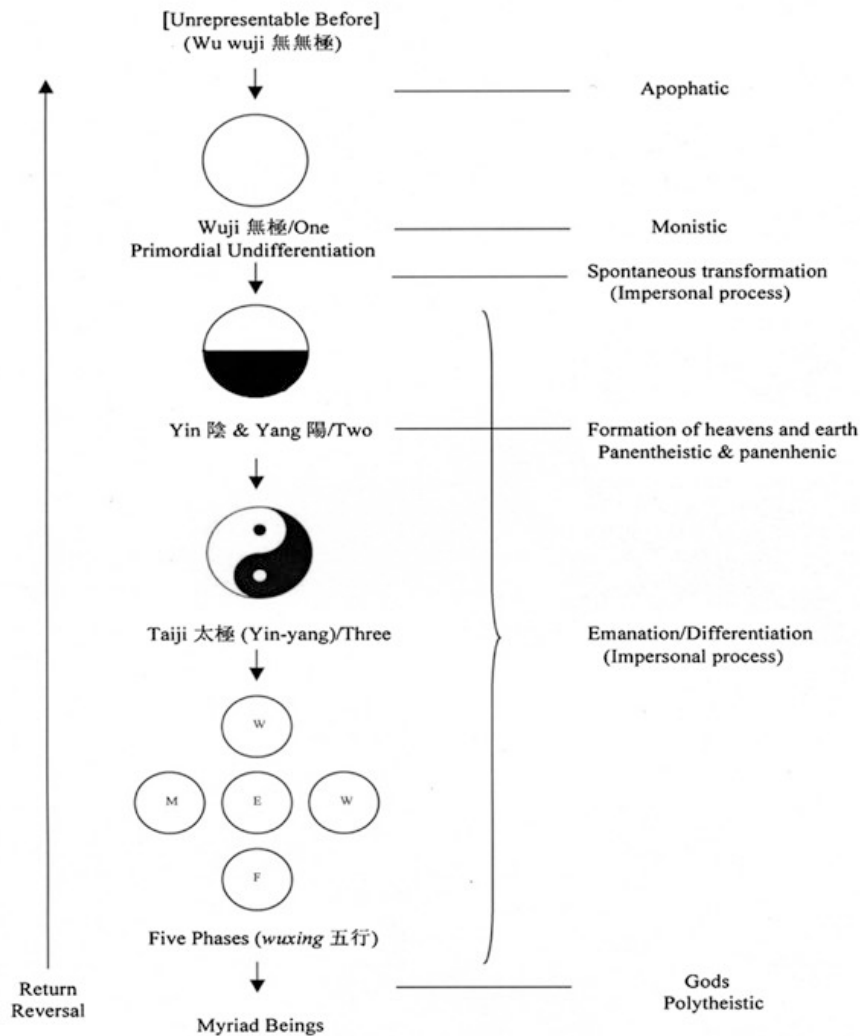


Fig. 5.3 Classical and foundational Daoist cosmogony

Source and primordial unity to differentiation, is spoken of in terms of Wu wuji 無極 (“without nondifferentiation”), Wuji 無極 (“nondifferentiation”) and Taiji 太極 (“differentiation”), which may be represented in a chart (Fig. 5.3).

Taiji, which literally means the “Great Ridgepole,” or the “Great Ultimate” by extension, refers to the dynamic interaction of *yin* and *yang*. It is a cosmological category. Etymologically speaking, *ji* 極 is the “ridgepole” or the center beam in an architectural structure. Applied to *yin* and *yang*, it suggests both distinction (a center dividing point) and connection (a center meeting point). This cosmogonic and cosmological process, involving *yin* and *yang* in continual, dynamic interaction, is not just in the past; it also represents the context of being and becoming, the unending process that is the world and being-in-the-world. *Yin-yang* interaction may be further mapped according to the Five Phases (*wuxing* 五行), which are represented cosmogonically in the above chart. That is, they are located in their associated directions (Water/north; Wood/east; Fire/south; Metal/west; and Earth/center).⁸

As the above illustration indicates, one of the primary Daoist soteriologies involves “returning the Source” (*guigen* 歸根), to the Dao as primordial origin. This is a movement from differentiation to nondifferentiation. Daoists in turn use various technical terms when referring to the Dao as primordial nondifferentiation. These include “source” (*yuan* 元/原), “root” (*gen* 根), “mother” (*mu* 母), “beginning” (*shi* 始), and “ancestor” (*zong* 宗). Here we must recognize that these are metaphors, and these metaphors have a context-specific Chinese cultural and Daoist religious meaning. In particular, the Daoist view of the Dao is primarily impersonal, especially when considering the Dao as primordial Source and in its own suchness. Thus, Dao as “mother” does not refer to a compassionate and loving being, a personal divine consciousness. Rather, it refers to that which gave birth to the world, to life, and to all beings. It is the source of life and that which nourishes all beings without conscious concern. It is neither an actual mother (or father) nor gendered in any essential respect. At the same time, one might recognize that the Dao as impersonal Source also manifests through beings who do express personal concern and consideration. This includes humans who embody humaneness. We may, in turn, recognize that the primary Daoist theology is monistic (one impersonal reality), pantheistic (sacred in and beyond the world), and panenhenic (Nature as sacred); the secondary Daoist theology is polytheistic (multiple gods in multiple sacred realms) and animistic (gods and spirits in Nature).

Turning to the topic of textual lineage, in addition to the *Book of Venerable Masters* and *Book of Master Zhuang*, recent revisionist scholarship by Harold Roth of Brown University and others would include additional works in the textual corpus of classical Daoism:

- *Guanzi* 管子 (*Kuan-tzu*; Book of Master Guan) (sections)
 - “Xinshu” 心術 (Techniques of the Heart-mind) chapters

⁸ Here it is important to recognize that the cosmological concepts of *yin-yang*, the Five Phases, and *qi* are not specifically Daoist. They are best understood as “traditional Chinese cosmology” and part of “traditional Chinese culture.” See Komjathy 2013.

- “Neiye” 內業 (Inward Training; ch. 49) (ca. 350 BCE)
- *Heguanzi* 鶡冠子 (Book of the Pheasant-Cap Master) (sections)
- *Laozi* 老子 (*Lao-tzu*; Book of Venerable Masters)
 - Also known as *Daode jing* 道德經 (*Tao-te ching*; Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power)
- *Lüshi chungiu* 呂氏春秋 (Spring and Autumn Annals of Mister Lü) (sections)
- *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (*Chuang-tzu*; Book of Master Zhuang)
 - Also known as *Nanhua zhenjing* 南華真經 (Perfect Scripture of Perfected Nanhua [Southern Florescence])
- *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Book of the Huainan Masters) (sections) (139 BCE)

These additional texts are especially important for providing more technical information on classical Daoist religious praxis. For present purposes, I would simply bring attention to the fact that the earliest text is the “Neiye” (Inward Training) chapter of the *Guanzi* (Book of Master Guan), which dates to around 350 BCE, and that the latest text is the *Huainanzi* (Book of the Huainan Masters), which was submitted to the Chinese emperor in 139 BCE. Thus, classical Daoism existed from the Warring States period to the Early Han dynasty, or the fourth to second centuries BCE.

Within this canon, the *Book of Master Zhuang* is especially important for classical and foundational Daoist views of language. Traditionally speaking, this text is associated with Zhuang Zhou, the classical Daoist elder after whom the text is titled. Little is known about Zhuang Zhou, but in terms of the text, scholars generally identify the so-called Inner Chapters (chs. 1–7) as containing his teachings and writings. However, the received text, the 33-chapter recension of Guo Xiang 郭象 (Kuo Hsiang; d. 312), is actually a multi-vocal anthology with a variety of historical and textual layers. This is true of all of the texts of classical Daoism, including the *Laozi* (thus I translate the latter title as the *Book of Venerable Masters* rather than the more conventional *Book of Master Lao*). Recent revisionist scholarship on the *Book of Master Zhuang* by A. C. Graham, Liu Xiaogan, Victor Mair, and Harold Roth identifies various “lineages” or “schools” associated with the remaining chapters.

1. **Primitivists** (chs. 8–10; parts of 11, 12, and 14). These individuals were influenced by the “old masters” (such as Lao Dan) and were active around the end of the Qin dynasty or the beginning of the Han. Emphasis placed on living simply, especially in seclusion from the world.
2. **Individualists** (a.k.a. Hedonists; chs. 28–31). These individuals were associated with Yang Zhu (5th c. BCE) and were active around 200 BCE. Emphasis placed on following one’s own aspirations, possibly even desire-driven pleasure. Avoidance of any type of personal sacrifice; complete self-fulfillment.
3. **Syncretists** (chs. 12–16, 33). These individuals were a group of eclectic thinkers who may have been responsible for compiling the text sometime between 180 and 130 BCE. Emphasis placed on synthesis, integration and pragmatism.

4. **Zhuangists** (chs. 17–22). These individuals were later followers of Zhuang Zhou, who strove to imitate the style and themes of the Inner Chapters. Emphasis placed on apophatic meditation, mystical union, and attaining a state of pure being and cosmological participation.
5. **Anthologists** (chs. 23–27, 32). These individuals collected fragmentary materials, including some that may derive from Zhuang Zhou himself and which could therefore also be placed in the Inner Chapters. Emphasis on chapters associated with specific classical Daoist teachers. (adapted from Mair 2000)

These lineages had shared cosmological and theological views (Dao), emphasized specific practices (apophatic meditation), and aimed at specific experiences (mystical union with the Dao). While they were connected by shared worldviews, as well as foundational meditative techniques, on some level their existential applications were at variance. These teachers and communities were committed to cultivating the Dao, but they often disagreed on the most efficacious methods and on the extent of its application, specifically in the realm of social engagement and political involvement.

5.4 Contemplative Forgetting and Mystical Disappearance

With this background in mind, we may now move on to examine classical Daoist contemplative practice, specifically apophatic meditation, that is, meditation in which emptiness and stillness are primary (Roth 1999; Komjathy 2013). Here I will simply reemphasize that, from my perspective, Daoist apophatic discourse presupposes contemplative practice and mystical experience, which I will discuss shortly. That is, Daoist “apophatic discourse” emerges from and literally expresses Daoist apophatic meditation. Practice is central, with two seminal descriptions appearing in the *Book of Master Zhuang*:

You must fast! I will tell you what that means. Do you think that it is easy to do anything while you have a heart-mind? If you do, the luminous heavens will not support you... Make your aspirations one! Don't listen with your ears; listen with your heart-mind. No, don't listen with your heart-mind; listen with *qi*.⁹ Listening stops with the ears, the heart-mind stops with joining, but *qi* is empty and waits on all things. The Dao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai* 心齋). (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 4; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 57–8)

I'm improving... I can sit in forgetfulness... I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with Great Pervasion (*datong* 大通). This is what I mean by sitting-in-forgetfulness (*zuowang* 坐忘). (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 6; adapted from Watson 1968, p. 90)

⁹Note that Burton Watson, in his highly influential and generally reliable rendering of the text, has mistranslated *qi* as “spirit.” In the texts of classical Daoism, it is clear that *qi* is central, although the contextual meaning of the term, whether subtle breath or physical respiration, is open to interpretation. Following Watson, most non-specialists misinterpret the passage as being primarily psychological, rather than energetic.

On the most basic level, Daoist apophatic meditation involves progressive disengagement, here referred to as “fasting,” “emptying,” and “forgetting.” As in other stillness-based forms of contemplative practice (see Komjathy 2015), one first disengages physical sensation and sensory perception. Turning inward and focusing on one’s psychological, energetic, and spiritual condition, one then disengages intellectual and emotional reactivity. One gradually enters into deeper stillness, an inner serenity. From a Daoist perspective, this practice is actually one expression of “non-action” (*wuwei* 無為), or effortlessness. This is a “passive,” rather than an “active” form of meditation. Letting go and releasing are foundational. This form of Daoist meditation is contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic.¹⁰ Ultimately, one forgets everything, even the process of forgetting. Forgetting forgetting, one enters the state/non-state of forgetfulness.

The informing view is that one’s original nature (*xing* 性) is the Dao; there is no necessary distinction between the human and the sacred. In fact, from a Daoist perspective, the Dao is immanent in all things, at least to some degree; and all things participate in the Dao’s enfolding mystery. Contemplative practice deepens this sense. Here one also notes the use of Daoist technical terms, namely, *qi* 氣 and heart-mind (*xin* 心). The former is an all-pervading subtle breath that circulates through the cosmos and even the body; the latter is the seat of consciousness. I will return to the informing psychology momentarily.

Combining these passages with others from the classical Daoist textual corpus, specifically the “Inward Training” chapter of the *Book of Master Guan*, we discover that there was a specific posture and psychosomatic view of contemplative practice. According to Harold Roth (1999, p. 109), “The practices outlined in *Inward Training* aim to generate and retain vital essence [here meaning concentrated *qi*] through developing an inner tranquility and an inner power associated with attaining the numinous ‘mind within the mind,’ the nondual awareness of the Way.” The text emphasizes a “fourfold aligning”: (1) aligning the body; (2) aligning the four limbs; (3) aligning *qi*; and (4) aligning the heart-mind (Roth 1999, pp. 109–12). The first two stages involve establishing oneself in a comfortable posture. Here we see the classical and foundational Daoist psychosomatic view: meditation practice and the associated psychological benefits are directly connected to postural alignment. Aligning *qi* refers to settling and circulating *qi*. Roth, problematically in my view, occasionally interprets the third stage as referring to breath regulation. While “aligning *qi*” could refer to breath regulation, it seems, instead, to indicate settling, storing and circulating *qi* in the body. *Qi* may designate both physical respiration and a more subtle energetic presence. The final stage involves stilling and emptying the heart-mind, and eventually “attaining” mystical union with the Dao.

¹⁰There are five primary forms of Daoist meditation, each of which emerges in a specific historical context and most of which are associated with particular Daoist movements (see Komjathy 2013). They include apophatic meditation, ingestion (*fuqi* 服氣), visualization (*cunxiang* 存想), inner observation (*neiguan* 內觀), and internal alchemy (*neidan* 內丹). The most common name for Daoist apophatic meditation is “guarding the One” (*shouyi* 守一), although this term eventually becomes used for Daoist meditation more generally. In a modern context, parallel practices are usually referred to as “quiet sitting” (*jingzuo* 靜坐).

Although detailed information on pre-Buddhist meditation postures is rare in Daoism, “Inward Training” provides some hints. The text emphasizes aligning the body (*zhengshen* 正身) and aligning the four limbs (*zheng siti* 正四體). Based on reasonable conjecture, especially drawing upon roughly contemporaneous texts and archaeological finds (Harper 1995, 1998), it appears that the corresponding posture involved sitting on the heels in a fashion that parallels the later Japanese *seiza* position. This was one of the standard seated postures in ancient China.¹¹ The spine would have been elongated and erect, and the shoulders aligned with the hips. The hands probably rested on the lap. In addition, the practice seems to have been solitary, rather than communal. With respect to actual method, adepts sought to empty the heart-mind of emotional and intellectual activity; they endeavored to enter a state of stillness, wherein perceptual and cognitive activity decreased. This was a hypoaroused and hyperquiescent state (Fischer 1980; Forman 1990), that is, a condition characterized by deep relaxation and decreased physiological activity. According to the texts of classical Daoism, apophatic meditation eventually leads to the dissolution of self, to the end of subject-object dichotomies and separate identity. Through dedicated and prolonged practice, one may attain a state of mystical union with the Dao and become an embodiment of the Dao in the world.

In any case, one key dimension of Daoist contemplative practice is the underlying psychosomatic (mind-body) view of personhood. Here we find that corporeal alignment is required for energetic alignment, which is in turn required for psychological and spiritual alignment. That is, one’s posture and embodied condition are directly related to one’s energetic and psychological experience. From a Daoist cosmological perspective, this is because an aligned body creates the context for a more direct connection with and participation in the cosmos. Specifically, it connects the crown-point, associated with the heavens (*tian* 天) and celestial *qi* by extension, with the perineum, associated with the earth (*di* 地) and the terrestrial *qi* by extension. In terms of later Daoist meditation practice, such postural alignment also activates the Thrusting Channel (*chongmai* 衝脈), the energetic pathway located in the center of the torso.

The center of Daoist psychology is the heart-mind (*xin* 心). The ancient seal script version of the character (𠄎) is revealing, as it depicts the actual heart. Interestingly, in certain contexts *xin* also means “center.” Along these lines, some Daoists interpret the Chinese character *zhong* 中 (“center”) as depicting the chest cavity intersected by a central axis. The axis may be understood as the Thrusting Channel, which moves through the center core of the torso between the crown-point (heaven) and perineum (earth). From a classical and foundational Daoist perspec-

¹¹ In the case of Daoism, it appears that sitting on one’s heels was the earliest meditation posture, eventually followed by sitting on small stools, and then, under the influence of Buddhism, using the full-lotus posture. Comparatively speaking, one may thus consider the embodied, kinesthetic and material dimensions of human existence. In my own studies of contemplative practice, one thing that I like to consider, perhaps bizarrely, is the history of furniture. While we may take sitting in chairs, and specific kinds of chairs, for granted, there is a history to such material culture, and this also relates to meditation paraphernalia.

tive, the heart-mind is understood both as a physical location in the chest (the heart as “organ” or *zang* 臟) and as relating to thoughts (*nian* 念) and emotions (*qing* 情) (the heart as “consciousness” or *shi* 識). For this reason, although sometimes translated as “mind” under Buddhist influence, *xin* is better translated as “heart-mind,” thus indicating its psychosomatic nature. The heart-mind is the emotional and intellectual center of the human person. It is associated with consciousness and identified as the storehouse of spirit (*shen* 神). In its original or realized condition, the heart-mind has the ability to attain numinous pervasion; in its disoriented or habituated condition, especially in a state of hyper-emotionality or intellectualism, the heart-mind has the ability to separate the adept from the Dao as Source. The latter is often referred to as the “ordinary heart-mind” (*suxin* 俗心) or more poetically as the “monkey-mind” (*yuanxin* 猿心), while the former is often referred to as the “original heart-mind” (*benxin* 本心). The ordinary heart-mind is characterized by chaos and instability, while the original heart-mind is characterized by coherence and constancy. In terms of classical Daoism, it is noteworthy that the received *Book of Master Guan* contains the four so-called “Techniques of the Heart-mind” (*xinshu* 心術) chapters, with the “Inward Training” chapter being particularly important.

The Dao fills all under the heavens.
 It is everywhere where people reside,
 But people are unable to recognize it.
 When you explore the whole meaning,
 You extend up to the heavens above,
 And stretch down to the earth below.
 You pervade the nine inhabited regions.
 What does it mean to investigate this?
 The answer resides in the calmness of the heart-mind.
 When your heart-mind is governed,
 The senses then are also governed.
 When your heart-mind is calm,
 The senses then are also calm.
 The heart-mind is what governs them;
 The heart-mind is what calms them.
 Store the heart-mind by means of the heart-mind;
 Within the heart-mind, there is yet another heart-mind.
 This inner heart-mind is an awareness that precedes language.
 (“Inward Training,” ch. 14)¹²

The notion of the “heart-mind within the heart-mind” suggests that there is mind within the actual, physical heart as well as that there is a purified form of consciousness within habituated psychological reactivity. Such a Daoist view is a form of “contemplative psychology” (de Wit 1991), meaning that it is a psychology informed by and manifested in contemplative practice. The “Inward Training” chapter in turn refers to this “inner heart-mind” as the “lodging place of the numinous.” For present

¹²The standard translation of the “Neiye” in terms of Daoist Studies is Roth 1999. See also Komjathy 2008, Handbook 1.

purposes, it is also noteworthy that “This inner heart-mind is an awareness that precedes language.” That is, from a classical and foundational Daoist perspective, there is a form of consciousness that is non-conceptual and non-linguistic, and, perhaps more radically, pre-conceptual and pre-linguistic. At the very least, such claims suggest that consciousness is more complex than the conventional emphasis on reason, intellect, and so forth. Some scholars have labeled this as “mystical consciousness” (McGinn 1991), with various parallel categories such as “Pure Consciousness Events” (PCE) (Forman 1990) and “Absolute Unitary Being” (AUB) (d’Aquili and Newberg 1999). Although beyond the present chapter, such considerations require engagement with consciousness studies, mysticism studies, neuroscience, psychology, and so forth.

We may, in turn, recognize that there is an informing psychology related to Daoist contemplative practice. This relates to Daoist views of consciousness and “philosophy of mind.” Developing Han De Wit, who wrote the seminal book *Contemplative Psychology* (1991), we may label this “Daoist contemplative psychology,” as it distinguishes “ordinary consciousness” from “realized” or “transformed consciousness.” This is psychology informed by and applicable to contemplative practice and contemplative experience. The distinction between “conditioned/ordinary” and “realized/transformed” corresponds to the degree to which the given practitioner is aligned or attuned with the Dao.

As mentioned, the “heart-mind” refers to both the physical heart and consciousness in a more abstract sense. Due to the psychosomatic nature of such Daoist views, these are interconnected. At the same time, the heart-mind is located in a larger network of relationships. On the visceral level and in terms of Chinese correlative cosmology, these include Wood/liver/ethereal soul (*hun* 魂), Fire/heart/spirit (*shen* 神), Earth/spleen/thought (*yi* 意), Metal/lungs/corporeal soul (*po* 魄), and Water/kidneys/will (*zhi* 志). Hence Daoist contemplative psychology is directly connected to Daoist cosmogony, and here we may recall the diagram and discussion above. In terms of the Daoist account of the emergence of the manifest universe, there was a movement, an emanational process, from primordial nondifferentiation to differentiation. Cosmogonically speaking, the Dao in its own suchness (*ziran* 自然) is an unrepresentable “before.” It is a pre-manifest unity even beyond “Oneness.” Applied to contemplative practice, one reverses the process of cosmogonic unfolding; one moves from differentiation to nondifferentiation. Such is one of the primary purposes of classical Daoist apophatic meditation, namely, “returning to the Source” (*guigen* 歸根).

This relates to the central importance of mystical experience in the Daoist tradition. As a comparative category, mysticism involves an experience of that which a given individual or community identifies as “sacred” or “ultimately real” (Komjathy 2012). From the perspective of mystics, mystical experience involves a direct experience of a trans-human reality, an interaction between an individual and/or communal subject and a sacred dimension. In terms of religious traditions, there are different conceptions of the sacred and different types of mystical experience. In the case of classical Daoism, the primary mystical experience involves union with or disappearance in the Dao. This may be mapped according to three stages.

Emergence: Being: Movement from primordial nondifferentiation (stillness) to differentiation (activity)

- Awareness, to intellectual and emotional engagement, to sense perception, to physicality

Return I: Nonbeing: Movement from differentiation (activity) to primordial nondifferentiation (stillness)

- Physicality, to sense perception, to intellectual and emotional engagement, to awareness, to mystical abiding

Return II: Being: Movement from nondifferentiation (stillness) to differentiation (activity)

- Mystical abiding, to transformed types of awareness, intellectual and emotional engagement, sense perception, and physicality

Along these lines, in Chap. 6 of the *Book of Master Zhuang*, one finds a dialogic exchange between Nüyu 女偶 (Woman Yu), a female Daoist elder, and her student Buliangyi 卜梁倚 (Dividing Beam-support). As so much of the *Book of Master Zhuang* consists of such “discourse records,” I would suggest that a more sophisticated contextual and praxis-based reading would consider the didactic dimension. We are dealing with person- and context-specific teachings between teachers and students, especially members of the classical Daoist inner cultivation lineages.

I began explaining and kept at (*shou* 守) him for three days, and after that he was able to put the world outside himself. When he had put the world outside himself, I kept at him for seven more days, and after that he was able to put things outside himself. When he had put things outside himself, I kept at him for nine more days, and after that he was able to put life outside himself. After he had put life outside himself, he was able to achieve the brightness of dawn, and when he had achieved the brightness of dawn, he could see his own aloneness (*du* 獨). After he had managed to see his own aloneness, he could do away with past and present, and after he had done away with past and present, he was able to enter where there is no life and no death. (*Book of Master Zhuang*, ch. 6; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 82–3)

According to Woman Yu, also known as Woman Crookback and the female recluse, there are seven stages of practice and levels of attainment.¹³

1. Externalizing the World (*wai tianxia* 外天下)
2. Externalizing Things (*waiwu* 外物)
3. Externalizing Life (*waisheng* 外生)
4. Pervading the Brightness of Dawn (*chaoche* 朝徹)
5. Realizing Aloneness (*jiandu* 見獨)
6. Doing Away with Past and Present (*wu gujin* 無古今)
7. Entering Where There Is No Death and No Life (*ru yu busi busheng* 入於不死不生)

¹³Harold Roth of Brown University has written extensive studies of classical Daoist apophatic meditation, including associated stages, states, and benefits.

In terms of the present chapter, the first three stages are especially fascinating, as one is instructed to “externalize” (lit., “place outside”; *wai* 外) the world, things, and existence. Interestingly, *wai* can also be translated and interpreted as “beyond,” and much of classical Daoism emphasizes attaining a “beyond state.” Again, through a process of centering down, one disengages sense perception and stills psychological reactivity. From a classical Daoist perspective, one eventually enters a state of timelessness and deathlessness. One disappears into the transformative process of the Dao, which is beyond personal “life” and “death.”

There is a similar dialogic exchange between Huzi 壺子 (Gourd Master) and Liezi 列子 (Master Lie) in the *Book of Master Zhuang*. A disciple of Gourd Master, Master Lie momentarily becomes enamored with the shaman Ji Xian 季咸. The latter attempts to diagnose Gourd Master using various “psychic methods,” such as physiognomy (facial divination). Each time that Ji Xian arrives, he finds Gourd Master manifesting a different energetic state. On the fourth meeting, Ji Xian flees in terror, running so fast that Master Lie cannot catch him. During the subsequent dialogic exchange, Gourd Master explains to Master Lie that he revealed four mystical states, suggesting that accomplished practitioners may and do transform in multiple ways. According to Gourd Master, “Where the swirling waves gather there is an abyss; where the still waters gather there is an abyss; where the running waters gather there is an abyss. The abyss has nine names...” (*Book of Master Zhuang*, ch. 7). The “nine abysses” (*jiuyuan* 九淵), realized through contemplative practice and manifested as energetic presence, are as follows:

1. Terrestrial Pattern (*diwen* 地文) and Pivot of Restrained Inner Power (*dude ji* 杜德機)
 2. Celestial Ground (*tianrang* 天壤) and Pivot of the Beneficial (*shanzhe ji* 善者機)
 3. Great Vastness beyond Victory (*taichong mosheng* 太沖莫勝) and Pivot of Balanced Qi (*hengqi ji* 衡氣機)
 4. Not-Yet-Emerged-from-the-Ancestral (*weishi chu wuzong* 未始出吾宗)
- 5–9. Unmentioned

One connects with and becomes pervaded by the earth, heavens, and all-encompassing Void. Then one returns to the state of being/not-being “not-yet-emerged-from-the-ancestral.” In the context of classical Daoism, the latter may mean the absence of both actual familial ancestry and identity separated from the Dao.¹⁴ The latter reading is supported because the Dao is referred to as the “Great Ancestor” (*dazong* 大宗) in the *Book of Master Zhuang* (see ch. 6). Once again there is a movement towards increasing degrees of nondifferentiation. Perhaps most interesting, and anticipating the linguistic subversiveness and radical “un-speaking”

¹⁴Technically speaking, from a Daoist perspective nothing is actually separated from the Dao; this is only apparently so. However, on an experiential level, there are varying degrees of connection. As the famous Daoist oral saying has it, “Human beings may be distant from the Dao, but the Dao is never distant from humans.” Recalling the above-mentioned “Joy of Fish” story,” here one also thinks of the following line: “Fish flourish in water; humans flourish in the Dao” (ch. 6).

or “non-speaking” discussed below, “stages” five through nine are unmentioned. A more straightforward reading might suggest that these instructions are more advanced, only being transmitted after a given adept passes through the other states. This recalls the central importance of “oral instruction” (*koujue* 口訣) in the later Daoist tradition. However, in keeping with my contemplative reading of the text and the concern of the present volume, a more “radical rereading” of the text might suggest that the fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth depth of the abyss are unmentioned because they are *unmentionable*. They are *indescribable*. They are beyond language and cognition, at least conventionally defined and understood. This passage and others suggest that there is a type of consciousness, a “state” of mystical abiding, wherein conventional cognitive faculties are inactive. This is realized through actual meditative praxis, here understood as contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic. Following the above exchange, Master Lie instructively decides that he has little spiritual realization, especially compared to what Gourd Master actually embodies and manifests. He in turn goes into a 3-year seclusion during which he engages in consistent and prolonged contemplative practice.

5.5 Daoist Apophatic Discourse and Soteriological Linguistics

With these foundations in place, specifically the recognition of the central importance of contemplative practice and mystical experience in classical Daoism, we may now turn to deeper linguistic analysis. As mentioned, I believe that the systemic misinterpretation of the *Book of Master Zhuang*, especially in the context of both scholarship on Chinese philosophy and comparative philosophy, is rooted in a failure to recognize that the text’s “philosophy” *presupposes* contemplative practice and contemplative experience. Its “philosophy of language” derives from and expresses classical Daoist apophatic meditation. That is, stillness and emptiness are the ground out of which linguistic expression emerges. The categorization of the *Book of Master Zhuang* as a “philosophical text,” with the associated concerns about “knowing,” “thinking,” and so forth, is exactly the type of consciousness and way of perceiving that the “soteriological linguistics” of the elders of the inner cultivation lineages attempts to subvert and ultimately liberate aspiring adepts from. We may, in turn, begin to examine Daoist “grammars of ineffability,” with particular attentiveness to a “contemplative” and “mystical discourse” that attempts to subvert conventional understanding and that expresses a praxis- and experience-based theological view. This view and approach is apophatic; it is rooted in unsaying, indescribability, and unnameability. Its primary purpose is soteriological, rather than philosophical, especially if one understands the latter category in terms of “rationality,” “thought,” and “knowledge.”¹⁵ For the elders of the classical Daoist inner culti-

¹⁵ From my perspective, one important potential trajectory in the “philosophy of religion” involves a “philosophy of praxis,” that is, theoretical examination of praxis. The latter category includes the

Table 5.1 Daoist technical terms

<i>baoyi</i> 抱一: Embracing the One	<i>miao</i> 妙: Subtle/wondrous
<i>datong</i> 大通: Great Pervasion	<i>moguang ye</i> 廣莫野: Field of Broad Boundlessness
<i>huanghu</i> 恍惚: Vague and indistinct	<i>shouyi</i> 守一: Guarding the One
Hundun 混沌: Primordial Chaos	<i>wu</i> 無: Nonbeing. Also <i>kong</i> 空 (“empty”) and <i>xu</i> 虛 (“empty”)
<i>jing</i> 靜: stillness. Also <i>an</i> 安 (“calm”), <i>jing</i> 淨 (“pure”), <i>mo</i> 默 (“silent”), <i>ning</i> 寧 (“serene”), etc.	<i>wuyou xiang</i> 無有鄉: Village of Nothing-Whatever
<i>ling</i> 靈: numinous	<i>xuan</i> 玄: Dark/mysterious

vation lineages in general and those responsible for the compilation *Book of Master Zhuang* in particular, there is something *beyond* thinking, knowing, and saying.

There are various Daoist technical terms related to apophatic meditation and mystical experience (Table 5.1). Classical Chinese in general and Chinese characters in particular have a certain linguistic flexibility, specifically with respect to grammatical tense and lexical class (parts of speech). Depending on context, many Chinese Daoist technical terms could be adjectives, nouns, or verbs. For example, *xuan* (“dark”), a term used by Daoists to refer to the Dao, might mean “mysterious” (adj.) or “mystery” (n.). *Xu* (“empty”), might mean “empty” (adj.), “emptiness” (n.), or “to empty” (v.). In keeping with my contemplative approach, perhaps to realize the state of emptiness, like the state of forgetfulness, particularly the “empty” nature of the Dao in its own suchness, one must go through the process of emptying. In any case, the above examples are sufficient to reveal that classical Daoist practice-realization and the associated experiences of the Dao involve darkness, emptiness, mystery, silence, unity, and so forth. That is, they are primarily apophatic. Moreover, I would suggest that the resultant transformative modes of being are characterized by expansiveness, inclusivity, stability, and so forth (Roth 1997). One of the primary projected outcomes of classical Daoist contemplative practice involves overcoming limited viewpoints and living through a more encompassing perspective.

Along these lines, it may be helpful to make a distinction between “introvertive mysticism” and “extrovertive mysticism.” In terms of the study of classical Daoism, this distinction derives from Harold Roth (2000), which is partially indebted to Walter Stace (1960) and Arthur Deikman (1982). According to Roth, classical Daoist “introvertive mysticism” involves an internal transformation, specifically various psychological changes and ultimately a mystical union with the Dao. Daoist “extrovertive mysticism” involves an external expression, specifically with respect to physical embodiment, being-in-the-world, and perhaps social engagement. This distinction is helpful as it draws our attention to both the inner or subjective dimension of mystical experience and the outer or intersubjective and observable dimension of mystical experience. Thus, the transformative effects of contemplative

informing worldview, distinctive methods, related experiences, and projected goals of specific training regimens. See Komjathy 2007, 2015; also Schilbrack 2014.

practice and mystical experience are not simply “psychological”; they are also embodied, kinesthetic, and social. From a classical Daoist perspective, while one’s own consciousness and being becomes transformed, one’s spiritual realization also manifests as a beneficial and transformative presence in the world. As I will discuss shortly, I would suggest that certain Daoist linguistic expressions are a form of extrovertive mysticism; that is, like Woman Yu and Gourd Master, they are attempts to inspire actual contemplative practice and mystical experience, specifically union with the Dao. This union may be both an internal state and an external activity.

A close reading of the *Book of Master Zhuang* reveals various elders of the classical Daoist inner cultivation lineages, often identified as characters in some proto-fiction, as well as entertaining stories about Daoist practice-realization (Table 5.2). In my way of reading and interpreting the text, these stories provide insights into and models for aspiring Daoist adepts. Here we may recall the dialogic and didactic aspects of the text. The stories are also subversive, presenting radically different ontological and psychological models. To engage in a radical rereading of the *Book of Master Zhuang*, perhaps a Zhuangist reading, one finds that the text includes a variety of “philosophical” dyads (Table 5.3). I have placed “philosophy” in scare quotation marks in order to indicate that I do not believe that philosophy is the correct category, unless one begins to rethink the history of Western philosophy in light of scholars such as Pierre Hadot (1995) and the characteristics of so-called “Asian philosophy” in light of post-colonialism (King 1999). The inadequacy of such

Table 5.2 Some famous stories from the *Book of Master Zhuang*^a

Butterfly’s Dream (ch. 2)	Gourd Master and Shaman Ji Xian (ch. 7)
Cook Ding (ch. 3)	Great Peng-bird (ch. 1)
Death of Primordial Chaos (ch. 7)	Three in the Morning (Monkey-keeper) (ch. 2)
Frog in the Well (ch. 17)	Useless Trees (ch. 4; also 1, 9, 12, 19, 20, 24, 25, 29)

^aThe *Book of Master Zhuang* provided many of the most influential stories that became part of “oral culture” or “folklore” in later Daoist tradition. Here one also thinks of the famous “Yellow Millet Dream” of Lü Dongbin

Table 5.3 “Philosophical” dyads in the *Book of Master Zhuang*

Encompassing	Limited
Sages (<i>shengren</i> 聖人)	Ordinary people (<i>suren</i> 俗人)
Artisans	Cramped scholars
Being/Observing	Thinking/Knowing
Fish	Fish-traps
Peng-bird	Quail
Sea turtle	Well frog
Useless tree	Carpenter
Zhuangzi (contemplative/Daoist)	Huizi (philosopher/Logician)
Apophysis (silence)	Kataphasis (language)

categorization is especially the case if one understands philosophy in terms of disembodied thought and ideas, thinking, and knowing. Such readings of the *Book of Master Zhuang* will always result in confusion and misunderstanding because they are exactly the types of cognitive modes and ways of reading that the text, and its associated teachers, attempt to subvert. Although the text is consistently read by comparative philosophers and scholars of “Chinese philosophy” as advocating “skepticism,” “relativism,” and so forth, I believe this is a misreading. In keeping with the text itself, there is a fundamental distinction between contemplatives and intellectuals or mystics and theologians, assuming that the latter reject the former. One of the primary insights of the *Book of Master Zhuang* is that there are more encompassing and more limited forms of consciousness. In keeping with classical Daoism, this often centers on conditions of “knowing” and “non-knowing.” Abiding in a condition of “non-knowing” (*wuzhi* 無知) is directly connected to contemplative practice and mystical experience, and from this state one uses language in radically different ways, ways that conventional interpretations fail to comprehend. Habituated consciousness attempts to colonialize and domesticate them into forms of “knowing”; that is, rather than confront the soteriology (ultimate purpose) of such expressions, conventional interpretations prevent the elders of classical Daoism from speaking the unspeakable. This is, perhaps, why reflections such as the present one are so surprising or uncommon in the context of modern academia. At the same time, and this is fundamentally important, such forms of discrimination must be understood as preliminary and also limited. Rather than leading to the projected state of realization and transformation of consciousness, they may become another form of limitation; one may create a new mythology in which one is the “Peng-bird” or “sea-turtle” while others are “quail” or “well-frogs.” One may fail to recognize that the dyads are a contemplative map, aimed at inner cultivation and self-transformation. From the perspective of classical Daoism, one must ultimately transcend dualistic and discriminatory ontological modes; one must avoid making yet another “fish-trap.” And anything may become a fish-trap.¹⁶

In terms of introvertive and extrovertive mystical experience, we find various types of transformation. As mentioned, introvertive mystical experience is about

¹⁶According to the text, “The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you’ve gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you’ve gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a person who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?” (ch. 26; adapted from Watson 1968, p. 302). And “Horses and oxen have four feet—this is what I mean by the celestial. Putting a halter on the horse’s head, piercing the ox’s nose—this is what I mean by the human. So I say: do not let what is human wipe out what is celestial; do not let what is purposeful wipe out what is fated; do not let [the desire for] gain lead you after fame. Be cautious, guard it (*shou* 守), and do not lose it—this is what I mean by returning to authenticity (*fanzhen* 反真)” (ch. 17; adapted from Watson 1968, p. 183). For a discussion of animals in Daoism, with particular attention to the distinction between wildness and domestication, see Komjathy 2011c. In terms of language as a “fish-trap,” “rabbit-snare,” and “horse-bridle,” one also thinks of the discussion of “goblet-words” (*zhiyan* 卮言) in the *Book of Master Zhuang* (see chs. 27 and 33). See, e.g., Wang 2004, 2014.

interiority, especially subjective experiencing and psychological states. For example, in the chapter “Lie Yukou” 列禦寇 in the *Book of Master Zhuang*,¹⁷ we find the following description concerning transformations of perception:

The understanding of the lesser person never gets beyond gifts and wrappings, letters and calling cards. He wastes his essential spirit (*jingshen* 精神) on the shallow and trivial, and yet wants to be the savior of both beings and the Dao, to blend both form and emptiness in Great Unity (*taiyi* 太一). Such a person will blunder and go astray in space and time; his body entangled, he will never come to know the Great Beginning (*taichu* 太初). But the utmost person lets his essential spirit return to the Beginningless (*wushi* 無始), to lie down in pleasant slumber in the Village of Nothing-Whatever; like water he flows through the Formless (*wuxing* 無形), or trickles forth from Great Purity (*taiqing* 太清). How pitiful—you whose understanding can be encompassed in a hair-tip, who know nothing of Great Tranquility (*daning* 大寧)! (ch. 32; adapted from Watson 1968, p. 356; see also chs. 1 and 7)

In ordinary and habituated states of consciousness, one uses various categories to analyze other beings and the world. Although one may apparently aspire to overcome such dichotomous thinking, one is, in fact, only engaging external appearances. One only perceives and encounters others in terms of desire, profit, utility, and so forth. However, the psychological transformation that results from apophatic meditation reveals a new and different world. One returns to “beginninglessness,” “formlessness,” and “great purity.” In Daoist terms, one returns to one’s original nature, which is the Dao. From this place of mystical pervasion, one comes to perceive other beings and the world differently. One accepts things as these are, in their own suchness. Each being strives and perhaps flourishes in its own way, and the Daoist contemplative abides in a state of non-action and non-knowing, a state of open receptivity unconditioned by separate identity or personal profit. As the *Book of Venerable Masters* instructs, “Appear plain and embrace simplicity; lessen personal interest and decrease desire” (ch. 19). The above passage is also noteworthy as some of its cosmogonic and cosmological categories, such as Taichu, Taiqing, and Taiyi, became utilized in the later Daoist tradition.

Perhaps more interestingly, the *Book of Master Zhuang* also describes forms of extrovertive mystical experience, or ways in which the Dao becomes embodied in the world. There are various stories about the transformations of action that occur through contemplative practice and the resultant states. One of the most famous and influential of these centers on Cook Ding.

Cook Ding 丁 was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui 文惠. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—*zip! zoop!* He slithered the knife along with a *zing*, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to Jingshou music.

“Ah, this is marvelous!” said Lord Wenhui. “Imagine skill reaching such heights!”

¹⁷Liezi 列子 (Master Lie) appears throughout the text, including in chapters 1, 7, 18, 21, 28 and 32. He eventually became the inspiration for the pseudonymous *Liezi* (Book of Master Lie; DZ 733), which most likely dates to the third century CE. Like the *Book of the Venerable Masters* and *Book of Master Zhuang*, this text has received excessive attention on the part of philosophers. In the overall context of Daoist history, it is a relatively minor text. See Komjathy 2013.

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Dao, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit (*shen* 神) and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I’ve had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife really has no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play about it. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I’m doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until—*flop!* the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.

“Excellent!” said Lord Wenhui. “I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life (*yangsheng* 養生!)” (*Book of Master Zhuang*, ch. 3; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 50–1)

Again, in my way of understanding the text, this passage alludes to a contemplative approach, or at least an application of meditative praxis: “Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants.” In terms of classical Daoism, Cook Ding represents a transformed ontological condition in which energetic listening is central. He practices a kind of deep awareness herein he remains attentive to space and openings: “If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room.” This recalls the central importance of water in classical Daoism: “The highest adeptness resembles water” (*Book of Venerable Masters*, ch. 8; see also 78).¹⁸ Like patterning oneself on the movements of water, such (non)skill is as relevant to spirit as it is to butchery. Cook Ding is able to cut up the entire ox effortlessly, applying the principle of non-action and recognizing the way in which the parts fit into the whole. Paralleling other passages in the *Book of Master Zhuang*, here a number of subversive elements are also noteworthy. A butcher, who is located in the lowest strata of the social structure, instructs an aristocrat. In addition, spiritual insight emerges from an individual whose work involves slaughtering animals and handling blood. One finds that Daoist sages may practice any profession and may be hidden in plain sight. Finally, there is an interesting paradox: Contemplation of death reveals the “secret of caring for life.”¹⁹ At the same

¹⁸While *shan* 善 is often translated as “goodness,” in my praxis-based reading it refers to “accomplishment” beyond skillfulness. Chapter 8 of the *Book of Venerable Masters* goes on to discuss the seven aptitudes (*qishan* 七善). See Komjathy 2013.

¹⁹The text explicitly refers to *yangsheng* 養生 (“nourishing life”), here translated as “caring for life.” This technical term often designates health and longevity techniques. However, the dominant model in the *Book of Master Zhuang* is not life-prolongation, but cosmological attunement and acceptance of death, specifically participation in the Dao’s transformative process. There is also an explicit critique of health and longevity practice in chapter 15. See Komjathy 2013.

time, Cook Ding sees beyond the carcass of oxen to the emptiness in which it is located and which fills its inner being. He has overcome the limitations of his own perceptual and cognitive patterns, symbolized by the knife, and attained a transformed ontological condition.²⁰

We are now in a position to summarize classical Daoist meditative praxis, mystical experience, and soteriology, with soteriology being a comparative category that refers to actualization, liberation, perfection, realization, salvation, or however an individual or community defines the ultimate purpose of human existence. The informing view centers on the Dao as a Daoist cosmological and theological category, as the Daoist name for that which is sacred or ultimately real. From a Daoist perspective, the Dao is the Source of existence, unnamable mystery, all-pervading sacred presence, and the universe as transformative process. This perspective emphasizes an energetic view of existence and includes a world-affirming and body-affirming approach. On some level, Nature is the Dao, and one must find one's place in the larger matrix of the cosmos. The primary practice that assists this process involves apophatic meditation, or stillness and emptiness. On both a practical and experiential level, it is contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic. The ultimate (non)goal is mystical union with the Dao, wherein one realizes that one's innate nature (*xing*) is an interior stillness and that this same stillness is the Stillness of the Dao. There are, in turn, introvertive and extrovertive dimensions of Daoist mystical experiencing. The former involves self-transformation, while the latter involves being-in-the-world. The soteriology that informs and is expressed in the contemplative practice and mystical experience centers on attunement with the Dao, specifically energetic presence, being and experiencing.

From this, we may also reflect on various issues derived from and applicable to religious studies, that is, to the academic study of religion. First, classical Daoism brings our attention to embodiment, in terms of both the ontological givenness of physicality and the possibility of being in specific ways. We may reflect on the relative importance of the body in any religious tradition, including the associated conceptions. Second, classical Daoism has a unique psychology and view of consciousness. We may consider the diverse psychological maps associated with particular practices and soteriological systems. In addition, classical Daoist perspectives challenge the reduction of consciousness to reason and intellect. Rather, for members of the inner cultivation lineages there are "higher faculties" and "different modes," ones characterized by intuition, non-discrimination, and energetic awareness. We might refer to this as "mystical consciousness." Classical Daoism also promotes a particular type of mystical experience, namely, apophatic and enstatic union with the Dao. One might investigate the diverse types of mystical experience, including the possibility of transformations of being and experiencing (Komjathy 2007, 2012). We might refer to this as "mystical experiencing." Classical Daoism also reveals the central importance of praxis, a relatively understudied and definitely under-theorized subject in religious studies. One may, in turn, consider the relationship between "practice" and "philosophy" or "theology." As mentioned, in my inter-

²⁰In this respect, one also thinks of the "sword of no-sword" employed by Zhuangzi in Chap. 30.

pretive approach “praxis” includes the informing worldview, distinctive methods, related experiences, and projected goals of specific training regimens. Finally, classical Daoism has a particular soteriology and theology. One might investigate the ultimate purpose and ultimate reality of any religious system, including the possibility of actual theological reflection.

5.6 Daoist Grammars of Ineffability

Now, for readers wondering what any of this has to do with language in general and apophatic discourse in particular, the time has come. As I have already stated, I believe that understanding Daoist contemplative practice and mystical experience is required for understanding Daoist linguistic expression. Especially in the case of classical Daoism, the use of language, on its multiple levels, is rooted in a contemplative and mystical perspective. Daoist linguistics and “philosophy” are informed by contemplative practice and mystical experience; they are also deeply connected to Daoist soteriology and theology. In terms of classical Daoism, apophatic language is primary. On the most basic level, one finds frequent negations of affirmations. However, here negation must be understood as preliminary and corrective; it is meant to help one unlearn. One finds repeated use of “not” (*bu* 不; *fei* 非) and “without” (*wu* 無) in the texts of classical Daoism. While these terms often have the connotation of “un,” in the sense of “undoing,” the primary emphasis actually centers on an experience beyond negation, a “non” or “trans” state. This use of language is also subversive and transformative. On the one hand, it is intended to subvert conventional patterns of thinking, perhaps even thinking and knowing itself, and conditioned ways of perceiving. On the other hand, the primary purpose involves transformations of consciousness; it is a form of “soteriological linguistics.”

An example is the classical Daoist emphasis on “dreaming” (*meng* 夢) and “awakening” (*jue* 覺; *wu* 悟), with the “positive” or “negative” connotations depending on context. In one instructive expression, we are told, “Someday there will be a great awakening when we realize that this is all a great dream” (*Book of Master Zhuang*, ch. 2; see also ch. 6).²¹ Here we may recall the above-mentioned philosophical dyads. Some general, representative examples of classical Daoist apophatic discourse and soteriological linguistics include various “nons”: Desirelessness (*wuyu* 無欲), emotionlessness (*wuqing* 無情), formlessness (*wuxing* 無形), namelessness (*wuming* 無名), non-action (*wuwei* 無為), non-knowing (*wuzhi* 無知), and so forth. As we have seen, classical Daoists also describe the Dao as a mystery

²¹This chapter is titled “Qiwu lun” (On Making Things Equal). Like the principle of “carefree wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊; ch. 1), “making things equal” (*qiwu* 齊物) is both a classical Daoist practice and a quality of spiritual realization. Along these lines, it is interesting that in the above-mentioned story of the exchange between Gourd Master and the shaman Ji Xian, the latter comments that the former has “no stability” (*buqi* 不齊). The practice of “equalizing” leads to the state of formlessness, or mystical pervasion.

beyond “mystery” (*xuan* 玄), a darkness within darkness. In addition, “names are the guest of reality” (*Book of Master Zhuang*, ch. 1), and there is an “awareness that precedes language” (“Inward Training,” ch. 14). Finally, in the *Book of Venerable Masters*, we find a fascinating statement. In response to a perhaps imagined inquiry from a disciple about the source of the Dao, an elder explains, “It is an image (*xiang* 象) of what precedes Di 帝 (Thearch).” Di was the high god of the Shang dynasty, while *xiang* may refer to a form, physical appearance, or symbol. In this Daoist theological view, that to which “Dao” refers was before any theistic manifestation. Moreover, it is only a vague approximation, a *re-presentation*, of “something” beyond language and conceptualization. I will return to these theological views shortly.

Let us now explore some specific examples of Daoist “grammars of ineffability” in detail. The first relate to linguistics and psychology, and specifically to the classical and foundational Daoist emphasis on “non-knowing” (*wuzhi* 無知).

知不知上,不知知病。夫唯病病,是以不病。

To know that one does not know is best;
Not to know that one is knowing is sickness.
It is only by being sick of sickness
That one ceases being sick.
(*Laozi*, ch. 71)

A crib/trot of these lines is as follows:²²

知:	zhi:	know
不:	bu:	not/without
知:	zhi:	know
上:	shang:	best/high
不:	bu:	not/without
知:	zhi:	know
知:	zhi:	know
病:	bing:	sick
夫:	fu:	now
唯:	wei:	only
病:	bing:	sick
病:	bing:	sick
是:	shi:	this/thus
以:	yi:	through/thus
不:	bu:	not/without
病:	bing:	sick

Simply on the level of language, one notices the repetition of a very small number of characters, specifically *bu* (“not”), *zhi* (“know”), and *bing* (“sick”). There is a

²² Here and in the passages that follow, I have placed negational characters in bold font. These include *bu* 不 (“not”), *fei* 非 (“not”), *wei* 未 (“not yet”), and *wu* 無 (“without”).

grammatical (and existential) pattern of alteration between “knowing” and “sickness” as well as between “non-knowing” and “non-sickness.” In knowing, there is sickness; in non-knowing, there is non-sickness.

The above linguistic structure *appears* to consist of strong negational language, that is, *bu* negates *zhi* and *bing*. However, read contextually, the passage actually expresses a hierarchical ordering of consciousness and spiritual realization.

1. Non-knowing (*wuzhi* 無知) (highest)
2. Knowing not-knowing (*zhi buzhi* 知不知)
3. Knowing knowing (*zhi zhi* 知知)
4. Not knowing knowing (*buzhi zhi* 不知知) (sickness [*bing* 病]) (lowest)

Non-knowing is clearly the “highest,” recognizing that in a classical Daoist frame “high” and “low” are only relative and conventional distinctions (*Book of Venerable Masters*, ch. 2). “Non-knowing” is a psychological condition parallel to the embodied practice of non-action (*wuwei*). In this psychological map, ordinary human beings, in a state of social conditioning and personal habituation, do not know that they are in a state of “knowing.” They do not realize that they only experience the world through assumed categories, ingrained opinions, personal preferences, and so forth. Such individuals simply *assume* that their knowledge and ways of knowing are true, while other individuals assume the same about completely different views and approaches. From a classical Daoist perspective, any form of knowing is limited, as it is rooted in discrimination and exclusion. So, through critical inquiry and reflection, one may recognize that one thinks that one knows. One recognizes that much of one’s life consists of being in a state of knowing, especially through dichotomous thought based on “right”/“wrong” and “true”/“false.” One may begin to recognize the accompanying limitations. Then one may work to overcome knowing by negating knowing. Every “this” assumes a “not-that,” every “that” assumes a “not-this” (*Book of Master Zhuang*, ch. 2). This is identity based on the negation of otherness.

What would it be like to overcome either/or? What would it be like to negate affirmation and negation, to affirm both affirmation and negation? Beyond recognition that one never really knows, that life and reality always evade one’s complete comprehension, there is the state of “non-knowing.” This is a contemplative approach characterized by open receptivity. However, such a psychological condition and state of consciousness is not “attained” through reason and intellect. Knowing cannot be overcome through the same cognitive processes that lead to and maintain knowing. From a classical Daoist perspective, it is meditation that allows such a breakthrough. Interestingly, for members of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism, the state of “knowing” is “sickness,” while the state of “non-knowing” is “non-sickness.” One might assume that sickness is a physical state, but these Daoists understand sickness as any condition that separates one from the Dao. In fact, conventional forms of sickness and dying may be opportunities to merge with the cosmological process (see, e.g., *Book of Master Zhuang*, ch. 6). The present form of sickness is one in which one has psychological agitation, confusion, disharmony, and so forth. There is also something beyond “non-knowing” and “non-sickness,” the apparent absence

or opposite.²³ One may abide in a condition of harmony, attunement, and wellness. While some might see this as Daoist “epistemology,” it is actually a Daoist “ontology,” a “non-epistemology” or “counter-epistemology.” If it is a theory of knowledge, it is one in which knowing and knowledge, including meta-reflection on such forms of consciousness, must be overcome.

Another interesting example comes from the *Book of Master Zhuang*. This passage, discussed in the introduction, centers on the resolution of perplexity, and specifically the ultimate (non)goal of entering a state of “non-perplexity” (*wuhuo* 無惑).

可不謂有大揚摧乎?闔不亦問是已,奚惑然為?以不惑解惑,復於不惑,是尚大不惑。

We may say that there is a great aspiration, may we not? Why not inquire about it? Why act in such perplexity? If we use unperplexity to dispel perplexity and return to non-perplexity, this will be the greatest non-perplexity. (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 24)

A crib/trot of these lines is as follows:

以:	yi:	by means of/through
不:	bu:	not/without
惑:	huo:	confusion/delusion/perplexity
解:	jie:	release/unravel
惑:	huo:	confusion/delusion/perplexity
復:	fu:	again/return
於:	yu:	with/through/to
不:	bu:	not/without
惑:	huo:	confusion/delusion/perplexity
是:	shi:	to be
尚:	shang:	still/yet
大:	da:	great
不:	bu:	not/without
惑:	huo:	confusion/delusion/perplexity

Again, on the level of language, we notice the repetition of a relatively small number of characters, especially *bu* (“not”) and *huo* (“perplexity”). While open to interpretation, it appears that the use of *bu* alternates between “not” and “non.” There is a term/condition that is stated, namely, “perplexity.” One must overcome perplexity by working to become “not perplexed.” Thus, the previous term/condition is negated. This is an “un” state. Then, in the language of classical Daoism, one enters a state

²³ Along these lines one might also consider the character *chi* 痴, which consists of the *chuang* 疒 (“sickness”) radical with *zhi* 知 (“know”). In later Chinese history, this character was used to translate the Buddhist technical term *avidyā*, “ignorance” or “delusion,” which is one of the Three Poisons, with the other two being greed and anger. While Buddhists might see this “ignorance” as a failure to understand the nature of existence as characterized by suffering, impermanence, and no-self (*anātman*), classical Daoism might suggest that “ignorance” is rather *the sickness of knowing*.

of “non-perplexity.” One returns to the Source (*guigen* 歸根) and enters clarity and stillness (*qingjing* 清靜). As mentioned above, in the context of classical Daoism, this state is one’s original nature. That is, perplexity is the disruption of one’s foundational consciousness, which is characterized by non-perplexity. This is a “trans” state and a contemplative mode.

Daoist apophatic discourse also relates to Daoist cosmogony, or discourse on the origins of the universe.

有始也者,有未始有始也者,有未始有夫未始有始也者。有有也者,有無也者,有未始有無也者,有未始有夫未始有無也者。俄而有無矣,而未知有無之果孰有孰無也。今我則已有謂矣,而未知吾所謂之果有謂乎,其果無謂乎?

There was a beginning. There was not yet beginning to be a beginning. There was not yet beginning to be not yet beginning to be a beginning. There was Being. There was Nonbeing. There was not yet beginning to be Nonbeing. There was not yet beginning to be not yet beginning to be Nonbeing. Suddenly there was Nonbeing. But when it comes to Nonbeing, I don’t know what is Being and what is Nonbeing. Now I have just said something. But I don’t know whether or not what I have said has really said something. (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 2; adapted from Watson 1968, p. 43)

Again, linguistically speaking, there are various apparently negational characters, including *wei* 未 (“not yet”) and *wu* 無 (“without”). However, here we actually find the use of negation as an alternative affirmation, specifically the “not-yet-beginning-to-be-a-beginning,” which is “Nonbeing.” The point is to understand the relationship between Nonbeing (*wu* 無), also translatable as Emptiness or Nothingness, and Being (*you* 有) and between human comprehension and reality. There are, in turn, multiple viable interpretations of the above passage. The first is that it is a Daoist joke—it is meant to mock the absurdity of cosmogonic and metaphysical speculation. This form of intellectual rumination is largely mythological, a story that humans tell themselves to create meaning and purpose and convince themselves about a larger order. The second is that it is an attempt to subvert cosmogonic speculation. Here we may recall the classical Daoist emphasis on non-knowing. One can never know the actual origins of the universe, as such a cosmogonic moment, assuming that it occurred, is irretrievable. However, interestingly, Daoists do not see it as completely irretrievable. It is inaccessible in terms of theory, but not in terms of practice. One may disappear into beginninglessness, timelessness, and so forth through apophatic meditation. One may return to primordial nondifferentiation.

Still another reading is that the passage is an actual Daoist cosmogony. Being emerges from Nonbeing, but actual Nonbeing is even beyond the category of “Nonbeing.” There is an endless process of emanation or unfolding, a movement from nondifferentiation to increasing differentiation. This occurs on every level of existence, including thought and emotionality. The “cosmogonic reading” is supported by other classical Daoist writings, especially Chap. 42 of the *Book of Venerable Masters* and Chaps. 1 and 3 of the *Book of the Huainan Masters*. The emphasis is on the cosmogonic unfolding of moments such as Grand Inception and Great Beginning from Nondifferentiation, Oneness, Primordial Chaos, and so forth. That is, Being emerges from Nonbeing, but Nonbeing continues to enfold and

infuse Being. There is a harmonious interrelationship. It is here that we discover the character *wu* 無 as one of the keys for deciphering classical Daoist apophatic discourse. While it can be used as negation, it is also beyond negation and affirmation. As discussed in more detail below, what we assume is negation is actually a different kind of affirmation.

Daoist apophatic discourse also relates to Daoist theology, or discourse on the Dao.

吾不知其名,強字之曰道,強為之名曰大。

I do not know its name (*ming* 名);

I style (*zi* 字) it “Dao.”

Forced to name (*ming*) it further, I call it “great.” (*Laozi*, ch. 25)

大道無名,長養萬物。吾不知其名,強名曰道。

The great Dao is without name (*ming* 名).

It raises and nourishes the ten thousand beings.

I do not know its name (*ming*);

Forced to name (*ming*) it, I call it Dao.

(*Qingjing jing*, DZ 620, 1a; in Komjathy 2008)²⁴

In my way of reading these passages, the actual characters used to discuss the process of “naming” are significant. In traditional Chinese society, individuals have a given surname (*xing* 姓), a given personal name (*ming* 名), and various nicknames or style-names (*zi* 字). The first indicates one’s ancestry; the second is given by one’s parents and indicates one’s location in a specific family; and the third may be given by others or by oneself. Applied to the above views, the classical and therefore foundational Daoist view is that it is impossible to know the *ming* of the “Dao.” The source and indescribable mystery of the Dao is beyond human comprehension; we cannot know the sacred as it is in its own suchness. On a fundamental level, it does not have a *ming* because it is *the Source*. However, ordinary human beings will not accept the unnameable, including the theological insight that even “mysterious” is simply another name. Thus, one *is forced* to name “it.” For Daoists, its *zi* becomes “Dao.” However, once again, ordinary human beings will not accept a name without additional attributes and descriptions. Thus, Daoists give it a new *ming*, here referred to as *da* (“great”). This is the sacred born from human thought; this *ming* reveals its location in the Daoist tradition. Tellingly, for Daoists, the Dao as *da* is that which is greater than human thought, conceptualization, and individual existence. While ultimately unknowable and indescribable, the “Dao” nonetheless births and nourishes everything that exists, without discrimination.

From this it becomes clear that “Dao” is simply a place-holder for [], for that which transcends names and naming. In terms of theological discourse, [] suggests that there are various names that are used to designate something beyond the

²⁴The *Qingjing jing* (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness) is an anonymous eighth-century Daoist text of unclear provenance. It is part of what I have labeled the Tang-dynasty “Clarity-and-Stillness literature.” See Komjathy 2008, vol. 4.

designation. And it is still a container. Alternatively, one might choose darkness or silence. One might also suggest that the brackets should face outward:] [. Everything else should be bracketed. In the case of Daoist theology, we find various names for the sacred. In addition to “Dao” (“Way”), these include the following: *ben* 本/*gen* 根 (“root”), *huanghu* 恍惚 (“vague and indistinct”), *miao* 妙 (“subtle”), *mu* 母 (“mother”),²⁵ *xuan* 玄 (“mystery”/“mysterious”), *yi* 一 (“One”/“oneness”), *yuan* 原/元 (“Source”/“Origin”), and *zong* 宗 (“Ancestor”). This is not to mention “non” characteristics: “beginningless” (*wushi* 無始), “emotionless” (*wuqing* 無情), “formless” (*wuxing* 無形), “nameless” (*wuming* 無名), and so forth. In keeping with a classical Daoist “process metaphysics,” many of these terms are adjectives, rather than nouns. They are less about a specific thing, an abiding or eternal substance, and more about how a particular process manifests and becomes experienced. Most radically, Daoist theology negates itself, including its own characterizations of []. Even the Dao is not the Dao.

From these considerations, we may turn to explicit classical Daoist discussions of language, philosophical argumentation, and theological discourse.

Waiting for one shifting voice [to pass judgment on] another is the same as waiting for none of them. Harmonize them all with celestial equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out your years. What do I mean by harmonizing them with the celestial equality? Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument. Forget the years; forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home! (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 2; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 48–9)

What’s more, we go around telling each other, I do this, I do that—but how do we know that this “I” we talk about has any “I” to it? You dream you’re a bird and soar up into the sky; you dream you’re a fish and dive down in the pool. But now when you tell me about it, I don’t know whether you are awake or whether you are dreaming. Running around accusing others is not as good as laughing, and enjoying a good laugh is not as good as going along with things. Be content to go along and forget about change and then you can enter the mysterious oneness of the cosmos. (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 6; adapted from Watson 1968, pp. 88–9)

So it is said that fish forget each other in rivers and lakes, and humans forget each other in the arts of the Dao (*daoshu* 道術). (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 6; see also ch. 33)

While these and similar passages have been interpreted conventionally in terms the Western philosophical categories of “skepticism” and “relativism” (see, e.g., Kjellberg and Ivanhoe 1996; Cook 2003; Bagger 2007), this is only apparently the case. Here we again encounter reflection on the limitations of human understanding. The point is not to become skeptical or relativistic, themselves consequences of

²⁵ Under modern feminist readings of Daoism, phrases like “mother” and “embracing the feminine” have been interpreted as “proto-feminist.” However, this is highly problematic, as the terms are only conventionally and mildly gendered. Read contextually, Dao as mother refers to that which generates and nourishes all beings without discrimination; it has no other “feminine” attributes (e.g., compassion). Similarly, “the feminine” is largely synonymous with yin, a cosmological principle in dynamic interaction with yang.

hyper-rationality and intellectualism; the point is to free oneself from such constraints. The point is to enter a state of trans-rationality, a condition of mystical being. This is consciousness beyond argumentation, conceptualization, intellectual apprehension, and so forth. It is alignment and attunement with the Dao and Nature by extension. The primary concern is direct experience, a way of experiencing beyond personal preferences, habituated desires, ingrained opinions, and so forth. From this Daoist perspective, forgetting is soteriological, and forgetfulness is a carefree state of being characterized by aliveness, joy, discovery, receptivity, and so forth. Recalling our earlier consideration of Zhuangzi walking next to the Hao River and observing fish, the above passages again tellingly refer to fish and water. How does one become a fish and experience water?

Now, of course, many historians, social critics, philosophers, and the like will argue that there is no such thing as “pure consciousness” or “direct experience,” but such views are rooted in particular assumptions and experiences. From a classical Daoist perspective, contemplative practice and mystical experience involve deconditioning, effortlessness, forgetting, letting go, unlearning, and so forth. In terms of a contemplative approach, one may analyze specific perspectives in terms of tension/relaxation, agitation/stillness, confusion/clarity, habituation/realization, and so forth. That is, sitting in silence and emptiness may resolve apparently unresolvable debates and may accept apparently unacceptable (non)descriptions of that which transcends names and argumentation. Perhaps, as the *Book of the Venerable Masters* suggests, clarity and stillness are the rectification of the world (ch. 45); perhaps silence revolves perplexity. The transformative effect of contemplative practice may result in a different type of philosophizing and theologizing, one that accepts both ultimate unknowability and the human aspiration for comprehension and communication. This directly relates to the Daoist principle of “non-contention” (*wuzheng* 無爭), and “non-argumentation” by extension.

We may, in turn, apply these insights to the comparative study of language and soteriology. Classical Daoist soteriological linguistics emphasizes apophatic discourse, a discourse apparently based on negation, but more properly understood as another type of affirmation in which a “non” or “trans” state of being is realized. Emphasis is placed on reality and a way of experiencing beyond names and conceptions. From my perspective, although beyond the confines of the present paper, such Daoist insights are deeply rooted in classical Chinese, specifically in the pictographic and ideogrammatic nature of Chinese characters. In classical Chinese, characters have a clearer relationship to that which they designate; the signifier-signified relationship is stronger. So, *yu* 魚 approximates a fish, but at the same time it is clearly not an actual fish. Thus, the layers of mediation and deviation are clearer: language helps us communicate, but may not lead to actual understanding. Language designates, but is not itself the designation. The latter is beyond language. Classical Chinese stands in contrast to Western Romance languages like English, wherein a “dog” could be a “cat,” and vice versa. The signs are largely arbitrary sounds used to designate something (the signified) without any clear connection to that something. Classical Daoist soteriological linguistics also emphasizes embodied being and experiencing, with particular attentiveness to the energetic dimensions of existence.

From such a viewpoint, experience is not only physical and psychological, but also energetic. This includes a human capacity for other forms of listening that do not involve actual auditory perception. Comparatively speaking, classical Daoist soteriological linguistics contrasts with that of other traditions, such as Hinduism and Judaism, wherein the dominant view respectively privileges Sanskrit and Hebrew as sacred on some level. In classical Daoist soteriological linguistics, language is not sacred; rather, language is a medium through which to experience the sacred, and a limited one at that. To mistake our names and concepts for that which they point towards is to mistake the map for the territory, which is experienced in but also transcends the map. The question then becomes *how to use language* in beneficial ways, in this case in ways that lead to some form of spiritual realization and mystical being.

In terms of Daoist “mystical unsaying,” to borrow a phrase from Michael Sells (1994), we may reflect on its various dimensions, including audience, genre, grammar, language, metaphor and symbolism, as well as purpose. The primary intended audience of the *Book of Master Zhuang* and most classical Daoist texts was members of the inner cultivation lineages. Specifically, much of the text documents context-specific instructions transmitted from particular teachers to particular students. By extension, the text addresses any aspiring Daoist adept. The audience thus becomes members of other movements and traditions in later Daoist history. The primary genre is dialogic exchange. As I have argued elsewhere (Komjathy 2007, 2013), the *Book of Master Zhuang* may be read a proto-*yulu* 語錄 (“discourse record”), which became a major form of literary expression in later Chan (Zen) Buddhism. Secondarily, the text consists of poetry, stories, and folktales. A thorough understanding must, in turn, consider the distinctive characteristics of each genre. With respect to grammar, one encounters many adjectives and verbs, which parallels the classical Daoist emphasis on process over substance. There is also a high density of “negation,” which I have argued is complex in terms of meaning and purpose. The primary language is, of course, classical Chinese, and one may consider the pictographic and ideogrammatic qualities as relevant to linguistic expression and analysis. Metaphors and symbolism in turn abound, and here more research and reflection are required. Why does a community that places so much emphasis on apophasis also employ so many metaphors for the indescribable and incomprehensible? In any case, some key “images” include ancestor, mother, mystery, one, source, uncarved block, water, and so forth. Finally, I believe that there are a number of primary purposes for classical Daoist apophatic discourse. First and lowest, elders of the inner cultivation lineages intended to confuse listeners and to subvert conventional ways of thinking and knowing. This was largely a corrective to received understanding. Second and more importantly, such discourse aimed to move practitioners from “unperplexity” to “nonperplexity.” That is, in classical Daoist apophatic meditation and religious training, one had to unlearn first. Then one could enter a state beyond learning and unlearning, a state characterized by clarity and stillness. This is the condition of “celestial equality” and “being carefree.” However, the ultimate purpose of classical Daoist apophatic discourse centers on alignment, awakening, freedom, open receptivity, union, and so forth. It is intended to inspire and direct one towards mystical being and mystical experiencing.

5.7 Disappearing into Namelessness

Considering the contemplative and mystical dimensions of Daoist apophatic discourse, including the actual purpose of “negation,” one finds an aspiration to disappear into namelessness. Throughout the present chapter I have emphasized the possibility of a “radical rereading” of classical Daoism in general and the *Book of Master Zhuang* in particular. The text is not primarily “philosophy,” unless one unlearns conventional associations and explores other possibilities. At the very least, the text emphasizes ontology (being) over epistemology (knowing); any classical Daoist epistemological concern centers first and foremost on the limitations of knowing and the possibilities of being. More importantly, such a radical rereading recognizes the central importance of contemplative practice and mystical experience. This is partly why I characterize the text and the inner cultivation lineages as “religious.” There is an underlying and informing anthropology (view of human personhood), psychology (view of consciousness), soteriology (ultimate purpose), and theology (discourse on the sacred). Classical Daoist apophatic discourse also challenges conventional understanding and requires that we consider the actual motivations and purposes of apophatic discourse: It negates assumed affirmations, imagines a state of consciousness beyond affirmations and negations, and points towards a condition wherein a new form of affirmation, a “non” or “trans” condition,” is possible. In terms of the study of apophasis, mysticism and theology, we find that particular views are rooted in and expressions of particular practices and experiences. There are alternative ways of being and experiencing. For this, subversion of domestication is required, including resistance to cognitive domestication. We must confront the radical challenges contained in the *Book of Master Zhuang* and associated texts. Then we may find that text points towards transformed existential modes.

For Daoists, at least for members of the classical Daoist inner cultivation lineages and those with similar affinities and aspirations, the elders and models documented in the *Book of Master Zhuang* suggest that there are transformed existential modes beyond conceptualization and intellectualism, beyond thinking and knowing. Transformed through contemplative practice and introvertive mystical experience, in such a state of being and form of extrovertive mysticism, one may find ways to speak the unspeakable. More importantly perhaps, one may come to resemble the fish of the Hao River, the great Peng-bird, sea turtles, and useless trees. In a state of receptive experiencing and participatory being, one may float with the currents and play among sunlight and shadows. From a Daoist perspective, such is a disappearing in the Dao and a reappearing in the world.

Now, in following a Zhuangist hermeneutics, I don’t know if I’m a turtle who has wandered in from the ocean or a frog in my own well. And I know that I have just said something. But I don’t know whether or not what I have said has really said something. Perhaps you know.

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