PHIL 1304
Analysis Paper #1
Dr. Adam Miller

“The Essence of Emptiness”

The “Tao Te Ching” is a mystifying religious Chinese text and source for philosophical Taoism. The eleventh chapter regarding emptiness helps us to understand the central claim of the “Tao Te Ching,” that we should appreciate and acknowledge the usefulness of being empty because that which exists can lead to profit while that which is empty leads to use. Emptiness is potentiality for anything and everything. It is the actual emptiness of something that is functional and can be utilized. One must pursue the path of emptiness to be at one with Tao which clarifies why this chapter is important to an overall understanding of the “Tao Te Ching.”

The title “Tao Te Ching,” can be translated as “The Scripture of the Way and the Power.” Containing eighty-one influential poems and two conceptual parts, the “Tao Te Ching” provides direction and inspiration to the reader. Through the use of epigrams, paradoxes, and repetition, it illustrates consistent ideas and offers guidance on how one should live his or her life, how to be at one with Tao, and how to correctly govern. The recurrent ambiguous nature of the text however, makes it difficult to comprehend. Lacking “a specific speaker or context and because it relies not on logical exposition but on sheer power of language in expounding its ideas, it comes closer to pure poetry than do any other philosophical texts” (Watson xv).

The “Tao Te Ching” has been traditionally accredited to Lao-tzu, also known as the “Old Master.” He was first recognized in chapter 63 of the Shih chi, written around 100 B.C.E. “Lao-tzu’s surname was Li, his personal names were Erh and Tan, and he was a native of Ch’u… He served as historian in charge of the archives of the Chou court, which means he must have resided at the Chou capital” (Watson xii). Lao-tzu’s existence has been questioned due to his
name, “Old Master” which is more or less a title rather than a name. “The man on whose teachings Taoism is based is semi-legendary. No one is really sure whether or not he existed. It has been suggested that he was not one man but a composite of many wise men of his time” (Hartz 20).

According to the book “Taoism: World Religions,” Lao-tzu was a very intelligent man known for his wise teachings. He was often consulted upon regarding questions of religion and politics. He believed that human beings were “born good and needed nothing to keep them that way except to be left alone” (Hartz 22). According to tradition, Lao-tzu left the Chou royal house due to its decline and ventured to the Han-ku Pass. The guard overlooking the Pass was distraught at the thought of losing Lao-tzu and his wisdom for all eternity. Therefore, the guard requested a recording of Lao-tzu’s wisdom before he disappeared into the mountains. And upon his request, Lao-tzu wrote the “Tao Te Ching,” “expounding the meaning of tao and te in some five thousand characters, and then departed” (Watson xii). The “Tao Te Ching” dates back “from the first to third centuries C.E, but recently two older versions of the text were discovered in the Mawangdui tomb, of the first century B.C.E.” (Addiss and Lombardo xvii).

The philosophy of Lao-tzu through the “Tao Te Ching” is that we need to accept what is there and what we have without wanting the circumstance to be any different. We need to work with nature and its unfathomable natural process rather than against it. We need to simply be and let things happen without resistance. The “Tao Te Ching” focuses on the central themes of wu-wei or inaction, Tao, Te or virtue, emptiness, detachment, yin and yang, and government. One must follow the Tao by abandoning his or her ego thus obtaining the essence of these themes. Our minds are the battlefield of our attachments and egos. We are more capable to treat others with compassionate patience and more likely to forgive when we detach ourselves from our ego.
We are more likely to worry and act out in violence or stupidity when we are *attached* to our ego.

Through clever examples in chapter eleven, one can recognize Lao-tzu’s teaching that we need to appreciate and acknowledge the usefulness of being empty because that which exists can lead to profit while that which is empty leads to use. The actual emptiness of something is functional and can be utilized:

Thirty spokes join one hub.  
The wheel’s use comes from emptiness.  
Clay is fired to make a pot.  
The pot’s use comes from emptiness.  
Windows and doors are cut to make a room.  
The room’s use comes from emptiness.  
Therefore,  
Having leads to profit,  
Not having leads to use. (11)

The key words in this intellectual poem are emptiness, use, profit, and having. Usefulness is a result of emptiness, “non-being”, or “nothingness” as described in other translations. Having in this poem refers to existence and one’s possession. Not having refers to a kind of invisible valuable possession in the sense that not having is the definitive goal chapter eleven describes. Taoists “place just as much importance on what is not there as on what is there” (Ming-Dao 249). They notice positive as well as negative space; the outside as well as the inside; life as well as death. What is can lead to profit while what is not ultimately leads to use.

Looking at a wheel, a pot, or a room, the most noticeable feature is the structure of how the object was made. The wheel’s thirty spokes have to be durable in order to be useful. The clay fired to make a pot has to be fired effectively in order to be useful. The windows and doors of a room have to be well-made in order to be useful. These material objects must be strongly and effectively built in order to last and be advantageous.
We are more inclined however, to not even fathom the usefulness of an object’s emptiness. The wheel’s thirty spokes must come together at a central point, the hole, in order to be useful. The pot must be deep enough in depth to hold an abundant amount of liquid or substance. The room must have windows for light and air and doors for entrance. Doors and windows are what turn walls from blockades to something of purpose. It is in the empty spaces that these material objects depend. Without the wheel’s emptiness, the thirty spokes would be too weak to carry any weight. The empty hole is the stronghold. Without the hollow emptiness in the pot and the room, there would only be solid. In that sense, the pot and room’s usefulness would cease and even be questioned. The emptiness is ironically the most important element. Therefore, we need to educate ourselves to take something that potentially can be profitable and mold it into something useful.

Just like the wheel, the pot, and the room, human beings can also carry the same attributes. We can be durable, effective, and useful. Just as wheels are put to use for transportation purposes, we can travel. Just as pots hold nutrition that we partake for health purposes, we can meditate and exercise to maintain nutrition in our mind and strength. Just as a room provides warmth, shelter, and protection, we also can treat ourselves and others warmly and provide protection by looking out for one another. We must look within ourselves and find the usefulness and abilities we possess. However, unless we are willing to be open like the empty pot to allow new circumstances and opportunities in our lives, we will always only see the profitable. “Having leads to profit / Not having leads to use” (Lao-tzu 11).

As I have indirectly mentioned, Tao is similar to an empty pot. It is empty and contains all things. It is a useful indivisible whole. It has neither an end nor a beginning similar to the rim of a pot. Pots can symbolize our lives because they are used to eat from. The emptiness of the pot
is the only part one really needs. The pot can be filled time and time again but will never be exhausted just as the Tao. Just as we partake in nutrients from a pot, we also partake in Tao and its nature. The closer we are to Tao, the more we empty ourselves each day and finally achieve *wu-wei*. “Non-doing—and nothing not done” (Lao-tzu 48).

“The Tao from which all being comes is called the Great Void—an emptiness or ‘not-being’” (Hartz 61). One must pursue the path of emptiness to be at one with Tao “which is seen as a higher state than consciousness or thought” (Hartz 61). Meditation, exercise, and eating healthy are associated with emptiness in the sense that one is emptying his or her mind in order to be unified with Tao. Complete emptiness is also relinquishing oneself from worries or selfish desires. “Worldly ambitions drain the energies. Turning away from desire and ambition is the way to be one with Tao” (Hartz 66). We will then also discover Te or virtue in ourselves.

All in all, the eleventh chapter of the “Tao Te Ching” focuses on the central theme of emptiness. Taoists believe emptiness is just as important as fullness. What is there is just as important as what is not there. Emptiness is potentiality for anything and everything. The “Tao Te Ching” suggests that when the mind is empty of desires, worries, and the self, it can then receive Tao. “The ancients characterized all of Tao as emptiness… This is why the wise are seldom disturbed by the comings and goings of life. They see it all as the alternating motions of the great bellows. Nothing is lasting, nothing is permanent” (Ming-Dao 248). This reason is why the eleventh chapter is so important. We need to empty our thoughts of worldly things and then we will be useful.

The song, “Dust in the Wind” by Kansas describes the essence of emptiness in Tao. Everything comes and passes. “One who knows Tao accepts all that comes, because ultimately, it will pass and yet Tao will continue to flow” (Ming-Dao 248). The earth and sky, as described
in this song are the only things that are constant and lasting. We do not matter; money does not matter. Therefore, we should not hang on to worldly things. We should not worry or be selfish. We need to simply let things be and let life take its natural course.

I close my eyes
Only for a moment and the moment's gone
All my dreams
Flash before my eyes of curiosity
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind
Same old song
Just a drop of water in an endless sea
All we do
Crumbles to the ground though we refuse to see
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind
Now don't hang on
Nothing lasts forever but the Earth and Sky
It slips away
And all your money won't another minute buy
Dust in the wind
All we are is dust in the wind
Dust in the wind
Everything is dust in the wind

The eleventh chapter regarding emptiness helps us to understand the central claim of the “Tao Te Ching,” that we should appreciate and acknowledge the usefulness of being empty because that which exists can lead to profit while that which is empty leads to use. Emptiness allows us to value everything in life and aids us to appreciate what we have by recognizing what we do not have. Negative space is as important as positive space; the intangible is just as important as the solid; life is just as important as death. When one withholds the quality of emptiness, he or she obtains patience, simplicity, restraint, and wu-wei. One must pursue the path of emptiness to be at one with Tao which clarifies once again why this chapter is important to an overall understanding of the “Tao Te Ching.”


