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 > In Christ,  
 Napoleon

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"Emptiness" and "Fullness" in the Lao-Tzu

By

Eugene Dennis Rose

A.B. (Pomona College) 1956

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Oriental Languages

in the

GRADUATE DIVISION

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Approved:

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## PREFACE

This paper was born of the desire to reconcile two seemingly contradictory aspects of Lao-tzu's thought: the "relativity" of his philosophy of the "opposites", and the "absoluteness" of the "emptiness" or "nothingness" to which he constantly refers. As "fullness" is the "opposite" of "emptiness", we were forced to discuss it too; but, despite the fact that "fullness" is, if anything is, the real goal of Lao-tzu's philosophy, we have devoted little space to it. For we have concerned ourselves with the dynamics of Lao-tzu's thought, the path to his goal more than that goal itself; and that path leads through "emptiness".

Despite our comprehensive title, the reader is herewith warned that he will find in these pages no thorough and systematic discussion of the terms found there; that would take us far outside the province of a paper of this size. What we have tried to do, rather, is to discover a key wherewith to unlock their secrets, as it were: the underlying ideas in terms of which they are most properly to be understood.

The approach we have used to do this is one that might be called "philologico-philosophical", an alternate examination of words and ideas. This approach is justified, we feel, on the grounds that Lao-tzu is no "philosopher" in the usual sense of that word; he is not concerned with abstract concepts, but rather with what one might call poetic ideas: ideas highly charged with dynamic associations, notions of which the concrete basis is still discernible and which may be described,

often, by a gesture of the hand or a simple graph. And our examination of the language of the book--always in conjunction with the ideas bound up in it--will serve, it is hoped, as a partial antidote to the too-often careless, even cavalier, approach to Lao-tzu the "mystic" and fount of "esoteric wisdom" that has marked many of the popular works on him. Lao-tzu's thought is often elusive and paradoxical, but it is rarely if ever as fantastic and contradictory as it has sometimes been made to seem.

Our approach to Lao-tzu's language has been primarily through phonetics, with Karlgren's reconstruction of Archaic Chinese in his Grammata Serica as our basis; his reconstruction is by no means perfect, but it is the best we have so far of the whole language. We have paid comparatively little attention to graphic analysis, mainly because in Chinese, as in any language, the sound is primary, the script secondary. In the case of the "logographic" Chinese script, a given graph is always a comparatively late interpretation of the meaning of a given word, if indeed the graph bears any concrete relation to the meaning at all. All we know of many graphs, in fact, is the phonetic information they convey: graphs of a common "phonetic" (or "etymonic") are almost always closely related in sound.

We have deliberately restricted ourselves, in this paper, to the text of the Lao-tzu itself, with scarcely any references to other texts contemporary or related in idea or language. To

go outside the Lao-tzu--to the I Ching, say, or other Taoist books like the Chuang-tzu or Lieh-tzu--would have involved us in materials impossible to bring within the scope of this essay, short of a drastic limitation of our topic, which we did not wish. Besides, one could not stop with overtly "Taoist" texts but would have to include many other Han and pre-Han texts which appropriated, each in its own way, the common fund of ideas from which the author of the Lao-tzu, as seems most likely, drew much of his inspiration. There are certainly many "Taoist" ideas, for example, in the "Confucian" Chung-yung. ~~==~~ What is perhaps more to the point, the thought of the Lao-tzu is by no means identical with that even of other "Taoists"; differences in intellectual climate and individual disposition make the thought of the Chuang-tzu, for instance, as close as it may be "in general" to that of the Lao-tzu, at least "somewhat" different from it. We have preferred, then, to take the Lao-tzu as a closed world and present as coherent a description of its ideas as possible, before proceeding to view them in the light of other texts--or vice versa.

Finally, we have not concerned ourselves with any problems of historical criticism; since we are concerned only with the ideas of the Lao-tzu itself, questions of dating and authorship are irrelevant to our purpose. If we alternately speak of "Lao-tzu" and "the Lao-tzu", it is merely a matter of stylistic convenience and imports no prejudice as to the identity of the author. We assume, of course, that the book

forms a coherent whole; otherwise there is little point in trying to make sense of it at all. The text quoted is always the usual one with commentary by Wang Pi (see bibliography). Rather than supply a fresh translation for every passage quoted, we have generally relied on what are probably the two most careful translations into Western European languages, those of Arthur Waley and J. J. L. Duyvendak; as for Duyvendak's, we have found his French rendering more satisfactory than his English. We have used the one or the other for reasons sometimes of interpretation, sometimes simply of style. Waley's and Duyvendak's versions are always identified as such in loco; where there is no such identification the rendering is our own (we have ventured such only when our interpretation differs from both of the aforementioned).

Note that we have modified Karlgren's reconstruction for typographical convenience:

Karlgren's	χ > h
"	ĥ > ʃ (and so for other initials)
"	â > â (and so for other vowels)
"	ǎ > ǎ ( " )
"	ə > e
"	é > @
"	ī > j



# I. THE "OPPOSITES" AND "RETURN"

The center of Lao-tzu's thought is the "way", that is to say, a kind of movement; and this movement is defined as "return" or "reversion",<sup>1</sup> which is usually interpreted as "return" to the "opposite". Now "return" and the "opposites" are both favorite themes of the Lao-tzu, but they are by no means as simple as this interpretation makes them. There are in fact three words in the text usually translated "return", two of which are connected with the "opposites": 反 pjwan and 復 b'jok. These two words commentators and translators alike evidently regard as more or less interchangeable;<sup>2</sup> but in fact, as we shall attempt to demonstrate, there is a clear distinction between them in the Lao-tzu, corresponding to two distinct attitudes the author takes toward the "opposites".

The first of these attitudes is the one most generally associated with Lao-tzu's thought: the opposites presuppose each other, depend on each other, pass into each other--they exist, in short, only "relative" to each other; you cannot have, or even think of, one to the exclusion of the other.

Being and Not-being grow out of one another;  
 Difficult and easy complete one another.  
 Long and short test one another;  
 High and low determine one another.  
 The sounds of instrument and voice give harmony to one another.  
 Front and back give sequence to one another.  
 (Waley).<sup>3</sup>

It is upon bad fortune that good fortune leans,  
 upon good fortune that bad fortune rests (Waley).<sup>4</sup>

Heaven's way is like the bending of a bow. When a bow is bent the top comes down and the bottom-end comes up. So too does Heaven take away from those who have too much and give to those that have not enough (Waley).<sup>5</sup>

Truly, 'things are often increased by seeking to diminish them, and diminished by seeking to increase them' (Waley).<sup>6</sup>

This "reciprocation" of the opposites is, we believe, precisely what Lao-tzu means by pjwàn. It itself is the very word that means "opposite" or "contrary", and it is used in this meaning in the Lao-tzu: "Straight words seem the opposite."<sup>7</sup> But to get to the root of its meaning in connection with the dynamism of the "opposites" we must examine its verbal sense.

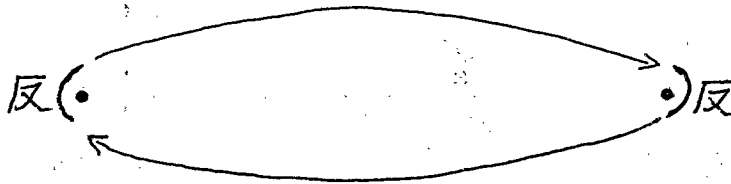
The most explicit description of the process of pjwàn is given in chapter 25, where, after the Tao has been called "great" (ta), we see:

Now ta also means passing on,  
And passing on means going Far Away,  
And going far away means returning (Waley).<sup>8</sup>

What is the concrete sense of this "returning"?

The graph 反 clearly depicts a "hand", evidently turning something over, and its derivatives bear out this idea: 叛 b'wàn, "desert, revolt" (i.e., turn over against); 返 pjwàn, "return" (turn over and come back); 販 pjwàn, "trade" (turn over back and forth). If beside these we set the close cognates 番 p'jwàn, "a turn, time, change"; 翻 p'jwàn, "turn over, reverse"; 轉 p'jwàn, "turn, reverse"; and probably 變 pljan, "change", we arrive at

something like the notion of "turnabout": not a full movement of "return", but the beginning of this movement, the flip of the hand that simply turns an object in the opposite direction. The sequence in chapter 25, in this view, gives just the essentials of the Tao-in-action: moving, it goes to a distance, and then "turns about"; and this process may be repeated indefinitely between the "opposites" or (what more apt term?) "turnabouts". "Return", then, being only motion "back", is not an accurate translation; the point of "turnabout" is at both extremes (compare the mutual action implied in "trading"). The process may be depicted thus, using two points for the "opposites":



Our translation has the advantage, it may be noted, of pointing out the connection between the extreme poles ("turnabouts") and the movement that leads from one to the other ("turning about", or simply "turnabout")--a connection that is overlooked if we translate one by "opposites" and the other by "return". A more elegant, Latinized translation would give us the "contraries" and the process of "contraversion".

But "turnabout", though it may be the beginning, is certainly not the end of Lao-tzu's thought. If "turnabout" is

all there is, we end in a kind of dynamic relativism. But in point of fact Lao-tzu does not believe in the equality of the contraries. If we analyse the contraries, as does D. C. Lau,<sup>9</sup> into the "higher" and the "lower" poles (for example, the "ahead" vs. the "behind", the "strong" vs. the "weak"), we see that Lao-tzu wants to attain, in some way, the "higher" pole, but since "turnabout" is the movement of the Tao, he knows that he can only attain it by approaching it through its contrary, the "lower".

The Sage  
 Puts himself in the background; but is  
 always to the fore.  
 Remains outside; but is always there (Waley).<sup>10</sup>

The Sage  
 In order to be above the people  
 Must speak as though he were lower  
 than the people.  
 In order to guide them  
 He must put himself behind them (Waley).<sup>11</sup>

And in order to put himself at the "higher" pole, one must cause what is already there to "turn about" to its contrary:

What is in the end to be shrunk  
 Must first be stretched.  
 Whatever is to be weakened  
 Must begin by being made strong.  
 What is to be overthrown  
 Must begin by being set up.  
 He who would be a taker  
 Must begin as a giver...  
 It is thus that the soft overcomes the hard  
 And the weak, the strong (Waley).<sup>12</sup>

All of this is so because

'The humble is the stem upon which the  
 mighty grows,  
 The low is the foundation upon which the  
 high is laid' (Waley).<sup>13</sup>

Thus,

The practice of Tao consists in 'sub-  
 tracting day by day' (Waley).<sup>14</sup>

Now this "subtracting" with the ultimate aim of "overcoming", while it is based on the principle of "turnabout" or "contraversion", would be impossible if "contraversion" were the only movement in the world. For then one would have "overcome" and reached the "higher" pole only to find himself subject to the very movement responsible for putting him there; every "overcoming" would then be followed by a "going under". It is here that Lao-tzu's second kind of "return" comes into play.

B'jók, as an examination of words having the same "phonetic" reveals, belongs to a family whose root is very close to the Latin prefix re-, in all three of its chief meanings: "back" (as in "recede"; compare retro-), "again" (as in "repeat"), and "against" (as in "repel"). Thus we have: 復 pjók, "double, double or lined garments"; 覆 p'jók, "reverse, over-turn, repeat"; 悞 b'jek, "resist, perverse"; and 復 itself in its second reading b'jóg, "again, repeat". Note also the cognates 背 pweg, "back, turn the back on"; 北 pek, "north" (back side); 負 b'jóg, "carry on the back, resist"; 倍 b'weg, "double, turn the back, rebel"; 報 póg, "requite"; 辟 b'jóg, "go away from".

The Lao-tzu uses b'jók, in fact, always in the meaning of "turning back":

Si tu abolis l'humanité et rejettes la  
justice, le peuple reviendra à la piété  
filiale et à l'amour (maternel) (Duyvendak).<sup>15</sup>

L'on pourrait amener le peuple a retourner à l'emploi des cordes nouées  
(Duyvendak).<sup>16</sup>

Le Saint...retourne là où tout le monde passe outre (Duyvendak).<sup>17</sup>

Having known the offspring, one turns back and keeps to the mother.<sup>18</sup>

Le normal redevient bizarre, et le bien redevient sinistre (Duyvendak).<sup>19</sup>

And as designating the motion contrary to "arising", it is "falling back".<sup>20</sup>

"Return" is certainly a more apt translation of b'jók than of pjwán, but even here it is somewhat inexact; for "return" involves a motion back to somewhere one has been before, and b'jók is, in Lao-tzu's use, rarely this. It is rather a turning back to a "lower", more "primitive" (and hence, for Lao-tzu, better) state. For this perhaps "retroversion" is better, and it provides a clear contrast to "contraversion"--though "turnback", too, contrasts well with "turnabout".

But what is "turnback" or "retroversion"? At first we might assume that it is one aspect of the whole process of "contraversion", merely the movement "back". But Lao-tzu nowhere contrasts it with any kind of "progression" or movement "forth"; and, as we have seen, the goal of "retroversion" is not merely one of the contraries, but a relatively better and more stable state. It must be seen, rather, in the light of the inequality of the contraries; it is a movement away from the "higher" pole towards the "lower", which is in some way the "root" of the "higher", the key to "overcoming" it.

Still, in itself "retroversion" cannot account for this "overcoming", for it is still bound up with the "opposites"--with "relativism", with "duality". This fact is underlined by the labial initial of b'jók, in the light of a rather remarkable phenomenon of Chinese phonology: a large number, perhaps the majority, of Chinese words of Archaic initial b- and p- denote or connote "duality". This "duality" may take the form of "opposition" (division, distinction, separation, rebellion, contradiction, etc.) or that of "complementation" (assistance, attachment, companionship--"togetherness" of some sort). A parallel to this phenomenon may be noted in the Indo-European initials and prefixes di-, du-, tw-, bi-; but the Chinese phenomenon seems if anything to be more comprehensive, covering the ground also of the Latin and Germanic prefixes re-, retro-, sc-, sl-, spl-, ob-, com-, with-, ad-, etc. The connection of pjwàn and b'jók with the notion of "duality" is quite clear from their derivatives and cognates.

Be this as it may, we can see that "retroversion", while it initiates the process away from "contraversion", that is from "relativism", does not complete the movement to the "absolute" that Lao-tzu is apparently seeking, the point where one may be "above" and "ahead" without "turning about" to the "below" and "behind", where one may "overcome" without "going under". It is, in fact, merely the first stage in this movement, which is only completed by yet a third kind of "return",

歸 kjwer.

The translation "return" is probably less suitable for kjwer than for either pjwən or b'jók. Throughout Chinese literature kjwer is used of motion not necessarily back to a point of origin (though it is often that too), but to a place of rest or security, a place felt as "home". It is used, for example, of a marrying woman, who "comes home" to her husband's house;<sup>21</sup> of people attaching themselves to a prince with whom they have had no previous connection;<sup>21a</sup> of a person taking "refuge" in Buddhism; or of ascribing a quality to a person--"sending it home" to its proper place.<sup>21b</sup> In none of these senses can kjwer be rendered "return"; and even in the many cases where it can be, the "return" involved is almost always a return to a place of rest, a "homecoming".

The closest cognates of kjwer give an insight into the concrete basis of this idea by revealing the nature of the motion involved. 回 g'wer, "return, revolve", is, in the Small Seal graph, 回, a spiral indicative of revolving motion; compare 迴 g'wer, "revolve"; 渦 g'wer, "whirlpool". 𠂔 gjwer pictures two feet walking in opposite directions about an enclosure (sentries on their "rounds"?); compare 圍 gjwer, "encircle". Among words with final -n (which frequently interchanges in phonetic series with -r) there are 運 gjwen, "revolve"; 暈 gjwen, "sun's halo"; 卷 kjwan, "to roll, curved"; 鬟 g'jwan, "chignon"; 拳 g'jwan, "fist"; 員 (and 圓) gjwan, "round"; 環 g'jwan, "turn round"; 還 g'jwan, "turn round, return"; 環 g'jwan, "ring, encircle"; 圓 gjwan, "round"; 鈞 kjwən, "potter's



wheel"--examples could be multiplied indefinitely.

Kjwer thus seems to be motion in a spiral or circle, motion, that is, removed from the tension between the con-

traries always implied in pjwan and b'jok. Perhaps "converge" is an apt translation, the prefix expressing the absence--even harmonizing--of the tension between the contraries, and the whole word conveying the sense of "tending toward a single point" which, as we shall shortly attempt to show, does seem to underlie Lao-tzu's use of it.

By itself kjwer always means, in the Lao-tzu, full and permanent return or "convergence"--not the mere "turning back" to a more primitive state that b'jok conveys. It is convergence in the Tao:

Tous les êtres retournent à elle, [la grande Voie] sans qu'elle se présente comme leur maître (Duyvendak).<sup>22</sup>

It is convergence in the "sage", the man fully in accord with the Tao:

When he is truly whole, there is a convergence in him (evidently of the 'myriad things').<sup>23</sup>

Now because these two (the 'sage' and 'spirits') do no harm, the powers (of things?) intermingle and converge in them (or 'him', the 'sage').<sup>24</sup>

And Lao-tzu speaks of himself "as if" homeless, having no ultimate place of rest, no final point of "convergence".<sup>25</sup>

The Lao-tzu thus seems to contrast "spiral" motion, which leads to the Tao itself, with "back and forth" motion, which never leaves the contraries, and motion "back", which leads to a primitive, "better" state--but not to a "best", not to a final "home". How are these two kinds of motion

to be reconciled? How does one leave the "back and forth", where he is evidently at the mercy of the contraries, and attain the "spiralling home", where he exerts some kind of mastery over them? The answer lies, as we have implied, in what follows b'jók, which is a preliminary movement; once one has "turned back", he is free to "converge". This seems, in fact, to be the meaning of the phrase b'jók kjwer, which occurs six times in the Lao-tzu.

B'jók kjwer, again, translators invariably render as "return" or "revert", thus taking them as a "compound" in the modern Chinese sense, where synonyms are joined to form a single word. This might seem to be borne out by the fact that the goal of b'jók kjwer, like the goal of kjwer alone, is always some kind of ultimate: the place "where there is nothing,"<sup>26</sup> "the state of infancy,"<sup>27</sup> "the Limitless,"<sup>28</sup> "the state of the Uncarved Block,"<sup>29</sup> "the root,"<sup>30</sup>, "the inner-light"<sup>31</sup> (all in Waley's translation). But the use of "compounds" of synonyms is rare, ~~in the Chinese of Lao-tzu's time~~, in the Chinese of Lao-tzu's time, and it is better to give full weight to both terms in what seem to be such "compounds". In the case of b'jók kjwer, two words which are not strictly synonymous in the Lao-tzu, we can quite easily understand each to have the meaning it has when used independently. The phrase, in this view, simply describes the whole process of which "retroversion" is the first stage, "convergence" the

last. The more "primitive" goals of "retroversion" (the "use of knotted cords", the "place everybody passes by", the "filial piety" and "love" that are less complicated than "humanity" and "justice") are thus mere way-stations, as it were, on the road to final "convergence" in the absolutely simple (the "infant", the "uncarved block", the "limitless", "nothinglessness", the "root"). "Convergence" simply takes up where "retroversion" leaves off.

This interpretation of b'jók kjwer seems to be substantiated by the contexts in which it occurs in the Lao-tzu. While what follows kjwer is always a final goal, what precedes b'jók is generally one of the "positive" contraries from which, as we have seen, "retroversion" always begins.

All things rise up together,  
I thus observe their turning back.  
Indeed, things flourish,  
Each to turn back and converge in its root.<sup>32</sup>

In chapter 28, where there is a series of three b'jók kjwer, each follows a passage involving the contraries and a kind of "convergence point" between them; it may thus, perhaps, be interpreted as a commentary on the preceding statements: first there is "retroversion", a turning back from one of the contraries towards the other, and only then "convergence", a full "return" not to the other but to a final point of convergence.

He who knows the male and yet keeps to  
the female becomes the ravine of the  
under-heaven...<sup>33</sup>  
Turning back [from the male toward the  
female] he converges in the state of

infancy [as in a ravine, the point of convergence of two slopes].

He who knows the white and yet keeps to the black becomes the standard of the under-heaven...

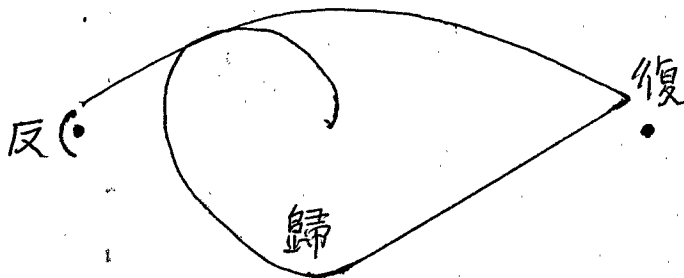
Turning back [from the white toward the black] he converges in the limitless [as in the standard].

He who knows glory and yet keeps to ignominy becomes the valley of the under-heaven...

Turning back [from glory toward ignominy] he converges in the state of the uncarved block [as in a valley].<sup>34</sup>

A similar pattern seems to be followed in chapter 14.<sup>35</sup>

In b'jók kjwer, then, we have the juncture of two motions: "relativistic" motion "back", which can only lead to a comparatively better state, never an ultimate place of rest; and completing motion in a spiral, which leads to Lao-tzu's ultimate goal. If b'jók is "turnback":  $\supset$ , and kjwer is "convergence":  $\odot$ , we may join them in a graph showing the relationship of the three kinds of "return" in the Lao-tzu:



The constant way of the universe is a "turnabout" of the contraries into each other, endlessly; but the "sage" "turns

back" from the extreme to "converge" in the center. To this "center", the goal of Lao-tzu's thought, we now turn.

## II. THE POINT OF CONVERGENCE

### 1. The Pliant

One of the favorite images of the Lao-tzu is that of the "infant". One could, of course, devote a whole essay to exploring the many ramifications of this symbol; but for our present purpose we shall have to be content with examining one of its facets: how can it be, as it is in chapter 28, the goal of "convergence"?

To answer this question we shall have to see what Lao-tzu regards as the character of the "infant".

Can you, when concentrating your breath,  
make it soft like that of a little child?  
(Waley)<sup>36</sup>

The impunity of that which is fraught  
with the 'power'  
May be likened to that of an infant...  
Its bones are soft, its sinews weak,  
but its grip is strong (Waley).<sup>37</sup>

To be "soft" and "weak" is most characteristic of the "infant". This we may see in the word itself--at least in half of it. The second syllable of the binom 嬰兒 that the Lao-tzu most frequently uses for "infant", njög, having by itself the same meaning, belongs to a quite distinct Archaic Chinese word family, several other members of which play an important role in the book. The words, for example, that Waley translates as "soft" and "weak", 柔 njög and 弱 niok, are powerful "overcomers":

The soft overcomes the hard  
And the weak, the strong (Waley).<sup>38</sup>

What is of all things most yielding  
Can overwhelm that which is of all  
things most hard (Waley).<sup>39</sup>

Nothing under heaven is softer or more  
yielding than water; but when it attacks  
things hard and resistant there is not  
one of them that can prevail (Waley).<sup>40</sup>

Actually, Waley is inconsistent in his translation of this pair of words; he seems undecided which to call "soft" and which "weak", and indeed they are so close in meaning and use that this is, perhaps, no great error. Still, there is a concrete notion underlying the words that the English ear misses when it hears either "soft" or "weak"; and here another rendering Waley gives both words is more appropriate: "yielding". Close cognates clearly reveal the underlying notion to be "bending": 嬈 nlog, "swaying in the wind"; 撓 nog, "bend, disturb"; 撓 nog, "bend, crooked, bent wood"; 猻 nog and 猻 nog, "monkey" (the supremely "bending" animal); 繞 nlog, "wind round"; 蟯 nlog, "intestinal worm"; 蓆 nlog, "rush used for making mats" (by "bending" or weaving it).

Let us look for a moment at what is to be overcome by "bending". The contrary of niok in the Lao-tzu is always 強 g'iang, "strong" (chs. 36, 76, 78), and of nlog usually 堅 kien, "firm" (chs. 43, 76, 78), sometimes 剛 kang, "hard, stiff" (chs. 36, 78).

The root of g'iang is clear. It occurs as "phonetic" (more likely it is etymonic) in 絳 kjang, "string"; 襁 kjang, "bands for wrapping and carrying a child"; and 鎗 Mandarin



chiang (not in Karlgren), "string of cash", thus providing a striking parallel to English words with initial str-: string, straight, strict, strain, strong, stretch, etc. The concrete notion underlying the root in both languages (emphasized in the Chinese graph by the "bow") seems to be the act of "stretching"; "strong", the usual translation, is thus quite apt for g'iang. The word in both languages bears the connotations of "stretched" (tight), "strict" (narrow, inflexible), and "strained"; witness the verbal use of g'iang in chapter 25, "constrained".

Kien is very possibly related to g'iang (-ng appears in derivatives of kien),<sup>40a</sup> as witness 𢇛 kjən, "bind tight", and 𢇛 k'ien, "drag by a cord". The origin of the etymonic 𢇛 is uncertain, though the "hand", we may speculate, plays the same role here that the "bow" does in g'iang, the latter being "bow-stretching", the former "hand-stretching". If so "firm" ("hold fast") would be an apt translation. From this point of view, we may note, the 賢 g'ien, "worthies", who loom so large in Confucian ethics would be those who hold too fast, who are too "firm", and hence far from the Way.

Käng is perhaps a cognate of g'iang, though the connection with "stretching" is not clear in its graphic relatives. 牯 käng, "bull" and 鋼 käng, "steel", perhaps point more to "hard, stiff".

The "strong", the "firm", the "stiff": three attributes of the powerful that yet are overcome by the "weak" and "soft". The reason is clear: they are tense and unyielding; powerful for a while, they cannot stay thus always. They have reached their extreme; their "contraversion" is near at hand.

'The weapon that is too hard will be broken, the tree that has the hardest wood will be cut down.' Truly, the hard and mighty are cast down, the soft and weak set on high (Waley).<sup>41</sup>

Whatever has a time of vigour also has a time of decay.  
Such things are against Tao,  
And whatever is against Tao is soon destroyed (Waley).<sup>42</sup>

What Waley translated "against Tao" is 不道, and after the preverbal negative "Tao" must be a verb; these things are thus an example of "not Tao-ing". This chapter opened with a description of the "infant"; "to Tao", we may infer, is to be like the infant--above all "weak" and "soft", i.e., "bending". In English these ideas are expressed by the initial cluster pl-/fl-: pliant, flexible, supple. Truly, the "strong" is overcome by the "supple", the "firm" and "stiff" by the "pliant".


The Tao as "pliant" is a theme of which the Lao-tzu is especially fond. It is nowhere more clearly set forth than in the opening of chapter 34, which Waley translates

Great Tao is like a boat that drifts;  
It can go this way; it can go that.<sup>43</sup>

This rendering of the first line is partially justified, at least, by the etymology of 汎 p'jwəm (also read b'jum), usually translated with an equivalent of "overflowing".

The etymon 凡 b'jwəm depicts a "sail", for which the augmented character 𠂔 b'jwəm is now used; 風 pjum, "wind", is an obvious cognate, as graph, sound, and meaning all testify. With the labial initial we seem to be again in the realm of "duality", and a "sail" is, indeed, something poised between contrary directions, tending to one or the other according to the direction of the wind.

Still, Waley's translation takes no account of the "water" determinative. Now "water" is, as we have seen in chapter 78, a supremely "pliant" and "supple" thing. May we not, then, carrying through the pl-/fl- cluster, translate 汎 as "fluent"? For that is just what it is: "fluid", like water; "flexible" (even "blowable"), like a sail; even "overflowing", as in the conventional renderings. Thus, "Great Tao is fluent; it may tend left or right."

The Tao, then, and he who is in accord with it, are pliant, supple, fluent, like an infant, like water. But what has this to do with the "point of convergence" of which we are in search? Again, a simple picture reveals what we are after:  . The act of "bending", while it issues in duality, springs from a single point; if the Tao "may tend left or right," it must be this midpoint itself, the point of "di-

vergence"--or, if seen from the other side, of "convergence".

## 2. The Ridgepole

To speak of the point of "divergence" leads us inevitably to the "ridgepole" 脊 g'jek. The "Great Appendix" of the Book of Changes speaks of it thus:

There is in the Changes the Great  
Primal Beginning. This generates  
the two primary forces (Wilhelm-Baynes).<sup>44</sup>

The "Great Primal Beginning" (Bodde's "Supreme Ultimate") was, to be sure, the subject of much abstract speculation by Neo-Confucian metaphysicians, but one may reasonably doubt that in the Changes it had travelled so far from its literal sense, "great ridgepole". At any rate, the concrete basis is clear: the "ridgepole" is what joins the two slopes of the roof; it is their "convergence", they are its "divergence". From this comes the metaphysical idea of the "ridgepole" as the primordial unity from which duality "diverges".

In the Lao-tzu the ridgepole has not yet become "great", and its concrete meaning is still discernible--though translators pay little enough attention to it. For 無極, the point of "convergence" in chapter 28, Waley has "the Limitless", Duyvendak "l'état où il n'y a pas de pôles (d'opposition)," and other renderings imply the same thing: that g'jek is to be taken in its extended meaning (apparently from the location of the ridgepole at the top of the roof)

as something like "topmost", "extreme", "farthest limit". But to make g'jek an "extreme" would be to place it in the realm of the "contraries"; we should then expect it to be involved in "contraversion". But it is not; the Lao-tzu sees it only as a point of "convergence", not an extreme but a kind of midpoint. Where it occurs in chapter 58, for example, the context permits us to translate it quite concretely:

Calamity is what good fortune leans against;  
Good fortune is what calamity rests upon.  
Who knows their ridgepole?<sup>45</sup>

Not their "combles" (Duyvendak), nor their "ultimate results" (Lin Yutang), nor Waley's "bourn"; but simply their "ridge-pole", the place where they meet, one "leaning against" the other, the other "resting upon" it, thus:



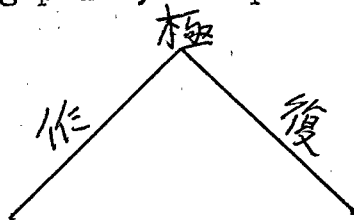
There could scarcely be a more vivid image than this for expressing the relationship between the contraries in Lao-tzu's thought: they cannot be conceived apart from each other, and the key to understanding them lies in neither extreme, but in their juncture.

The opening phrase of chapter 16, 至虛極 (zhì xū jí), most translators render, in effect, "attain the utmost point of emptiness". The thought is vague, and thus easily assimilable to the usual view that sees Lao-tzu as a "mystic", and "mysticism" as something hazy and nebulous. But again we may suspect Lao-tzu of being much more concrete than he is given credit for;

what follows in this chapter confirms the suspicion:


The myriad things rise up together;  
I thereby contemplate their falling  
back.<sup>46</sup>

Again, in conjunction with the ridgepole, we have a statement concerning contraries, linked to the opening phrase<sup>47</sup> by the word 由, "thereby", which most translators conveniently overlook. "By" what? If it is by "attaining the utmost point", nothing very precise is conveyed; but if it is by "reaching the ridgepole", the picture is clear:



The best point for watching the "rising up" and "falling back" of things is not at some distant extreme but at the "ridgepole" right above and between them, where, it seems, they too "converge".<sup>48</sup>

### 3. The valley

Yet another image bound up with "convergence", as we have seen in chapter 28, is the "valley" 谷 kuk, together with the "ravine" 溪 k'ieg. The obvious picture  suggests an inverted "ridgepole" which is, clearly, a place of "confluence". But to go beyond these observations would lead us into realms outside the province of this essay; the "valley", especially in its connection with the "female" (see chs.

6, 28, 61), deserves and requires a separate examination of its own.

We have tried to demonstrate thus far that the "point of convergence" in various forms--the infant, water, pliancy, the ridgepole, the valley--is a major theme in the Lao-tzu's treatment of the contraries. It is a kind of midpoint between them occupied by the Tao itself and by the man perfectly in accord with the Tao, the "sage"; it is the point in which the myriad things ultimately converge; it is the place whence the contraries may be "contemplated", even "overcome". It is, in fact, the elusive "emptiness" or "nothingness" which stands at the center of Lao-tzu's thought, as we shall now attempt to show.

### III. "EMPTINESS"

#### 1. Emptiness as an Extreme: Exhaustion

In the usual understanding of the word, both in English and Chinese, "emptiness" has a contrary, "fullness"; but if this kind of emptiness, an extreme, is what Lao-tzu has in mind when he speaks of it, all that we have said on the "mid-point" as the ultimate goal of his thought is set at naught. But in fact this is not what he has in mind.

L'espace entre le ciel et la terre,  
comme il ressemble à un soufflet de  
forge! Vidé, il n'est pas épuisé  
(Duyvendak).<sup>49</sup>

To be "emptied", 虛, is not the same as to be "exhausted", 屈. "Exhaustion" here is evidently "emptying" carried to an extreme; it is an example of the "excess" (which can be carried in either direction) against which Lao-tzu frequently cautions;<sup>50</sup> it is merely the contrary of that too great "fullness" Lao-tzu equally abhors.<sup>51</sup> Cognates of 屈 k'jwet likewise reveal the idea of "going to an extreme", "going to the end": 黜 k'jwet, "expel, abandon"; 止 k'jwet and 訖 k'jwet, "stop speaking, cease"; 屈 kwet, "exhaust"; even 掘 g'jwet, "dig out" (all the way, hence:) "hole"; 窟 k'wet, "cave, hole". The etymon 出 k'jwet, "go out, emit", is itself used several times in the Lao-tzu to suggest a going too far, hence becoming exhausted.

Sans sortir de la porte, connaître le monde!... Plus on sort loin, moins on connaît (Duyvendak).<sup>52</sup>



It was when intelligence and know-  
ledge appeared [i.e., came out and  
exhausted themselves]  
That the Great Artifice began (Waley).<sup>53</sup>

Lao-tzu in numerous other contexts speaks of "exhaustion" as an extreme that is to be avoided; not to be "exhausted" he always regards as something very much to be desired.

If one uses it [the Tao], it is  
inexhaustible (Waley).<sup>54</sup>

Here the word used is 既 kjed, "exhaust, finish, entirely"; compare 至 hjed, "rest" (reach end of movement); 既 g'jed, "arrive, attain"; 既 and 既 k'ied, "sigh" (expel the breath).

Speaking of "what is most perfect" Lao-tzu says, "its use is unimpaired" (Waley).<sup>55</sup> Here we have 敝 b'jad, "im-pair, damage, ruin, worn out"; compare 弊 b'jad, "ruin, become spoiled"; 弊 and 弊 b'jad, "die, fall down, kill, destroy". In the same chapter he says of "what is most full", "its use will never fail" (Waley),<sup>56</sup> using 窮 g'jəŋ, "extreme, reduced to extremity, poverty"; the word occurs again in chapter 5: "the force of words is soon spent" (Waley).<sup>57</sup>

It was when the Great Way declined  
That human kindness and morality arose  
(Waley).<sup>58</sup>

"Declined" is 廢 pjwət, "cast aside, cease, fail"; compare 發 pjwət, "throw out, issue, shoot".

Chapter 39 is a veritable tour-de-force of images of exhaustion:

Were it not for their holiness, the  
spirits would soon wither away (Waley).<sup>59</sup>

"Wither away": 歇 hjat, "cease, dissipate"; compare 渴 k'jad,  
"rest"; 去 k'jat, "go away"; 渴 k'at, "thirsty" and g'jat,  
"dried up"; 竭 g'jat, "exhaust, dry out". The latter appears  
in the next line:

Were it not for this replenishment, the  
abyss would soon go dry (Waley).<sup>60</sup>

Were it not that the ten thousand crea-  
tures can bear their kind,  
They would soon become extinct (Waley).<sup>61</sup>

"Extinct": 滅 mjat; compare its etymon 滅 hmjwat, "extinguish,  
destroy".

Were the barons and princes no longer  
directors of their people and for  
that reason honored and exalted,  
they would soon be overthrown (Waley).<sup>62</sup>

"Overthrown": 蹶 kjwat, "pull up, tear up"; compare 掘 g'jwat,  
"pull up, dig out"; 闕 k'jwat, "breach, opening" (through  
which something exits) and g'jwat, "excavate".

Again,

Those that tamper with it [the under  
heaven], harm it (Waley).<sup>63</sup>

"Harm": 敗 b(wad), "spoil, ruin, be ruined". This sentence is  
parallel to "those that grab at it, lose it" (Waley).<sup>64</sup> "Lose": 失  
sjət; compare 佚 djət, "escape, retire"; 失 djət, "gush forth,  
let loose"; 軼 djət, "rush past, overtake". It occurs again  
in chapter 38, where it describes the progressive "losing" of  
the Tao.<sup>65</sup>

Finally,

What is most perfect seems to have something missing (Waley).<sup>66</sup>

"Missing": 缺 k'jwat; compare 抉 .iwat, "dig out, pull out"; 決 kiwat, "open a passage and lead forth a stream, opening made in a dike".

We have deliberately given nearly a complete catalog of Lao-tzu's images of "exhaustion", in order to show conclusively that, whereas Lao-tzu values "emptiness" he does not understand it as an extreme, an exhaustion, a lack; and to point out a most interesting fact: with one exception (g'jōng) all these words have final -d or -t. It is quite likely, in fact, that the final dental stop in Archaic Chinese did, in many cases, express something like the idea of "stopping, going to the end, finality"; one could supply a good many more examples where this is so--for example, 卒 tsjwet, "finish, die" and its derivatives 醉 tsjwed, "drink to the full, drunk"; 頓 dz'jwed, "exhausted, weary"; 瘁 dz'jwed, "fatigue, distress"; or various common words of "arriving", "reaching to": 至 ʃjəd, 逮 d'ed, 達 d'ət. For our present purpose, however, this suggestion is mainly relevant for placing in larger perspective one particular kind of "exhaustion" or "finality" that plays a major role in the thought of the Lao-tzu: reaching the end of the breath, total expiration.

Several of the words discussed above obviously involve this notion: note the derivatives of 既, 嘅 and 慨 k'ied, "sigh" (and the Shuo Wen says the etymon 无 means "belch"); and the cognates of 缺, 呖 hjawat, "wheeze"; 訣 kiwat, "farewell words" (given at one's "last breath"?). Closely cognate is the usual word for "breath", 气 (now the augmented 氣) k'jed, with its derivatives 悵 hjed, "sigh"; 訖 kjet, "finish, cease"; 沕 hjet, "water drying up". "Speaking" is also a kind of expiration, and in fact the words of "speaking" do seem to belong to this group: 謂 gjwed, "say, tell, call" (compare 喝 k'jwəd, "sigh"); 曰 gjwət, "say". 言 ngjan and 云 gjwan, the two other principal words of "saying", have a nasalized version of the dental final. From these we may deduce a root something like \*GJE(T), "exhale" (to the end), a sound evidently imitative of expulsion of air from the mouth, the dental final expressing the end, the "finality<sub>n</sub>" of the movement. Perhaps,--to return finally from philology to philosophy--all of this was somehow in the back of Lao-tzu's mind when he developed his idea of the harm of "speaking": it is another case of that going to an extreme which is "against Tao". Let us turn now to this idea.

The word Lao-tzu uses for "speaking" is  $\frac{1}{2}$  ngjan. Of course, this immediately seems to throw a wrench in our hypothesis of final -d or -t as indicative of "finality<sub>n</sub>"; the continuant -n is certainly less-suited to express this idea,

rather seeming to introduce a note of indefiniteness (if it has any semantic function at all). But in fact ngjan is indefinite in the Lao-tzu: it is not always a fault, it need not always be an extreme.

There are passages, it is true, where Lao-tzu is decidedly against "speaking": he preaches "the doctrine of not speaking";<sup>67</sup> and

Those who know do not speak;  
Those who speak do not know (Waley).<sup>68</sup>

But surely this is paradoxical; we shall have to ask, like Po Chü-i,<sup>68a</sup> how Lao-tzu was able to "speak" five thousand words on the virtue of "not speaking". This paradox is, at bottom, one with that of such notions as "action" and "fullness" (which we shall shortly examine), and is quite easily explained by the fact that there are, for Lao-tzu, two kinds of "speaking", as there are two kinds of "action" and two kinds of "fullness", one good and one bad--or, to be more precise, one extreme and one moderate. For Lao-tzu describes the virtue of "good" (or "skillful") speaking,<sup>69</sup> and of "valuing speaking";<sup>70</sup> and the key to the meaning of these phrases lies in the fact that "much speaking is soon exhausted"<sup>71</sup>--where the connection with the idea of carrying the breath to an extreme is made clear by the context, in which this phrase follows the passage on the bellows, "emptied but not exhausted". Truly, "to speak little is to be spontaneous"<sup>72</sup>--and "spontaneity" is a quality of the Tao.<sup>73</sup>

If we have had a great deal to say on the subject of "exhaustion", it is for the same reason we earlier discussed the "contraries" in some detail (and "exhaustion" is, in fact, one of the "contraries"): in order to discover what Lao-tzu's goal is we must find out what it is not, what, indeed, is the chief obstacle to it. And, just as we saw earlier that the remedy to entanglement in the movement of the contraries was a "turning back" and "convergence" in a kind of "midpoint", we shall see now that the antidote to breathing all the way to "exhaustion" is a holding back, as it were, of the breath, a gentler breathing that leads to another kind of "midpoint", a place of "balance" (which is again a kind of "point of convergence").

## 2. Emptiness as a Point of Balance: Faint Expiration

"Speaking little" (or "few words"), as we have just seen, is, in Lao-tzu's eyes, the proper way of speaking; let us try to find out just what kind of speaking this is.

<sup>X</sup>希 hjer most commonly means "few, rare, thinned", occasionally "cease". What is the root of these notions? The Archaic pronunciation leads us to suspect kinship with the \*GJE(T) "exhale" family, and derivatives like 歔 hjer, "sob, moan"; 唏 hjer, "grunting of pigs"; 自<sup>X</sup>希, "snore" and 呷<sup>X</sup>, "chuckle" (both Mandarin hsi; not in Karlgren), strengthen

the suspicion. The suspicion is confirmed by Lao-tzu's own use of the word: of six occurrences, five are connected with "speaking" or "sounding"; and, lest we be tempted to dismiss these as mere coincidences, we must note that in two (perhaps three) of these cases we are forced by the context to give "unusual" renderings of hjer, renderings which seem most naturally to come under the heading of "breathing".

There is, for example, the celebrated opening passage of chapter 14:

Because the eye gazes but can catch no  
glimpse of it,  
It is called elusive.  
Because the ear listens but cannot hear it,  
It is called the rarefied.  
Because the hand feels for it but cannot  
find it,  
It is called the infinitesimal (Waley).<sup>74</sup>

The context here forces all translators to render hjer something like "inaudible" or "soundless", an understanding of the word that seems to give the Chinese commentators no difficulty but which is certainly peculiar, even somewhat far-fetched, if the word otherwise is always "rare, few, thinned". Waley's "rarefied" might seem to connect the two meanings for English ears, but it does not get to the root of the problem; "rare" ("thinned") has nothing to do with anything audible. Duyvendak translates "aphone" only because forced to, but he finds the rendering "doubtful". If, however, hjer is, as we think it is, a kind of "expiration", i.e., "faint ~~ex~~piration" or even "whispering", this passage becomes clear,

and it is not difficult to explain the extended sense of hjer as "faintly present", "audible only here and there" > "rare, few". Hjer in chapter 14 is, thus, not absolutely "inaudible", but "scarcely, faintly audible", "whisper-like".

With this in mind, let us look again at the "few words" Lao-tzu praises in chapter 23. It is clearly intended to contrast with the following clause: "a hurricane never lasts a whole morning" (Waley).<sup>75</sup> The "hurricane" (or "whirlwind") represents excess of air, "few words" a moderate amount; is it not then likely that Lao-tzu had something more concrete in mind than "few", something more like "faint" or "whispered" words (or "speaking")?

Such an interpretation is mandatory in chapter 41, where translators do not hesitate to render "Great music has the faintest notes" (Waley).<sup>76</sup> Here we disagree with them only over the syntactical function of hjer; parallelism with phrases like "Great form lacks shape"<sup>77</sup> requires it to be understood, not as an adverb or adjective, but as a transitive verb: "Great tone whispers its sound."

In the two other occurrences of hjer in connection with "speaking", nothing forces us to translate them as anything but "few"; but, in the light of the three previous passages, the temptation is strong to understand them more concretely.

As for the doctrine of not-speaking...  
The under-heaven comes up to it by  
whispering.<sup>78</sup>



For is not whispering the next best thing to not speaking at all?

My speech is very easy to understand... but nobody in the under-heaven is able to understand it... Now it is only because they have no understanding [of my speech] that they do not understand me. Those who understand me [hence my speech] whisper [for that is how I speak]. 79

But what has all this, however cogent it may or may not be, to do with "emptiness"? The answer is, simply, that Lao-tzu apparently sees "emptiness" in terms of breathing. The word in the Lao-tzu most commonly translated "emptiness" is 虛 hjo, which is one of a group of words closely related to the \*GJE(T) "exhale" family, with vocalic final; many of them are simply onomatopoetic exclamations, others in some other way are bound up with the idea of "expiration". Derivatives of hjo, for example, reveal 歔 hjo, "sigh, sob"; and 嘔 hjo, "blow, exhale". Cognates include 吁 gjwo, "oh, alas, sigh"; 吁 hjwo, (same); 竽 gjwo, "reed organ"; 响 hju, "exhale, breathe on, cry out"; 乎 g'o (final particle of exclamation); 呼 ho, "call out"; 呼 ho, "shout"; 烏 and 於 o, "oh!"

Hjo thus seems to be "empty" in the sense of "expired" or "deflated"; and that Lao-tzu has this in mind is clear from his use of hjo in chapter 5, where, as we saw, the bellows was "emptied (deflated) but not exhausted." The "empty" is thus not the completely empty, not total deflation; compared with k'jwet, "exhausted", it is "deflation" up to a cer-

tain point only. It is, we may speculate, like hjer, a "faint expiration", one that restrains itself from going too far, to "exhaustion"; and indeed the vocalic final of hjo, together with the "faint" -r (or -s; there is some doubt as to this final in Archaic Chinese) of hjer, may have been quite consciously used by Lao-tzu as a contrast to the too "audible" -t of k'jwet and the many other words of "finality". Do we go too far in detecting here again a movement to a kind of middle point, a "moderate" breathing as an antidote to total "expiration"? Lao-tzu himself suggests it when he concludes his chapter on the bellows with

Much speaking [i.e., expulsion of air]  
soon exhausts;  
It is better to keep to the middle.<sup>80</sup>

Is this a kind of commentary on the line "deflated but not exhausted"? If "much speaking" is a kind of "exhausting", is "keeping to the middle" somehow bound up with "deflating"? In fact, a derivative of 中 tjōng, "middle", is 沖 d'jōng, "empty, deplete", a word practically synonymous with hjo, "deflate"; and in view of the fact that we are not at all sure which words in the original text of the Lao-tzu were augmented by determinatives, we cannot be certain that Lao-tzu did not mean here "keep to the deplete". But it is perhaps more likely, if we bear in mind the oft-times intentional ambiguity of the author, that he meant both. In chapter 42, for example, we find:

The myriad things bear on their back  
 the yin and enfold the yang [breaths];  
 Deplete the breath to effect a balance  
 [between them].<sup>81</sup>

Here a "balance" (a kind of "midpoint") is the result of "depletion"; is not the "depletion", then, a kind of "moderation"--a "bringing to a midpoint"? The same ambiguity exists in chapter 45, where a seeming "depletion", just as with the bellows, is not carried to the point of "exhaustion";<sup>82</sup> but it may just as well be a seeming "midpoint" that is not carried to an extreme (of exhaustion). And in chapter 4 the Tao is seen as "deplete", yet not to be "filled";<sup>84</sup> or alternatively as a "midpoint" (and in fact the Ho-shang-kung commentary equates 冲 with 中 in this case) that is not to be carried to the extreme (of filling).

After all this has been said, it remains to ask the obvious question: what does it mean to say that "deflation" (or "depletion") is a "midpoint" or "balance"? To answer this we must return to a passage we have already examined in another context, which we may now translate, "Attain the ridgepole of faint expiration" (note that here "faint expiration" as leading to a "midpoint" receives a most explicit expression); "the myriad things rise up together, I thereby contemplate their falling back." In this context "rising up" and "falling back", whatever other meaning they possess, have at least an overtone of "inspiration" and "expiration"; and the "ridge-

pole of faint expiration" is thus the point between them: that momentary point of balance, when expiration is completed and inspiration not yet begun, when there is no breath at all. This is precisely the point of "emptiness" in the Lao-tzu.

It may be suspected that what we have been discussing sounds very much like a kind of breath control; and in fact later Taoists did develop a rather elaborate "yoga", involving, among other things, a "soft breathing". It is interesting that neither Waley nor Maspero, who do discuss the subject, has much to say about the "yoga" of the Lao-tzu. Yet there are some passages that are quite explicit: "concentrate the breath" in chapter 10; "deplete the breath" in chapter 42; the definition of "strength" in chapter 55 as "the heart employing the breath,"<sup>815</sup> which in turn makes one wonder about the "deflate their hearts"<sup>86</sup> of chapter 3. These, together with the less obvious passages on "whispering" and "faint expiration" that we have examined, would seem to provide a fairly firm foundation for a study of the question, which could hardly be pursued, however, without reference to the more elaborate later Taoist descriptions. But such a study would take us far outside the bounds of this essay, which is concerned not with technique, but with "philosophy"; and if it is true that the passages we have been

examining do contain references to breath-technique, it is just as true that they may be understood, to an extent, without these references.

### 3. Emptiness as Diminuendo: the Minimal

All that we have said up to this point on "emptiness" is but a prelude, as it were, to an examination of the most important single word, perhaps, in the whole of the Lao-tzu: ~~the~~ mjwo, "nothingness, to lack". Other words bound up with the notion of "emptiness"--hjer, "whispering; hjo, "deflation"; d'jong, "depletion"--occur in all no more than a dozen times, and sometimes with little weight attached to them; mjwo, on the other hand, recurs countless times throughout the text, and always in a heavily charged context. It is frequently the one word in a passage upon which the meaning of the whole passage rests--but never is it defined, never explained. Lao-tzu almost seems to be saying, "This is the one word that sums up what I am talking about; if you understand it, you know what I am talking about; if not--well, there is no helping you." The Chinese commentators give no more assistance; they "comment" on it by using the word itself, assuming, apparently, that everyone must know what it means. But what does it mean?

One may approach the word from a number of directions; here, we shall examine it in the light of what seems to be a

quite conscious parallelism with the idea of "expiration" that we have just discussed.

Lao-tzu speaks of the "ridgepole of faint expiration," 虛極; clearly parallel to this is the 無極 of chapter 14, which, in the light of what we had to say earlier on the "ridgepole", should be translated not, as it usually is, the "limitless", or even "that which has no ridgepole", but simply "the ridgepole of nothingness" (to use, for the moment, a conventional rendering of mjwo). Again, Lao-tzu twice (chs. 2, 43) juxtaposes "the doctrine of not speaking" and "the benefit of non-action" (無為). And, as we have seen, mjwo is several times parallel to hjer in chapter 41: "Great tone whispers its sound, great form lacks shape," etc.

We earlier used hjer to throw light on hjo; if we now return to our starting point in that undertaking, chapter 14, we find parallel to it a word 微 mjwer, "infinitesimal" (Waley), that bears exactly the same relationship, phonetically, to mjwo that hjer bears to hjo. It is just possible, we believe, that there is a similar semantic relationship as well.

In chapter 14 mjwer, being "what the hand feels for but cannot find," is usually rendered "intangible", just as hjer is usually rendered "inaudible". But we saw that hjer is more precisely the "faintly audible"; and in fact mjwer, too, is actually the "hardly graspable", the "minute, infinitesimal". It belongs to a group of words that seems to convey the notion

of "diminishing, tapering to a point": 末 mwét, "end of branch, tip, diminish, small"; 曼 mjwan, "extended, long, slender"; 枚 mwer, "stem, twig"; 尾 mjwer, "tail"; 亡 mjwang, "disappear, vanish" (taper off?); 芒 mjwang, "beard of grain, sharp point"; 銳 mjwang, "sharp point of a weapon"; 眇 mjog, "small, minute"; 杪 mjog, "utmost end".

Now mjwo itself, as used in the Lao-tzu, is most closely associated with the "tangible", the "graspable". Its contrary, 有 gjug, "something, to have", is both graphically and phonetically connected with the "hand" 又 gjug, and thus seems to mean "have" or "possess" in the sense of "handling" or "grasping". Again, the second character of the key phrase 無為, gwia, the graph of which depicts a "hand" leading an "elephant", is the general word of "doing" (by hand), "making, acting, effecting," often with the connotation in Taoist thought of "doing too much"--perhaps "handling too much" (hence the derivative 偽 ngwia, "effeign, artificial").

But let us look now at the phrase mjwo gwia; this is central to the thought of Lao-tzu, and if the meaning of mjwo is not clear in it, it is not likely to be clear anywhere in the book.

The commonplace rendering "non-action" we must immediately rule out of court. The Lao-tzu is not a book of "do-nothing" philosophy; quite the contrary, it takes great pains to advise the proper way of acting. We have seen, it is true, that to

"tamper" (Waley's apt translation) with the under-heaven is to ruin it;<sup>87</sup> but gwia does not always have this pejorative connotation.

"Control them, but never lean upon them" (Waley),<sup>88</sup> "act without striving" (Waley),<sup>89</sup> "it acts without action" (Waley).<sup>90</sup> In these and other passages "acting" is obviously something desirable; and in fact the Lao-tzu only once unequivocally praises "not acting",<sup>91</sup> where the preverbal negative requires this translation. Mjwo gwia, then, rather than the absence of action, must be a particular kind of action; and in that case mjwo must be something else than "nothingness", total "lack".

We earlier discovered that hjo was not total "exhaustion" or "emptiness", but rather a restrained, faint expiration, or the point at the end of faint expiration; is it not possible that mjwo, similarly, is a "tapering, diminishing", or the "minim" point at the end of the process of tapering? There is a hint at this in chapter 48: in "practising the Tao", one "decreases it and again decreases, until he reaches to mjwo gwia";<sup>92</sup> the temptation is strong to translate the goal of this process as "minimal effecting", i.e., doing as little as possible to get things done. And Lao-tzu speaks, as we have seen, of the "benefit of non-action", which we might better render (since 益 "benefit, increase", is the contrary of 損 "decrease") "the increment of minimal effect-



ing", i.e., the true increment of what seems to be decrease.

But the strongest argument in support of this understanding of mjwo is the philosophy of chapters 63 and 64. Chapter 63 opens 為無為, which we are apparently to understand in the light of what comes later: "effect the great through the very small", for

The great matters of the under-heaven  
must take their rise in the very small.  
For this reason the sage, though to the  
end he does not try to effect the great,  
is able to accomplish it.<sup>93</sup>

If the "very small" is the key to effecting the "great", is not "minimal effecting" the key to effecting the "maximum"? In this light, that paradox of paradoxes at the heart of Lao-tzu's thought, 無為而無不為 (chs. 37, 48), rendered by Waley "Tao never does. Yet through it all things are done", takes on new coloring: "By minimizing effecting, you minimize non-effecting"; or, since two negatives produce a positive, "By minimizing effecting, you maximize it." That is, since great things can only be done by starting with the very small, the way to get everything done is to start by doing almost nothing.

The next chapter expresses the same idea a little differently:

'What is minute is easy to scatter.'  
Deal with things in their state of  
not-yet-being (Waley).<sup>94</sup>

This translation seems to miss the "point" by just a little.

The "minute" (mjwer) is something that is almost not; but "not-yet-being" 未有 mjwed gjug seems to be what is simply nonexistent. But if "not yet", mjwed, belongs to the "ta-per/tip" family we examined above, the "not-yet" becomes something more like the "almost", and the "not-yet-being" is what is, as it were, on the "tip" of being; is the phrase not, in short, another way of expressing what is meant by mjwer, the "minim" point of existence?

This understanding of mjwo allows us to approach another celebrated passage from a new angle. The usual understanding of the opening lines of chapter 11 is, as in Waley,

We put thirty spokes together and  
call it a wheel;  
But it is on the space where there  
is nothing that the utility of the  
wheel depends.<sup>95</sup>

But we might now translate this more concretely as

Thirty spokes join in a single hub,  
And it is just in this its minim point  
that the use of the carriage lies.

Here mjwo is the single, smallest point, the point of convergence of the spokes, which is the "axis" upon which the wheel turns and the carriage moves. Such a specific interpretation, admittedly, does not apply to what follows, where the mjwo of a vessel (the space inside) is what is most "useful" in it, and similarly the mjwo of a house (its doors and windows). Still, it is not difficult to extend the sense of "minim" to cover what seems to be simply "empty space":

it is not non-existent, a "nothing", for it is "used"; it is rather what exists on the very "tip" of existence, a "something" just verging on "nothing". It is the very "least" thing that can be spoken of at all. Take away the vessel or the house or the wheel--and then there is "nothing"; but the useful "space" in the midst of these is still a "something"--a "minim".

The two difficult phrases that conclude--and summarize--the chapter Waley translates

Therefore just as we take advantage  
of what is, we should recognize the  
utility of what is not.<sup>97</sup>

This vague "what is not" could be taken to include any kind of "nothingness", and this is not what Lao-tzu is trying to express. Literally it reads: "gjwg it [a thing] to effect advantage; mjwo it to effect use." Keeping in mind the "handling" implied in gjwg, and all that we have said on mjwo, we may perhaps interpret these lines thus: "Regard a thing as something you can 'handle', and you will derive a certain advantage from it; but look inside to the point where it seems on the verge of slipping off into 'nothing', where it just eludes 'handling', and you will get the real use of it."


It is especially in the light of this chapter that a phrase we quoted at the beginning of this paper makes most sense: "Being and Not-being (or, as we would prefer to say, 'the tangible and the minimal') grow out of one another." A

carriage, a vessel, a house could not be "used" if they had not both of these; break these objects to pieces and both the tangible and the minimal in them, being complementary, vanish. From the point of view of ontological primacy, of course, the "minimal" takes precedence, for it is what is really "used"; thus "the tangible grows out of the minimal."<sup>98</sup>

With this view of mjwo as the "minim", "minimal", "minimize", a whole new perspective in the interpretation of the Lao-tzu opens up before us. Instead of "being substanceless it can enter even where there is no space" (Waley),<sup>99</sup> we have simply "the minimally tangible enters the minimal interstice." Instead of a doctrine of "bodilessness"<sup>100</sup> we have the more probable idea of "minimizing one's body (i.e., person)". The "tasteless"<sup>101</sup> becomes "minimal taste"; "knowledgelessness,"<sup>102</sup> "minimal knowing" or "minimizing knowledge"; "desirelessness,"<sup>103</sup> "minimal desire" or "minimizing desire". As to the latter, note that the somewhat esoteric flavor of "only he that rids himself forever of desire can see the Secret Essences" (Waley)<sup>104</sup> is toned down if we render "Constantly minimize desire to contemplate the minute"; and Lao-tzu elsewhere praises having "few desires".<sup>105</sup> Even the "nameless"<sup>106</sup> is perhaps the "minimally named"; for we know that Lao-tzu, though he "does not know its name", does at least "style it Tao", and if "constrained to give it a name", goes further and calls it "great"<sup>107</sup> --he does, in short, try to "minimize naming", but not to forego

it altogether.

But our task is not, as we said at the outset of our undertaking, to describe our subject in detail; what we hope we have done, rather, is provide a key to a somewhat different understanding of Lao-tzu's idea of "emptiness" or "nothingness".

To sum up what we have said on mjwo, we can do no better than depict the sign of diminuendo:  . This sign would do as well for hjo, "faint (even 'minimal') expiration"; and the connection with the "ridgepole", the "pliant", the "valley", is obvious. To this one point of "convergence" all of Lao-tzu's thought tends.

## IV. "FULLNESS"

We must ask, finally, what happens once one has reached the point of "convergence", the "minim". The answer has already been given: one proceeds to the "maximal"; when one has "expired", it remains only for him to "inspire"; the end of "emptiness" is "fullness".

For 'the tree as big as a man's embrace began as a tiny sprout,  
The tower nine storeys high began with a heap of earth,  
The journey of a thousand leagues began with what was under the feet' (Waley).<sup>108</sup>

Yet "fullness", as we suggested earlier, is of two kinds for Lao-tzu; there is the true fullness arrived at through the "minim", and there is the fullness of excess, which leads to exhaustion.

Stretch a bow to the very full,  
And you will wish you had stopped in time (Waley).<sup>109</sup>

Those who possess this Tao do not try to fill themselves to the brim (Waley).<sup>110</sup>

This kind of filling, to the extreme, is doomed by the law of "contraversion"; "Heaven takes away from those who have too much."

Of true fullness, however, Lao-tzu has only the highest praise; in various forms it occurs throughout the book as one of the leading leitmotivs of Lao-tzu's thought. It would perhaps be not too great an exaggeration, in fact, to call Lao-tzu the philosopher par excellence of life, fertility, abun-

dance--in short, of "fullness".

A whole essay could be written on this topic alone, but we shall content ourselves here with adducing a few words of "fullness" from a single phonetic-semantic category: the fullness of "swelling-growing-rising".

The word "fullness" itself, 成 djəng, heads this category; though, keeping in mind the dynamic character of Lao-tzu's thought, we would do better to use the verbal form, "filling". It is the contrary of hjo, "empty" (or "faint expiration"); more concretely it is the "waxing" of the moon, while hjo is its "waning". We have seen that Lao-tzu takes a dim view of excessive "filling", but he approves of the right sort. "The valley, by obtaining the One, is filled".<sup>111</sup> For, "if a thing is hollow, it will be filled."<sup>112</sup> The right kind of "filling" is the "great filling"<sup>113</sup> that Lao-tzu praises in chapter 45.

In the same chapter we find a cognate in great "perfection", 成 djəng; the kinship of the words is made clear in English if we translate the first as "implete", the second as "complete." "Complete" is, in chapter 25, a quality of the Tao itself.<sup>114</sup>

Something that is "full" is naturally "fecund", and one of the most recurrent themes of the Lao-tzu is that of "life" or "lifegiving", 生 səng, a quality imparted both by the "sage" and the Tao to the "myriad things".<sup>115</sup> "Life" is bound up most intimately, too, with the "pliancy" which, as we have seen, is so characteristic of the Tao.<sup>116</sup>

The "sage" and the Tao possess, in addition to the power of "lifegiving", that of causing "growth", 長 tjang.<sup>117</sup> And it is characteristic of one who possesses the Tao--whether "heaven and earth" or the "sage"--to possess "extended lifegiving", 長生<sup>118</sup> (a rendering perhaps more consonant with Lao-tzu's philosophy of "fecundity" than the more usual "long life").

The "overcoming", 勝 sjeng, which Lao-tzu so emphasizes<sup>119</sup> is most likely related to these ideas: it too is a "rising up", a "filling". And the "sage", 聖 sjeng, is perhaps primarily the "full", the "fecund" man.

But is it possible to reach a fullness that will not "turn about"? Is the "sage"--the man who, through attaining the "minim", has gained everything--beyond all change? Does he, having become "full", never again become "empty"? This



could not be, for the world Lao-tzu describes is one of constant change. But since his "fullness", unlike that of the "multitudes", is not an extreme, but a moderate one--it seems, indeed, as though "empty"<sup>120</sup>--he will not come to catastrophe. He will "turn back" before the extreme and "converge" in the "minim". Lao-tzu makes no distinction between the path of the "sage" and the path of the aspirant to "sageliness"; the path that conducts one to the goal is apparently the same as the goal itself. The "sage", like the aspirant, "breathes faintly", "turns back" from excess, seeks always the "minim". But that the goal is the path is something we might have known from the subject of Lao-tzu's book: the "Way".

In a paper ostensibly devoted to "emptiness" and "fullness" the reader may well express amazement that our treatment of the two should be so disproportionate. In extenuation we can only reply that our treatment is proportionate to the obscurity of the subject; Lao-tzu's discussion of "emptiness" in its various forms is elusive and full of paradoxes, while his treatment of "fullness" is always quite clear. "Fullness" is the treasure house, but "emptiness" is the door. We have concerned ourselves with finding the key to the door; if we have indeed found it, the treasure is now plainly in view.

## NOTES

1. Ch. 40: 反者道之動
2. Even in a careful study of the "opposites" in the Lao-tzu, D. C. Lau distinguishes between them (反 is "revert", 復 "return") "simply because it is better to use two English words to translate two different Chinese words. In fact fan and fu are in this connexion synonymous, both meaning 'return'" (p. 353, n.).
3. Ch. 2: 有無相<sup>此</sup>難易相成長短相形高下相傾音聲相和。
4. Ch. 58: 禍兮福之所倚福兮禍之所伏。前後相隨。
5. Ch. 77: 天之道其猶張弓乎高者抑之下者舉之有餘者損之不足者與之。
6. Ch. 42: 物或損之而益或益之而損。
7. Ch. 78: 正言若反。
8. <sup>Ch. 25</sup> 大曰逝逝曰遠遠曰反。 A similar character is ascribed to the "mysterious power" in the Lao-tzu's only other use of 反, in ch. 65: it is "deep, far-reaching, and together with things it returns, until it reaches the great compliance." 玄德深矣遠矣與物反矣然後乃至大順。
9. See his essay, p. 344.
10. Ch. 7: 聖人後其身而身先外其身而身存。
11. Ch. 66: 聖人欲上民必以言下之欲先民必以身後之。
12. Ch. 36: 將欲翕之必固張之將使弱之必固強之。將欲廢之必固興之將欲奪之必固與之... 柔弱勝剛強。
13. Ch. 39: 貴以賤為本高以下為基。
14. Ch. 48: 為道日損。復
15. Ch. 19: 絕仁棄義民復孝慈。
16. Ch. 80: 使人復結繩而用之。
17. Ch. 64: 復衆人之所過。
18. Ch. 52: 既知其子復守其母。
19. Ch. 58: 正復為奇善復為妖。

20. Ch. 16: 萬物並作。吾以觀復。 This exhausts Lao-tzu's use of 復。
21. As in the Shih Ching, 周南 section.
- 21a. As in the Shih Ching, 大雅 section; and in the Mencius, IA, 6.
- 21b. As in the Analects, XII.
22. Ch. 34: 萬物歸焉而不為主。
23. Ch. 22: 誠全而歸之。
24. Ch. 60: 夫兩不相傷。故德交歸焉。
25. Ch. 20: 若無所歸。
26. Ch. 14: 無物。
27. Ch. 28: 嬰兒。
28. Ch. 28: 無極。
29. Ch. 28: 樸。
30. Ch. 16: 根。
31. Ch. 52: 明。
32. Ch. 16: 萬物並作。吾以觀復。夫物芸芸各復歸其根。
33. Here, and in the corresponding places below, there are quasi-parenthetical remarks that do not interrupt the train of thought. Here, for example, it is: 為天下谷。常德不離。 "And being such a ravine he knows a power that he never calls upon in vain" (Waley).
34. Ch. 28; a modified form of Waley's translation. 知其雄守其雌。為天下谷。復歸於嬰兒。知其白守其黑。為天下式。復歸於無極。知其榮守其辱。為天下谷。復歸於樸。
35. Ch. 14: 其上不皦。其下不昧。繩繩不可名。復歸於無物。
36. Ch. 10: 專氣致柔。能嬰兒乎。
37. Ch. 55: 含德之厚。比於赤子。骨弱筋柔而握固。 Here a different word is used for "infant" from the usual one, which we shall examine shortly; however, the meaning and associations are the same.

38. ch. 36: 柔弱勝剛強。
39. ch. 43: 天下之至柔。馳騁天下之至堅。
40. ch. 78: 天下莫柔弱於水。而攻堅強者莫之能勝。
- 40a. 鉅 Anc. k'eng; 硯 and 擣 Mand. k'eng (not in Karlgren).
41. ch. 76: 兵強則不勝。木強則兵。強大處下。柔弱處上。
42. ch. 55: 物壯則老。謂之不道。不道早已。
43. ch. 34: 大道汎兮。其可左右。
44. 繫辭, Pt. I, ch. 11; Wilhelm-Baynes, Vol. I, p. 342. "Changes" more probably refers to the principle, not the text. 易有大極。是生兩儀。
45. ch. 58: 禍兮福之所倚。福兮禍之所伏。孰知其極。
46. ch. 16: 萬物並作。吾以觀復。
47. And to the parallel phrase 守靜篤, "keep to the substance of quietude", of which we omit discussion since it does not affect our argument here.
48. Let it not be thought that we are avoiding "emptiness" here; we shall treat it in detail shortly.
49. ch. 5: 天地之間。其猶橐籥乎。虛而不屈。
50. See for example the end of ch. 29.
51. See for example chs. 9 and 15.
52. ch. 47: 不出戶知天下。其出彌遠其知彌少。
53. ch. 18: 智慧出。有大偽。
54. ch. 35: 用之不可既。
55. ch. 45: 大成。其用不敝。
56. ch. 45: 大盈。其用不窮。
57. ch. 5: 多言數窮。
58. ch. 18: 大道廢。有仁義。
59. ch. 39: 神無以靈。將恐歇。

60. ch. 39: 谷無以盈將恐竭。
61. ch. 39: 萬物無以生將恐滅。
62. ch. 39: 侯王無以貴高將恐蹶。
63. chs. 29 and 64: 為者敗之。
64. chs. 29 and 64: 執者失之。
65. ch. 38: 失道而後德。失德而後仁。失仁而後義。失義而後禮。
66. ch. 45: 大成若缺。
67. chs. 2 and 43: 不言之教。 cf. ch. 73, where "not speaking" is again approved.
68. ch. 56: 知者不言。言者不知。
- 68a. In his poem, "Lao-tzu", which Waley (Chinese Poems, London, 1948, p. 190) translates:  
 'Those who speak know nothing;  
 Those who know are silent.'  
 Those words, I am told,  
 Were spoken by Lao-tzu.  
 If we are to believe that Lao-tzu  
 Was himself one who knew,  
 How comes it that he wrote a book  
 Of five thousand words?
69. ch. 27: 善言。
70. ch. 17: 貴言。
71. ch. 5: 多言數窮。
72. ch. 23: 希言自然。
73. ch. 25: 道法自然。
74. ch. 14: 視之不見。名曰夷。聽之不聞。名曰希。搏之不得。名曰微。
75. ch. 23: 飄風不終朝。
76. ch. 41: 大音希聲。
77. ch. 41: 大象無形。
78. ch. 43: 不言之教。天下希及之。
79. ch. 70: 吾言甚易知。天下莫能知。夫唯無知。是以不我知。知我者希。

80. ch. 5: 多言數窮. 不如守中.
81. ch. 42: 萬物負陰而抱陽. 沖氣以為和.
82. ch. 45: 大盈若沖其用不窮. "Great fullness is as if deplete; (yet) in its use it is not exhausted."
83. ch. 4: 道沖而用之. 或不盈. "The Tao is deplete, yet use it and it probably won't be filled."
85. ch. 55: 心使氣曰強.
86. ch. 3: 虛其心.
87. chs. 29 and 64: 為者敗之.
88. chs. 2, 51, 77: 為而不恃.
89. ch. 81: 為而不爭.
90. chs. 3 and 63: 為無為.
91. ch. 47: 不為而成.
92. ch. 48: 損之又損以至於無為.
93. ch. 63: 為大於其細. 天下大事. 必作於細. 是以聖人終不為大. 故能成其大.
94. ch. 64: 其微易散. 為之於未有.
95. ch. 11: 三十輻共一轂. 當其無. 有車之用.
96. ch. 11: 埴埴以為器. 當其無. 有器之用. 鑿戶牖以為室. 當其無. 有室之用.
97. ch. 11: 故有之以為利. 無之以為用.
98. ch. 40: 有生於無.
99. ch. 43: 無有入無間.
100. ch. 13: 無身.
101. chs. 35 and 63: 無味.
102. chs. 3, 10, etc.: 無知.
103. chs. 1, 3, 34, 57: 無欲.
104. ch. 1: 常無欲以觀其妙.

105. ch. 19: 寡欲.
106. chs. 1, 32, 37, 41: 無名.
107. ch. 25: 吾不知其名. 宰之曰道. 強為之名曰大.
108. ch. 64: 合抱之木. 生於毫末. 九層之臺. 起於累土. 千里之行. 始於足下.
109. ch. 9: 持而盈之. 不如其已.
110. ch. 15: 保此道者. 不欲盈.
111. ch. 39: 谷得一以盈.
112. ch. 22: 窪則盈.
113. ch. 45: 大盈.
114. ch. 25: 有物混成.
115. chs. 2, 10, 51, etc.
116. See also the opening of ch. 76: 人之生也柔弱.
117. chs. 10, 51, etc.
118. See chs. 7 and 59.
119. chs. 33, 36, 76, 78, etc.
120. ch. 45: 大盈若沖.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS CONSULTED

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For 308t  
1961  
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Dear Reader:

The author of this essay, Eugene D. Rose, became an Eastern Orthodox Christian after completing his M.A. in ancient Oriental Languages here at U.C. Berkeley. A few years later, he helped to form a monastery in the forests of Northern California. He was tonsured a monk and then ordained a priest under the name Father Seraphim. He continued writing on religious and philosophical subjects, focusing on the 2,000 year old tradition of Orthodox Christianity. In addition to writing numerous books, he edited 100 issues of a highly respected missionary periodical, The Orthodox Word. Father Seraphim Rose died unexpectedly in September, 1982, leaving behind a great literary legacy. His friends, fellow monastics, and spiritual children are hoping to publish his 12 unpublished books.

If you benefited from reading Fr. Seraphim's essay on Lao-tzu, you may also be interested in following the growth and development of his thought. If so, write to his monastery at this address:

P.O. Box 70  
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Platina, CA 96076  
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P.S. Please leave this paper in the book.

μωνάχας ἱεροκέντιος  
9/10/03

-- John Christensen, Sept. 27, 1982  
(415) 643-1126