

# The Birth of Empathy

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*Travelling with Huizi over a bridge on the Hao River, Zhuangzi said: "The fish is swimming at ease. This is how fish enjoy themselves."*

*Huizi said: "You are not a fish. How do you know the fish are enjoying themselves?"*

*Zhuangzi said: "You are not me. How do you know that I don't know about the fish?"*

*Huizi said: "I am not you and I certainly don't know about you; you are certainly not a fish and you will not know about the fish. That's for sure."*

*Zhuangzi said: "Let's trace back to your original question. You said: "How do you know the fish are enjoying themselves?" This question shows that you know I know about the fish. Since you know about me, why can't I know about the fish? I got to know it over a bridge on the Hao River."*

(Zhuangzi, ch.17, 283, tr. Wang Rongpei)

## INTRODUCTION

In Western culture, psychological growth of the person is considered to culminate in her independence, in her autonomy. It is only then that the individual is able to manifest her personal freedom in assertive, self-reliant action. As soon as other autonomous, independent persons enter the field, however, the dynamics change. The other is perceived as essentially separate as well as different. This dichotomy of *self* versus *other* entails the potential of interpersonal contact. Consequently, this dichotomy lies also at the basis of interpersonal conflict. (Tophoff, 2016)

Emphasizing the primacy of individual autonomy, however, frequently comes at the expense of the fundamental, biologically based interconnectedness of self and nature. In Daoist philosophical and religious traditions, the focus is less on autonomy than on communality. It is only within the awareness of interconnectedness that dichotomy between self and non-self, which, historically, has too often been proven fatal, may ultimately be transcended.

The main ingredient of interconnecting is empathy. Empathy is the recognizing of emotions in others and the ability to place one self into the shoes of the other person, *as if* one is the other. The *as-if* quality in empathy is essential, as it points not to identification with the other but to difference. The awareness of difference (1), as had been said earlier, is the essential condition for contact.

Neurophysiologically, empathy is possible through brain cells that start to fire when we watch the activity of another person that touches us (Rizzolatti, 2009; Austin, 2006.) Also other mammals, e.g. chimpanzees, are genetically able to interconnect and to show empathy (De Waal, 2009).

In this paper, empathy as the most important ingredient of our interconnectedness will be explored. The birth of empathy is

traced here as to its historical, Daoist roots. The nature-nurture paradigm of empathy is discussed within the context of inborn nature on the one hand, and self-cultivation on the other. Empathy, as will be shown, can only be manifested by its operational consequence, which is compassion.

## NATURE AND INNOCENCE

In its essential dialectics, the *Daode jing* (2) (Waley, tr. 1958), dynamically embraces an ethical stand vis-à-vis human behavior, while at the same time underlining the ruthless indifference of the *dao* (3). The text always balances on the narrow ridge of words and of their significance:

*"The Way that can be told of is not the Unvarying Way;*

*The names that can be named are not the unvarying names"* (Waley, tr. 1958, 141).

The *Daode jing* 'coaches' the human being along the line of virtuous behavior (*de*), behavior that is in accord with the *dao*. Virtue is fully embodied in the concept of the Sage (*shengren*) and by his awareness of complete interconnectedness, as well as by his attitude and his actions. The Sage is '*socially responsible, benevolent, helpful in all actions (...), he acts appropriately at all times (...), he always sees the inherent patterns of nature and the world, and thinks of the greater good of all*' (Kohn, 2014, 68). He understands what people need, and thus he shows empathy. In this way, ordinary people too should '*honor and venerate Heaven and Earth, (...), be compassionate and empathic to the orphaned and lonely*' advises *Master Redpine* (abt. 320 C.E., in: Kohn, 2004, 15), and he continues '*Seeing other people suffering loss should give them pain*'. In the *Fifty-Eight Prayers of Great Clarity* (in Kohn, *ibid.*, 104) the Daoist practitioners are encouraged 'to put themselves into one other person's place'. The *Huainanzi* (4) focuses on '*humaneness*' (*ren*), referring to the ability to empathize with others and treat them with compassion (Meyer, in: Major, J.S. 2010, 885).

In radiating empathy, the Sage embodies the *dao*, making his way in tune with the dynamics of cosmic change. '*His morality depends upon following something that is there by nature*' (Van Keerbergen, 2001, 101). His mode of being in the world '*reflects most closely the movements of the Way*' (Lee, 2014, 10), and thus is in harmony with it. However, harmony is not sought after as a special goal to be attained. It is not because altruistic, empathic actions are placed higher on the moral scale of interpersonal virtues, that the Sage performs them. Being in tune with the dynamics of cosmic change does not imply moral judgment. (Though) '*the goodness of the cosmos is all pervasive (...)* it is not



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necessarily a moral goodness. (...) The goodness of the cosmos goes beyond human morality because it is cosmic and natural, and both cosmos and nature are cruel and unjust at times' (Kohn, 2011, 2). According to the *Daode jing* neither the Way nor the Sage is ultimately humane (Meyer, in: Major 2010, 885).

The Sage, then, has transcended moral distinction. He no longer morally discerns between virtue and non-virtue, between structure and anarchy. He is, in the words of Zhuang Zi, 'free of distinctions in that he does not allow likes and dislikes entering him (...) but always goes along with his inherent naturalness' (in: Kohn, 2014, 61). What, then, implies 'inherent naturalness'? Is it the abode of empathy?

Inherent naturalness, or inborn nature (*xing*), refers to the functional dispositions of the human being. It 'defines our inborn, genetically defined uniqueness' (Kohn, *ibid.*, 102), and thus our personality. Our personality, to put it in contemporary terms, is a construct of a set of validly measurable personality traits. These, indeed, are inborn and genetically determined. Empathy is anchored in our brain through mirror neurons. In Austin's (Austin, 2006, 268) words the brain has "mirrors" that 'would reflect others, become sympathetic with them. Inside (has) ways of experiencing outside.'

The Sage has realized his inherent naturalness, which manifests itself in mirroring the world. The mirror does not do anything, she simply is. Like the mirror, the Sage 'acts' by non-doing (*wu-wei*). In this deeply Daoist sense, the Sage does not act virtuously and consciously empathic, since she is not concerned with virtue as such. This is why she may justly be called *innocent*. No wonder that Daoism's metaphors for 'the Sage' point to this very innocence. The Sage is called 'Little Child', 'An Infant' by *Lao Zi* (Waley, tr.1958, 153, 168). *Zhuang Zi* speaks about 'The Child', 'A Little Baby' (Watson, tr. 1968, 57, 153).

Ordinary man, however, is no longer a little child. Nor is he a Sage – yet. When inherent naturalness is not manifested, is empathetic behavior at all possible?

### NURTURING LIFE: SELF-CULTIVATION

Chan Buddhists, too, use the metaphor of the mirror, emphasizing its need to be cleaned and polished, so that it might reflect clearly again the world as it is. Historically much earlier, Daoists refer to 'returning' as the path to naturalness - returning, indeed, to our own inborn nature.

Is moving along the Way indeed backwards instead of forwards? Within the dialectics of *yin* and *yang*, beyond all alternatives, it could be said that movement is implied in stillness, as stillness is implied in movement (5). The 'wayfarer' needs to stay still in movement because only then she is able to connect to the awareness of her fundamental interconnectedness, and thus, potentially, to empathy.

Research shows that – even though empathy is possible through the construction of the brain – tangible empathic action needs conditioning and training (Jinpa, 2014). Indeed, the *Daode jing* can be understood as a paradigm of training – be it of training in the sense of *wu-wei*, or training by non-doing.

Self-cultivation, or 'nurturing life' as it is called in the *Zhuangzi*, ultimately refers to the *allowing* of mindful stillness, so that awareness of interconnected empathy becomes possible. 'Quietness, stillness, emptiness, not-having, non-acting – these are the balancers of Heaven and Earth, the very substance of the Way and its Power' (Zhuang Zi, in: Waley, 1974, 69). Here, it is no question of consciously changing or modifying something

which one does or doesn't want. It is not a teleological, future oriented striving to become or to acquire something of value. Instead, it is a movement 'backwards', a *returning* to the source of our naturalness. Commenting on the *Zhuangzi* (6), Kohn (2014, 124) formulates succinctly: 'The central focus of the text is on *allowing* rather than *pursuing*, *easing* into the experience and *relaxing* into non-action'. *Easing* into the experience and *relaxing* into non-action, however, is not at all tantamount to *laissez-faire*. 'Relaxing into non-action' can be hard work, requiring stamina, and demanding deliberation and vigor of the practitioner of the Way. Here, one of the self-defeating, self contradictory pitfalls is the deliberation of wanting to reach the source of inborn naturalness. Yet, without deliberation, in the sense of a mindful alertness the wayfarer is lost. The very desiring of virtuous behavior in fact alienates the practitioner from staying in touch with the Way: 'When Humaneness and Rightness are established, the Way and its Potency are abandoned' (in *Huiainanzi*, 96). Self-cultivation is not *exercising* with a fixed goal in mind. Instead, it is an open, mindful *exploration* of what is presenting itself inside and outside of oneself.

The methods which are helpful in developing our sense of interconnectedness reflect this seeming contradiction between discipline and allowing, between hard work and *wu-wei*. These methods include meditation, forms of movement and the martial arts.

Meditation, be it by sitting (*zazen*), by standing (*wuji*) or by walking (*kinhin*), may be conceived as a training in mindfulness. Mindfulness, nowadays, is often popularized and commercialized into a commodity, into 'McMindfulness' (Hyland, 2016, 177), a therapeutic panacea. In the original Buddhist sense, however, mindfulness (sansk. *smriti*) is a form of remembrance, a recollecting of 'how it originally is'. In fact it is a *returning* to inborn nature. In mindfulness, attention is focused on the actual flow of internal and external events within the perspective of the Way of virtuous behavior. In this way, through mindfulness, returning to the source is facilitated.

Next to the well known forms of movement such as *Qi Gong* and techniques of breathing and breath control, *Sensory Awareness* (7) might be briefly mentioned. In free, minimally structured movements, practitioners explore their own personal path by studying a recursive dynamic that balances autonomy with interconnectedness. In *Sensory Awareness*, experiencing personal autonomy, the practitioner considers the intimate connection between her external environment and inner consciousness to seek response-able ways to understand these two realms within their interconnectedness. The result of this process may well be a new and mindful re-learning, a remembrance, a returning. This deeply Daoist process of returning helps to bring us closer to the Source, to Inner Naturalness, and thus to inner mastership.

Chinese Martial Arts, specifically of the internal *gong fu* categories such as *Taiji*, *Xingyi chuan* and *Bagua*, also can be conceived as powerful methods on the way of returning to the source (Tophoff, 2013). In these arts, stillness is cultivated in movement, movement is integrated within stillness. The circular nature of these processes is illustrated through the Daoist paradigm of change, which is essentially expressed in the *Daode jing* as the Law of Opposites: 'What is in the end to be shrunk must first be stretched. Whatever is to be weakened must begin by being made strong'. (Waley 1958,187). Change, here, is not to be conceived as linear, but rather as circular. In these martial arts this paradigm is, so to say, translated into movement, allowing the essence





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of 'returning' to become internalized within the practitioner.

### EMPATHY IN ACTION: COMPASSION

Somewhere on the Way empathy is born, by returning to the source, and by being nourished by the cultivation of mindfulness. At this moment, empathy may be experienced as an attitude, or as a state, with undertones of feelings and cognitions. The awareness of empathy as such is a transient, inner state of consciousness. It is, however, not externally manifested, because it has not yet been translated into interconnected action. What, then, would empathy in action imply?

Neurologically, mirror neurons are not only involved in emotional, interpersonal cognition, but also in motor cognition (Schulte-Rüther, 2007). The empathic perceiving of one's suffering child by the mother activates brain centers to promote her adequate, compassionate action. Prinz (2013) notes that 'perceptual representations are linked with motor responses'.

Inherent in empathy is the tendency to act. Empathy, so to say, potentially activates the organism in the direction of the other(s). It is important to underline again that empathy, as such, is beyond good and evil. In the *Daode jing* moral distinctions are transcended. Also the torturer, for instance, is in need of degrees of empathy to inflict well-defined damage to his victim.

In the Daoist context of virtuous behavior, however, empathy may translate itself into compassion. In that case, compassion may operationally be defined as empathy-in-action. It is only when empathy is translated into compassionate action that virtuous behavior is achieved. The *Daode jing*, chapter 67 is very explicit in this respect: 'I really have three prized possessions (8), (...) the first of these is compassion. (Ames, tr. 2003, 183). 'For only he that pities is truly able to be brave (...) Heaven arms with pity those whom it would not see destroyed' (Waley, tr., 1958, 225). Brave and courageous, the Sage shuns coercion, violence and suppression. Instead, she allows empathy and empathy driven compassion to manifest itself.

### SUMMARY

Instead of autonomy, Daoism emphasizes interconnectedness. Its main ingredient is empathy. The birth of empathy is traced to its historical Daoist roots of inherent naturalness and self-cultivation. Contemporary neurological research underlines the inherent nature of empathy. It is, however, only when empathy is translated into compassionate action that virtuous behavior is achieved.

1. Eventually, it may be necessary to transcend this dichotomy, e.g. in conflict management, which is only possible on the base of interconnectedness which is based on a 'we' (Tophoff, 2016).
2. The *Daode jing* (lit. *The classic of the Way and of Virtuous Behavior*) allegedly was written by Laozi about 400 BCE.
3. Ames and Hull (2003, 57) translate *dao* somewhat differently as 'the active project of moving ahead in the world (...) way making (...) a pathway that can be travelled'.
4. The *Huainanzi* is a collection of texts by Liu An, King of Huainan (165 – 122 BCE).
5. In Daoist forms of martial arts precisely these dialectics are essential (Tophoff, 2013b).
6. The *Zhuangzi* derives its name from the Daoist philosopher *Zhuang Zi* who lived somewhere between 370 – 319 B.C.E. (Watson, 1968, 1).
7. For an extensive description of *Sensory Awareness* the reader is referred to Tophoff, 2003).

8. The other two possessions are: frugality and the refusal to put oneself in the foreground.

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