



# The Dao of cultivation

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

I turned and stared in shock. It was Cook.

**H**E STOOD JUST inside the door, looking straight ahead, and in his hands were two huge knives: shiny meat choppers. His eyes scanned the room before they locked on to us. He took a step forward.

The Daoist was on his feet. He said, with a strange inflection in his voice, “Cook! You’re back!”

Cook continued his silent steps toward us, raising the choppers as he came. The Daoist advanced to meet him. I rose, pushing my seat backwards, trying to put distance between myself and the two of them.

They embraced, the fat monk patting Cook on the back, Cook holding the choppers awkwardly away from the monk. They parted.

“It’s been a long time! Where did you go?”

“The abbot wanted me to refurbish the kitchen, no expense spared. I went all over the country. Check these out,” Cook said, holding out the choppers. “That’s what I wanted to show you. Best brand of *wen wu*

*dao* around. They’ll last for generations.”

“*Wen wu dao?*” I asked, recovering from my fright. “What does that mean?”

They both laughed. “*Wen* means ‘literature’, *wu* means ‘martial’. But in a knife, *wen* means for vegetables while *wu* means for meat. So a *wen dao* is for chopping vegetables and is somewhat lighter, a *wu dao* is a cleaver and is heavier for chopping through bones, and a *wen wu dao* is sort of in the middle and useable for both.”

Cook looked at me and broke out in a big smile. “The other reason I came over now is that the Abbot says Xiaoyao has been freeloading long enough. It’s time he put in a bit of labour around here.”

The fat monk laughed. “I told the Abbot this one wasn’t going away anytime soon.”

Cook nodded. “I am supposed to assign him some work involved with the kitchen. He can come back here during his off time.”

The fat monk lost no time in shooing me out the door. If I didn’t know better, I might have imagined he was happy to get rid of me. With these thoughts running around my head, I followed Cook through the compound, towards the kitchen.

But we didn’t stop at the kitchen. We kept going, passing a series of narrow passage-

ways open to the sky, between the buildings that housed the rooms each of the monks had for sleeping and keeping their few possessions. Thin mats of bamboo hung in front of most of these rooms, acting as permeable screens. Clotheslines held newly washed tunics, buckets stood by outdoor water faucets which had concrete catch-drains spread below them. And over all was the drift of the snow-like pollen of the willows and poplars that characterised springtime in this part of China.

We went out through a small circular door in the outer wall which led us to the fields where vegetables were grown. These were terraced sections of the hill behind the monastery, now mostly well-dug and cultivated for the early spring planting. Just outside the door, Cook pointed to several thick wooden handles protruding upwards from a bucket. I lifted one out. It was a large mattock, its heavy iron head dripping oil. I shook the oil off, put the shaft on my shoulder, and followed Cook up the uneven and narrow path between two terraces to arrive at a field. The stubble and ruin of the previous season still peppered its decrepit furrows.

“There you go,” said Cook. “See you later.”

The ground was hard, but as my muscles loosened up I began to enjoy the physical effort. Each furrow was about 25 paces long, the field holding at least 20 furrows. Half-way through the second furrow I stopped for a break. The combination of the gentle late-morning sun, the smell of the newly turned earth, and the light breeze made the exercise delightful.

Further up the hill the uncleared vegetation was thick and green. Turning my head the other way, I could see directly into the second-story rooms in the rear hall of the monastery. With a shock I realised that someone was standing just inside the windows of one of those rooms, looking at me. A small figure.

It was the Abbot.

I remembered then the visit to his rooms. I had noticed, through his window, these very fields. Was that why he had me working here?

I waved, awkwardly. The Abbot did not respond but turned away from the window and disappeared into the shadows

concealing the rest of the room. I lifted the mattock and resumed my hoeing, the feeling of supervision reducing the pure enjoyment of the work, but I made it through the next three furrows without stopping.

The cry of a bird made me look up. At the bottom of the hill, close to the round door in the wall, stood Shijie, the fat monk’s old friend, and Xiaojing, her student. The younger woman stood with her fists on her hips looking up at me, shaking her head. She leaned over and said something to Shijie, who nodded, turned and went back through the round door. Xiaojing made her way up the narrow path to where I stood with my mattock.

“Is your arthritis playing up?” she said by way of greeting.

I reddened. So that was how it was going to be.

“Can you do better?” I said, pointing to the proud evidence of the four-and-a-half well-hoed furrows.

“My grandmother could do better,” she replied, and made her way over to take possession of the mattock. She lifted it with ease and began to hoe. The rise and fall of the mattock was at the same time both faster and more effortless than mine. Xiaojing had a rhythm and economy of movement that spoke of long familiarity with this work. Within several minutes she had finished the row and worked her way back to where I stood along the next. She stopped and looked at me, a challenge in her eyes. She was not short of breath at all.

“Ok, that’s pretty good,” I admitted. She looked surprised, her expression softened, and she was just about to say something when we heard Shijie calling.

We turned. The older woman was standing by the Abbot’s window, where I had seen him earlier, and gesturing us to come in. Xiaojing knocked the residual dirt from the head of the mattock by banging it against the sole of her shoe, then threw it over her shoulder, shaking off my attempts to take it from her.

We threaded our way down the uneven path, left the mattock in the barrel, washed our hands at an outdoor faucet and found the stairs that led to the second floor corridor balcony and the Abbot’s rooms.

Shijie met us at the door. “The Abbot



*The last bit of the ox's tail gets stuck in the knothole*

■ Xiaoyao Xingzhe, a wandering pilgrim, continues his series exclusive to *The Lantern*.



*You must be careful not to become reliant on a quiet place in order to achieve a quiet mind*

wants to go over a short text with the two of you,” she said. “But first we should sit for a brief time.”

The Abbot was already seated on a cushion with his back to the window. His eyes were closed and he did not speak to us, but his posture was erect. Shijie sat down facing him, her back to the door. She indicated with her chin that I should sit to her left, Xiaojing to her right, where the cushions had been placed, making a circle with the Abbot.

We sat in silence. My thoughts seemed to settle much more rapidly than in my usual practice, and a feeling of empty clarity filled me with freshness and a sense of light. Gradually my thoughts ceased, and my sense of self diminished until it appeared that a hole in the universe opened before me, an invitation to enter. But before the passage was complete, my whole body reacted with a sudden jerk that shocked my eyes open. The other three were looking at me.

“The last bit of the ox’s tail gets stuck in the knothole,” the Abbot said with a smile. “One must continue to clarify the self until no impediment remains, and then one can just let go and take that step off of the hundred-foot flagpole, as our Chan brothers have it.” He nodded. “But that takes time, and skill. Which is why I asked for you both to be here.” He glanced at Shijie, who picked up a thin book lying next to her.

“This is the *Taishang Dongxuan Lingbao Guanmiao Jing*, the *Classic for Contemplating the Marvellous*,” she said. “It is part of the Dongxuan section of the Daoist canon, and gives very simple and clear directions for quieting your mind properly, in a balanced way. It is very old, at least the Tang dynasty.”

The Abbot continued: “We are going to look at the first section, which is the part most useful for the two of you.” He took the book from Shijie, and opened it, beginning to read.

***Now, those who wish to gaze on marvels and become perfected first must eliminate deviant and perverse behaviours, and cut off external affairs.***

The Abbot looked up from the book and said “The words ‘gaze on marvels’ could also be called observing the subtleties of the

mysterious Dao. It mentions this in the first chapter of the *, you will recall: *thus they reside in nothingness through their desire to observe its marvels*. Then it goes on *mystery upon mystery, the gate of all marvels*. The Master on the River commented that *marvel* meant *essential*. Wang Bi said that it meant *the extremely subtle*.”*

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and said “*Cutting off external affairs* means getting rid of excessive concern with things or doings. The Tang dynasty master Sima Chengzhen talked about this: *so the person cultivating the Dao must simplify their life, weighing the relative importance of things and affairs. Those things that are not crucial or important all should be cut off.*”

The Abbot turned back to the text.

***Then they purify and calm their mind, thoughts being successively restrained then eliminated. Making this a habit for a long time, the mind gradually becomes still.***

The Abbot said “You gradually reduce your thoughts, reining them in then extinguishing them, time and again, until after a long time the mind regains its essential quietude. In the beginning you may need to set aside a time for calm sitting, but you must be careful not to become reliant on a quiet place in order to achieve a quiet mind.”

Shijie said “Fangzhang, my teacher said that the best meditation was in the midst of activity.”

“He was right.”

This was something I recalled the fat monk had told me.

“He also said that one training technique was, when possible, to withdraw yourself while in the midst of the activity, expending only the most necessary of energy on the situation around you, turning the attention inward. Then, when the situation demanded it, you could turn outward and respond to whatever may be needed at the moment.”

“Hmm.”

“In this way, he said, you could conserve your energy on the one hand while placing your attention where it could be most useful.”

Xiaojing said “Yes, most of the time we just get bored and want to occupy our attention with worthless distractions.”

The Abbot said “Most of humanity are like people who live in a marvellous enclosed garden, but stand by the windows looking only outward at the desert outside. Blinded by the light, when they do turn around it all seems dark, so they imagine nothing is there. If only they gave their eyes a chance to adjust.”

“That analogy does not completely work,” I said.

Xiaojing snorted.

“No, he is right,” the Abbot said. “But what analogy does? It is enough to get the idea across: we stay most of our lives glued to our senses, forever looking outward, ignoring our inner richness which at first seems all dark, but with time can blossom like a golden flower.” He picked up the book again. “In any case, let’s go on with our text.”

***Only extinguish the restless mind, do not extinguish the mind of stillness.***

The Abbot said “The *restless mind* is the mind drawn outward, the mind of desire. The *mind of stillness* is our natural mind, our essence. Li Dao-Chun said something almost the same in his *Zhong He Ji* (Book of Balance and Harmony): *Only extinguish the deluded mind, do not extinguish the shining mind; the mind that does not move at all is the shining mind, the mind that can never stop moving is the deluded mind.*”

***Only congeal the empty mind, do not congeal the possessive mind.***

Xiaojing said “What does it mean when it says ‘congeal’?”

Shijie said “Congeal (*ning*) means to sustain, or to maintain and not allow to dissipate. The empty mind is that which is calm, peaceful and not attached to anything, the possessive mind (*you xin*) is the mind that grasps and desires.”

***Above the mind of stillness, open understanding extends forever; below the mind of stillness, a quiet that holds nothing. Active or inactive, the mind of no-mind is constant. Whether in quiet or clamour, the will is one.***

The Abbot said “These lines attempt to describe the sensation of the mind of stillness, but it really must be experienced. More, it must become a natural state, so that even if you are in the noisy marketplace, the mind sustains this lucid awareness. All

those external distractions do not disturb it.”

I said “Sounds like a pot-head friend I know.” Xiaojing made an impatient gesture and turned her head, but I thought there was a hint of a grin there.

Shijie shook her head. “There is a ten-thousand mile difference between the two states. Your friend is not lucid. His mind may be empty, but it is not filled with clarity. It is filled with fog.”

The Abbot leaned forward and said “A Daoist is not some woolly-headed mystic lost in his imaginings. A Daoist is effective and efficient in his use of mind.”

“Her use of mind,” Xiaojing said.

“Of course,” the Abbot said, winking at Shijie. He smiled, then became serious again. “One must be able to respond effectively to the situation around one, moving from a quiet mind into a thinking mind when necessary, then back into the quiet mind again. But there is something else.”

Even Shijie frowned slightly. “What?”

“We aim to access what we call the *Dao xin*: the mind of Dao. In many situations where the average person tries to think through a problem, we rely on a flash of insight from the *Dao xin*. As you learn to trust it and look for it, it in turn comes to you more. The solutions it presents are often elegant, often unexpected, but always takes the whole of the situation into account.” He picked up the book again. “All right, let’s continue. Pay attention here, this is crucial.”

***Tie up the mind too tightly, though, and it will certainly result in sickness, expressed as mania or idiocy. Those are the symptoms.***

“Now remember, this is a Tang dynasty text. The dangers in meditation have been recognised for a long time. The signs and symptoms are known, the cause is also clear. But people no longer look to the past for guidance, they act as if they are the first to discover anything, and so they rush into all sorts of practices and techniques and end up deranged.” The Abbot shook his head.

I knew people like this. The problems were usually temporary, but quite disturbing. Worse, there were so-called teachers who specialised in promoting exactly this sort of



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extreme technique. Apparently they thought that the more intense the experience, the more “spiritual” that made it. I said all this to the Abbot. He nodded.

“Yes, it is like someone who sticks their finger into a light socket just for the intense experience. In fact there are much more sophisticated ways of utilising that energy: providing illumination, radio, TV and so on. It is the same in our field. You can certainly short yourself out, but that can also fuse your circuits, so to speak, and block the more subtle and sophisticated applications for a while, or sometimes forever.”

Did this never happen in a monastic situation, or in an organised circle? I looked at Shijie.

“First, we provide the information,” she said. “Second, we monitor and give feedback. These are the advantages of learning in a group under competent guidance. But of course there are many solitary wayfarers. It is up to them to read widely and associate as much as possible with friends of some accomplishment.”

Xiaojing said “But what can you do when someone is afflicted like this?”

“It depends upon the person and the situation,” the Abbot said. “If an expert is available let them deal with it. In general terms though *grounding* is the most important element. Get them back in touch with their body. In an acute situation a bucket of cold water may be just the thing to do that.”

Xiaojing looked puzzled. “A bucket of cold water?”

“Or a river, or a lake. Toss them in. Just make sure they don’t drown.”

“Oh.”

“Otherwise, postures that keep the whole body close to the ground can be practised. Gardening is excellent, getting the hands dirty. Walking barefoot. That sort of thing.”

The emphasis on work in the monastery gardens suddenly took on new meaning for me.

“Getting back to the sentence, though, just be aware that we advocate a gradual approach,” the Abbot said. “Greedily grabbing for sudden ‘enlightenment’ always leads to trouble. The book called *Tianyinzi*<sup>a</sup>

says ‘In the *Yijing* there is a hexagram called “Gradual”. Lao Zi has the “Gate of Marvels.” People who refine themselves to become real and reach their essence should not aim for sudden enlightenment, but rather must aim for gradual progress. Practise calmly.’”

“But I have heard many stories of people becoming suddenly enlightened,” I said. “They are walking along, and they see a rock or something and *bang!* They’re enlightened.”

Shijie smiled. “But you will notice that this never happens unless the person has put in years of calm, gentle and gradual work beforehand. The gradual practice sets the stage, so to speak, in order that you may be able to respond well when the moment of sudden enlightenment arrives.”

***If the mind is not moving, one should let it alone; let it always regulate itself. Don’t block it up by knotting.***

The Abbot said “You don’t want to kill the effective essence of mind by enforcing a quiet that is dead like a piece of wood or a stone. If it is already quiet, gently let it go enough to be able to respond to change, to differentiate good from bad.”

Shijie continued “It is a fine balance between extinguishing the restless mind, but still giving the quiet mind the freedom to move within its own realm. Sima Chengzhen said ‘If you extinguish each and every stirring of mind without distinguishing the right mind from the wrong mind, you cut off every means of knowing and enter a state of blind immovability.’”

***In the midst of clamour, you do not abhor it; involved in matters, you are not concerned: this is true quiet. But do not seek quiet just so that you can be involved in matters without concern.***

Xiaojing said “Why not? Isn’t it a good thing to be able to deal with things calmly?”

Shijie smiled and said “Yes, but it is a woeful waste of your possibilities. The potential inner development of humanity is almost limitless. Using these techniques just to keep your cool is like designing a spaceship to go do your shopping.”

The Abbot said “It also has to do with the importance of intention.”

The fat monk had also discussed this with me.

“What you aim at is basically where you

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Tips for running  
a successful clinic ...**

People’s time has value.  
So does yours.



a. The *Tianyinzi* is a very popular Tang dynasty Daoist text.

will end up,” I said.

“Yes, that is a simple way to put it, and reasonably accurate.” He looked down at the book again. “Not much more now.”

**Long-term quiet will stabilise the Spirit, and the Heavenly Radiance will shine forth of itself.**

“The term Heavenly Radiance was explained by Cheng Xuan-Ying: *The body is the residence of the spirit, and is used by the Elect as a container for their Dao-power (dao de). When that chamber of power is peaceful and stabilises through calm, it develops a shining substance of mind, which originates from a radiant wisdom that is-of-itself.*<sup>b</sup>”

**Do not arouse an agitated desire for progress, this would go against nature.**

“Lao Zi said that the Dao imitates nature,” Shijie said. “So should you. Gently simplify your life, reorder your priorities, look within, turn the light around and let the natural process of clarification of your self occur without trying to force it.”

**In the midst of the realm of stillness, observe nothing to be obtained. If you do see something to grasp, then the false will disturb the Real.**

“If you are anxious to ‘become enlightened’ this is often a sign,” the Abbot said, “that the ego has become involved, and the fruits of your efforts are being swallowed up by your ego. That was the meaning of the line before. This line shows another indication: that you may approach stillness with the wrong attitude.”

“What attitude?” Xiaojing said.

“An attitude of greed. You are going to get something – wisdom, reputation for cleverness, whatever – from this process. And it often happens.”

“What happens?” I asked. “Do you mean that they *do* get wisdom, reputation and so on?”

Shijie nodded. “Yes, people find they can solve all sorts of problems, come up with all sorts of insights. Then they get excited. And it all fades away. This is called ‘accepting the first fruits’. What you should do is be restrained, allow it to mature, don’t take advantage.”

The Abbot continued: “Sima Chengzhen

b. Cheng Xuan-Ying (成玄英) was a Tang dynasty hermit and commentator on Laozi and Zhuangzi, also well-versed in Buddhism.

spoke directly to this in his *Zuo Wang Lun*. He said: *Once insight has emerged, treasure it ... it is not that producing insight is difficult, being insightful but not using it is hard. Since ancient times there have been many people who have forgotten their bodies but few who have forgotten their reputations. Being insightful but not using it is forgetting repute; few in the world can attain this, so it is considered difficult.*<sup>c</sup>

Then he lifted the book. “And here is the last line.”

**Practice this for a long time and you will obtain the Dao naturally.**

He let the book in his hands drop down to touch the floor and looked out the window at the field. After a long moment he turned back to us. “It is not how much effort you use,” he said looking at me, then shifted his gaze to Xiaojing “and it is not how fast you are. It is in the quality of your presence. You must practise being *present*. There are ways to help train this.” He stood up to put the book away and gestured at Shijie.

She said “One way is to take the load off your eyes by using your ears. Our predominant sense organ is the eyes, but the end result is that our eyes use us rather than the other way around. We look at something but see our *idea* of that something, rather than what is actually there. It hypnotises us, makes our world ever more narrow, ever more boring.” She sighed, then looked up. “But we can free the eyes for gazing inward by taking some time and using our ears in preference to the eyes in some situations.”

The Abbot, standing by the bookshelf, said “Yes, that is one way. It is good to have a range of techniques. Another very important one is becoming aware of your body and how it feels. Pour your attention into your proprioceptive sensation, *feel* how your little toe moves, or your earlobe, or how your ribs move with your breath. This is easy to do while engaged in a little light field labour.”

He gestured with his head at Xiaojing and me.

“So why don’t you go finish that field.”



*In an acute situation, a bucket of cold water may be just the thing ...*