



Working in the World

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

As I struggled through the bustling market beneath an old seven-storied pagoda, hunting for a pair of fake Dolce Gabbanas, my eye was caught by an island of calm: a stall completely unbesieged by bargain shoppers. In fact, they seemed to be giving it a wide berth. Intrigued by this, I made my way closer and saw that the stall-keeper was sitting facing away from the crowds, sandalled feet up on a chair, reading a book and sipping a cup of tea. Despite the jeans and glasses, I saw immediately that it was my friend the fat monk.

I CALLED OUT TO HIM, and he turned around with a grin and a slightly sheepish look. He took off his sunglasses and gave me a wink as he shuffled aside some boxes and stuff at the back of his stall so that I could sit down.

"I can tell you're dying to ask what I'm doing here," he said, although I had quite

pointedly refrained from doing any such thing. He waited for me to reply, but I just raised my eyebrows. He grinned. "Ah, so you have learned the use of silence. Well, speech has its uses too, so I'll confess that the Abbott sent me down here as a bit of punishment ..."

My eyebrows went higher.

"... I'm supposed to flog all this." He gestured at the stuff laid out on display at his stall.

"But why?" I asked.

"The Abbott said that I 'had insufficient appreciation of the benefits of monastic life' and that a few days of market business would remind me of what I was failing to utilise properly. It would also top up the monastic coffers a bit, but he didn't mention that."

"You don't seem to mind," I said, noting his book and his tea.

"Oh, but I do," he said with a smile. "Just not the way you mean. Its all about mind,

isn't it? No, I was minding, all right. But I was practicing a little rejuvenating technique my teacher taught me, that he called 'alone in a crowd'. When your mind is in danger of losing its centre, and being dragged forth to suffer all sorts of ignominious buffetings in the realm of the ten thousand things, you take a moment or two, withdraw and disengage, turn the light around, and re-establish your connection with the source. Once you have regained your balance, and recovered some energy, you can turn back to the fray."

"Looked to me like you were reading and sipping a cup of tea," I said, doubtfully.

"Just camouflage," he grinned. "Like the sunglasses. No good if people keep coming up to ask what you're doing, is it? No: you work, then you rest."

I had been thinking about taichi, and his comments sparked off thoughts in that direction. "It's like *kai he*," I said, "We talked about that before. Opening and closing! You work in quiet, and you work in activity as well."

"It's also about rhythms," he agreed. "Rhythms and harmony with them. I can detach from the bustle, but at a deeper level I still must mesh with the over-riding rhythms that govern the patterns of our life. It would be no good for me to sit here at night, for example, since the back-and-forth of daytime dealings would not be present."

He looked around, then said "Now that you're here, though, it seems one cycle has finished and another taken its place!" He stood up and was immediately besieged with clamouring shoppers seemingly desperate to purchase his cloth shoes, incense and *nian zhu* – prayer beads.

I helped as I could, replacing sold items by digging around in the dusty paper packages stacked at the back of the stall, going for change, and making tea. It was chaos.

"How can you practice like this?" I asked breathlessly at a temporary gap in the selling. "We barely have time to scratch ourselves!"

"You deal with things as they arise, but maintain a sense of presence," he said, over his shoulder, as he shuffled some dirty paper bills into order. "You don't get carried away. You are present with your body, and present in your heart, as well as with your mind.

The three areas link and give your actions a sense of power and purposefulness that flows smoothly. When you link this flow to the rhythms of the greater flow around you, this is the posture that we call 'aligning yourself with the Dao'."

He looked around at the ebbing current of the market crowd – only a few stragglers cruised the stalls, hoping for last minute bargains – then said "Come on, let's close up here."

We secured the remaining goods into the small bench-like lockers at the back of the stall, and left the market along a narrow winding street clogged with bicycles and motorcycles that inched their way past stone lions and other pedestrians. The street was overhung with balconies in the old style. There were not many streets like this left in this area: the modern remaking of the city had seen many areas like this razed by bulldozers.

"I've told you about my teacher," the monk said, seeming to take little notice of the surroundings, but ducking and weaving smoothly through the crowd. "Well, he has another student who lives in this city, senior to me, who owns a restaurant not far from here. Let's go there and have some dinner. They serve *yao shan* – medicinal cuisine – and we can use a boost after that stint in the market."

We crossed a narrow arched bridge over a small canal. The two opposing flows of traffic squeezed and jostled like blood cells in a narrow artery. We made it to the other side and turned the corner into a much quieter street, with high white-washed walls on one side, and old two-storied shops on the other. I knew this area, the famous old herbal pharmacy was just on the other side of those high walls. Legend had it that it was started when a customer had been frustrated by a long wait for his herbal prescription, only to discover that the herbs dispensed were of low quality. Complaining, he was met with the insolent reply "If you think you can do better, why don't you go start your own place!" Well, he did, and took special care to source his herbs from only the best suppliers, to provide plenty of help in busy times, and to make service to the customer a priority. Perhaps that is why his pharmacy had grown and survived for

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almost 200 years.

I had not visited the place for quite a while and thought to look in. The Daoist said “Let’s have dinner first. Anyway, people at the restaurant have connections there, we can visit later.”

The restaurant itself was fitted out in traditional style: wooden construction, intricate latticework windows, solid wooden tables with benches inside. We went through to the back and mounted the stairs. The second floor held a more private room entered via an arched half-moon doorway, and included a balcony overlooking the street. We were the only occupants. That did not last long. A smiling waitress bustled in carrying a pot of tea, cups, and a few small dishes of snacks. She obviously knew the Daoist well, as they exchanged banter, and he asked after her boss. “*Deng yi xia* – wait a bit” came the almost inevitable reply.

Plucking some chopsticks from the round bamboo container on the table, we occupied ourselves with the tea and snacks, and I broached the topic I had been pondering for a considerable time: the motivation and process of awakening.

“What makes some people interested in pursuing the Way, while others seem to have no interest in it whatsoever?”

“You should be able to answer that question quite easily. Haven’t you noticed that your own interest and motivation tends to flag and revive over time? This is quite common, especially in the beginning.”

I was ready for this, as with experience I had learned that the fat monk adamantly refused to do my thinking for me. Therefore I had thought beyond my question, to his probable rejoinder, and was prepared.

“Yes. But it seems to be more than interest, it is almost an *ability* to do so.”

He raised his eyebrows as he popped a spiced peanut into his mouth, and spoke around it. “Ah! A proper insight at last. It is an ability, or actually more of a capacity, and this capacity exists only when there is a certain alignment within the person, a balance of several factors: proper motivation, a reduction in distractions, and the consequent accumulation of *de*. We have talked about the last one quite a bit already.”

I nodded. *De* – the common translation

as “virtue” – was unfortunately loaded with emotional baggage, but not completely inaccurate, especially if one harked back to an original meaning of “*virtus*”: power. But what is a proper motivation?

“Motivation is like a compass needle. What are you aimed at? You need to be very clear about your motivation, because you will tend to find what you seek. Do you study the Dao to be admired? You will find – and have to live with – people that admire you. That can be particularly tiresome. To gain power? It is possible, but doing it this way is like getting a PhD in order to impress the crowd at McDonald’s. To live forever? Have you really thought that through?”

He smiled a particularly wicked smile at that point. “Maybe you haven’t realised it, but aiming for your own Private Illumination is a contradiction in terms,” he said.

“I don’t understand,” I replied.

“Illumination is an alignment with the essential currents of all life, and essence aims for the illumination of all things. If your aim is your own private illumination, you are not only *not* in alignment, you are going backwards.” He sighed. “But look: not everyone is going to ‘become Buddha’, not this time around, anyway. There are many different stages and levels. Some simply learn to live a fuller life and die well, and this is good. Others go further. You have not ‘failed’ if you don’t go all the way.”

Just then a middle-aged woman with an air of authority entered, and the monk gave a cry of greeting and stood up. I followed.

“This is my *Shijie*!” he said. “My teacher’s senior student. This is her restaurant.”

The woman greeted me and gestured for us to sit down. She joined us, refilling our teacups as she did so. “*Shidi* has mentioned you.” Her voice was modulated and mellow. “Go on with what you were discussing, don’t let me interrupt.”

“*Shijie*, my friend and I were talking about the motivation and process of awakening. He likes practical advice, things he can use.”

She smiled. She had a pleasantly round face with slightly reddened rounded cheeks, with eyes that were clear and sharp without being shrewd. Her hair was pulled back into a bun, and very slightly greying.

“Some practical advice,” she said. “All

right then, I can tell you this: Get the rest of your life in order. If you find you are 'studying Daoism' to escape from your daily problems, it will be hard to make much progress – much harder than it needs to be. Take a long cold look at your life, deal with whatever you have to in order to free up some time and energy, and start from there. Be efficient. Even better, be elegant. Elegance is effective simplicity, which is often beautiful." She gestured around her at the room.

I had not taken it in before, but the room was indeed beautiful in its simplicity of form. This unstudied elegance strangely imbued the room with an atmosphere reminiscent of a deep forest of stately and graceful pines, and this atmosphere had the effect of clearing the mind and minimising distractions. Practically, this meant that one could grasp and hold rather difficult concepts for longer without losing them. All this flashed through my mind in a instant.

"We have talked about going against inclinations to gather energy to wake up," the fat monk prompted.

"Yes, that's a little understood but very important method of accumulating the energy you will need to make the changes you find necessary." She frowned. "You know, it is strange that the method is so little known. But I think people confuse it with 'trying to be good' or 'trying to be virtuous'. It is not, it is a precise technique, and very practical." She smiled at me, then continued.

"We see examples of it all the time, but people misunderstand what they are seeing. Take the movies. We see the hero – man or woman – resist whatever temptation may be offered to them, and we admire them: how strong they are, how virtuous, to resist that temptation. People think that the hero or heroine is powerful because they can resist temptation. In fact it's the other way around: the power *comes* from resisting the temptation. They are in fact heroes not because they *can* resist, but because they *do* resist, and thus gain power. Anyone can prove it to themselves, by experiment and experience."

"It can go wrong, though," the fat monk said.

"Yes, it certainly can, but then, anything

can be abused." She picked up a piece of pickled vegetable, and chewed on it thoughtfully. "I was talking to my husband about this – he's a doctor," she said aside to me, "and he pointed out that this was exactly the mechanism that anorexics abuse. They fall in love with the power, the power that comes with denial. It's a big secret! Anorexics know it, but do not use it wisely. They abuse it, and it can kill them."

We sat in silence for a few moments. I thought about how difficult it seemed to be to find that line of balance that defined a harmonious life, with tugs and pulls to either side every step of the way. But something else was working away inside me, and finally I burst out with it.

"But how, but why," I struggled. "If you are a senior student of Daoism, why are you running a restaurant? Shouldn't you be in the mountains, or at a monastery, or ...?" I stopped, realising what a stupid question that was. The fat monk and I had been all over that misconception several times.

She glanced at the fat monk, and raised her eyebrows. He shrugged. She smiled at me.

"Our teacher told me that I would progress most quickly if I opened a restaurant, and regarded its day-to-day operations as my focus in meditation." There was not even the barest hint of talking down to me in her tone of voice, although I knew that my question had instantly defined for her my degree of progress. That did not seem to matter. She would, it appeared clear, take me at whatever level she found me.

"That made no sense to me then, as you can imagine," she said. "But over a number of years I came to view the restaurant as a *larger self*, and its transactions, its comings and goings, as *exteriorisations* of similar processes within my littler 'self'. That meant that I could view these processes much more easily, in a detached way, and make similar changes both in the restaurant and in myself."

The fat monk prodded me. "We were talking about this earlier, how practice had to reach the stage where you could respond effectively to the world around you without distraction. That should eventually turn into action informed by the deeper currents of life, action in the world that benefits the



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world by aligning it just a bit more with those currents.”

“In terms of ‘action in the world’ our teacher was a most remarkable man,” the restaurant owner said. She smiled, her eyes briefly faraway. “Say, *Shidi*, I don’t think I have ever told you about when we met the man who wanted to hang himself.” She looked at him enquiringly.

The fat monk smiled broadly and his eyes lit up with interest, “Hang himself? When was this?”

“We had been on a journey down in one of the mountainside forests in Yunnan, just the two of us,” she said, “when suddenly we spied a man in a clearing ahead of us. He looked like a city businessman, and very out of place. He actually looked like he was trying to climb a tree. I had no idea what he was doing, but our teacher turned to me and said urgently, ‘Stay here, and don’t make a sound, no matter what I say!’ He pulled out his tunic randomly – you know how neat he always was – untied the laces on his sandals, mussed up his hair, and rubbed some dirt onto his hands and face.”

The fat monk chuckled, shaking his head at the picture. “Then what happened?” he asked.

“Then he staggered out into the clearing, singing as if to himself ‘Die! Might as well die. Nothing else to do but die.’ By this time I could see the business man had taken off his belt and had tied one end over a branch nine or 10 feet off the ground. He was just about to slip the looped end over his neck and jump off when he saw our teacher coming.”

She stopped to pour tea, and said “Do you think we should order dinner?”

“*Shijie!*” the fat monk cried. “I hate it when you do that! Just get on with the story!”

She laughed lightly, her round cheeks crinkling her eyes. “Just teasing. There I was, watching secretly from the bushes. Our teacher wandered, still singing, up to the businessman, who stared at him as if fascinated.

“‘Is there room on that branch for someone else?’ I could hear our teacher ask. ‘Move over, I’m going to hang myself! I need to die!’

“The businessman seemed to come awake, and said ‘But why, *Shifu*, why do you want

to kill yourself?!”

“Our teacher said ‘I’ve lost it all! Everything! There is no reason to live!’

“‘What have you lost?’

“‘I have lost all 50 dollars! Everything we had earned for the monastery! I got drunk, and lost it. Life has no meaning! Move over, there!’

“At that I could hear the businessman laugh scornfully. ‘Fifty dollars?!’ he snorted. ‘Fifty dollars isn’t worth dying for! I’ve lost five hundred thousand! Look, I have 50 dollars right here in my pocket. You can have it, have it all. It’s no good to me anyway.’

“He threw the money down to our teacher, who took it with both hands and looked at it with a big slightly crazed smile. But then he frowned and said ‘Wait a minute, these bills are all crumpled up! It’s not as good as the money I had, all crisp new bills.’

“He looked angrily at the businessman for a second, then shrugged, shoved the money into his pockets and said ‘Oh, well. It’s only money!’ Then he wandered away from the man, disappearing into the forest on the other side.

“I could see that the businessman was angry. What sort of monk was this?! he was thinking. Didn’t try to stop him hanging himself; didn’t thank him for the money, but instead complained about it; and didn’t even ask him his name before taking off! I could see him shake his head, then sigh, and start to slip the noose over his neck again.”

The girl who had served us at first arrived, carrying a large platter of vegetarian and medicinal dishes which she distributed over the table with a practised hand. Bowls of rice followed. I had not seen the order, but then everything seemed to work on an almost intuitive level in this establishment.

We all had a few mouthfuls of rice, and I realised how hungry I was. But the suspense was greater. “Please, go on with the story,” I begged.

She finished chewing, and took a sip of tea before continuing. It occurred to me that she was a consummate storyteller.

“Before he got very far though, our teacher came back out of the forest and called up to him ‘Wait! I didn’t ask your name!’ The man told him it was Hu something or other.

'I should have thanked you for that money, Mister Hu. So why do you want to kill yourself?' our teacher asked. The man told him his story, how he'd made a hash of his business, lost his money, etc. 'Oh, OK,' our teacher said, heading away into the forest again. 'Just curious.'

"The businessman seemed a bit stunned, but shook himself after a bit and got himself ready to do the deed.

"Just as the businessman was once again lowering the noose, our teacher walked back into the clearing yet again.

"Hey!' he called to up the businessman. 'Are you really going to do it? Or are you just pretending?'

"I am really going to do it!' the businessman said firmly. I could hear the annoyance in his voice, but he stopped and held the noose without putting it around his neck.

"Oh, that's good,' said our teacher. 'Look, if you're really going to do it, would you mind just taking off that nice suit first? It looks really expensive, and you're about my size. The underwear too, while you're at it, it's probably silk or something. You won't need it. Anyway, people usually shit themselves pretty badly when they're hanged and to ruin a nice suit like that would be such a...'

"At that point the businessman had had enough, and he jumped down off the branch, chased our teacher close to our edge of the clearing, forced him to the ground and began to pummel him. I could hear bits and pieces of what he was muttering under his breath in between blows, saying things like '... money not good enough ... want my suit, do you?... want me to die and leave a thing like you still wandering the earth ...' His power seemed to wane after a while, and his muttering gradually changed as well: '... forget it, it was a stupid idea .. what's five hundred thou anyway ... it's only money.' With this last bit he gave a final shove at our teacher who was lying on the ground with his arms over his head, then stalked away, putting his belt back on, and straightening his suit he headed down the mountain."

We chuckled about this story as we finished off the truly delicious dishes, then wiped our mouths and leaned back.

"I hadn't heard that before, *Shijie*, but it is

quite a story."

She nodded. "I have thought of it often, since then, and only much later realised that, in an instant, our teacher had intuited exactly the right approach to take with this guy. It is in fact classic Daoist psychology: Wood overcomes Earth. Anger overcomes Worry. But did you notice the subtleties?"

The fat monk had an uncharacteristic moment of looking confused. I relished it. Not that I had any clue what she meant myself.

She smiled. "Our teacher got the guy off balance, to start, breaking up his customary world-view, shaking his certainty in what was important and what was not. He told me later that the '50 dollars' was a guess; he took a chance that it was all about money. He said: 'This guy didn't look like he would kill himself over love, that one, and for that type there isn't much else besides money. So I just made my pretended situation an analogy for his, only the amount was different. He said himself it wasn't worth it, and once the idea was there it just needed time to grow.' He also gave him a chance to tell his story, and get it off his chest."

"Amazing," the monk said, shaking his head. I could only agree.

"And that's not all," she continued. "Lastly he planted a visual image of the immediate result of the businessman's intended action: naked, soiled, and at the mercy of any passerby. The self-important entrepreneur couldn't stand that. Finally our teacher allowed himself to be beaten, and that took all the power out of any self-destructive tendency that might have been left. Not that our teacher was hurt at all."

"Too tough for that," the fat monk agreed, unconsciously rubbing the back of his calf. I smiled grimly to myself.

The waitress returned and cleared the now-empty dishes from the table, and refilled the teapot.

The Daoist turned to the restaurant owner and said "My friend here is interested in the pharmacy. Is your husband still at work? Maybe we could go over and visit."

"My husband? Huh! Don't talk to me about my husband!"

■ To be continued ...



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