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## SOLITUDE IN ANCIENT TAOISM

“Greatest hermit in crowded street!”<sup>1</sup>  
(Traditional Chinese saying)

In so far as the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* are life-philosophies, they are philosophies of solitude. My aim in the following pages is to explain and defend this claim, clarifying the distinctive kind of solitude that is taught by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu.<sup>2</sup>

Now although a sense of solitude, of a seeking that aims at once far beyond other people yet ever more deeply into oneself, flows out of virtually every page of these works, it is not so easy to articulate the precise nature of this solitude. For one thing,

<sup>1</sup> I owe this apothegm to Prof. Zhong Zhaopeng of the Religion Institute, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. I am grateful to him for helpful guidance on some of the points of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> I will follow the conventional simplifying pretence that our two works had each one author with these names. The scholarly problems about the true authorship of the texts are well known by all. Again for simplifying purposes, I will limit my quotations from the *Chuang Tzu* to the first seven chapters (the *Nei peng*), those believed most likely to have been written by the originator of the work (or by his immediate disciples).

when we think of solitude we think of a hermitic existence apart from other people; yet there are relatively few references to hermits to be found in either book.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, the *Tao Te Ching* says

“A Sound man’s heart is not shut within itself  
But is open to other people’s hearts:” (Ch. 49)<sup>4</sup>

and the parables of the *Chuang Tzu* are full of teachers arguing with disciples, friends mourning at funerals, hopeful advisors discussing strategy, etc. Both Chuang Tzu and the (perhaps fictional) sage Lieh Tzu had wives! Can there be a solitude among people?

There can, but it requires some reflective analysis to see just how. Let us begin by focusing on a particular experience of solitude, familiar to Western readers, one related by Henry David Thoreau, that free and easy wanderer who built himself a small cabin by Walden Pond in 1845 and settled there “to live deliberately” for two years:

This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty

<sup>3</sup> At least in the *Nei peng*. But compare Wolfgang Bauer: “Taoist philosophy in general—and that contained in *Chuang Tzu* in particular—may be called a philosophy of eremitism; almost every paragraph of the book is interpretable along these lines”. (“The hidden hero: creation and disintegration of the ideal of eremitism”, p. 164 in *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*, published by the University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1985). However Bauer operates with an unconventionally broad definition of “eremitism” (see p. 161, *op. cit.*), and his illustrations come from the later chapters of *Chuang Tzu*. Nevertheless his is a learned and insightful study from which I have profited greatly.

<sup>4</sup> Witter Bynner (trans.): *The Way of Life according to Lao Tzu* (New York, Perigee Books, 1972), Chapter 49. All quotations will be from this translation. For ease of comparison with other versions, I will cite the chapter number in the text. Translations of the *Tao Te Ching* are notoriously different, and any choice is sure to offend some scholars. Bynner’s is controversial, using poetic licence liberally in an attempt to capture the poetic spirit of the original. On its behalf, I may note that the renowned sinologist Herlee Creel found, after considering 29 translations of the opening line of the *Tao Te Ching*, that he was most in agreement with Bynner’s version (see H. Creel, “On The Opening Words of the Lao Tzu”, *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1983, page 315).

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in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature's watchmen—links which connect the days of animated life.<sup>5</sup>

Three features which we intuitively associate with solitude are evident in this case.

1. **Physical Isolation.** Thoreau is alone by the pond in the simple physical sense: there are no human bodies within sensing distance of his body. He is away from other people.
2. **Experiential Disengagement From Other People.** Experientially, he is not engaged with other humans. He feels alone, is not conscious of anyone near him, is not thinking of anyone.
3. **Reflectiveness.** Although during most of the passage, he seems perceptually immersed in the sights and sounds of the evening, the last line signals a reflective distancing from the directly perceptually given: it yields two metaphorical construals of the given, Nature's Watchmen and the vision of them as links in a great living chain.

When all three of these features characterize an extended experience, an enduring state, a "time", we feel most comfortable calling it solitude. But are they equally necessary, equally central to our conception of solitude? I think that they are not. For, to take the question of physical isolation, suppose that there were in fact other people strolling around Walden Pond, but that

<sup>5</sup> H. Thoreau, *Walden* (Cambridge, Mass., The Riverside Press, 1957) p. 94.

Thoreau was so lost in thought that he was oblivious to them; it would still be quite proper to call his state a solitude. Similarly, reflectiveness, though a common activity of solitude, does not seem to be essential; for if Thoreau had remained immersed in the perceptual experiences of the wind and the water and the alders, his thoughts never rising to the reflective plane, it would be quite intelligible for him to describe his experiences—later—as a time of solitude.

It is experiential disengagement from other people, then, that is definitive of solitude. Here I do not mean that one necessarily experiences oneself *as* disengaged from other—that would involve a reflective awareness of self and other which is not essential. Rather, I simply mean a state of consciousness in which one is not experientially engaged with others. This can be made clearer by considering four different modalities of experience, and the ways in which they would characterize Thoreau’s solitude in the purest possible case:

1. **Perception.** He is not, in his solitude, seeing or hearing or smelling, etc., any other people.
2. **Cognition.** He is not thinking of anyone, imagining responses to their words, planning future encounters with them.
3. **Emotion.** He is not longing for another, feeling fear of her, lovingly dreaming of her.
4. **Action.** He is not walking towards someone, making a path for someone, taking someone’s hand.

Two cautions are necessary here. First, the fourfold disengagement I have just described suggests a purity that is seldom attained, and does not seem to be entailed in the concept of solitude; that is to say, we are willing to call an experience solitude even though it may involve a few elements of engagement. Indeed quite often in solitude one will reflect in a detached way upon the other people in one’s life, perhaps feeling some weak emotions in the process. But these must not become too powerful or too consuming if we are to speak unqualifiedly of a solitude; rather we would say that the solitude was *broken*, or that we were not *really* alone at all. And there is a second kind of impurity that our ordinary concept of solitude seems to tolerate. Solitude is an extended period of experience, a “time”, and such a period can incorporate brief or partial engagements without losing its title.

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Having completed our brief analysis of the nature of solitude, it is time to consider the extent to which it is taught and celebrated in the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu*. Given the differences among the nine English translations I have studied, given the disagreements between scholars (whether Western or Chinese) as to the most probable meanings of the mystical pronouncements of Lao Tzu and the provocative parables of Chuang Tzu, I am diffident about undertaking to say what these books say! Yet among all the varying interpretations, one thing stands clear at least to my eyes: the central importance of solitude.

To begin with the *Tao Te Ching*, unclear as it is (must be!) precisely what Tao is, it is clear that the central teaching of the book is that we should attempt to bring our whole nature into harmonious union with Tao.

Though there can be no name for it [Tao]  
I have called it "the way of life".  
Perhaps I should have called it "the fullness of life",  
Since fullness implies widening into space,  
Implies still further widening,  
Implies widening until the circle is whole.  
In this sense  
The way of life is fulfilled,  
Heaven is fulfilled,  
Earth fulfilled  
And a fit man also is fulfilled. (Ch. 25)

Merging with Tao, coming to live in harmony with it, involves widening ourselves into fullness; this is accomplished by opening ourselves to all things in an accepting non-interfering way:

Be utterly humble,  
And you shall hold to the foundation of peace.  
Be at one with all these living things which,  
Having arisen and flourished,  
Return to the quiet whence they came,  
Like a healthy growth of vegetation  
Falling back upon the root.  
Acceptance of this return to the root has been called "quietism". (Ch. 16)

This is essentially a solitary process for Lao Tzu, for several different reasons. First there is the repudiation of words—the naming, assertive, argumentative discourses we share with other people. From the famous opening pronouncement

“Existence is beyond the power of words  
To define:  
Terms may be used,  
But are none of them absolute” (Ch.1) <sup>6</sup>

to the warning

“Those who know do not tell,  
Those who tell do not know” (Ch.56)

to the final chapter’s admonition

“Since those who argue prove nothing,  
A sensible man does not argue” (Ch.81)

all naming and articulate verbal knowledge is rejected; for language presupposes *distinctions*, distinctions which artificially break the organic wholeness of Tao.

“... End the nuisance of saying yes to this and perhaps to that,  
distinctions with how little difference!” (Ch.20)

Thus language can only becloud Tao; and since language is the medium of our interactions with other people, it is futile to seek Tao through them.

Secondly, Lao Tzu finds humankind alone, among all of the

<sup>6</sup> Professor Tang Yi-jie of Beijing University has pointed out to me the sense of solitude issuing from these very opening lines: not only Existence in general, but my own personal inner reality is “beyond the power of words to define”. Prof. Tang reads a similar expression of the inescapability of solitude in the traditional story that Lao Tan, for many years a librarian, finally left the Library and indeed the whole middle kingdom: books—words—are incapable of communicating both Tao and inner self, so Lao Tan was in no deeper solitude wandering in the wilderness than he was in the court library.

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parts of creation, out of tune with Tao. Filled with individuating desires and emotions, foolishly striving against the true ways of existence, unquiet in body and spirit—these ordinary human creatures are certainly not gateways for the sage seeking the Tao. Far better to let them be and seek Tao on your own—better for you and actually better for them too:

“If I keep from meddling with people, they take care of themselves,  
If I keep from commanding people, they behave themselves,  
If I keep from preaching at people, they improve themselves,  
If I keep from imposing on people, they become themselves”. (Ch.57)

Thirdly, people—myself as well as others—occupy no special place in Lao Tzu’s universe. What arrogance and chauvinism he would have found in the humanistic idea that “the proper study of man is man”. Other people are but a tiny part of the vast ever-changing universe which the Tao enforms; and really,

“Who will prefer the jingle of jade pendants if he once has heard stone growing in a cliff!” (Ch.39)

For all these reasons, “the sensible man prefers the inner to the outer eye” (Ch.12):

“Knowledge studies others,  
Wisdom is self-known”. (Ch.33)

“There is **no need** to run outside  
For better **seeing**,  
Nor to peer from a window. Rather abide  
At the center of your being;  
For the more you leave it, the less you learn”. (Ch.47)

How is this knowledge of Tao through the self possible? Because Tao is already prefigured within: “The wholeness of life has, from of old, been made manifest in the part” (Ch.39).

Man

“Is in himself an image of the world  
And, being an image of the world,

Is continuously, endlessly  
The dwelling of creation'. (Ch.28)

Each of us is a microcosm of the macrocosmic Universe, a cell whose DNA prefigures the whole body. What need have we, then, to consult with other cells?

The passages just cited convey the idea of the *fullness* with Tao of the individual self, but numerous other passages insist that this fullness is in fact acquired by emptying oneself, by becoming “the valley of the world” (Ch.28), letting all the ten thousand things flow into and through and out of us so that we are ourselves as ever-full and ever-emptying as Tao itself (Ch.5). In this state, the active striving assertion of a determinate self which is part of normal interactions with other humans is precluded, since there is no longer a distinct self to engage with the other. Again, normal human intercourse is not the way to Tao.

So other people, in the *Tao Te Ching*, are seen at the worst as obstacles and babbling diversions from the Tao, at best as one sort of curious objects among countless others flowing past us. Should one live apart from them, then? Yes, in the sense of solitary disengagement, no in the sense of hermitic isolation. Other people are a part—though only a part—of the great whole of creation, and so you should let them flow through you without hindrance as all the other parts flow through; but you should practice *wu wei*, “inaction”, towards them as towards everything else. *Wu wei* is a notoriously difficult idea in Taoism, but one interpretation of the teaching can be made in terms of the disengagement which I have called the essence of solitude. If we eliminate from our experience of the other all striving to affect him and engage with him (whether to help or to harm), if we eliminate all the passions and desires which imply such striving and engagement, if we perceive and think of others only in a detached non-desiring non-striving way, we have achieved what I understand as *wu wei*. But this could be Thoreau by Walden Pond completely detached from the people flowing past him: it is a solitude.

One might object that there are passages in the Lao Tzu which certainly seem to teach engagement with others. In the realm of feelings for example:



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“A sound man’s heart is not shut within itself  
But is open to other people’s hearts:

.....  
.....

I feel the heartbeats of others above my own  
If I am enough of a father,  
Enough of a son.” (Ch.49)

But in fact it is possible to render these passages consistent with the foregoing interpretation. A sound man’s heart is open to others because it seeks to open itself to every particle and aspect of reality; it is not self-contained, selfish, self-centered in the normal senses of those terms. But merely open to their hearts: it is a valley they may flow through just as all existence may flow through. There is no suggestion of active involvement. Similarly, it is possible to read the last three lines of the chapter not as a plea for altruism, not as encouragement to do good deeds without thought for your own well-being, but as indicating the openness to all other beings in the world which signals abandonment of the narrow self, self-consciousness and self-interestedness on the way towards forgetfulness of self in union with the Tao.

Turning now to the *Chuang Tzu*, in spite of numerous differences of both style and substance<sup>3</sup> from the *Tao Te Ching*, one finds basically the same conception of Tao and the same directions for attaining to it. Tao is not to be gotten from other people. This is partly owing to their over-excited, strife-and-striving way of living, but more deeply owing to the incommunicability of the Tao through “discriminating” language:

“The Great Way is not named; the Great Discriminations are not spoken; ...If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way” (Ch.2)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Prof. Zhou Gui-dian of Beijing Normal College pointed out to me the far greater concern on Lao Tzu’s part with teaching rulers about Tao so that it may guide their governance—a concern with which Chuang Tzu appears to have little patience. Lao Tzu’s *wu wei* has an aim, the proper governance of self and mind which is intrinsically valuable. In fact, Chuang Tzu is much more suspicious of the idea of usefulness in general than Lao Tzu: many parables teach that apparent usefulness is not useful and that apparent uselessness is useful!

<sup>8</sup> Burton Watson (trans.): *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1968), Chapter 2. All references will be to Watson’s translation, with the chapter numbers indicated in the text.

In story after story, with an almost passionate determination, Chuang Tzu teaches that the discriminations we actually share with other people are illusory or arbitrary. Again and again he exhorts us to forget knowledge, rules, rites: all of these are attempts to separate things which are in themselves hopelessly jumbled and intertwined, and all of them involve the illegitimate move of setting up one of the innumerable perspectives on the world as the only true one. The cicada and the little dove laugh at the very idea that great P'eng can fly ninety thousand li to the south, and the little quail adds "I never get more than ten or twelve yards... and that's the best kind of flying anyway! Where does he think He's going?" (Ch.1) But they merely make us laugh at the relativism of their judgements, and lead us to wonder if all distinguishing judgements may not be similarly arbitrary.

Abandoning the illusions of order, knowledge and interpersonal objectivity, the sage steers by "the torch of chaos and doubt" on his solitary voyage: he

"leans on the sun and moon, tucks the universe under his arm, merges himself with things, leaves the confusion and muddle as it is, and looks on slaves as exalted. Ordinary men strain and struggle; the sage is stupid and blockish. He takes part in the ten thousand ages and achieves simplicity in oneness. For him, all the ten thousand things are what they are, and thus they enfold each other." (Ch.2)

Yen Hui wins Confucius' approval by forgetting benevolence and righteousness, more encouragement when he has forgotten rites and music, but startled admiration when he can sit down and "forget everything":

"I smash up my limbs and body, drive out perception and intellect, cast off form, do away with understanding, and make myself identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by sitting down and forgetting everything." (Ch.6)

Yet however necessary disengaged solitude may be for Free and Easy Wandering in the Tao, there is a profound awareness in the *Chuang Tzu* that the human condition situates us inextricably In The World Of Men. You feel this first in the sense of human presence that pervades the book; whereas the poetically mysteri-

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ous teachings of the *Tao Te Ching* seem sometimes like disembodied words heard in rustling leaves, in river waters rushing over boulders, in the silence of mist rising, the *Chuang Tzu's* truths about the Tao are almost always spoken by one easily imaginable person to another.

Our original condition of social embeddedness, the initial position from which we struggle towards Tao, is of course partly a matter of bio-social origins, but more importantly is owing to what a Christian might have called our “fallen” nature:

The true Man breathes with his heels; the mass of men breathe with their throats... Deep in their passions and desires, they are shallow in the workings of Heaven.”

Desire and passion which tie us to other people are impediments to Tao: they are conditions to be transcended by the sage. But they *are* our condition, and we never escape them permanently:

“What use does [the sage] have for men? He has the form of a man but not the feelings of a man. Since he has the form of a man, he bands together with other men. Since he doesn't have the feelings of a man, right and wrong cannot get at him. Puny and small, he sticks with the rest of men. Massive and great, he perfects his Heaven alone”. (Ch.5)

But no one is always massive and great: even Chuang Tzu mourned at his wife's funeral.

There is a sad realization, too, of our vulnerability and need for each other, complemented by our instinct to care for each other:<sup>9</sup>

“When the springs dry up and the fish are left stranded on the ground, they spew each other with moisture and wet each other down with spit—but it would be much better if they could forget each other in the rivers and lakes.” (Ch.6)

It would be much better if—but it isn't: we are linked with humanity.

<sup>9</sup> Compare *Tao Te Ching*, chapters 67 and 68.

A crucial problem for ancient Taoism thus emerges: how, inextricably situated in the world of men, can one find the disengaged solitude necessary for attaining Tao? What is the life of transcendence actually like for a social being? To my mind it is a great virtue of our texts that while a variety of solutions to this problem are recorded, no single one is given clear endorsement over all the others. Recall, from the *Chuang Tzu*,<sup>10</sup> these four different exemplars:

T'ien Ken was wandering on the sunny side of Yin Mountain. When he reached the banks of the Liao River, he happened to meet a Nameless Man. He questioned the man, saying, "Please may I ask how to rule the world?"

The Nameless Man said: "Get away from me, you peasant! What kind of a dreary question is that! I'm just about to set off with the Creator. And if I get bored with that, then I'll ride on the Light-and-Lissome Bird out beyond the six directions, wandering in the village of Not-Even-Everything and living in the Broad and Borderless field. What business do you have coming with this talk of governing the world and disturbing my mind?" (Ch.7)<sup>11</sup>

After this, Lieh Tzu concluded that he had never really begun to learn anything. He went home and for three years did not go out. He replaced his wife at the stove, fed the pigs as though he were feeding people, and showed no preferences in the things he did. He got rid of the carving and polishing and returned to plainness, letting his body stand alone like a clod. In the midst of entanglement he remained sealed, and in this oneness he ended his life. (Ch.7)<sup>12</sup>

Tzu-ch'i of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing — vacant and far away, as though he'd lost his com-

<sup>10</sup> The general bent of the *Tao Te Ching* is in the direction of Master Li's solution (see especially chapters 8, 13, 54 and 67). However an advocate of any of the other three solutions could cite passages which support those solutions, at least implicitly. For example, "There is no need to run outside for better seeing... rather abide at the center of your being" (Ch.47) could be interpreted as underwriting the ways of Nameless Man, Lieh Tzu or T'ien Ken!

<sup>11</sup> Compare the story of Shan Ch'uan in chapter 28.

<sup>12</sup> Compare the story of "the farmer of Stone Door" in chapter 28.

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panion. Yen Ch'eng Tzu-yu, who was standing by his side in attendance, said, "What is this? Can you really make the body like a withered tree and the mind like dead ashes? The man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before!"

Tzu-ch'i said, "You do well to ask the question, Yen. Now I have lost myself. Do you understand that? You hear the piping of men, but you haven't heard the piping of earth. Or if you've heard the piping of earth, you haven't heard the piping of Heaven!" (Ch.2)

Master Ssu, Master Yu, Master Li and Master Lai were all four talking together. "Who can look upon nonbeing as his head, on life as his back, and on death as his rump?" they said. "Who knows that life and death, existence and annihilation, are all a single body? I will be his friend!"

The four men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts and so the four of them became friends.

Suddenly Master Lai grew ill. Gasping and wheezing, he lay at the point of death. His wife and children gathered round in a circle and began to cry. Master Li, who had come to ask how he was, said, "Shoo! Get back! Don't disturb the process of change!" (Ch.6)

Nameless Man's strategy is the withdrawal of the hermit, true; but notice firstly that he is not entirely successful—intruders like T'ien Ken keep turning up—and secondly that his strategy is only one of the variety elaborated. Lieh Tzu remains with his family, but seems to have achieved a kind of total and permanent disengagement from them. Tzu-Chi contacts the Tao through the total disengagement of trance-meditation, but is quite willing to discuss the resulting insights with a student. Master Li, finding a man who agrees with him about the Tao of human life and death, actually becomes his friend; he inquires after the friend's health and stays to talk in a kindly way just as any other kind friend might do—though with a detachment that is certainly distinctive of Taoism.

If I am right that the central life-project for Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu is to achieve the Free And Easy Wandering of the spirit in Tao while situated in the world of men, the relevance of their works as life-philosophies for the late twentieth century increases dramatically over that usually accorded them. When the texts are read solely as guides to an isolated personal transcendence, no matter how moving and how profound the teachings seem, there is

an aura of unreality about them. For we are not isolated spirits: the hermitic existence has never been a popular option, but today it is virtually impossible to achieve—most impossible in China, the birthplace of Taoism! Inescapably situated in social and intimate nexes, yet touched by some dim sense of the nourishing and fulfilling power of spiritual transcendence—this is our plight. The human project, accordingly, is not a project of denial of either human relationship or inner transcendence, but a continuing exploration of the possibilities for coordination between them, the crafting of a solitude among people. The possibilities are many, the finest search lifelong. So it is for us, so it was for Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu; and what has been so for twenty-three centuries will perhaps not change.

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