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**NONDUALITY**

**A STUDY IN  
COMPARATIVE  
PHILOSOPHY**

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## CHAPTER 3

### NONDUAL ACTION

*... at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance; and there is only the dance.*

—T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

If we are to find a parallel to nondual perception in nondual action, then it must be action in which there is also no bifurcation between subject and object. Such nondual action requires that there be no differentiation between agent and act; in other words, no awareness of an agent as distinct from its actions. This chapter explores what that might mean. The first section argues that the Taoist paradox of *wei-wu-wei* (the action of nonaction) is a description of such nondual action. It is highly significant that the same paradox is found in the other two nondualist traditions, clearly enunciated in the *Bhagavad-gītā* and more fully developed in the Buddhist account of the Bodhisattva's path. Comparing these, we discover that the difference between dualistic and nondualistic action involves intention. The mental process of intending a result *from* an action devalues that act into a means and functions as a superimposition that bifurcates the nondual "psychic body" into a mind inhabiting a body, "a ghost in a machine." The second section supports this by demonstrating that the bifurcating role of intentionality is one of the crucial claims in the first chapter of the *Tao Tê Ching*; that chapter is explicated in detail. The third section makes comparisons with some recent analytic work in Western philosophy of mind and suggests that, contrary to first

appearances, its conclusions are consistent with and even support the claim that action can be nondual. The last section evaluates two objections that might be raised against this concept of nondual action.

#### WEI-WU-WEI

Nondual action has just been defined as action in which there is no awareness by an agent, the subject that is usually believed to *do* the action, of being distinct from an objective action that is *done*. Chapter 2 gave us occasion to notice that nondual experience tends to be described in one of two ways: either the subject incorporates the object, or vice versa. In the present case the first alternative amounts to denying that any action is performed. It can hardly be a coincidence that we find precisely this claim in the *wei-wu-wei* of Taoism. *Wei-wu-wei* is the central paradox of Taoism and as a concept is second in importance only to the Tao itself, which incorporates it: Lao Tzu describes the activity of someone who has realized the Tao as *wu-wei*.

Thus, the wise man deals with things through *wu-wei* and teaches through no-words.

The ten thousand things flourish without interruption.

They grow by themselves, and no one possesses them. (Chap. 2)

The Tao is constant and *wu-wei*, yet nothing remains undone.

If rulers abide with it, all things reform themselves. (Chap. 37)

The highest virtue [*tê*] is *wu-wei* and is purposeless [*wei*]. (Chap. 38)

To learn, one accumulates day by day.

To study Tao, one reduces day by day.

Less and less is done

Until *wu-wei* is achieved.

When *wu-wei* is done, nothing is left undone. (Chap. 48)<sup>1</sup>

That other Taoist paradoxes are susceptible to parallel expression—"the morality of no morality," "the knowledge of no knowledge," and so on—suggests that they derive from *wu-wei*, perhaps as more specific manifestations of its general pattern. As a paradox, *wei-wu-wei* seems to be as difficult to understand as the ineffable Tao itself. A number of interpretations have been offered, but they are unsatisfactory without the more radical understanding of *wu-wei* as nondual action. This is not to claim that nondual action is the only correct

meaning, for it may be a mistake to assume that any one particular interpretation must be *the* meaning of wu-wei. Here we might have a case of what Wittgenstein called "family resemblances"; rather than any one characteristic being common to all instances, sometimes there is a cluster of overlapping characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

The simplest interpretation of wei-wu-wei is that it means doing nothing, or, more practically, as little as possible. This may be understood either politically or personally. The political interpretation sees wu-wei as "the main precept behind the *Lao Tzu's* conception of government as the minimum amount of external interference projected onto the individual from those in power combined with an environment most conducive to the individual's quest for personal fulfilment."<sup>3</sup> If one leaves the people alone and lets them live their own lives, social problems will resolve themselves—perhaps because political interference is more often the cause of such problems than their solution, as was certainly the case during the Warring States period when Lao Tzu is believed to have lived. Such an explanation of wu-wei is often part of a more general political interpretation of Taoism, which however fits the *Tao Tê Ching* better than the *Chuang Tzu*.<sup>4</sup> This view of wu-wei is also consistent with the sole recorded reference to wu-wei by Confucius:

The Master said, "If anyone could be said to have effected proper order while remaining inactive [wu-wei], it was Shun. What was there for him to do? He simply made himself respectful and took up his position facing due south."<sup>5</sup>

By regulating his own conduct so that it reflects the moral order, the Confucian ruler sets a positive example and thus is able to influence his subordinates without coercing them. But this does not necessarily imply wu-wei toward the people. The emphasis in Confucianism is that the king reigns but does not rule. In the ideal administration, the ruler does not personally attend to matters of government but depends upon the charismatic influence of his virtue (*tê*); this does not mean that the king's ministers do not need to act. In Taoism the emphasis shifts from this need for a personal example to an anarchism that allows all social and political organization to evolve according to the Tao. Unfortunately, both approaches are faced with the

same problem. Despite the hopes of utopian anarchists and economic conservatives, neither of these philosophies of government is very practicable today. Perhaps such government might work in an unthreatened traditional society, but I do not see how it could have been successful in the cutthroat Warring States period, nor do I see a place for it in our contemporary interdependent world, given its complexity and rapid transformation.

The personal interpretation of wei-wu-wei as literally "doing nothing" does not fare much better, and in fact this approach does not seem to have been very common. In his commentary on the *Chuang Tzu*, Kuo Hsiang criticized this view: "Hearing the theory of wu-wei, some people think that lying down is better than walking. These people are far wrong in understanding the ideas of Chuang Tzu."<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Fung Yu-lan, after quoting this, went on to add: "despite this criticism, it would seem that in their understanding of Chuang Tzu such people were not far wrong."<sup>7</sup> This reveals more about Fung than Chuang, but I think that Fung is not completely wrong. In fact, such a reading is consistent with the nondual interpretation offered later, since complete "not acting" requires eliminating the sense of self, which is inclined to interfere. Noninterference is not really possible unless one has dissipated the fog of expectations and desires that keeps us from experiencing the world as it is in itself (Tao), and the judgement that "something must be done" is usually part of that fog. Josh Billings said that he was old and had had lots of troubles—most of which never happened. Many, perhaps most of our problems originate in our own minds, in an anxiety projected outward into the environment.

What might be seen as a corollary of "doing nothing" is knowing when to stop. Chapter 77 of the *Tao Tê Ching* compares the course of nature to a bow: "That which is at the top is pulled down; that which is at the bottom is brought up. That which is overfull is reduced; that which is deficient is supplemented." Thus the man who abides in the Tao never wants to reach an extreme, and because he knows the right time to stop he is free from danger (chaps. 15 and 44). Nature, here including man, is a succession of alternations: when one extreme is reached a reversal occurs (chap. 40), as we see in such natural phenomena as day/night and summer/winter—an insight later elaborated into the complexities of the Yin-Yang school.

A more common interpretation of wei-wu-wei sees it as action that does not force but *yields*. This might be called "the action of passivity." Under the weight of a heavy snowfall, pine branches break off, but by bending, the willow can drop its burden and spring up again. Chuang Tzu gives the example of an intoxicated man who is not killed when he falls out of his carriage because he does not resist the fall. This would seem to be an argument for alcoholism, but "if such integrity of the spirit can be got from wine, how much greater must be the integrity that is got from Heaven."<sup>8</sup> So wu-wei is a recommendation to be soft and yielding, like water—Lao Tzu's favorite metaphor. Often the character I translated as "yielding," *joh*, is translated as "weakness,"<sup>9</sup> but "weakness" has unavoidably negative connotations that do not seem right in this context—especially since *joh* is usually (although not always; see chaps. 8 and 66) a means to conquer in the end. It is because water is the softest and most yielding thing that it is able to overcome the hard and strong.

A corollary to this is that a very slight action may be enough to have extraordinary results, if done at the right time. This is "contemplating the difficult with the easy, working on the great with the small" (chap. 63). In particular, one should deal with potentially big problems before they become big (chap. 64). The growth of the sapling is easy to affect, but not that of a mature tree. Both of these points seem undeniable, if limited, truisms. The challenge is knowing when and how to apply them.

Probably the most common interpretation of wei-wu-wei is action that is *natural*. Herlee G. Creel quotes several examples:

The natural is sufficient. If one strives, he fails. (Wang Pi)

The Taoist saint chooses this attitude in the conviction that only by so doing the "natural" development of things will favour him.

(Duyvendak)

According to the theory of "having-no-activity," a man should restrict his activities to what is necessary and what is natural. "Necessary" means necessary to the achievement of a certain purpose, and never over-doing. "Natural" means following one's *Te* with no arbitrary effort. (Fung Yu-lan)<sup>10</sup>

The problem with such explanations is that they do not explain very

much. As Creel asks, how can we distinguish natural from unnatural action? The term is so pliable that it ends up meaning whatever one wants it to mean, as those who check the ingredients in "natural food" products know. Fung's use of *arbitrary* just pushes the question one step back, for how shall we distinguish arbitrary from not arbitrary? Isn't the passing of such dualistic judgement condemned in Taoist literature? Wang Pi equates the natural with not striving, and others with not making willful effort,<sup>11</sup> but this too begs the question unless some criterion is offered for distinguishing willful from nonwillful action; otherwise we are left, like Fung, lying down. One suggested criterion is spontaneity,<sup>12</sup> but at best that can be only a necessary and not a sufficient condition. The anger I spontaneously feel when someone steps on my toe, or runs off with my wife, is not necessarily a case of wu-wei.

None of the above is a refutation of the view that wei-wu-wei is natural, nonwillful action and so on. The problem is rather that such descriptions do not in themselves go far enough. But allied with the proper criterion they may be valuable. In fact, the concept of nondual action can be seen as such a criterion. The root irruption and disturbance of the natural order of things is man's self-consciousness, and the return to Tao is conversely a realization of the ground of one's being, including one's own consciousness. If consciousness of self is the ultimate source of unnatural action, then natural action must be that in which there is no such self-consciousness—in which there is no awareness of the agent as being distinct from "his" act.

The main problem with understanding wei-wu-wei is that it is a genuine paradox: the union of two contradictory concepts, nonaction ("nothing is done...") and action ("...and nothing remains undone"). The resolution of this paradox must somehow combine both, but how this can be anything other than a contradiction in terms is difficult to understand. Some scholars have concluded that it is an unresolvable contradiction. Creel, for example, decided that this greatest Taoist paradox was probably unintentional, due to the juxtaposition of two different aspects in early Taoism: an original "contemplative aspect" and a subsequent "purposive aspect." The first denotes "an attitude of genuine non-action, motivated by a lack of desire to participate in the struggle of human affairs," while the



second is "a technique by means of which one who practices may gain enhanced control over human affairs." The former is merely passive (hence "nonaction"), the latter is an attempt to act in and reform the world ("action"), and as Creel emphasizes, these are not only different but "logically and essentially they are incompatible." Creel admits that this interpretation is not to be found within the Taoist texts themselves, and he further recognizes that this puts him in the awkward position of claiming that the more contemplative *Chuang Tzu* is earlier than the compilation of the more purposive *Lao Tzu*. What is worse, he must acknowledge that "we find 'contemplative' Taoism and 'purposive' Taoism lying cheek by jowl, and sometimes scrambled in a grand mixture, in the *Lao Tzu* and the *Chuang Tzu*," which he tries to justify by saying that men are seldom wholly governed by logic.<sup>13</sup> I think the problem is rather that, because Creel here is wholly governed by logic, he cannot understand that the paradox is resolved by a particular experience—the realization of Tao—which cannot be grasped so logically. As with the Vedāntic realization of Brahman and the Buddhist attainment of nirvana, this experience is nondual in the sense that there is no differentiation between subject and object, between self and world. The implication of this nonduality for action is that there is no longer any bifurcation between an agent and the objective action that is done. As usually understood, "action" requires an active agent; "nonaction" implies a passive subject that does nothing and/or yields. The "action of nonaction" occurs when there is no "I" to be either active or passive, an experience that can be expressed only paradoxically: "nothing is done, yet nothing remains undone." The simpler interpretations of wu-wei as noninterference and yielding view not-acting as a kind of action; nondual action reverses this and sees nonaction—that which does not change—"in" the action.

That wei-wu-wei means nondual action is suggested in the *Chuang Tzu*, although less by its references to wu-wei than by its description of another, very similar, paradox. In contrast to the twelve instances of wu-wei in the *Tao Tê Ching*, there are some fifty-six occurrences in the *Chuang Tzu*, but only three of these occur in the seven "inner chapters." It is significant that two of these clearly describe more than noninterference or yielding:

Now you have a large tree and are anxious about its uselessness. Why do you not plant it in the domain of non-existence, in a wide and barren wild? By its side you may wander in nonaction [wu-wei], under it you may sleep in happiness.

Tao has reality and evidence, but no action [wu-wei] or form.

Unconsciously, they stroll beyond the dirty world and wander in the realm of nonaction [wu-wei].

Even more important is the paradox we find in chapter 6, where Nu Chü teaches the Tao to Pu Liang I:

Having disregarded his own existence, he [Pu Liang I] was enlightened . . . gained vision of the One . . . was able to enter the realm where life and death are no more. Then, to him, the destruction of life did not mean death, nor the prolongation of life an addition to the duration of his existence. He would follow anything; he would receive anything. To him, everything was in destruction, everything was in construction. This is called tranquillity-in-disturbance. Tranquillity in disturbance means perfection.<sup>14</sup>

Here "tranquillity-in-disturbance" (or "Peace-in-Strife")<sup>15</sup> cannot mean a lack of activity. Rather, there is an unchanging sense of peace in the midst of continual destruction and construction—in that ceaseless transformation which includes Pu Liang I's own activity. This is possible only because Pu Liang I first "disregarded his own existence," thus overcoming the duality between self and nonself and "gaining vision of the One."

It can hardly be a coincidence that we find precisely the same paradox in the other traditions which maintain the nonduality of subject and object. Not surprisingly, it is most common in Chinese Buddhism, where Taoist influence is to be expected. But that wei-wu-wei is a paradoxical synthesis of nonaction *in* action is more clearly recognized in Buddhism. Seng Chao maintained in the *Chao Lun* that action and nonaction are not exclusive: things in action are at the same time always in nonaction; things in nonaction are always in action.<sup>16</sup> This claim is expounded in the first chapter, "On the Immutability of Things," but the point is so important to him that he repeats it in chapter 4, "Nirvāṇa is Nameless": "Through nonaction, movement is always quiescent. Through action, everything is acted upon, means that quiescence is always in motion."<sup>17</sup> One of the earliest Ch'an texts,

the *Hsin Hsin Ming* of the third patriarch, Seng-ts'an, states twice that the awakened mind transcends the duality of rest and nonrest:

When rest and no rest cease to be,  
Then even oneness disappears.  
From small mind comes rest and unrest  
But mind awakened transcends both.<sup>18</sup>

Niu-t'ou Fa-yung, an important disciple of the fourth Ch'an patriarch, expressed the same paradox using the Ch'an concept of "no mind" (*wu-hsin*), in answer to the question whether the mind should be brought to quiescence:

The moment when the mind is in action is the moment at which no-mind acts. To talk about names and manifestations is useless, but a direct approach easily reaches it. No-mind is that which is in action; it is that constant action which does not act.<sup>19</sup>

Although this understanding may be derived from Taoism, the Buddhist conception of no-mind shows more clearly that such action involves the denial of a subjective agent.

There are other instances of the paradox that definitely do not derive from Taoism. Seng-ts'an's poem echoes chapter 2 of Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā*, which concludes that both motion and rest are incomprehensible and unreal (*śūnya*). Given the seminal role of this text, which became the most important work of Mahāyāna philosophy, it is possible that all subsequent Buddhist references are traceable to it. (Full discussion of this claim must be reserved for chapter 6, where it forms part of a larger examination of causality.) Yet Nāgārjuna did not write in isolation. His works are usually understood to be a more systematic exposition and defense of claims found in the *Prajñāpāramitā*, and we find the same paradox there. Just as all dharmas are said to be unproduced and unborn, so suchness (*tathatā*) does not become, nor does it cease to become. A Bodhisattva neither comes nor goes, for his coursing is a noncoursing. According to both the *Daśabhūmika Sūtra* and Candrakīrti's *Madhyamakāvatara*, beginning with the eighth of the ten *bhūmis* (the stages of a Bodhisattva's career), which is called *acalā* (the immovable), the Bodhisattva works without making any effort, just like the moon, the sun, a wishing jewel, or the four primary elements. A characteristic of the tenth stage

is that such a "celestial Bodhisattva" is both active and inactive: although results are produced, he does nothing.<sup>20</sup>

In Tibetan Buddhism, the "Yoga of the Mahāmudrā" (already quoted in chapter 1) describes "the final state of quiescence" as follows:

Although while thus quiescent there is cognition of the [mental] motion [of thoughts arising and vanishing], nevertheless, the mind having attained its own condition of rest or calmness and being indifferent to the motion, the state is called "The state wherein falleth the partition separating motion from rest."

Thereby one recognizeth one-pointedness of mind.

This state is followed by an "Analysis of the 'Moving' and the 'Non-Moving,'" as a result of which

One cometh to know that neither is the "Moving" other than the "Non-Moving," nor the "Non-Moving" other than the "Moving."

If the real nature of the "Moving" and the "Non-Moving" be not discovered by these analyses, one is to observe:—

Whether the Intellect, which is looking on, is other than the "Moving" and the "Non-Moving";

Or whether it is the very self of the "Moving" and the "Non-Moving."

Upon analysing, with the eyes of the Self-Knowing Intellect, one discovereth nothing; the observer and the thing observed are found to be inseparable.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, probably the best-known example from India is a passage in the *Bhagavad-gītā* that explicitly describes action which is yet no-action:

He who in action sees inaction and action in inaction—he is wise among men; he is a *yogin*, and he has accomplished all his work.

Having abandoned attachment to the fruit of works, ever content without any kind of dependence, he does nothing though he is ever engaged in work.<sup>22</sup>

The Sanskrit word for action, *karma*, suggests that we might interpret these verses to recommend action which does not bring karmic results. In answer to the Buddhist and Yogic emphasis on withdrawal from the world of social obligation, the *Gītā* claims that action too may lead to Krishna because no karma accrues if an act is performed

"without attachment to the fruit of action." This does not disagree with a nondualist interpretation of these verses but rather supplements it. Lao Tzu, the Buddhists, and the *Gītā* may be seen to be describing different aspects of the same experience of nondual action. The difference between the descriptions of Lao Tzu and the Buddhists is in which half of the dualism of agent ↔ action is eliminated. The Taoist wei-wu-wei is the denial of objective action, while the Indian Buddhist concept of anātman and the no-mind of Ch'an emphasize the denial of an agent. The Taoist denies that *I* act; the Buddhist denies that *I* act. But to deny a subjective agent or to deny an objective action amounts to the same thing, since each half of the polarity is dependent on the other. The *Gītā* passage implies how this bifurcation occurs. The sense of dualism arises because action is done with reference to the fruit of action—that is, because an act is performed with some goal or aim in mind: *I* act *in order to* gain some particular result. The *Gītā* may be understood either (more narrowly) as proscribing selfish action in favor of work "for the maintenance of the world" or (more broadly) as showing the problem with all intentional action. The Buddhist concept of karma, which emphasizes intention, is another expression of the latter view: although "good actions" may lead to pleasurable rebirth in the *deva* (god) realm, that is still saṃsāra. One must act in such a way as to escape both good and bad karmic consequences. Both good and bad karmic acts originate from dualism. In the former, the self manipulates the world for its own advantage; in the latter, the self consciously works for the benefit of something or someone else. The only way to transcend the dualism between the self and the other is to act without intention—that is, without attachment to some projected goal to be obtained from the action—in which case the agent can simply *be* the act.

According to Pāli Buddhism, one of the three "doors to deliverance" (*vimokṣa-mukhāni*) is "wishlessness" or "aimlessness." The other two, *śūnyatā* and *animitta* ("signlessness," referring to perception without thought-construction) are discussed in chapter 2. The Sanskrit term for the third, *apraṇihita*, literally means that one "places nothing in front"; this is understood to recommend the absence of intentions (*āśaya*) or plan (*praṇidhāna*). Mahāyāna retained all three "doors": "He [the Bodhisattva] should cognize the wishless, in that no thought proceeds in him concerning the triple world" (*Śat-*

*asāhasrikā*).<sup>23</sup> For the dedicated Buddhist, the most problematic intention—in one way necessary, but as self-defeating as any other—is the desire for enlightenment itself. "Do not seek for Buddha outside" emphasizes Ch'an, because as long as one seeks Buddha the true Buddha cannot self-awaken. "If you seek a Buddha, you will be seized by a Buddha-devil; if you seek a patriarch, you will be bound by a patriarch devil; if you seek at all, all is suffering" (Rinzai).<sup>24</sup>

The problem is that intentions are thoughts, which are "superimposed" upon actions in much the same way that thoughts are superimposed upon perception, as discussed in chapter 2. When superimposed upon perception, the superstructure of thought is delusive because it causes a polarization between the subjective consciousness that perceives and the external world that is perceived. In the present case, the attachment to and identification with thought (i.e., the projected goal) gives rise to a sense of duality between the mind that intends (agent) and the body that is used to attain the intended result.

But how does the nonduality of agent and act resolve the paradox of "the action of nonaction"? One may accept the negation of a subject, in the absence of which the action can no longer be called something "objective"; yet there is still an action of some sort. The answer is that, when one completely *becomes* an action, there is no longer the awareness that it is an action. Buber saw this:

For an action of the whole being does away with all partial actions and thus also with all sensations of action (which depend entirely on the limited nature of actions)—and hence it comes to resemble passivity.

This is the activity of the human being who has become whole: it has been called not-doing, for nothing particular, nothing partial is at work in man and thus nothing of him intrudes into the world.<sup>25</sup>

As long as there is the sense of oneself as an agent distinct from one's action, that act can be only partial and there will be a sensation of action due to the relation between them. In such a case there is a perspective from which an act is observed to occur (or not to occur), whereas in nondual action there is no sense of an ego-consciousness outside the action. When one *is* the action, no residue of self-consciousness remains to observe that action objectively. Then there is wu-wei: a quiet center ~~that~~ does not change although activity constantly occurs, as in Chuang Tzu's tranquillity-in-disturbance. Just as

in nondual hearing there is awareness of an unchanging silence as the ground from which all sounds arise, so in nondual action the act is experienced as grounded in that which is peaceful and does not act. In both these cases (and others to follow), to forget oneself and completely become something is also to realize its "emptiness" and thus to "transcend" it.

Such an action can be experienced as nondual because it is complete and whole in itself. It cannot be related to anything else, for such relating is an act of thought, which shows that there is thinking as well as acting and hence the action is only "partial." If the nondual act is complete in itself and does not refer to something else, then it is also meaningless: that is, it simply is what it is, which is suchness (*tathatā*). This pinpoints the problem with intention, since it is the reference to some goal to be derived from the act that gives the act meaning. In contrast, the *dānapāramita* (perfection of generosity) of Mahāyāna is a complete giving in which the giver, the gift, and the recipient are all realized to be empty (*śūnya*):

The supramundane perfection of giving... consists in the threefold purity. What is the threefold purity? Here a Bodhisattva gives a gift, and he does not apprehend a self, a recipient, a gift; also no reward of his giving. He surrenders that gift to all beings, but he apprehends neither beings nor self. (*Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā*)<sup>26</sup>

Such a "giving of no-giving" (as it might be termed) can be done "without leaning on something" because there is no intention tied to it. The best giving, like the best action generally, is so "free from traces" (*Tao Tz Ching*) that there is not even the sense that it is a gift. Developing this "intentionless activity" (*anābhogacārya*) constitutes an important part of the path of the Bodhisattva.

Nondual action becomes effortless because there is not the duality of one part of oneself pushing another part—in the case of physical activity, of an "I" which needs to exert itself in order to get the muscles to move. Rather, I *am* the muscles. This gives insight into a number of Zen koans, such as the following from the *Mumonkan*:

Master Shōgen said, "Why is it that a man of great strength cannot lift up *his* legs?"

And he also said, "We do not use the tongue to speak." [or: "It is not the tongue that we speak *with*."] <sup>27</sup>

This amounts to a denial of the mind-body dualism. However, this is not materialism or behaviorism. Rather than negating the psyche, this claims that the body itself is wholly psychic.

Yun Yen asked Tao Wu, "What does the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion use so many hands and eyes for?"

Wu said, "It's like someone reaching back grasping for a pillow in the middle of the night."

Yen said, "I understand."

Wu said, "How do you understand it?"

Yen said, "All over the body are hands and eyes." (*The Blue Cliff Record*)<sup>28</sup>

The Heart Sutra says that one who has realized the emptiness of all things acts freely because he is "without hindrance in the mind." Clearly this is one way in which mental events interfere with nondual action, by sometimes keeping one's physical actions from responding naturally to the situation. All athletes are aware of how anxiety can cause a self-consciousness that interferes with the spontaneity of one's bodily reactions to the movement of a football or tennis ball, for example. The nondual "psychic body," which knows how to react perfectly well by itself, suffers a kind of paralysis due to psychological hindrances. Asian martial arts usually include some meditation in their training in order to avoid this, so students can react spontaneously to attack without being paralyzed by fear and without needing to deliberate first. According to some Zen masters, the first aim of zazen (Zen meditation) is to develop such a "power of concentration" (*joriki*).

*Joriki*... is the power or strength which arises when the mind has been unified and brought to one-pointedness through concentration. This is more than the ability to concentrate in the usual sense of the word. It is a dynamic power which, once mobilized, enables us even in the most sudden and unexpected situations to act instantly, without pausing to collect our wits, and in a manner wholly appropriate to the circumstances. (Yasutani)<sup>29</sup>

However, the problem with dualistic action is not just "hindrance in the mind" but intention in general:

Cultivation is of no use for the attainment of Tao. The only thing that



one can do is to be free from defilement. When one's mind is stained with thought of life and death, or deliberate action, that is defilement. The grasping of Truth is the function of everyday-mindedness. Everyday-mindedness is free from intentional action, free from concepts of right and wrong, taking and giving, the finite and the infinite. . . . All our daily activities—walking, standing, sitting, lying down—all response to situations, our dealing with circumstances as they arise: all this is Tao. (Ma-tsu)<sup>30</sup>

"Ordinary mind is the Tao" because, when daily activities are "free from intentional action," they are realized to be nondual. This gives insight into how the "mindfulness of body" described in the *Satipatthāna Sūtra*, and Theravāda *vipassanā* practice in general, might function. In the slow "walking meditation" of *vipassanā*, for example, one lets go of all intentions by concentrating on the act of walking itself. This also suggests why Zen koans that ask "Why?" (e.g., "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?") never receive a straight answer. "Unmon said, 'The world is vast and wide like this. Why do we put on our seven-panel robe at the sound of the bell?'" (*Mumonkan*, case 16). A contemporary Zen master commented thus on this koan:

Some of you are familiar with the last line of the mealtime sutra, "We and this food and our eating are equally empty." If you can acknowledge this fact, you will realize that when you put on your robe, there is no reason or "why" in it. . . . Try to search out this "why". There is no reason for the "why" in anything! When we stand up, there is no reason "why". We just stand up! When we eat, we just eat without any reason "why". When we put on the *kesa* [seven-piece robe], we just put it on. Our life is a continuous just . . . just . . . just.<sup>31</sup>

This passage clarifies what *intentionless activity* means. From the usual perspective, it seems impossible to avoid intentions. We eat to satisfy our hunger, for example, and even taking a walk can be said to have relaxation as its purpose. In this way it is possible to find a purpose in every activity. But the claim above is that even now actions such as dressing and eating are not purposive. Intentionless activity does not mean merely random and spontaneous action; it involves realizing the distinction between thought (intention) and action. The thought (for example, "time to eat") is whole and complete in itself; the act (eating) is also whole and complete in itself. It is when each is not

experienced wholly and discretely but only in relation to the other, the first as if "superimposed" upon the second, that action seems intentional and there is the sense of an agent/mind that uses the act/body for the sake of something.

In answer to such stock questions as "What is the first principle of Buddhism?" Zen masters such as Ma-tsu, Huang Po, and Lin Chi were apt to strike the student or shout in his ear. If the Tao is nonintentional everyday-mind, such responses are not evasive. They are answers to the question, demonstrations of "why" because they exemplify nondual action, complete and whole in itself.

One day the World-Honoured One [Śākyamuni Buddha] ascended his seat. Mañjuśrī struck the gavel and said, "Clearly behold the Dharma of the King of the Dharma; the Dharma of the King of Dharma is 'just this!'" (*The Blue Cliff Record*)<sup>32</sup>

In his lecture on the first case of the *Mumonkan*, Yasutani-rōshi describes the actions of someone who has attained kenshō:

Wherever you may be born, and by whatever means, you will be able to live with the spontaneity and joy of children at play—this is what is meant by a "samādhi of innocent delight." Samādhi is complete absorption.<sup>33</sup>

*Complete absorption* means that the self is completely absorbed in play, in which case the self and its activity are nondual. The Sanskrit word for play, *līlā*, is often used in Vedānta to describe Saguṇa Brahman's purpose in creating the phenomenal universe: that is, there is no purpose outside the process itself. The dialectic of ignorance-and-liberation is God playing hide-and-seek with Himself. The Semitic religions, which do not accept reincarnation, generally look upon spiritual life as a more serious business, our "one chance" to prepare ourselves for God's judgment. But the experience of some Western mystics led them to a conclusion similar to that of the nondualists:

When [Jakob] Boehme is speaking of God's life as it is in himself he refers to it as "play." . . . Adam ought to have been content to play with nature in Paradise. (*Mysterium Magnum* 16:10) Adam fell when this play became serious business, that is, when nature was made an end instead of a means.<sup>34</sup>

Meister Eckhart echoes the Zen masters:



Do all you do, acting from the core of your soul, without a single "Why." . . . Thus, if you ask a genuine person, that is, one who acts from his heart: "Why are you doing that?"—he will reply in the only possible way: "I do it because I do it!"

[The just man] wants nothing, seeks nothing, and has no reason for doing anything. As God, having no motives, acts without them, so the just man acts without motives. As life lives on for its own sake, needing no reason for being, so the just man has no reason for doing what he does.<sup>35</sup>

*Effort*

## CHAPTER ONE OF THE *TAO TÊ CHING*

. . . contracting our infinite senses  
We behold multitude; or expanding, we behold as one,  
As One Man all the Universal Family . . .

—William Blake, *Jerusalem*

The previous section developed the view that the difference between dualistic and nondualistic action is intentionality. That intentionality is the "hinge" between duality and nonduality is also emphasized in the difficult first chapter of the *Tao Tê Ching*, according to the traditional interpretation. Despite its ambiguity, this succinct chapter (only fifty-nine Chinese characters) is clearly the most important passage in all of Taoism.<sup>36</sup> Scholars such as Wing-tsit Chan and Chang Chung-yuan<sup>37</sup> go further to claim that chapter 1 is the key to the entire *Tao Tê Ching*; all the rest may be inferred from it. Therefore it is all the more unfortunate that the importance of the concept of intention has been obscured in some recent translations. To correct this, and to show how well a nondualistic interpretation of this chapter works, I present a line-by-line explication of this crucial passage, demonstrating that the first eight lines are in a parallel structure because they refer to two different ways of experiencing: lines 1, 3, 5, and 7 refer to the nondual experience of Tao, and lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 to our more usual dualistic way of experiencing the world. This parallel structure unfolds dialectically: each succeeding pair of lines elaborates upon the issues that are raised by the preceding pair. In the process of showing this, I discuss the two main controversies over this chapter: first, whether it should be interpreted cosmologically or ontologically/epistemologically; second, whether lines 5 and 6 should be punctuated to

translate *yü* as "desire/intention." My main point is that the traditional understanding of *yü* as "desire" or "intention" is an essential part of the meaning. This is not an original claim, but *why* it is so important does not seem to have been noticed. Wing-tsit Chan's criticism of such an interpretation, that "intention interrupts the thought of the chapter," is a serious misreading of the text.<sup>38</sup>

But, when dealing with so laconic a passage, one must be especially cautious about declaring any interpretation to be "the correct one." Of no text are deconstructive qualifications more relevant, and perhaps the most we can ever expect to have are "strong misreadings." In justification of what follows—indeed, of this whole work—I can do no better than cite Heidegger: "Every interpretation is a dialogue with the work, and with the saying. However, every dialogue becomes halting and fruitless if it combines itself obdurately to nothing but what is directly said."<sup>39</sup>

The Tao that can be Tao'd is not the constant Tao  
The name that can be named is not a constant name  
Having-no-name is the source of heaven and earth  
Having-names is the mother of the ten thousand things  
Therefore always do not have intention in order to see the wonder  
Always have intention in order to see the forms  
These two thing have the same origin  
Although different in name  
Their sameness is called the mystery  
From mystery to mystery: the gate of all wonder!<sup>40</sup>

How to translate *Tao* is a question which need not detain us, since Chinese thought is now familiar enough that we can leave the term untranslated and let it reverberate according to its usage in various contexts. Literally, *Tao* combines the character for "head" with a radical meaning "the way" or "the path"; thus a literal translation is "the Supreme Way." As one would expect, the earliest sense of the radical seems to have been a road or path, and only later did the more metaphoric and metaphysical meanings arise, enabling Tao (like its Greek counterpart *logos*) to be translated, although not very well, as Truth, Reason, Nature, and so on. The philosophical issue of what the Tao is cannot, of course, be evaded and will need to be discussed.

A common translation of the first line is: "The Tao that can be

spoken of is not the eternal Tao." There are two problems with such a rendering. First, translating *ch'ang* as "eternal" implies a metaphysical bias toward unchanging permanence which is not in the original. *Eternal* would be a suitable characterization of the Indian *puruṣa* or Nirguṇa Brahman, but, given the Chinese emphasis on the reality of changing phenomena, not for the Tao. The word *constant* (or *invariable*) is preferable because it is more ambiguous, leaving more possibilities open—for example, that the Tao is to be understood not diachronically but synchronically, as some pattern in the flux of change. This brings us to the second point. To describe the Tao as an ineffable metaphysical principle is to exclude another part of the meaning, that the path (here temporal as much as spatial) which can be followed is not the true path. Putting these two together, we have something like: "The Tao which is spoken about/followed is not the real Tao." Why not? Why cannot the Tao be Tao'd? This is answered in the second line, which drives a wedge between the Tao and all attempts to characterize it. Names—later it becomes clear that this means language generally—are not "constant" in the way that the Tao is; so, conversely, that which can be named can't be the Tao. The namelessness of the Tao, our inability to characterize it, is declared to be its primary characteristic—a paradox that is self-stultifying only insofar as we are confined within the bounds of language, whereas the claim is evidently that there is a reality "outside" language which is inaccessible to it but not necessarily to us. That the Tao is unnameable is repeatedly emphasized in later chapters; for example, 32 ("The constant Tao is unnameable") and 41 ("The Tao, when hidden, has no name").

This issue of the ineffability of the Tao has been much discussed.<sup>41</sup> It is clear that Lao Tzu is, among other things, denying a representative theory of truth.<sup>42</sup> But so, for example, does Wittgenstein, without postulating any spiritual Absolute. So it is necessary to say more to uncover the meaning of Lao Tzu's claim. Given the brevity of this chapter, and the "pre-philosophical" nature of the whole work, one cannot expect any textual exegesis to reveal a complete metaphysical theory implicit in this passage or in the ones that follow. So here we may benefit from a comparison with the other nondualist systems discussed in this work, which also emphasize the ineffability of the Absolute and go further to link that ineffability with the nonduality of

subject and object—a nonduality that is also found in Taoism, especially in Chuang Tzu, but which is not explicit in the *Tao Tê Ching*. As discussed in chapter 2, Mādhyamika characterizes (or, more precisely, explains why we cannot characterize) nirvana as "the coming-to-rest of the manifold of named things," in which we realize that our usual way of perceiving the world—as a collection of discrete named things—is just one way of "taking" it. Yogācāra Buddhism is more explicit in asserting that the true nature of things is nondual. The apparent bifurcation of subject from object is due to grasping at phenomena: that-which-is-grasped is reified into an object, and that-which-grasps becomes the sense of an autonomous self. What is most relevant to us at the moment is that our main way of grasping is through language. The object is a creation of thought-construction, which converts the bare nirvikalpa sensation into a determinate image associated with a name. We have understood Śaṅkara's explanation of *māyā* as *adhyāsa*—name and form superimposed upon Brahman—in the same way. Ch'an Buddhism too asserts nonduality and criticizes language as deceptive: "Reality is right before you, and yet you are apt to translate it into a world of names and forms" (Fa-yen Wen-i). With the exception of Vedānta, all of the above were well-received in China and greatly influenced its thought—largely because the similarities between Buddhism and Taoism were so deep. Ch'an, of course, was a result of their convergence and as a living tradition is therefore especially valuable in interpreting Taoism "after the fact."

The factor common to all these schools is that they link the ineffability of the Absolute (however otherwise "characterized") with its nonduality: the problem with any attempt to describe the nondual Absolute is that it amounts to dualistically separating oneself from it. Later I argue that the above nondualities are phenomenologically equivalent; here the important point is that, although we do not find an explicit denial of subject-object duality in the *Tao Tê Ching*, such a claim is quite consistent with its claims and is particularly helpful in explicating the first chapter. The Tao can then be understood as the totality of what-is, which is both ontologically and epistemologically prior to any duality that arises within it. Then to give the Tao a name is to try to determine that whose nature is indeterminate, to objectify that which cannot be objectified because it is what there is before any bifurcation into subject and object. If the goal is to experience that

nondual Tao, this also amounts to an indictment of all philosophy. Philosophy originates in the awareness that the apparently objective and matter-of-fact reality of the world is in fact problematical, and in our uncertainty as to how we relate to it. We realize that our everyday understanding of the world is just an understanding, and philosophy is the resulting search for the correct understanding, an attempt to construct that set of categories which when superimposed upon reality will "mirror" it precisely. Thought thus distinguishes itself from the world in order to divine the world's structure—but in the process it perpetuates the dualism between "inner" conscious mind and "outer" objective world, which dualism is the root problem to be overcome, according to our nondualist systems. The "spirituality" of the Tao, like the Brahman of Vedānta and the Dharmakāya, and so on, of Mahāyāna, arises from the fact that these nondual Absolutes cannot be understood reductively as some material substratum but are the source of all consciousness as well. All of these negate ego-self because the individual consciousness usually understood to be the essence or property of that self is finally realized to be but an aspect or "reflection" of an all-encompassing consciousness.

If the first line is understood as "the Path that can be followed," the emphasis becomes different. The problem with attempting to "follow" the Tao is the self-conscious and hence dualistic effort involved. If one is truly harmonized—that is, one—with the nondual Tao, the Way will not be experienced as something external to oneself, as a path that either is or is not being followed. From this perspective, the Tao should be understood not as a timeless Absolute but as the natural course of things; and *trying* to follow the natural course of things is to be no longer natural. That is the point of the famous *mondo* between Ch'an masters Chao-chou (Jap., Jōshū) and Nan-ch'üan (Nansen):

Chao-chou: "What is the Tao?"

Nan-ch'üan: "Ordinary mind is the Tao."

Chao-chou: "How should I try to follow it [more literally, 'turn towards it']?"

Nan-ch'üan: "If you try to turn towards it, it will turn away from you."<sup>43</sup>

In summary, I am suggesting that the first two lines be taken as describing two different ways of experiencing—nondual and dual,

respectively. The role of language in the bifurcation of the Tao into subject and object is elaborated in lines 3 and 4:

Having-no-name is the source of heaven and earth

Having-names is the mother of the ten thousand things

Since the Tao is what has no name, these two lines parallel the first two. But they are more controversial. Should they be taken cosmologically, as a cosmogonic myth describing the creation of the phenomenal world, or ontologically/epistemologically, as I have been doing?<sup>44</sup> Given that the ambiguity of this laconic text is obviously intentional, I see no reason to conclude that these interpretations must be mutually exclusive. But the ontological/epistemological approach does seem more revealing. That the Tao is the source of heaven and earth means that the Tao is everything, a totality which incorporates the entire universe. In contrast, "having-names" is the mother of "the ten thousand things," the common Chinese idiom for all the things *in* the world—that is, the sum total of all the particulars that exist. At first glance the distinction between the two is not clear. But if the "source" of line three is understood as what heaven and earth really *are*, then the Tao as their source is the universe apprehended nondually; the claim is that this is how the universe may be experienced when we "take" it without names. In contrast to this, language-acquisition is identified as the process that gives birth to our phenomenal world of multiplicity, breaking up the primordial whole into objects—one of which is the subject, since the sense of self is also reified in the process. These objects are then perceived as distinct from each other but as interacting causally *in* space and time. This interpretation is obliquely supported by another term for the Tao, used in later chapters: *p'o*, or "the Uncarved Block," to use Waley's felicitous expression; chapter 37 refers twice to "the unnameable *p'o*." So lines 3 and 4 make another distinction between nonduality and duality, contrasting the nameless "ground" of everything with the multiplicity of various objects "in" the world. But, as I pointed out in chapter 1, this nonduality also implies the nondifference of subject and object, for "my" world cannot be a whole unless it incorporates "my" consciousness as well.

But why do we name? What motivates us to carve up the Uncarved Block? This is explained in the next pair of lines:

Therefore always do not have intention in order to see the wonder  
 Always have intention in order to see the forms

More idiomatically: whenever you let go of all intentions, you will experience the wonder; whenever you have intentions, you will see forms. These lines are the heart of the chapter. The parallel structure continues: the first concerns the Tao and the second refers to the manifold phenomenal world. This becomes evident when we clarify the meaning of the key terms. "Wonder" is *miao*, also translated "subtlety" (Wing-tsit Chan, following Wang Pi), "secrets" (D. C. Lau), and "inner wonders" (Charles Fu). What is unquestionable in all cases is that *miao* has connotations of spirituality and holiness. It refers to the "spiritual" way of apprehending reality, which is the experience of Tao, or, better (because less dualistic), Tao-experience. "Forms" is *chiao*, which has been translated in even more different ways: "outcome" (Wing-tsit Chan), "manifestations" (Chang Chung-yuan), "manifest forms" (Lin Yutang), "outer fringe" (Giles), "borders" (Bodde), "ultimate results" (Waley), "the obvious" (Nagatomo). That the original image for *chiao* seems to have been "edges" is felicitous for my interpretation, for how do we divide up the undifferentiated Tao into multiple forms? We distinguish one thing from another by determining it, in the etymological sense of perceiving where it terminates. The edge is where an object comes to an end. To define something is to differentiate its form from another form, or from the formless. But the Tao itself has no edges or borders. The Tao is infinite and in-determinate, because it is all-encompassing. So *miao* is a spiritual experience of the Tao, and *chiao* is the world experienced as a collection of discrete forms.

"Intention," *yü*, is often translated "desire," but I think "intention" is to be preferred because it is more general and captures a meaning that "desire" misses—unless one understands the term broadly, as in "desiring to do something." Yet lines 5 and 6 are susceptible to an entirely different translation, according to how they are punctuated. If a comma is read between the *wu* and *yü*, rather than after the *yü*, they become:

Therefore let there always be nonbeing, so one may see the wonder  
 Let there always be being, so one may see the forms

The former version, using "intention/desire," is more traditional,

deriving ultimately from Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung. Recently Wing-tsit Chan has followed Wang An-shih and Su Ch'ê in preferring the latter version: "I have also departed from tradition because the idea of desires interrupts the thought of the chapter."<sup>45</sup> But this misses Lao Tzu's point. As Chang Chung-yuan points out:

Su Ch'ê did not understand that through *wu yü*, or without intention or non-willing, one is freed from conceptualization and released to the total identity of the seer and the seen, which is the highest stage of the mystery of Tao. . . . Then one will achieve what Taoists call "*wu o chu wang*" or "both things and myself are forgotten." Once one is free from both subjectivity and objectivity, one can enter the gate of Tao.<sup>46</sup>

Before elaborating on this, it is important to designate the limits of the controversy. Both readings are possible because both are consistent with other claims made in subsequent chapters. More than consistent, both claims are essential to Lao Tzu's conception of the Tao. For example, chapters 11 and 40 both refer to nonbeing as in some sense prior to being,<sup>47</sup> and "no intention" is emphasized in chapters 34 and 37. So the controversy is reduced to the less significant issue of whether, as Wing-tsit Chan claims, the concept of desire/intention disrupts the meaning of the first chapter. In what follows I argue that, on the contrary, *yü* as "intention" is essential for a full understanding of Lao Tzu's point.

Let me summarize where we are. What is it that keeps me from experiencing the "wonder" (*miao*) of Tao? Lao Tzu has already pointed to names. In naming, I determine something as a thing, distinguishing it both from its contextual ground and from me, its "grasper." If the name itself is not part of the thing, but something subjective, then I do not apprehend just the thing, as it is in itself, when I see it as "a pen" or as "a cup." Then why do I name? What is the link between naming and intentions? In order to answer this, we need to understand the relationship between language and causality: how causality is built into language itself.

In chapter 2, John Searle was quoted to point out that naming is not just a matter of pinning labels on self-identifying objects. "The world doesn't come to us already sliced up into objects and experiences: what counts as an object is already a function of our system of representation, and how we perceive the world in our experiences is influ-



enced by that system of representation." When naming, I do not first see a thing and then decide to call it a "door"; learning to call it a door is how I pick it out from the nirvikalpa visual manifold and notice it. We divide up the world and come to see it as a collection of objects by giving names to those objects. But now we may take a further step. How does language "mean"? As Wittgenstein has shown, a name should not be understood merely as a label. Names usually imply functions, because we cannot understand how language works until we see its connection with our behavior. The meaning of a word is usually to be discovered in how it is used, what "form of life" it is part of. "We may say: only someone who already knows how to do something with it can significantly ask a name."<sup>48</sup> Since language is an integral part of our life, the only way we can determine whether a person truly "understands" certain language patterns is by observing his behavior. A person shows that he understands the meaning of *door* not by being able to give a verbal definition, but by being able to use it in the appropriate way for going in and coming out. To understand that "that" (pointing) is "a door" includes understanding the function of a door, which defines one's causal relationship with "that."

In looking about my office, I see many things—books, blackboard, cup, pens, chalk, chairs, and so on. To experience the room in this way (an effect of prapañca) is to perceive it as a set of things ready-to-hand to be used in the appropriate ways. Heidegger's concept of *zuhanden*<sup>49</sup> (utensils) is helpful here. In our usual day-to-day living what we experience are not objects just "simply there," but utensils available to be used. The full nondual presence of a pen is not perceived as it is in itself because "I" am busy utilizing "it" to write these words, and the paper is also not perceived fully but just utilized as something to write on, the desk is used to support the paper, the cup to drink from when I am thirsty, and so on. As soon as I identify something as, for example, "a piece of chalk," its function—that is, my relationship with it, where it fits into my web of intentions—is established, and at that point I usually put it in its "place" and then pay no more attention to it until I need to write on the blackboard. As I argued in chapter 2, seeing in this way is something we have learned to do, although we are not usually aware of the fact. We are not normally conscious of the difference between that which is actually perceived by the eye and the functions sub-

jectively implied by the name; the two are experienced together.<sup>50</sup> Only with the "wondrous experience" of Tao do I realize that I have been seeing things *as . . .*, rather than as they are in themselves, which is Tao.

Heidegger concludes that we most immediately experience the world as a "totality of destinations" (purposes) which ultimately refers back to *me*. But it is important not to hypostatize this *me*. If the Tao is nondual, it is not the "I" that names and intends, but rather the reverse: subjectivity—the sense of a subjective consciousness that is *doing* the seeing, acting, and so on—arises because of the naming and intending. Without these activities—for example, in Taoist "mind-fasting"—the self evaporates. (Such mind-fasting is discussed in the *Chuang Tzu*—for example, that of Pu Liang I in chapter 6—but there are only oblique references to meditation in the *Tao Tê Ching*—e.g., in chapter 10.)

Why do we tend to see objects as utensils—that is, causally? Insofar as I have desires and intentions, I will need to manipulate the world in order to get what I want. Such manipulation requires me to ask what will produce the desired effect. In fact, that tendency to manipulation may be seen as the root of the concept of causality.

The idea of cause has its roots in purposive activity and is employed in the first instance when we are concerned to produce or to prevent something. To discover the cause of something is to discover what has to be attested by our activity in order to produce or to prevent that thing; but once the "cause" comes to be applied to natural events, the notion of altering the course of events tends to be dropped. "Cause" is then used in a non-practical, purely diagnostic way in cases where we have no interest in altering events or power to alter them. (Nowell-Smith)<sup>51</sup>

So causality is built into language. Names do not simply cover things like a blanket of snow resting on the roof of a house. Learning a language is learning to make causal connections, learning to see the world as a collection of utensils used to accomplish certain ends. The same point may be made in terms of conceptualizing: thought-construction (vikalpa, prapañca) is also causality-construction. In this way, craving, conceptualizing, and causality work together to sustain the dualistic sense of a self "in" an objective world (fig.1). Further



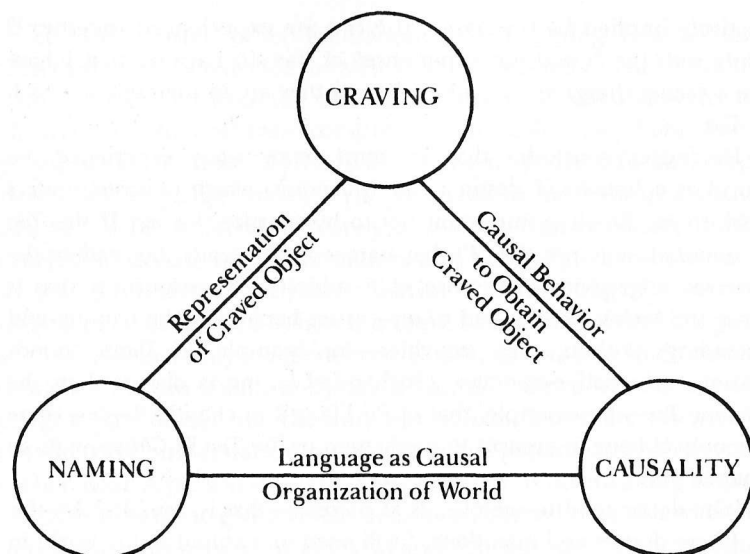


Figure 1

development of this is reserved for the discussion of causality in chapter 6; now we return to the *Tao Tê Ching*.

If the above is true, and intentions are "built into" language, then the concept of intention by no means interrupts the thought of the first chapter, as Wing-tsit Chan claims. On the contrary, intention becomes the crucial point. To ignore this is to miss Lao Tzu's logic. The first two lines distinguish the ineffable Tao from the everyday world of named things. The second pair declare that the Tao is what everything really is, but that language splits up this whole by distinguishing one thing from another. The third pair explain why we name by connecting language with our web of intentional action and they claim that we can return to the nondual Tao-experience by letting go of our intentions.

Having completed differentiating these two modes of experience, the next two lines emphasize their unity:

These two things [*miao* and *chiao*] have the same origin  
Although different in name

There is no specifiable difference between nirvana and the everyday world, said Nāgārjuna; the limits of the one are also the limits of the

other.<sup>52</sup> The same is true for the Tao and our world of multiplicity. They are two ways of apprehending the same reality. To experience the wonder of Tao is to apprehend this reality nondually. To experience the world as we usually do is to perceive that reality fragmented into the ten thousand things, one of which is *me*, the subject who is really the first hypostatized object. There are other similarities between the Tao and the nondual Absolutes of Indian philosophy, but we should also notice an important difference. For Vedānta, ultimately only Brahman is real, for the changing phenomenal world is eventually sublated into illusory *māyā*. But Lao Tzu grants reality to the forms also, since the world of named things is one way the Tao manifests itself. Indian philosophy generally is more "otherworldly" in wanting to negate completely the phenomenal world for the sake of a changeless Absolute, whereas the more pragmatic Chinese ideal, as in this passage, is to understand the relation between both ways of experiencing so as to be able to move back and forth freely from one mode to the other.

Yet this very distinction between two modes of experience, and their subsequent identification, is valid only from the perspective of one of those modes. That they are different only in name shows this, for names do not apply to the Tao itself. This means that the sage who is fully harmonized with the Tao will see only the Tao and everything as a manifestation of the Tao. One who has realized the Tao may feel alienated from it, but from his perspective there is always only the Tao and we have never been apart from it. *Tao Tê Ching*:

Their sameness is called the mystery  
From mystery to further mystery: the gate of all wonder!

The relation between these two modes, the nondual Tao and named multiplicity, the fact that reality has two aspects and yet is one, is here declared to be a great mystery. Perhaps there is a hint too that this is an essential mystery which can never be fathomed. For in order to understand it, would we not need to stand outside the relation and see it objectively? And according to this chapter we cannot do that: there is no third mode.

To conclude this section, the first chapter of the *Tao Tê Ching* may be summarized as follows. Lines 1, 3, 5, and 7 describe the nameless Tao, the source of heaven and earth, which is reality apprehended as a

"spiritual" (*miao*) whole. Such Tao-experience can occur when one has no intentions, in which case there is no self in the usual sense and experience is nondual. Lines 2, 4, 6, and 8 refer to the dualistic everyday world, which is perceived as a collection of interacting but discrete things. We experience the world in this way due to language and intention, which mental processes are not the activities that a self does but rather are what create and sustain the illusory sense of a self.

### INTENTIONALITY AND FREEDOM

Recent Western work in the philosophy of mind has developed the view that the continuity of consciousness is maintained not by memory, as the earlier empiricists believed, but by the stream of intentional action. Stuart Hampshire argues for this in *Thought and Action*:

British empiricists since Hume have tried, to their own dissatisfaction, to represent the continuity of a person's consciousness as some binding thread of memory running through the separate data of consciousness. But within the trajectory of an action, with its guiding intention, there is already a continuity through change, and, if it is true that a conscious person is necessarily engaged upon some action, however trivial, this known continuity is interrupted only by sleep and by other forms of unconsciousness. . . . I do distinguish myself, as the inner core that is the source of directed effort, from all my passing states, and it is this sense of myself as the source of meaningful action that gives me the sense of my continuity from the present into the future.

. . . a conscious mind is always and necessarily envisaging possibilities of action, of finding means towards ends, as a body is always and necessarily occupying a certain position. To be a conscious human being, and therefore a thinking being, is to have intentions and plans, to be trying to bring about a certain effect. We are therefore always actively following what is happening now as leading into what is to happen next. Because intentional action is ineliminable from our notion of experience, so also is temporal order.<sup>53</sup>

This seems to contradict what was maintained in the first two sections of this chapter, but the disagreement masks a deeper agreement. If we take the "conscious mind" of the second passage to mean "consciousness (or awareness) of self," then such a view about the relation between "the sense of myself" and intentional action is consis-

tent with what has been claimed in this chapter. The only significant difference is that, because Hampshire believes intentional action to be "ineliminable from our notion of experience," he does not envision the possibility of nondual action as a result of eliminating "the source of directed effort." If intentional action were eliminable, then the implication of Hampshire's position is that the sense of self is also thus eliminable—precisely what I have argued. Hampshire is wrong when he claims that "a conscious mind is always and necessarily envisaging possibilities of action," for there is the counterexample of meditation—an example very much to the point, since it is generally agreed to be a very important part, perhaps the most important part, of the path for those who wish to experience nonduality. It may be objected that even in meditation one has intentions and makes efforts to concentrate on something, but, as we shall see later, this is no longer the case in the deeper stages of meditation, for in samādhi the sense of self evaporates, precisely because all effort and intention cease. Hampshire's account seems valid as an explanation of the usual dualistic way of understanding experience, but it does not amount to a critique of nonduality. On the contrary, if one accepts (as Hampshire would not) a distinction between sense of self and nondual experience, then his account would agree with this chapter in explaining the difference between dualistic and nondual experience as due to intentionality. In this sense, Hampshire's view of action as intentional corresponds to Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's view of perception as conceptual (discussed in chapter 2). Both are consistent with—indeed, implied by—the account of nonduality presented here, for they are descriptions of everyday experience that account for why experience seems dualistic. They should not be taken *prima facie* as refutations of the possibility of nondual experience.

There is still a serious problem with Hampshire's account. Explaining the continuity of consciousness as due to intentionality takes for granted what we usually take for granted, some sort of causal relationship between intentions and actions. However, Hume pointed out, as a corollary to his critique of the causal relation, that no one can hope to understand how volition produces motion in our limbs: "That their motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience, like other natural events: but the power or energy by which this is effected, like that in other natural events, is unknown and

inconceivable."<sup>54</sup> In other words, the relationship between intention and action, which normally we readily accept, is really inexplicable. The implication of this is that intentionality—the sense of myself as the source of meaningful action, to use Hampshire's words—cannot provide my continuity through change, for that continuity between guiding intention and an action is itself philosophically problematic. One might be inclined to say that only consciousness *can* bridge the gap; however, then one has not explained the continuity of consciousness but merely postulated it ad hoc to resolve the difficulty.

This gap is a problem for those who, like Hampshire, presuppose a dualistic account of experience and therefore must attribute some type of reality to "the sense of myself"—thus reifying consciousness into a self, in effect. But having accepted Hume's critique, one cannot thereafter bring back the self through the back door, as it were, as "continuity of consciousness." This inexplicable relation between intention and action is not a problem for the nondualist, who accepts that the consciousness of the self is actually illusory and agrees that a fictive self has been postulated in order to bridge the "gap." The nondualist can accept this "gap" between thought and action—in fact he can deny any causal link, as we see in chapter 6—and this is why actions have always been nondual, even when not realized as such.

Hampshire might try to bridge that gap between thought and action by agreeing on the one hand that the relation is incomprehensible yet asserting on the other that, as we experience in daily life, it is undeniable. As Hume said, "That their motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience." But that this is undeniable is not true, as the history of the mind-body problem indicates. Nietzsche, for example, denies that intention is the cause of an event, and he reverses Hume by extrapolating this denial of volition into a denial of the causal relation generally:

*Critique of the concept "cause"* . . . We have absolutely no experience of a cause; psychologically considered, we derive the entire concept from the subjective conviction that we are causes, namely, that the arm moves—But that is an error. We separate ourselves, the doers, from the deed, and we make use of this pattern everywhere—we seek a doer for every event. What is it we have done? We have misunderstood the feeling of strength, tension, resistance, a muscular feeling that is

already the beginning of the act, as the cause, or we have taken the will to do this or that for a cause because the action follows upon it . . .

—*In Summa*: an event is neither effected nor does it effect. *Cause* is a capacity to produce effects that has been super-added to the events—

. . . Only because we have introduced subjects, "doers", into things does it appear that all events are the consequences of compulsion exerted upon subjects—exerted by whom? again by a "doer". Cause and effect—a dangerous concept as long as one thinks of something that causes and something upon which an effect is produced.

. . . When one has grasped that the "subject" is not something that creates effects, but only a fiction, much follows.

It is only/after the model of the subject that we have invented the reality of things and projected them into the medley of sensations. If we no longer believe in the effective subject, then belief also disappears in effective things, in reciprocation, cause and effect between those phenomena that we call things. . . . At last, the "thing-in-itself" also disappears, because this is fundamentally the conception of a "subject-in-itself". . . . If we give up the concept "subject" and "object", then also the concept "substance"—and as a consequence also the various modifications of it, e.g., "matter", "spirit", and other hypothetical entities, "the eternity and immutability of matter", etc. We have got rid of *materiality*.

As soon as we imagine someone who is responsible for our being thus and thus, etc. (God, nature), and therefore attribute to him the intention that we should exist and be happy or wretched, we corrupt for ourselves the *innocence of becoming*. We then have someone who wants to achieve something through us and with us.<sup>55</sup>

Nietzsche is quoted at some length because these passages not only deny intention but also relate that denial to the negation of other entities whose existence the nondualist also rejects: cause and effect, subject and object, substance, matter, personal God. Our sense of being a subject is connected with the discrimination that intentionality "causes" certain events but not others. The point most immediately relevant is that, for Nietzsche, intention and the will in general are epiphenomena and not the true cause of an action.

Such a denial of volition (by no means uncommon)<sup>56</sup> is usually understood to imply determinism, but the concept of nondual action suggests an alternative that escapes the usual dilemma of freedom versus determinism. The usual formulations of that problem are



dualistic in presupposing a conscious subject whose actions either are completely determined by a causal chain (the strongest causal influence reaps the effect) or are free from a causal chain (or rather free from complete determination, since totally uncaused, random choice does not seem to provide freedom in any meaningful sense). Both alternatives assume the existence of a conscious self distinct from its actions and existent outside the causal chain, although its actions may be totally determined by external causes. But the nondualist claim that there is no self does not imply unimpeded determinism, for if there is no subject then there are also no "objective" causal factors. The deterministic view implies a self helpless before causal influences that struggle among themselves to see which is strongest, rather like medieval knights competing to see who will win the hapless lady; but if there is no hapless consciousness here then the situation must be understood differently. Hobbes said that "liberty or freedom signifies properly the absence of opposition"<sup>57</sup> and that captures our common-sense notion of freedom *from*. This means that the concept of freedom is dualistic in two senses. *Free* is dependent upon its opposite, becoming the negation of unfree, and moreover that opposite is dualistic in the sense that one thing constrains another. If there is no "other" to be opposed, as in nondualistic experience, such dualistic concepts do not apply. In later chapters I argue that the nondualist denial of self (as in Buddhism) is equivalent to asserting that there is only the Self (as in Vedānta). We would normally infer that the former implies complete determinism, the latter absolute freedom. However, if the universe is a whole (Brahman, Tao, Vijnaptimātratā, etc.) and if, as Hua Yen Buddhism develops in its image of Indra's Net, each particular is not isolated but contains and manifests that whole, then whenever "I" act it is not "I" but the whole universe that acts—or, rather, *is* the action. And if we accept that the universe is self-caused, then it acts freely whenever anything is done. Thus, from the nondualist perspective, complete determinism turns out to be equivalent to absolute freedom.<sup>58</sup>

But a disclaimer is necessary. Despite everything argued in this chapter about nondual action, I do not want to deny that, from another point of view, thoughts and actions are related to each other causally. From a "phenomenal" perspective they certainly condition each other. My point is that, when one "forgets oneself" and *becomes* a

nondual action, there is no longer any awareness that the action is determined: it is experienced as spontaneous and "self-caused." The paradoxical relationship between these two viewpoints is discussed in chapter 6, which evaluates the implications of nonduality for causation generally by considering the Mādhyamika equivalence between seamless conditionality and unconditioned freedom.

## TWO OBJECTIONS CONSIDERED

We cannot conclude without evaluating two objections against the concept of nondual action as it has been developed in this chapter. The first is a critique of the notion of *anābhogacārya* (Sanskrit, "intentionless activity"), while the second questions the value and indeed the possibility of *acintyakarma* (Sanskrit, "activity transcending thought").

The first objection is that blanket recommendation of intentionless activity overlooks a distinction, at least as old as Aristotle, between two different types of activity, which he calls *poiesis* and *praxis*. *Poiesis* refers to the productive arts, which are engaged in means directed toward an end (e.g., flute-making), whereas *praxis* describes the performing arts, in which the activity is an end in itself (e.g., flute-playing).<sup>59</sup> This distinction is valid for all activity, and all discussion of intentionless activity can apply only to the latter. If one is to make good flutes, then one's actions must be directed towards an end—that is, must be intentional.

The reply to this objection is that the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, although valuable up to a point, becomes questionable when pushed. The result is that the distinction between them may be located within intentionless activity, within *praxis* in the broad sense. Even flute-playing may be understood as a means to an end, such as making money or impressing others, but of course it may be an end in itself. However, *poiesis* may be viewed in the same way. If the flute-maker is not thinking about the money to be made from selling the flute or about impressing others with his craftsmanship, then his work can be *praxis* too. Drilling a perfectly sized hole can be an end in itself just as playing a perfectly pitched note can be. In both cases we can imagine an audience of apprentices admiring their master's skill. This is not to deny that there is a different kind of "product" in the two cases, but if the flute-maker is not thinking about the finished product

and what will be done with it, then there is no relevant difference in the acts themselves. From the nondualist standpoint, the experienced flute-maker can become one with the act of flute-making just as the master flutist can become one with his flute-playing.

There are a number of passages in the *Chuang Tzu* that illustrate the nondual *tê* of such craftspeople—butcher, wheelwright, boatman, and so forth. For example:

Ch'ing, the chief carpenter, was carving wood into a stand for hanging musical instruments. When finished, the work appeared to those who saw it as though of supernatural execution. And the prince of Lu asked him, saying, "What mystery is there in your art?"

"No mystery, Your Highness," replied Ch'ing; "and yet there is something. When I am about to make such a stand, I guard against any diminution of my vital power. I first reduce my mind to absolute quiescence. Three days in this condition, and I become oblivious of any reward to be gained. Five days, and I become oblivious of any fame to be acquired. Seven days, and I become unconscious of my four limbs and my physical frame. Then, with no thought of the Court present in my mind, my skill becomes concentrated, and all disturbing elements from without are gone. . . . I bring my own natural capacity in relation with that of the wood.<sup>60</sup>

One might expect some such process of preparation by a flute-player before an important concert, but here it is experienced by the equivalent of a flute-maker. It supports the idea that the distinction between poiesis and praxis is one that is to be found within the intentionless activity of praxis in the broad sense.

This answer contains the seeds of a reply to the next objection. The second objection is that eliminating intention—driving a wedge between action and all thought—seems hardly possible and is certainly not desirable. To act in such a way would mean to live aimlessly, with no direction or meaning at all. Moreover, "activity transcending thought" is likely to be more willful and selfish, giving greater freedom to instinctive and indiscriminate drives, than action that has been deliberated and mediated by moral principles. We need intentions because we must reflect on what we do, and before we act.

However, as mentioned earlier, nondual action does not imply wanton, merely spontaneous activity like that of a spoiled child. The point is more subtle. The objection assumes that acculturation intro-

duces ethical factors (e.g., a superego) that condition our instinctive selfishness, but nonduality, in denying an ego-self, eliminates the basis of selfishness. (This is the essence of the Taoist response to Confucian morality.) It is true that "activity transcending thought" negates any meaning to life, in the sense that life's acts do not gain their meaning from referring to something outside themselves. But from another perspective, that meaning may be found within the action and perceptions themselves, which are experienced as fully satisfying. Only thus can each moment be complete in itself.

In order to determine whether nondual life may be said to have any goal or direction, we must again distinguish between two perspectives. From one perspective it is true that life does not have a direction, but then, as above, life does not need a direction. The present may be fulfilling without deriving its meaning from being projected toward some future state of affairs. From another perspective, however, life can still have a pattern without having a direction dualistically imposed upon it. As Unmon said, when the bell sounds we put on our robes and go to the meditation hall. There is the nondual sound "bong!", there is the nondual thought "time to sit," and there is the nondual activity of dressing and walking. I venture to suggest that those who learn to live in such a way often become aware of a pattern developing in their lives which is more profound and meaningful than any they could have created for themselves.

It may be objected here that, while such "activity transcending thought" may be possible in the protected environment of a monastery, where the sequence of activities is determined, it is not possible for the rest of us, who as laypeople are constantly required to make decisions and choose between possible intentions. This issue will be taken up in the following chapter. But here it is necessary to say that for the person who experiences nondually, decisions too are made differently. Choosing between pros and cons is not such a problem because the appropriate choice is much clearer, perhaps arising more spontaneously from what are normally called "subconscious" parts of the mind. Of course, to express the matter in this way is to take for granted the causal relation between decision and actions that was questioned earlier. We may make the same point in a less dualistic way by pointing out that how decisions are actually made is no less mysterious than how intentions "cause" actions. Seng-ts'an's *Hsin Hsin Ming*,



cited in the first section of this chapter, begins with the much-quoted lines: "The Supreme Way [Tao] is not difficult, it simply dislikes choosing." But how can we escape the dilemma of choice? Only if nondual decisions make themselves. That brings us to the topic of the next chapter.