Everything is nothing

English transcript to the podcast

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An introductory podcast to Daoism

English transcript

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FM: *Hello and welcome to Wisdom-Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices, to be found on www.metis.ethz.ch.*
In this edition, we turn our attention to teachings of the way, Daoism. A Chinese school of thought that has taken shape in both philosophy and religion.
Michael Hampe and I, Frederike Maas, are pleased to be able to interview Professor Kai Marchal about this topic. He joins us online from Taipei, where he lives, and teaches philosophy at the National Cheng Chi University.
Welcome, Mr. Marchal.
KM: Hello.
MH: Hello.

FM: The Daodejing is the founding work of Daoism. Legend has it that it was written by the author Laozi. In Europe, Confucianism, as the Southeast Asian wisdom doctrine, is more known. Alongside Confucianism, Daoism is one of the three major schools of thought in the Chinese-speaking world today. The Daodejing is addressed to a ruler and propagates a doctrine of non-intervention. At first glance, this seems to stand in conflict; an education on passive ruling. How am I to understand this?

KM: The Daodejing, together with the Zhuangzi, are the two founding texts of Daoism. Both texts are about knowledge and wisdom, but the basic idea is to get rid of knowledge. So that's a logic of negativity. It's not about accumulating knowledge to eventually attain a final state of wisdom, it's about ridding yourself of useless knowledge.

MH: Negativity and freeing remind me of Pyrrhonian skepticism. According to Pyrrho, while one has views and represents certain points of view, someone may appear who asserts the opposite point of view, so that disputes arise. Pyrrhonian skeptics wanted to free themselves from knowledge, in the sense of asserting. Do you think there is an analogy there?

KM: Yes, definitely. The idea of asserting is deconstructed in Daoism. It's not about coming into an assertive position about the world, it's about freeing yourself from all kinds of opinions. And as you said, every opinion generates a counter-opinion. So if someone says: "the cat is sitting on the table", then immediately the sentence follows: "this cat is not sitting on the table". Or if someone says: "I am in Munich", then the sentence "I am not in Munich" follows immediately. All these assertions about the world can be negated and both texts, the Daodejing and the Zhuangzi, play with this idea that one should free oneself from all kinds of conditionalities. It's about acquiring knowledge, but it's not about knowledge about concrete states of the world, rather, it's about a higher form of knowledge, which is more or less identified with the idea of wisdom. If you look at the two texts, they are not a conceptual inquiry about wisdom, but rather metaphors, stories, and parables. The first chapter of the Zhuangzi, for example, has a very nice idea. The chapter outlines the idea that wisdom requires some form of extension. So I'm here now in this room or in this recording studio, but it's about ascending to the heights and freeing myself from the fact that I'm embodied here, in my body.

FM: I'd like to circle back to my first question about the Daodejing as a guide for rulers. This seems rather elitist, and not very contemporary. I would like to understand this a little better. I'm not a ruler, so how can I apply these teachings of the Daodejing to my life in the 21st century?

KM: That's a very good question. If you go back into the history of Daoism, the ruler certainly played a very crucial role. The book of Daodejing has no author. We can't reconstruct its author. The person Laozi probably never existed, the text itself came into being as a result of a very long oral tradition, originally addressed primarily to the ruler. But in the course of history, especially in the 2nd and 3rd century A.D., the readership became larger and larger. The text was then understood as being addressed to every reader, including women. This idea of the ruler, I believe, must be understood metaphorically. There is the beautiful image of the wheel on a cart with the hub in the middle. The ruler, so to speak, denotes this position of the hub, which is empty. The space between the spokes is also empty. By identifying myself with this center, with the emptiness in the middle, I should succeed in coming into a more favorable or successful relationship with the world. And to embody wisdom this way.

MH: Are there any parallels with the Mirrors for Princes in Europe? I'm thinking of Machiavelli's 'The Prince' in particular, which I don't associate with wisdom at first glance, but rather with prudence. It is more about how a ruler shall behave wisely in order to maintain their power. This seems to be less the case in the text you just characterized, although I remember that the ruler must not favor anyone, that this hub in the middle must not favor any spoke, but that it must be empty so that everything in the state runs by itself as if lubricated, so to speak. Is that also a rule of prudence, that the state works best that way? Or would you say that this is a wisdom rule that goes beyond state action?

KM: That's a good point. To distinguish prudence from wisdom is certainly difficult in the Daoist context. There are countless passages in the Daodejing about clarifying the relationship between the ruler and the people, about the close interweaving of knowledge and rule. In the Chinese language, the word for *knowledge* is directly etymologically related to the word for *ruling*. But the interesting point is that it's not about a positive or a direct relation between ruler and ruled, but about breaking this direct relationship and introducing a dialectic, a dialectical moment. The ruler or then also the reader is urged not to rule, that is, to become passive or to do nothing. And thus, realizing an even more comprehensive rule or wisdom. This can certainly be put into a political context; the Daodejing has often been read politically and the emperors in imperial China very much appreciated the Daodejing.

Simultaneously there were other readers too, even subversive ones. The idea of a strong controlling center could always be challenged as well.

FM: Exactly, you've now drawn this picture of the ruler in the center, which leads us to another key concept of Daoism. Namely, the Dao, who is somewhat in the center and encircled by the truth seeker. What exactly is this center, how can I imagine it? And is this idea of the center something that is more mystical or is it something that I can also grasp rationally?

KM: Dao is of course the central concept of Daoism. Literally translated, it means *the way* or 'the method', or also verbally as 'speaking', 'verbalizing', or 'addressing', and ultimately it is not a concept. It should be approached through the stories in the Zhuangzi, for example, where it's always about expanding, about breaking down and overcoming existing boundaries and conditionalities. For example, by becoming like a bird, the mythical bird Pong, or, as Richard Wilhelm then translated it, Roc from 1001 Nights, by ascending to the heights, and learning to overcome, so to speak, these trivialities of everyday life. Similarly, the parable of the frog in the well urges us to ascend from the well and relativize the existing contexts from a more comprehensive perspective, unlike the frog who took the well for the world. The further one expands, the closer one gets to the Dao. At least that's what I'm assuming. And certainly, this total view of the entire universe contains a very strong mystical element. At some point at least a sage is supposed to be able to relate to the world in this way, by regarding heaven and earth as a whole. Us ordinary mortals are required to at least align ourselves with this perspective. The Dao is not conceptual, there are certainly also rational elements, so certain arguments or sentences in the Daodejing sound like arguments, although at its innermost core, there is a very strong mystical element.

FM: Exactly, you have now gone into this mystical dimension. In the intro, I mentioned that Daoism is a school of thought, but maybe we can be a little more specific about what that means. Perhaps one could now ask: Is Daoism a religion or a philosophy?

KM: Of course, the distinction between religion and philosophy is used to describe certain elements in Daoism - this distinction, however, is of European or occidental origin. In the

Chinse language, there is no such distinction. I think Daoism encompasses both elements. The book of Zhuangzi in particular, can be read skeptically. Similar to Pyrrho, certain descriptions or distinctions, for example the small and the great knowledge sound like Pyrrho, But then there are also these parables and stories that can probably ultimately only be understood mystically or religiously. And then, of course, there are all kinds of practices. Daoism has never been just a discourse, but always a collection of practices. Then there are certain visualization practices, where you sit down and meditate. Like meditating on a vase in Buddhism, you can meditate on a story in Daoism. This idea of Zhuangzi that the Dao is even present in ants, or even in piss and shit, is really visualizable when you sit alone in your room and meditate on this sentence. Then there are concrete breathing techniques or certain practices from inner alchemy that basically all serve this goal of visualizing the Dao, the ultimate reason of the universe.

FM: Maybe we can go into these practices later. I think this is very relevant. We have touched on the Zhuangzi several times now, and I think it might be important to clarify what that actually is? The author of this book is called Zhuangzi, like the book itself. Why is the book named after the author? And what is the relationship between these two central texts - the Zhuangzi and the Daodejing? Perhaps you can explain this to us briefly?

KM: Both texts are traditionally considered as wisdom texts. Both can be dated to the late fourth or early third century. Both come from a similar era, although it has to be said that the Daodejing comes from an oral tradition, so it probably emerged much earlier and was gradually compiled by different people. The book Zhuangzi, on the other hand, actually has an individual author. There is quite a bit that can be said about the individual Zhuangzi, and the Book of Zhuangzi is in many ways much more articulate, much livelier than the text of the Daodejing. The Daodejing often comes across as a bit dry, but then it also has very surprising poetic turns, and leaps, and all these very astonishing metaphors about the wheel, the wheel on a cart, we've already had that, about the mother, about the valley, about the water, about the root, that is of course very poetic and still appeals to many people today, but ultimately the text is still relatively brittle and very short. The Zhuangzi is much longer. It feels like it is written by an individual. It has 33 chapters and contains all kinds of elements. A discursive theoretical element, for example, in the famous second chapter about the

equality of things. There are also many parables and stories about people who have been crippled in war, about trees, the mythical birds or just about all kinds of other natural phenomena. The Zhuangzi is basically much richer than the Daodejing.

MH: It sounds like there is no conflict between argumentative texts and narrative poetic texts in the Chinese wisdom literature that you're outlining. In Western philosophy there is sometimes a conflict between authors who argue sharply, like Descartes, for example, and authors who tell stories from their lives or just stories, like Montaigne. This dispute seems to be absent in Chinese literature, when you say that there are reflections and arguments as well as stories in one and the same book. Is that a correct observation or am I misunderstanding this?

KM: No, the observation is correct. And to that extent, of course, Daoism challenges us to rethink our own destiny, our own delimitations. The book of Zhuangzi seems postmodern in many ways. The fact that the author himself appears in the book of Zhuangzi, perhaps reminds you of short stories by Broches or others. Many postmodern writers have been enthusiastic about the book of Zhuangzi, so it's quite a confusing conundrum and a labyrinth, a textual labyrinth basically, and you can sink into it like I did. And for the Chinese authors, the thinkers and philosophers of this tradition, this great tension between logos and myth, or between rational argumentation and poetic representation, does not in fact play as great a role as it does for us.

FM: Now regarding the Daodejing, you mentioned that the main addressee of the book is the ruler who is supposed to be made wise; is the Zhuangzi addressed to a different audience? It sounds like it is, based on what you just said.

KM: Yes, I believe that is correct. Since it has a specific author who saw himself at a great distance from the ruling Confucians and who responded directly to his historical situation, you can say that. Zhuangzi was in many ways embittered by all the wars and the political strife of his time, so he tried to create a counter-image. This text is certainly written for the ordinary reader and not for the ruler. It is very easily accessible. There are also countless readers of the Zhuangzi in the German-speaking world.

FM: You just mentioned Confucianism. Would you like to briefly explain whether there are any overlaps there, and in what relationship this central text of Daoism stands to Confucianism?

KM: Especially in the Zhuangzi, the Confucians and the Confucian virtues are attacked very sharply and presented as a phenomenon of decay. As soon as you have to start talking about virtues in a country, such as virtues of humanity, it is already too late. This discussion always comes much too late. People should be left in a natural self-relation and should regulate themselves naturally. There is no need for external guidance through moral codes or regulations. In Zhuangzi there is similar criticism, so that this tension between Daoism and Confucianism runs through the centuries and this idea, which I had already briefly outlined, this idea of expansion, of extension, it also plays a role. According to Zhuangzi, one should transcend the existing social roles that one is naturally born into or that one grows into. One should free oneself from them. There are later interpretations, which try to connect both, Daoism and Confucianism. In the 3rd or 4th century AD, one could allegedly be a Daoist as an official at the imperial court, at the ruler's court. During the day, you play the Confucian, so to speak, and try to fulfill these social roles as well as you can, but in the evening or at home, you are a Daoist and turn inwards. There are such attempts. Transcendence in immanence, so to speak. One is part of a hierarchy and tries to overcome this hierarchy through certain meditative practices or through other expansive strategies. Both are certainly expressions of this idea that Dao ultimately encompasses everything. There is a monastic structure that is circled around repeatedly in Daoism, with the metaphor of the wheel amongst others, and, so to say, this idea also serves hierarchy and anarchy. This plays a big role for us. We often perceive Daoism as a doctrine of self-realization or as an anarchism that, as it were, in Chinese, is tried to be re-embedded or embedded in a Confucian hierarchy. That certainly also exists.

FM: Yes, based on what you have told us now, it sounds as though it is really about practical life advice, that is, about how to live under certain conditions. So far, we have visualized the theories mostly by talking about books and people, but now I would like to talk about everyday practice. You've already touched on this a bit, but perhaps you'd like to elaborate.

How does reading these two books help you deal with life-related issues, such as your own transience?

KM: In Daoism, there is certainly some kind of basic trust in the meaningfulness of the whole universe. One believes in the Dao or one embodies this assumption, or one is convinced that there is a Dao and that one can approach this Dao in some way. It certainly embodies this idea that the universe has a meaning and that it is friendly to us, and that it is friendly to man, and that is always spun out and spun on in all natural stories, this thread. It just doesn't stop with a theoretical belief. This idea or this insight into the Dao, should always be practically underpinned or should be practically embodied in one's own life. And then there are all kinds of descriptions in both texts. Descriptions of forms of spiritual practice as summarized by Pierre Hadot. I have just mentioned inner alchemy, which is certainly very foreign to us. Common before and during the Renaissance in Europe, for most people in the 21st century practicing inner alchemy is no longer a realistic option. Now, forms of meditation or other forms of retreat are more accessible. The Daoists of 2000 years ago retreated into grottos or bamboo forests, while we can perhaps retreat into the bedroom. By sitting down in a certain mediation posture or by starting to visualize certain stories from the Zhuangzi, you can restore an inner peace that you may have lost during the day. Learning to feel one's own body also plays a big role in Daoism, the notion of making the body transparent through thoughts. One thinks oneself into the foot, into the hand, into the belly. As is often said in a strongly religious language, one senses one's own cosmic embryo. There are then such manners of speaking. There is also the idea of becoming soft. That one becomes soft, for example, through Tai-chi and other exercises, where one learns to soften the body. And then in the Zhuangzi there's this beautiful story that if you actually soften your body to such an extent, then you don't break any bones when you fall out of a cart. Like the theory that a drunk is not supposed to break anything when falling from a great height. This makes you invulnerable according to the Zhuangzi.

FM: Exactly, you described Daoism earlier as discourse. I would be interested in the genesis, the historical relationship of the exercise, that you just described, to the texts? Are they all rooted there or are there perhaps institutions that have established certain practices in the

past? To what extent is Daoism something ever evolving, and to what extent can this be traced back to these texts? What constitutes Daoism as a discourse?

KM: In the past there were always Daoist schools, so the idea that you just learn Daoist thought by yourself at home, that didn't exist. You needed a master or a teacher to guide you in the practice of Daoism. This student-master relationship runs through the centuries, and, naturally, certain schools, or rather, personalities at the schools, attracted very many students. These personalities then developed a special version of Daoism and passed it on to later generations. Then, for example, in the Han Dynasty about 2000 years ago, there were great schools and currents that had a lot of influence in society. Even later, in the 16th and 17th centuries, you can still see that people never just studied these texts academically or at a modern university, but actually built their lives around them. This may remind us of Christian cults or certain schools or currents in Christianity and there are certainly analogies. These developments exist to this day in China, and especially in Taiwan. There is also a strongly religiously tainted Daoism, where Daoist thoughts and practices are taught by masters in temples and other teaching institutions. Similar to Zen Buddhism.

FM: Exactly, we have spoken about Daoism in China and Taiwan, but traditional Southeast Asian practices such as mediation and various martial arts are also very popular in the West today. To what extent can an appropriation of such practices be understood as a mediator of the tradition behind it? Or to what extent is it actually a problematic extraction that tears things out of their original context?

KM: You're addressing the question of cultural appropriation, I think. How far others can appropriate knowledge or wisdom forms from other cultures, which is a very complicated question, to which I certainly don't have a simple answer. There have always been movements of intercultural appropriation in history. So, for example, Indian Buddhism was further developed in Tibet and the form of Buddhism in Tibet, has then continued to develop in China and Japan. Just as in the sixties, for example, when John Cage appropriated the Book of Changes or Daoist ideas, there have always been learning movements in history. Today, of course, they have a greater ethical sensitivity for the underlying problems than previous generations. So we are more aware of the historical contexts, which may be due to

the commercialization that often distorts this appropriation process. If you go to a Daoism center in Los Angeles to learn with a master, this master might tell you a lot about these ideas from the Zhuangzi, about master Lie who rides the wind, but what happens here defacto, may in fact be a very commercial activity. So you pay money for Daoism to be divided into short blocks of teaching that are then reified. And it is precisely this phenomenon of reification that concerned the early Daoists. These are certainly tensions to which there is no simple answer and which continue to play out and will be experienced as tensions by many people in the future.

FM: Unfortunately, we have already reached the end of our conversation. I would like to thank Kai Marchal and Michael Hampe for participating in this podcast and I would like to invite our listeners to follow further Wisdom-Talks as well as to curiously plunge into the medial offers of the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature and wisdom practices on metis.ethz.ch. For example, you can access the link to our text archive directly below the podcast in the show notes.
Thank you for your time and goodbye!
MH: Thank you very much Ms. Maas, thank you very much Kai.
KM: Thank you very much Ms. Maas for the lovely questions and thank you Michael.
MH: All the best!

FM: This podcast was produced by Martin Münnich with support from ETH Zurich and the Udo Keller Foundation, Forum Humanum in Hamburg.