**Dao in Nature**

In ancient Chinese literature, which has shaped East Asian cultures, being a good person means conforming to the way of Dao,**1** which is understood as the order of nature or the natural order of society (or even the divine will). Although Daoist and Confucian perceptions of Dao differ, each school of thought follows this same pattern.

Legend has it that Lao Tzu wrote the *Dao De Jing* around 500 BCE, as he was leaving China to die in the wilderness. The *Dao De Jing* says, “The greatest Virtue is to follow Dao and Dao alone.”**2**

Virtue is not a character trait that a person can achieve through diligence but is the delight that comes with discerning the Dao.**3**

Confucius (551–479 BCE) agrees in the *Analects* that living according to the Dao — doing one’s duty and being unconcerned about rewards — is how one may encourage virtue in others. For Confucius, a virtuous person respects those with greater power, is gracious to dependents, is just with subordinates, and always acts with humility.

Can virtue be learned? Both the *Dao De Jing* and the *Analects* agree it can. Confucius spent his life traveling and teaching others how to live a virtuous life.

In the *Analects* living the Dao is the best way to govern. This means those who strive for a position of power to create the good society are foolish. “Do not worry about holding high position,” Confucius taught. “Worry rather about playing your proper role.”**4**

Virtue requires “balance,” he said. “When substance overbalances refinement, crudeness results. When refinement overbalances substance, there is superficiality. When refinement and substance are balanced, one has Great Stature.”**5**

In this respect the *Dao De Jing* and the *Analects* diverge in affirming how to follow the Dao. To promote the virtue of refinement Confucius teaches the importance of ceremonies, music, and public rituals.

The *Dao De Jing*, however, finds virtue in the way of nature: As “water overcomes the stone,” a person of virtue “is like water, which benefits all things,” but “does not contend with them.”**6**

Nonetheless, the two schools of the Dao tradition agree that refraining from action, rather than trying to make the world right, is often the way to harmony, which is the goal of good living. The *Dao De Jing* asserts:

 *The Way takes no action but leaves nothing undone.*

*When you accept this the world will flourish in harmony with nature*.**7**

“Nature is not kind,” the *Dao De Jing* reminds us, but “treats all things impartially.” Therefore, virtue also requires treating all people impartially, rather than having mercy on some and not on others.**8**

Daoists and Confucians agree that from “mercy comes courage,” as the *Dao De Jing* affirms, and from “humility comes leadership.”**9**

This notion of Dao is reflected in the teaching of Confucius that we should respond to unjust leaders by being civil, which will encourage them to become virtuous.

**Can we learn from the Dao about our eco-choices today?**

Robert Traer, *Doing Environmental Ethics* (Routledge, 2020).

1 In earlier centuries, writers in English used the word Tao for this Chinese concept.

2 Lao Tzu, Dao De Jing, transl. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English, number 21.

3 Ibid.

4 James R. Ware, trans. The Sayings of Confucius, 36, number 4:14.

5 Ibid., 47, number 6:18. Great Man has been changed to Great Stature.

6 Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, numbers 43 and 8, <https://www.scribd.com/document/126762852/Tao-Te-Ching-by-Lao-Tze-An-Interpolation-of-Several-Popular-English-Trns-by-Peter-a-Merel>. Rendition by Peter A. Merel of translations by Robert G. Henricks, Lin Yutang, D. C. Lau, Ch’u TaKao, Gia-Fu Feng, Jane English, Richard Wilhelm, and Aleister Crowley.

7 Ibid., number 37.

8 Ibid., number 5.

9 Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, number 67.