

# Daoist symbolism



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Daoism is a philosophy that uses images and allegories to explain its concepts of balance and harmony, two of its main aspects. By understanding the analogy of the wheel, one can better understand Daoism and many of its principles. The image of the wheel symbolizes the Dao: the ultimate being of perfect harmony, egolessness, and fullness. The wheel represents the way that the Dao substantially stays the same, but moves and changes places. It incorporates aspects of typical Daoist compliments: it is made up of the hub and the spokes, and both function in different ways to complete the substance of the wheel. The spokes, many in number, surround the hub equally and physically. Because they are made of materials, they can potentially fade or wear away. The spokes all connect to the middle of the wheel and meet at the center place called the hub. Unlike the spokes, the hub is empty and contains nothing. Although this lack of material cannot be defined positively, it has significance in its emptiness, stability, cohesiveness, and singularity. The wheel as a whole never changes, only moves, and its two parts, the hub and spokes, function differently. Moeller says, "The hub does not move the spokes, the spokes rather turn around the hub" (pg. 36). One can relate the static aspect of the hub to a Daoist ruler, and how the people- the dynamic spokes- act on their own accord and move themselves. These two aspects together represent the ideal Dao, and the wheel as a whole constitutes as a model of the harmonious state of being that we should aim to achieve. The Ancient leaders would try to align themselves with the hub and become like it in order to more closely resemble the Dao and be the center of power. Daoist rulers also aim to be like water because of its humble and low-lying, yet energetic and flowing aspects. The theory is that ideal ruler will be like water in these ways, and

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therefore will be the source of life, the giver of Qi. The word “ qi” can be translated to mean “ breath”, “ energy”, and “ vital force”, all life giving qualities that an ideal Daoist ruler strives to obtain. Qi flows through and gives life to everything. The center of the hub, the part of the wheel that is nothing, can be defined by its emptiness. But how does one go about defining emptiness itself? The Chinese word ‘ xu’ discusses this concept of emptiness and its significant role in Daoist philosophy. As Moeller explains, emptiness cannot be defined positively, because of its lack of physical material. The empty hub or an empty glass is simply empty because there is nothing. Therefore, the emptiness is defined negatively, by describing what it is not. An empty glass is not full of water, not full of anything physical. It is full of nothing, and lacks everything, so it is empty. The surrounding material is irrelevant to the emptiness, whether it be a glass, a basket, or a room. Because emptiness is defined negatively, and is nonmaterial, it cannot be defined in terms of degrees; emptiness does not increase or decrease, it just covers more space- as one drinks out of the glass or as people leave a room- while remaining substantially the same. The entire philosophy of Daoism is based on balance and harmony, particularly in the respects of ‘ emptiness’ and ‘ fullness’. The yin yang symbol demonstrates this balance, and is a crucial concept in Daoism. The symbol is made up of two complimentary sides, each that are meant to balance each other out and create a whole. Most concepts in Daoism incorporate these aspects of complementary opposites; for example, it is a Daoist’s goal to achieve perfect emptiness, in order to accomplish absolute fullness. In other words, a Daoist seeks to completely rid him or herself of an ego, in order to engage in a perfect state of nonpresence, or emptiness. It is only in this nonpresence that one can

experience fullness, or complete presence, because the lack of ego doesn't allow for any distractions to take away from the fullness. This perfect harmony encapsulates the Daoist philosophy. Wang Bi, an interpreter of the Daodejing, comments further on the aspect of presence and nonpresence. He writes, " Things in the world are brought to life by presence. Presence is brought to life by nonpresence. " (pg. 41). To better understand this passage, we put it in a human perspective. Experiences and daily activities are possible because of presence, because with presence we are able to fully participate in our lives. However, presence is only possible because of its compliment, nonpresence. Without achieving nonpresence first, our experiences would never be complete or " full" because our egos get in the way and prevent us from achieving presence. One of my favorite lessons from Daoism Explained involves this very principle. Moeller sites the butterfly allegory and references the idea that " lingering about the past, as well as anticipation for the future will irritate and eventually spoil the enjoyment of pure presence" (pg. 97). Our ability to appreciate and experience the present gets lost in our apprehensions, and temporal friction is introduced. Since I began writing this paper and thinking about this concept more in depth, I have found myself more aware of how much of my time is spent lingering on the past and worrying about the future. Despite my conscious efforts, I find it extremely difficult to put myself in such a state of complete presence in my school environment. Daoism holds that in order to maintain happiness, we should not transgress presence. In other words, joy will come to those who live in the present time, and one will be able to experience the fullness of life. This concept fascinates me because I find it to be true and I have never thought to wonder about it previously. Looking back, the moments of true

happiness in my life were at times in which I was fully living in the moment and not concerned with the past or the future. Many of the happiest memories I have are from concerts or retreats at which I am able to truly lose myself and focus only on the events unfolding around me. According to the Daoist philosophy, time is a sequence of extended phases of presence, and it is important that we continue to live in this time.