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Field, focus and focused-field: a classical Daoist world view and physiology

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Abstract In this paper I argue that Classical Daoist philosophy, especially Zhuangzi's worldview, offers a unique understanding of place. For classical Daoists, existing in a place puts a creature in a position that results in a certain limited perspective. Daoist physiology, by means of meditation, teaches people to “walk both ways” (Zhuangzi in *A Concordance to Chuang tzu*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 4/2/40, 1956; Watson in *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1968). Walking both ways provides a new position in their placement thereby expanding peoples' perspectives. As Laozi says, “we can know the world without going out the door; we can see the way-making of nature without looking out the window ...” (Laozi in *Konkordanz zum Lao tzu*, E. Schmitt, München, 1968). With the right training that activates their neurophysiology, Daoists develop the ability to take different positions to discover new perspectives regarding their place in the world. These new perspectives also allow them to gain insights into the position and perspective of other creatures and people.

Keywords Perspective · Place · Meditation · Physiology · Field · Focus and focused-field

The field and focus explanation of *dao* (道 way or field) and *de* (德 instantiated power or particular focus) in classical Daoist philosophy by David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames offers a unique interpretation for understanding the self.¹ For

¹ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1998) (Hall and Ames 1998, pp. 45–77).

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classical Daoists, *de* 德 or particular focus puts a creature in a position that results in a particular limited perspective, generating various biases. In developing the focus-field interpretation of the self, Hall and Ames do not emphasize the importance of meditation or deep breathing exercises in Daoism. In this paper I expand upon their focus-field interpretation by emphasizing the role of meditation. Daoist meditation changes people's physiology and thereby teaches people to "walk two roads."² Walking two roads or seeing things the way they really are provide new environmental and social positions that expand peoples' perspectives and understandings. As the *Laozi* says sitting quietly in your room is sufficient, "We can know the world without going out the door; we can see the way-making of nature without looking out the window...."³ With the right training that activates their neurophysiology, Daoists develop the ability to take different positions to discover new perspectives regarding the self and their place in the world. These new perspectives allow them to gain insights into the position and perspective of other creatures and people.

Field

In *Thinking from the Han*, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames introduce and develop a focus-field interpretation of *dao* and *de* to explain the Daoist understating of the self.⁴ Recently Roger T. Ames has proposed that Daoist worldviews are based on an understanding that the world or *dao* 道 is an unsummed totality in which the field of existence, or *dao* of nature, and the instantiated focus or *de* 德 are correlative aspects.⁵ They draw inspiration for the focus-field interpretation from Joseph Needham.⁶ Robert Henricks' agricultural metaphor⁷ is easily expanded to an energy field.⁸ The field and focus are contextual and they may change places. Hall and Ames explain the contextual and interrelated exchange in the following:

² Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1968) (Watson 1968, p. 41). Zhuangzi, *A Concordance to Chuang tzu*, Harvard-Yenching Index Series No. 20 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1956) (Zhuangzi 1956, 4/2/40).

³ Laozi, *Konkordanz zum Lao tzu*, ed. C.C. Müller, and R.G. Wagner (München, Germany: E. Schmitt, 1968) (Laozi 1968, p. 47).

⁴ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*: 45–77.

⁵ Roger T. Ames, "Classical Daoism in an Age of Globalization: From Abduction to *Ars Contextualis* in Early Daoist Cosmology," *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, (Dec. 2015): 105–148 (Ames 2015).

⁶ Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*. Vol. II (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1956) (Needham 1956, p. 466).

⁷ Robert G. Henricks, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts* (New York, New York: Ballantine Books, 1989) (Henricks 1989, pp. xx–xxii).

⁸ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (New York, New York: Harper Collins, 2010) (Fritjof Capra 2010). Livia Kohn, *Science and the Dao: From the Big Bang to Lived Perfection* (St. Petersburg, Florida: Three Pines Press, 2016) (Kohn 2016).

Our focus-field model of the self must be understood in terms of what we have elsewhere termed, *ars contextualis*. Chinese thinkers, both Confucian and Daoist, most often employ an approach to philosophic understanding that is in striking contrast to the two dominant modes of Western speculations. ... [namely] ... a 'general ontology,' nor ... a 'science of universal principles.' It is the 'art of contextualization' that is most characteristic of Chinese intellectual endeavors. The variety of specific contexts defined by particular family relations, or sociopolitical orders, constitute the fields focused by individuals who are in turn shaped by the field of influences they focus. *Ars contextualis*, as a practical endeavor, names that peculiar art of contextualization that allows the focal individual to ally herself with those contexts that she will constitute and that in turn will constitute her.⁹

In one context the field becomes a focus and the focus in another context becomes a field. The correlative or non-dual character of all things, the large and the small, the river and the ocean and so on is explicated by the God of the North Sea, Ruo, in his discourse with the River God.¹⁰ For example on the largest scale the multi-verse is the field and the universe we dwell in is a focus or a focused-field. Our universe is a field and the galaxies are foci, and so on. In the correlative, bimodal, non-dual, logic of the early Daoist worldviews, there are no higher order principles or laws. As the God of the North Sea advises: "It (great wisdom) comprehends the Level Road, and for that reason it does not rejoice in life nor look on death as a calamity, for it knows that no fixed rule can be assigned to beginning and end."¹¹ Hence Ames argues that the Daoists have a complex "pluri-verse" rather than a single ordered "universe" and their cosmology is "acosmotic" in that it is not derived from a single order, law or principle.¹²

Focus

For Hall and Ames the focus-field self in classical Daoism is determined by three *wu*-forms of deferential activity, namely *wuzhi* 無知, *wuwei* 無為, and *wuyu* 無欲.¹³ These three *wu*-activities occur in a context of yielding and being yielded to. For the most part they describe these as intellectual activities. Following Zhuangzi, they recognize that each creature is limited by its own perspective.¹⁴ The three *wu*-activities provide what they refer to as a "discipline and practice" for overcoming the limited perspective and to embrace the ongoing transformation of things.¹⁵

⁹ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*: 39–40.

¹⁰ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 173–183.

¹¹ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 177.

¹² Ames, "Classical Daoism," 114.

¹³ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*: 46–58.

¹⁴ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*: 56.

¹⁵ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*: 55 n16.

So when Zhuangzi says a morning mushroom cannot understand the evening, let alone the long life of the Rose of Sharron or when he says that men prefer Lady Li but fish are afraid of her and dive deep to escape her gaze, Zhuangzi is displaying his understanding of how the particular focus maintains its position and perspective.¹⁶ For the self-aware creature the perspective is both a visual view and an understanding. Hence each creature has its own limited perspective. However, Zhuangzi is able to see things from the other's perspective; he has a kind of empathy for others that allow him to see from the other's point of view. Hence he knows the difference between the morning mushroom's and the Rose of Sharron's experiences, the limitations of the well frog, the summer insect or the cramped scholar.

For humans, society imposes additional understandings, values, forms of proper conduct, desires, and so on. These hinder the natural flow of life. Daoists developed various breathing exercises, forms of meditation both in motion and sitting still, and philosophical understandings concerning how to cut lose (*jie* 解) from the restrictions imposed by the social order that shorten a person's natural life span. They developed physiological practices to allow people to expand their perspective to empathize with others. This is called "walking both ways." It is a bimodal or non-dual way of viewing and understanding. How is it achieved?

Focused-field as perspective

The place we inhabit is changing. It is a dynamic process, and we are changing too. The focused-field is creative, and we in turn are co-creating our place in the field. Transformation (*hua* 化) is the first philosophical concept introduced in the opening lines of the *Zhuangzi*, relating the story of a whale, Kun, transforming into the Peng bird.¹⁷ Transformation and change (*bian* 變) are important aspects of the Daoist worldview that impact the way they look at and understand things.

Consider the story of Lady Li, the daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was taken captive, she cried until her collar was wet. After she settled down and enjoyed the comforts and food at the palace, she wondered why she ever cried.¹⁸ The Lady Li story shows how changing a person's location and position generate new perspectives on a person's life and reflectively on a person's place and position. At home Lady Li has one perspective; at the palace she takes on a new perspective that changes the way she sees her place, her perspective, and herself.

The ability to change perspectives comes from relying on "heavenly equality or natural parity."¹⁹ The Daoist perspective that Zhuangzi holds is a correlative, bimodal or non-dual logic based on the interplay of correlative opposites and the recognition that most creatures.

¹⁶ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 30 and 46.

¹⁷ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 29.

¹⁸ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 47.

¹⁹ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 48.

Everything has its ‘that,’ everything has its ‘this.’ From the point of view of ‘that’ you cannot see it, but through understanding you can know it. So I say, ‘that’ comes out of ‘this’ and ‘this’ depends on ‘that’—which is to say that ‘this’ and ‘that’ give birth to each other. But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. ... Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Nature.²⁰

The flip-flop of correlative opposites leads to a non-dual logic that makes all things into one. “No thing is either complete or impaired, but all are made into one again. Only the man of far-reaching vision knows how to make them into one.”²¹ Saying that things are different when they are not different or trying to make things into one with the mind’s eye alone will not yield the natural perspective. The point of the “three in the morning” story is that we fool ourselves with our wording that things are different when in fact they are one already, but our limited perspectives and wording obstruct our view of the way things really are.

There was no change in the reality behind the words, and yet the monkeys responded with joy and anger. Let them if they want to. So the sage harmonizes with both right and wrong and rests in natural parity. This is called walking two roads.²²

The Daoist uses clarity, the light of nature or the revolving hinge to open new horizons, new perspectives on the interplay of things and concepts. “Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was and the ten thousand things are one with me.”²³ The alleged opposites are united as one in the Daoist sage’s perspective. There is no world without my participation just as I could not exist without the world. Self and world, self and others, or each and every focused-field, these are all mutually co-creating each other. This is what the sage relies upon (*yinshi* 因是) by means of clarity, the light of nature or the natural parity.

Physiology and meditation

How does the Daoist sage obtain this unique perspective? I propose that it is by means of meditation or deep breathing exercises that the Daoists are able to transform their worldview by freeing themselves from their limited, situational perspective to embrace a correlative, bi-modal, or non-dual understanding, and experience of the great pervade. Thomas Michael links these meditation practices to the art of nourishing life (*yangsheng* 養生) exercises in the *Laozi*.²⁴ The outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are critical of the one-sided optimism of the *yangsheng* practitioners who only advocate long life, not recognizing that life and death are

²⁰ Modifying Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 39–40.

²¹ Modifying Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 40–41.

²² Modifying Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 41.

²³ Modifying Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 43.

²⁴ Thomas Michael, *In the Shadows of the Dao: Laozi, the Sage, and the Daodejing* (Albany, New York: State University Press of New York, 2015) (Michael 2015, pp. 93–138).

interrelated and mutually dependent.²⁵ The *Zhuangzi* does advocate the use of deep breathing or meditation to release oneself from the restrictions of the desires, knowledge and the accepted forms of behavior. These practices open new horizons and new perspectives on the way people live. “In fact, the perfected breathe all the way to their heels, unlike ordinary folk who breathe only as far as their throats.”²⁶

These deep breathing exercises circulate the material-energy (*qi* 氣) throughout the body, changing the way a person controls the desires, knowledge and action by focusing attention on the *dao* of nature. The meditations and breathing exercises help people focus on their actual place in nature, freeing them from the limitations of the desires, knowledge and behavior generated by biological-processes or by society. The meditation practices free them to take on new perspectives. These entail the three *wu*-forms of deference proposed by Hall and Ames.

The opening passage of the *Zhuangzi*, chapter two, depicts a meditation experience in which “Zi Qi of South Wall sat leaning on his armrest, staring up at the sky and breathing—vacant and far away, as though he’d lost his companion.”²⁷ His disciple recognizes the personal transformation by noting that “the man leaning on the armrest now is not the one who leaned on it before!”²⁸ Ames modifies Graham’s translation of this passage as: “The person meditating now is not the same one who was meditating a time ago.”²⁹ It is interesting that Roger elected to translate “leaning or reclining” as “meditating,” because this is the strongest reference to meditation playing a role in his understanding of the “discipline and practice” of Daoism. So Roger Ames does recognize that meditation plays a role in the practice. He did not emphasize meditation, only mentioning it in passing in the translation.

The practice of meditation and deep breathing transform people such that they gain new views on life and the world. They are able to achieve a mystical experience of being at one with nature. These practices allow them to understand the discussion on making things equal on par or making things one; that is, seeing things from the unifying *dao* perspective. This new perspective is called the “that is it that goes by circumstances” (*yinshi* 因是).

The famous fasting the heart-mind story in chapter four of the *Zhuangzi* provides another example of a Daoist meditation. Confucius advises Yan Hui:

Make your will one! Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don’t listen with your mind, but listen with your spirit. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the heart-mind.³⁰

²⁵ Livia Kohn, *Chinese Healing Exercises: The Tradition of Daoyin* (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2008) (Kohn 2008, p. 14); citing Angus C. Graham, trans., *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book Chuang-tzu* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981) (Graham 1981, p. 265).

²⁶ Modifying Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 77–78; in Kohn, *Healing Exercises*, 14.

²⁷ Watson *Chuang Tzu*, 36.

²⁸ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 36.

²⁹ Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*: 58.

³⁰ Modifying Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 57–58.

The fasting of the heart-mind describes a meditation practice of stopping the mind's analysis, and allowing the empty spirit to be totally absorbed in the *dao*-perspective.

Another example of mediation practices in the *Zhuangzi* is found in chapter seven in the famous story of Liezi bringing a shaman to meet his master Huzi. Each day they meet, Huzi practices a different meditation, changing his physical and mental disposition. These practices confuse the shaman so much so that in the end he runs away. Liezi realizes that he has learned nothing and returns home for three years without traveling; he replaces his wife at the stove, and feeds the pigs as if they were people; he stands alone like a clod. "In the midst of entanglement he remains sealed, and in this oneness he ended his life."³¹ Huzi and Liezi are both practicing meditation in their own ways.

Chan (Zen) Buddhism was influenced by the *Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi's* love for nature, simplicity, spontaneity and the radical antinomian use of language for humor and shock effect influence Zen. John Wu noted that the *Zhuangzi* influenced Zen with three concepts, namely fasting the heart-mind (*xinzhai* 心齋); sitting in forgetfulness (*zuowang* 坐忘), and being clear as the morning (*zhaoche* 朝徹).³² These expressions and others, such as dropping the body and mind, are borrowed from the *Zhuangzi* to describe Zen meditation. These expressions were created to describe Daoist meditation and were later appropriated by Chan and Zen masters.

Roth argues convincingly that the Nei-ye chapter of the *Guanzi* is a meditation manual. He provides a great detail of evidence which shows "...that inner cultivation is one of the most prevalent and significant influences in the *Chuang Tzu* collection."³³ Roth argues that the *Zhuangzi* and the Nei-ye chapter share three kinds of passages: those that use different wording for shared techniques and goals; those that use the same or similar wording for shared techniques and goals; and whole passages that are the same or similar.³⁴ He proposes that there is a "bimodal" mystical experience in chapter two of the *Zhuangzi*, which is referred to by the phrase "the 'that's it' which goes by circumstances (*yinshi* 因是)—the author's distinctive label for the free and selfless cognition of perfected human beings who 'pervade and unify' (*tongweiyi* 通為一) everything in their world."³⁵

This meditative process is described as a progressive series of forgetting that leads to an insight of the unity of events and things. The unity is described as the great pervade or the great thoroughfare or the great ongoing process of transformation. *Zhuangzi* uses Confucius and Yan Hui to depict the forgetting process in the following passage:

On another day he saw Confucius again and said, "I'm making progress."
 "Where?"
 "I just sit and forget."

³¹ Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 97.

³² John C.H. Wu, *The Golden Age of Zen* (New York, New York: Doubleday, 1996) (Wu 1996, pp. 25–29).

³³ Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training (Nei-yeh) and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) (Roth 1999, p. 153).

³⁴ Roth, *Original Tao*, 153.

³⁵ Roth, *Original Tao*, 153 and 154.

Confucius was taken aback.

“What do you mean by just sit and forget?”

“I let organs and limbs drop away, dismiss eyesight and hearing, cast off the body and expel knowledge, and go along with the Great Thoroughfare. This is what I mean by ‘just sit and forget’,”

“If you go along with it, you have no desires, if you let yourself transform, you have no norms. Has it really turned out that you are the better of us? Oblige me by accepting me as your disciple.”³⁶

By dropping the body-and-mind the meditator is able to get beyond the limitations of his or her limited perspective by merging with the Great Thoroughfare, the ongoing process of transformation. Getting beyond the limitations of one’s own limited perspective opens up new horizons for seeing things differently and being able to see things from the perspective of others. This kind of personal transformation puts the practitioner in touch with a wider perspective, and a different way of viewing the world and its creatures. “This cognition is the culmination of an apophatic practice like that in Inward Training...”³⁷

From the *Nei-ye* chapter to the *Zhuangzi* early Daoist meditation practices developed. Some of the basic practices continued to develop with inner alchemy and with other forms of Daoist meditation to this day.³⁸

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³⁶ Modifying both Graham, *Chuang-tzu*, 92 and Watson, *Chuang Tzu*, 90.

³⁷ Roth, *Original Tao*, 154.

³⁸ Kohn, *Healing Exercises*, and Kohn, *Science and the Dao*. Chung-yuan Chang, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963) (Chang 1963, pp. 123–168). Michael Saso, “The *Chuang –tzu nei-p’ien*: A Daoist Meditation,” in *Experimental Essays on the Chuang-tzu*, Victor H. Mair, ed. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983) (Saso 1983, pp. 140–159).

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