

Rounding Off the Corners

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Chapters 4 and 56 of the *Laozi* share four lines. In chapter 4 they describe the function and use of the Dao :

(The Dao) Rounds off the corners
Unties the tangled
Harmonises the brilliant
Brings together the dust.

In chapter 56 the same lines can be read as a description of one who knows mentioned in the first line ('One who knows does not talk about it.') or, more likely, as a series of instructions to anyone intent on following the way:

Round off the corners
Untie the tangled
Harmonise the brilliant
Bring together the dust.

The repetition of these lines in different contexts points to the importance of their message and to the holographic nature of existence. The Dao functions in this way and so one who is guided by the Dao will embody the Dao. When one gets the Dao he is not different to the Dao and everything he does is necessarily a manifestation of the power of the Dao. The sage and the Dao are not two.

What does it mean to embody what these four lines are suggesting? As always in this tradition, we must begin with the physical body before moving on to the more subtle bodies. 'Rounding off the corners' is one of the neatest characterisations of gradually allowing one's movements to become increasingly circular. The more corners our movements have, the more they start and stop, which reduces flow and wastes energy. The more we round off the corners, the less stuck we become and things smooth out: our nervous systems, our blood flow, our breathing etc.. On a more subtle level our energy starts to flow more smoothly and strongly. Finer still, rounding off the corners emotionally allows our emotions to smooth out and calm down; to return to balance. The same is true of our thoughts. A famous phrase from Chinese Medicine, which Bruce often quotes, points in the same direction and applies to all levels of our being:

‘With free flow there is no pain, with pain there is no free flow.’¹

‘Untying the tangles,’ which can also be translated as ‘easing the confusion,’ can refer to coordination and physical balance and also to making space in the body. Tension and contraction can tie your blood vessels in knots, as, for instance, with varicose veins. Worry and anxiety can literally tie your intestines in knots. Untying the knots is very much a health practice, physical, emotional and mental, and is all part of opening up the free flow in the body, the emotions and the mind.

‘Harmonising the brilliant,’ often translated as ‘softening the glare’ indicates the need for balancing out extremes. In western culture the brilliant is highly valued. From the Daoist perspective it is an extreme that cannot be maintained. Consider being on a beach in the full sun of summer. It is so bright that you cannot see properly. It is only by bringing that light into harmony with your eyes (using sun glasses) that you are able to see clearly what is in front of you. Harmonising extremes, returning to balance, centrality, is fundamental to all Daoist practice:

The Dao of Heaven is like drawing a bow.
What is high it draws down,
What is low it lifts,
What has too much it lessens,
What does not have enough it adds to.²

‘Bringing together the dust:’ often called ‘red dust,’ dust is an age old metaphor in China for that which reduces clarity, especially emotionally and mentally. While a more Buddhist approach would be to leave the red dust of the world behind and escape it, the Daoist approach is to allow the dust to come together and settle by allowing everything to go calm and still. Bruce talks about his conversations with his master Liu on this subject in *Relaxing into your Being*.³ Dust in water is the traditional image. When stirred up the water goes cloudy and nothing can be seen in it. When allowed to go calm the dust comes together and settles at the bottom, leaving the water clear. Our hearts and minds are the same, when stirred up our emotions and thoughts make everything cloudy and we cannot see things as they are. As we calm and still the water of our heart-minds our thoughts and emotions go quiet and we are able to see clearly and so respond appropriately to the changing situation.

We see that these four lines are actually about two primary, related subjects in Daoist practice at all levels: removing blockages through circularity and internal space; and clarifying perception through balance and stillness.

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¹ 通則不痛, 痛則不通

² Laozi 77.

³ Frantzis, B.K., *Relaxing Into Your Being* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2001), pp.105-107.