



About Dao

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The Babylonian cosmogony, recorded in the **Enuma Elish**, starts with: “When in the height heaven was not named,/ And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,/ And the primeval Apsu, who begat them,/ And chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both/ Their waters were mingled together.”

Apsu is the Abyss, which is a symbol for the Universal Possibility such as René Guénon defined it. The Universal Possibility, symbolized for our finite mind as an infinite valley or abyss, should be regarded as “the limit of all limits,” “the integral of all integrals,” containing by this supreme integration not only the manifestation but also the non-manifestation, the Being and the Non-Being. The Being is – as Guénon explained from a universal perspective – the principle of the universal manifestation, but it is not the absolute Infinity and does not coincide with the Universal Possibility.

The absolute Being, even though the source of manifestation, does not belong to it, being itself non-manifested. Matgioi wrote, commenting on Lao Zi: “*Dao* is like the one who provides the design, the materials for a house and the workers to build it, but will not live in it.” Guénon called this domain of the non-manifested possibilities, to which the Being belongs, the Non-Being. Yet the Non-Being is not the nothingness, the emptiness, the non-existence, the impossibility, but corresponds to the Supreme Principle, it is the Infinite *Dao*.

“Then was not Non-Being nor Being: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it. What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water? Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day’s and night’s divider. That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever” (**Rig-Vēda Samhitā**, 10.129). Then, the Non-Being appeared; then, “the Being, in the earliest age of Gods, from Non-Being sprang” (*asatah sad ajāyata*) (**Rig-Vēda Samhitā**, 10.72).

“All things under heaven [the ten thousand beings] sprang from It as the Being (and named); that Being sprang from It as Non-Being (and not named)” (**Lao-zi, Dao De Jing**, XL).

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“Beyond the senses is the mind, beyond the mind is the intellect, higher than the intellect is the Great Âtmâ, higher than the Great Âtmâ is the Unmanifest. Beyond the Unmanifest is Brahma, all-pervading and imperceptible. Having realized Him, the embodied self becomes liberated and attains Immortality” (**Katha Up.** 3, 7-8).

“He desired: many may I be, may I be born! He made *tapas*. Having made *tapas*, He sent forth all this, and what of this more. This having sent forth, into that very thing He then entered. That having entered, both the being and the beyond He became, the definite and the indefinite, the abode and the non-abode, the conscious and the unconscious; both the real (the truth) and the false did the Real (the Truth) become, and whatever else is there. That, they say, is the Real (the Brahma Truth). … In the beginning all this was but the Unmanifested (Brahma). From that emerged the manifested. That Brahma produced Itself by Itself. Therefore It is called the self-producer” (**Taittirîya Up.** 2, 6, 7).

It seems that the Non-Being is above the Being, the former enclosing the latter, yet we may see the Infinite or the Universal Possibility as an assembly of Non-Being and Being. The Being is One; the Non-Being is the metaphysical Zero, and as the Silence envelops the Word, likewise the Non-Being encases the Being; the Word is uttered Silence, the One is the metaphysical Zero affirmed, but, conversely, this Zero is more than non-affirmed One, and so is the Silence – more than the Word non-uttered. If we distinguish the Non-Being and the Being as two separate domains, then they could be considered two facets of the Universal Possibility: the non-manifestation and the manifestation. However, we may consider the Universal Possibility itself as the feminine aspect of the Infinity, in which case we mastermind a supreme pair, Qian and Kun, the active and passive perfections, as Matgioi and Guénon named them.

Far-Eastern tradition tells that the first emperor was Fu Xi, and he is described with horns (like Matsya-Vishnu, Phanes or Moses), a sign of spirituality and royalty. Fu Xi witnessed the divorce of Heaven and Earth, and then he noticed a Dragon emerging from the waters of a river, with its back marked by some curious diagrams, called “the river chart,” composed of round points, black and white, diagrams the emperor used as a model to draw the eight primary *guas*. Fu Xi contemplated the sky, then he looked down to the earth, observing its particularities, considering the appearance of the birds and of the earth’s products, the characteristics of the human body and of all things, and only then did he begin to draw the eight primary trigrams. The trigrams were conceived combining two fundamental traits: a straight continuous line, symbolizing Heaven, Qian, the Active Perfection, Yang, and a straight discontinuous line, symbolizing Earth, Kun, the Passive Perfection, Yin. The eight primary *guas* were arranged in a circle and then, once more, in another circle, concentric with the first one. By rotating the two circles in opposite directions the 64 hexagrams (or double trigrams) were generated.

The 64 hexagrams wove the texture of the oldest sacred scripture, the **Yi Jing**, “The Book of Changes”; of course, emperor Fu Xi, as an individual, was not the author of **Yi Jing**, and we should rather consider Fu Xi representing an “intellectual aggregate” (like Hermes – Matgioi specified) or an Age that inherited the Tradition transmitted on the Dragon’s back. Following the 64 hexagrams, one by one, all changes are generated, preserved and corrupted (in an Aristotelian sense).

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The indefinity, affirmed Matgioi, is suitable to symbolize the idea of infinity, the best representation being the straight line of indefinite length, which explains why Fu Xi chose the straight continuous line as the Principle's token. Nicolaus Cusanus has also symbolized God by an indefinite straight line, into which all the geometrical figures merge and all the contraries are resolved. The indefinite straight line suggests well the idea of non-determination, of non-definition, and it is appropriate to symbolize Active Perfection. With respect to Passive Perfection, affected by our individual rationality anchored into multiplicity, it is proper that it be represented by the discontinuous straight line. The production of the universal manifestation means then to double the line, replacing it with the *digram*, and to triple it, explicating the offspring. The *trigram* obtained, following a universal law, will appear as double, since all that is in Heaven replicates on Earth, and so the *hexagram* was born.

The **Yi Jing**, as a synthesis, accommodates the Far-Eastern traditional doctrines, yet to try to decipher this scripture without any knowledge about Tradition or without the support of a spiritual master is a waste of time; and, even if such support exists, like in Matgioi's case, the comprehension of the Book of Changes would be extremely difficult due to these very changes generated by the "current of forms." The **Yi Jing** is an opportunity for meditation and profound study from all viewpoints, for which reason we can receive enlightenment, better than following profane instruction, even by contemplating the Book's form, a changeable form, in accordance to the development of the cosmic cycles: at the beginning, the Book was a series of trigrams, essential and compressed ("complicated") symbols, the vision of which allowed the realization of everlasting Truth; then, the cosmic decline forced an explication and explicit description of these symbols, thus the succinct forms were born; eventually, the escalation of spiritual decadence imposed more and more elaborated commentaries. This is the natural way from quality to quantity, from essence to substance: Silence – Word – words. This is the way followed also by the Hindu tradition, where the **Upanishads** represent the explicit vision of the kernel that dwells in the **Vêdas**.

The *Logos*, Matgioi stated, is precisely the Dragon of the **Yi Jing**: "hidden dragon, non-action"; "dragon appearing in the field." The Silence is the hidden Dragon, the Word is the visible Dragon, the Judaic Kabbala names the Thinking (*Mahasheba*) "the hidden point," and the Word (*Memra*) is "the tangible point"; from this point, six directions of space radiated – another symbol for Logos and for the Universal Man. These six directions, reorganized from another perspective as six horizontal lines, define the first *gua* or hexagram of the **Yi Jing**, symbolizing the Principle as Active Perfection, Qian. We may note that we are able to identify the six lines due to the empty spaces that separate them, empty spaces representing the Void, while the line illustrates the One, the uttered Void. "The Word (*Memra*) has produced all things through its name One" (**Sepher Yetsirah**); the Word is One, and the Dragon is One, and the All is One, yet this truth, evident in the past, was lost during the advancement of the cycle, and therefore the **Yi Jing** had to have commentaries and the commentaries had to have more commentaries. Therefore, in the Islamic tradition, it was necessary to state a doctrine of Unity (*Et-Tawhîd*), in order to explicate what *ab origo* did not need any explication.

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The commentary of **Yi Jing** affirms: “The Abyss is the resting abode of the Dragon. Sometimes the Dragon jumps, sometimes it does not.”¹ Here it is the legend of the Dragon, as Matgioi told it: “The terrestrial waters mirrors the clouds flying in the sky. Their nature is similar; only their appearance is different. ... If their actions are not united, the celestial waters are powerless with regard to the earth; the terrestrial waters have no power upon the clouds. Thus, the fish in the earthly waters, the bird Hac (the crane) in the celestial waters, they live separately and are imperfect. But if the storm rises the waters or the heat vaporize them; and if the clouds rain toward the earth, then the union of the terrestrial and celestial waters occurs; the bird Hac descends towards the earth, like the clouds; the fish ascends toward heaven, like the water of the river; when they meet, the bird Hac lends its wings to the fish; the fish lends to the bird its body and the scales: in the middle of lightning and thunders, among the stormy waters, emerges the Great Fish with the secrets of the Law written on its back. This is the Dragon.”²

In the Hindu tradition, this Dragon is Ananta, the master of the Abyss, the dwelling of the sleeping Vishnu.³ The Abyss is the Babylonian Apsu, the Daoist Void, the synthesis of the waters, of the clouds and of the river.⁴ The Abyss is the resting place of the Dragon, yet from a metaphysical perspective there is no difference between the Abyss and the Dragon. The Abyss is, in a way, the feminine aspect of Infinity, the Passive Perfection, Kun; the Dragon is the masculine aspect, the Active Perfection, Qian.

Nevertheless, to define the Abyss or the Void means systematization, limitation, and determination, but the Principle cannot be limited in any mode; therefore, to translate metaphysical notions into human language the negative way is used (*neti, neti*).⁵

Meister Eckhart said in his sermons: “Beware! God has no name, since nobody can talk about Him, nor can understand Him. If I say, «God is good,» this is not true. I am good, God is not good. I would say even more: I am better than God; because what is good can become better, but God, since He is not good, cannot become better and neither the best,

¹ “The traditional commentary” says: “Sometimes the dragon jumps, sometimes it stays; ascending or descending, its position is not the same. Sometimes it advances, sometimes it retreats; coming closer or going away, the dragon follows the proper right way.” This illustrates also the development of the cosmic cycles, never a linear progression.

² The famous Daoist treatise, **Zhuang-zi** begins with “In the Northern Ocean there is a fish, the name of which is Kun, I do not know how many lǐ in size. It changes into a bird with the name of Peng, the back of which is ...”

³ Lie Zi told about the Abyss and the Dragon: “who knows how many thousands of millions of miles, there is a deep ravine, a valley truly without bottom; and its bottomless underneath is named «The Entry to the Void.» The waters of the eight corners and the nine regions, the stream of the Milky Way, all pour into it, but it neither shrinks nor grows. (...) To the North of the utmost North there is an ocean, the Lake of Heaven. There is a fish there, several thousand miles broad and long in proportion, named *kun*. There is a bird there named *peng*, with wings like clouds hanging from the sky, and a body big in proportion” (**Lie-zi, The Questions of Tang**, 2). The Wallachian traditional data named the Abyss *Vidrosul* (“otterly,” masculine) and the Dragon *Vidra* (“the otter,” feminine), stressing the two aspects of the Infinity.

⁴ “The highest excellence is like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things (the ten thousand beings), and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike. Hence (its way) is near to (that of) the Dao” (**Dao De Jing**, VIII).

⁵ Nicolaus Cusanus said that by negating something about God we get closer to the truth than when we affirm something. Meister Eckhart used the negative way: “It is no good, no being, no truth, no One, then what is It? It is the Void (“Nothingness”), it is not this, not this.”

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these terms being far away from God. He is above all. If I say also: God is wise, this is not true, I am wiser than God. If I add: God is a being, this is not true. He is the supreme Being and a superessential Void (Nothingness). Saint Augustine affirms about this: « the best a man can say about God is to be silent because of the wisdom of the divine richness.» Therefore, be silent and don't chat about Him, because you would lie and sin. If you want to be perfect and without sins, don't chat about God. Don't try to understand anything [in a rational way] about God, because God is above [discursive] understanding. A master said: If I had a God that I understand, I would not consider Him God anymore. You must get rid of yourself and melt in Him, and your self with His Self must become so completely a « mine », such that you understand forever, with Him, His primordial being and His unnamed Void.”

“A cicada and a little dove laughed at it, saying, « We make an effort and fly towards an elm or sapan-wood tree; and sometimes before we reach it, we can do no more but drop to the ground. » (...) What should these two small creatures know about the matter? The knowledge of that which is small does not reach to that which is great; (the experience of) a few years does not reach to that of many. How do we know that it is so? The mushroom of a morning does not know (what takes place between) the beginning and end of a month; the short-lived cicada does not know (what takes place between) the spring and autumn. These are instances of a short term of life. Don't ask the ephemeral beings about the great turtle, which lives five centuries, or about the tree that lives eight thousand years” (**Zhuang-zi**, 18, 1); similarly, the finite individual mind cannot understand the Infinity, the individual one cannot comprehend the universal one.

Lao Zi stated: “The Dao is hidden, and has no name; but it is the Dao which is skilful at imparting (to all things what they need) and making them complete” (**Dao De Jing**, XLI).

In the Islamic tradition, Allâh, in His Essence, is without names and qualities; Ibn ‘Arabî affirmed: “Allâh is without resemblance, without pair, has no helper or adjutant, has no associate, no minister, and no adviser. He is not body, nor substance, nor accident, nor composition, He cannot be defined. He is no star, nor darkness that manifests, nor light that shines.”

He is no light. He is no darkness. He “is” not, therefore the idea of nothingness, of void. He is indestructible, non-confinable, immovable, without ties, *non aliud* (as Nicolaus Cusanus would say). He is the Mysterious Anonymous, Ain Soph (**Zohar** III, 26 b).

“Lao Zi said, «The Dao does not exhaust itself in what is greatest, nor is it ever absent from what is least; and therefore it is to be found complete and diffused in all things. How wide is its universal comprehension! How deep [abyss] is its unfathomableness! It contains everything and does not have a bottom»” (**Zhuang-zi**, 13, 9).

From a metaphysical perspective, the Infinity is identical with the Abyss, an Abyss identical with the Void as absolute Plenitude. “Dao is a void, used but never filled. An abyss it is, from which all things come” (Lao Zi, **Dao De Jing**, IV); the “never filled” observation means that the Void is the Infinity and “it is the nature of the Dao, that even though used continuously, it is replenished naturally, never being emptied, and never being over-filled,” the Principle being unchangeable and immutable.

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“Chun Mang, on his way to the ocean, met with Yuan Feng on the shore of the eastern sea, and was asked by him where he was going. «I am going,» he replied, «to the ocean»; and the other again asked, «What for?» Chun Mang said, «Such is the nature of the ocean that the waters which flow into it can never fill it, nor those which flow from it exhaust it. I will enjoy myself, rambling by it» (**Zhuang-zi**, 12, 12). Sometimes, this “ocean” is called “the Great Valley” and it represents the image of the Principle, as Léon Wieger stated in his translation.

The Great Valley is another name for the Universal Possibility, its symbolism being present in the Christian and Judaic traditions: “I will also gather all nations, and will bring them down into the valley of Jehoshaphat, and will plead with them there for my people and for my heritage Israel, whom they have scattered among the nations, and parted my land” (**Joel III**, 2); “Let the heathern be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about” (**Joel III**, 12).⁶ “The valley spirit never dies. It refers to the dark and mysterious female (mother). The gate of the mysterious female is the root of Heaven and Earth. Continuous, seeming to remain” (**Lao-zi, Dao De Jing**, VI). “The valley spirit never dies” is an ancient Chinese dictum; the dark mother is the Universal Possibility (the Abyss) and the valley spirit is the Dragon.

Nevertheless, in the Western world, the Universal Possibility of the Far-Eastern tradition is better known as Void than Valley. Yet for Daoism, the Void is not only the supreme Principle, the Infinity or the Universal Possibility, but it descends on “Jacob’s ladder,” projecting its reflections at different levels, the universal manifestation being, if we can say so, imbued with a void that is its invisible support.

The void could be a symbol of the feminine pole, in correlation with the plenitude as the masculine pole⁷; the void is also a token for the intermediary world (Hindu *antariksha*), “the Atmosphere” (Hindu *Bhuva*); it is the median void, which, in another sense, is the central void inside the heart cavity. For modern man, the void is completely different

⁶ In Masonry, the Lodge is an equivalent of the Valley.

⁷ In this case, the Mountain is the masculine principle and the Valley the feminine one. “To be «male» (rooster) and appear as «female» (hen) is to act as the world’s ravine [the Abyss]. To act as the world’s ravine, treat virtuosity [De] as constant, and avoid separating is to return to infancy. To be «white» but appear as «black» is to act as the world’s paradigm. To act as the world’s paradigm, treat virtuosity as constant and avoid lapses is to return to the negative ultimate [no-end, no-limit]. To be «glorious» but appear as «disgraced» is to act as the world’s valley [The hexagram no. 3, Zhun, of the **Yi Jing**, having the first trait, the inferior one, a continuous line, signifies – Zheng Zi explained – “the symbolic image of nobility and a voluntarily descent under what is humble”]. To act as the world’s valley, treating virtuosity as constant is sufficient to return to uncarved wood [simplicity]” (**Dao De Jing**, XXVIII). The Valley or the Abyss represents here *coincidentia oppositorum*, the land of perfection, of simplicity, of infancy (attributes characterizing the spiritual realization). We note the triads: ravine – valley – paradigm (Hindu *Dharma*) (the Principle’s triad); cock and hen – white and black – glory and humility (the Yin-Yang’s triad); infancy – infinity – simplicity (the triad of spiritual realization).



gua Zhun (Kan, water, up; Zhen, thunderbolt, down)

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from the Daoist void, and is regarded from such a narrow and materialistic perspective that the void is confused with nothingness and non-existence.

The Void, as we stressed, is void only in the sense of being non-manifested, but it presents a formidable symbolic richness of perfect plenitude. The Void is the infinite and abyssal Plenitude, of the Non-Being and the Being in non-duality, it is specifically the ambiance of the sages: “The perfect men of old trod the path of benevolence as a path which they borrowed for the occasion, and dwelt in Righteousness as in a lodging which they used for a night. Thus they rambled in the vacancy of Untroubled Ease [the Void]” (**Zhuang-zi**, 14, 5).