

Touching the Ineffable

The first line of the Chinese classic, the Dao De Jing, reads something like, “**The Way that can be spoken of is not the eternal Way**”, or, even more succinctly, “the Dao that can be Dao is not Dao.” Either your eyes are rolling back in your head and you are convinced this, and sayings like this, are complete gibberish, or you have had an experience of the ineffable. This ineffable kind of experience brings with it the sense that it is both important and impossible to talk about.

This is the jumping off point for many spiritual philosophies from around the world. These philosophies assume that the deeper things cannot be spoken about and then proceed to tell you about them. It is a bit of a dilemma. There is an insight here that the things of utmost importance - those things that have traditionally been referred to as ‘spiritual’ - have a way of totally slipping through the hands of our language; we can’t quite make our words stick to them, making the relationship between language and spirituality always indirect.

The ancient authors we will consider here have to assume that we are traveling along with them. They must assume that we have some experience and appreciation of the ineffable. They must assume we have had some kind of experience of overwhelm, of being at a loss, of coming into the presence of an insight, mystery, or depth of love and beauty that is ‘beyond words.’ Here, words change their meaning and function. We no longer expect words to give us the taste of the apple; they merely point the way to the apple tree. **The words do not contain the reality.** They can merely suggest the thing that is already there despite the words. At the very least, they can, perhaps, remind us of the sweet taste of the apple once this taste has become a fact of our own experience.

Dao De Jing chapter 32: “When you have names and forms, know they are provisional”

But the spiritual philosophies go deeper than this. They are not satisfied with the memory of an experience, no matter how sublime, but rather a WAY or DAO of experiencing that takes us into the depths of the marrow of life. What do these ‘beyond words’ moments have in common? Well, obviously they are all considered to be beyond description...



Perhaps we should switch the question around: What is it that allows description to take place? The describer must be **different** and **separate** from the thing they are describing. I can describe the appearance of the mountain because ‘I’ am here and ‘the mountain’ is there. However, the experiences these philosophies are concerned with are the ones where the distinction between the “I” and the thing this “I” experiences collapses. They are not two different things.



They are one. This oneness carries the feeling that we are tapping into a different possibility of experience - something 'beyond' our normal mode of experience. This thing that is 'beyond' is never in the content of our experience, we can't see it, or hear it or hold it. It is that aspect of experience that is somehow sensed but never held, suggested but never captured. It is defined by the contour of our experience but never contained within it. The spiritual is not a 'thing'.

Dao De Jing chapter 14: "Look, and it can't be seen. Listen, and it can't be heard. Reach, and it can't be grasped... Approach it and there is no beginning, follow it and there is no end. You can't know it, but you can be it, at ease in your own life. Just realize where you come from; this is the essence of wisdom."

The spiritual philosophies point to this ineffable source. They are trying to evoke a sustained fascination with it. It is not that they reject experience in favor of some spiritual principle that stands in opposition to experience, though this is a common misunderstanding. They reject those vestiges of self-consciousness that hold us back from experience. When we fully unite with our experience it loses its density. It becomes light, free, and transparent to spirit. However, the paradox is that **full participation and total detachment are two ways of describing the same state**. We are fully participating in the sense that we are holding nothing back from the moment. We are detached in the sense that we are not controlling, manipulating, or mediating experience. We take our hands completely off the wheel and let our experience touch our innermost nerve. Only this innermost center is capable of experiencing the oneness, the total intimacy with the moment.

My first taiji teacher taught about this by making reference to sneezing. He taught that when you sneeze you should TOTALLY sneeze. Now, is this full participation in the sneeze or am I detaching myself and simply allowing the sneeze to happen? HAAATCHOOOO! The distinction between the two is purely semantic. In reality, they are one. There is no use clinging to one side of a paradox. There is just the HAAATCHOOOO of the moment, which is the HAAATCHOOOO of the entire universe and the ineffable spiritual power out of which the moment and the universe and the HAAATCHOOOO arise.

Dao De Jing Chapter 23: "Express yourself completely, then keep quiet. Be like the forces of nature: when it blows, there is only wind; when it rains, there is only rain; when the clouds pass, the sun shines through. If you open yourself to the Dao, you are at one with the Dao and you can completely embody it..."



My taiji students might wonder what all this has to do with my endless fascination with how the body rotates, with my insistence on the proper position of the elbow, with the movement of the knee.... In taiji training, every effort is made so that the body moves as one; no part moves in isolation from the others.

"When one part moves all parts move, when one part is still all parts are still." We have learned to separate and isolate the moving parts of the body. Taiji wants us

to reintegrate all the parts into a seamless whole. As we reintegrate, we learn not just about the body, but about life. We are becoming one with the powers that animate the body, aligning ourselves with them. When the body moves as a whole, there is a qualitative shift. **The body that moves as a whole**

becomes an expression of the whole in which it moves. The rotating body stands on a rotating earth which rotates within a galaxy that in turn rotates at incalculable speed. The atoms in the body are also rotating at incalculable speed. The body is not separate from the rotations happening at the micro or macro levels. It is integral to them. There is not the movement of the atoms that is separate from the movement of the body that is separate from the movement of the planets and galaxies, leaving us with three unconnected movements. There is one great movement, one great way, one great Dao, and all divisions are, however useful, ultimately illusory. There is no inner movement or outer movement, there is only the one great movement, the one great HAAATCHOOOO.

My teacher does not move; the universe, the Dao moves within him. When he rotates he rattles the bones of the cosmos.

<https://youtu.be/IFd-rOf68cg>