

# The Dao of P4C

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## Introduction

This mysterious text was excavated in the Pacific Ocean, where the legendary Hawaiian Islands was purported to have existed, in the year 3721. It is one of the few writings that have survived the nuclear war in the year 3003, when almost

everything of the ancient civilizations had been destroyed. It is very difficult for us to know the historical situation when this book was written or who wrote it and to what school the author belonged. However, with the few remaining archeological fragments we have, we have put together a hypothetical description of the background of this mysterious text.

The author seems to have studied under the ‘infant sage,’ one of the 14 sages that had shared their wisdom with their disciples, and was inspired to write this book under the influence of the sages’ teachings. The real name of the sage is not known. However, it is purported that the sage sometimes went by the name of Dr.J, so we can categorize the author as having written this book under the school of Dr.J. From the remaining fragments it has been analyzed that this Dr.J seems to have been a tall male of Caucasian descent. He was famous for his friendly smile. He is said to have lived a time of 500 years due to his secret elixir called ‘chocolate.’ Besides the teachings of the ‘infant sage,’ the author has incorporated the teachings of a sage named ‘Laozi’ who seems to have lived near the author’s point of origin. However, it is impossible for us to get a grasp of who this ‘Laozi’ was, but it seems that *Laozi* lived in a time too ancient for us to recollect.

Unfortunately, few works of Dr.J have survived the nuclear war. The ‘infant sage’ Dr. J seemed to have been working on a project called ‘P4C.’ There have been controversies of what this means but it is highly plausible that it means ‘Philosophy for Children.’ As the remaining fragments tell us, this project of P4C was initially started by another master possibly named Matthew Lipman. Lipman, wondering what possible benefit anyone would obtain from logic, wrote a book called *Harry Stottlemeier’s Discovery* (amongst many other works) to help children understand

logic. Lipman took a group of children forming a ‘community of inquiry’ through their dialogues as the model for his book, and hoped that his works would “help children span the chasms between wonder and reflection, between reflection and dialogue, and between dialogue and experience.”<sup>1</sup>

We do not know if this work of the mysterious author is an adequate representation of the school of Dr.J, but it being the only text to survive from this school, we rely on it to understand the teachings of the ancient sage. Hundreds of translations have been done of this text, and there still remain many controversial points. However, despite the difficulties, this school of thought has provided the most influential way of thinking that has shaped our education as it is today (4002).

## The Dao of P4C

The five things that the master and his disciples meditated on were: Children, Thinking, Community, Inquiry, Philosophy

To the question: “Why is Philosophy for Children needed?” the master replies:

“To help students develop their ability to think for themselves and to use that ability in a responsible way.”

“To set people on the journey to become ever more confident and competent facilitators of philosophical inquiry.”

To the question “How do we do it?” The master replies: “Plain Vanilla”

As a disciple of the ‘infant sage of the West,’ Dr.J, I have meditated on these teachings of the master and also my experience as a practitioner/facilitator of P4C at schools and have integrated them with the philosophy of the ancient master *Laozi* who is considered as the ‘infant sage of the East.’ The reason I do this is because of the striking resonance between the teachings of the sages, and also between my experience and the teachings. It seems that P4C is a realization of the *Dao*. The other reason I do this is because it is my hope that people from both East and West may feel that they are not far apart, and that they may be come closer to one another in harmony.

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## Chapter 55

### The Dao of the Community of Inquiry I

*To possess Power that runs deep, Is to be like a newborn Child.  
Poisonous insects do not sting it, Fierce beasts do not seize it,  
Birds of prey do not strike it. It's bones are yielding, Its muscles are relaxed, Its grip it is strong. It does not yet know the union of male and female, yet its virility is active. Its Life force is at its greatest. I can scream all day, Yet it does not become hoarse.  
Its Harmony is at its greatest. To know Harmony is called [Chang].  
To know [Chang] is called insight. To enhance life is called propitious.  
To be conscious of Influence is called strength. Things overgrown must decline.  
This is not the Tao. What is not the Tao will soon end.*



The state of the community of inquiry should be a state of harmony “The Shuowen defines he [harmony] as “mutual responsiveness” xiangying. The etymology of this term is culinary, takes us back to geng, a gruel-like staple of the early diet, comparable probably with the contemporary congee or zhou. Geng was made

by combining he, the widely cultivated fox-millet, and other locally available ingredients, in service to the palate, kou. Harmony is the art of combining and blending two or more foodstuffs so they come together with mutual benefit and enhancement without losing their separate and particular identities, and yet with the effect of constituting a frictionless whole ... harmony is distinguished from mere agreement by again invoking the central role of particularity.”<sup>2</sup>

So the community of inquiry should not be a unity of same opinions but a harmony of each individual opinions. Harmony does not always imply peacefulness. It contains tension and even conflict among the particulars. Harmony without tension would not be harmony at all, but rather a uniform agreement. To fully understand harmony here, we must understand what ‘chang’ and ‘insight’ are for *Laozi*. ‘Chang’ appears in chapter 16 and 28. Chapter 16: “... Experiencing [chang] is Clarity. Not to experience [chang] is to be heedless in one’s actions—bad luck. Experiencing [chang], then one is all-embracing, all embracing, an impartial Prince, Prince then King, King then Heaven, Heaven then Tao, Tao then one lasts very long. As to destroying the self, there will be nothing to fear.” Chapter 28: “Be familiar with Masculinity but watch over Femininity ... Be familiar with what is praiseworthy but watch over what is disgraceful .... Your [chang power] will be sufficient. Turn back to

being an Uncarved Block.”<sup>3</sup>

In chapter 16 ‘chang’ is described as ‘all embracing’. Experiencing it will lead to impartiality. In Chapter 28 it is said: “Don’t be attached to one of the opposites and return to the ‘uncarved block’ (= unnamed=unfixed=unbiased=nature=spontaneity) and your ‘chang power’ will be sufficient. The impartial state of having balanced the opposites, this is harmony and this is the state of the infant.” This is the way of the community of inquiry.

In chapter 36 *Laozi* defines what insight is: “When you want to shrink something you must always enlarge it. When you want to weaken something you must always strengthen it. When you want to neglect something you must always involve yourself with it. When you want to deprive something you must always give to it. This is called ‘subtle [insight].’”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, insight, for *Laozi*, is understanding that all things are interdependent and that they dynamically correspond with one another. This state of interdependence and correspondence is the state of harmony. Knowing this is the way of the community of inquiry.

## Chapter 32 - The Dao of the Community of Inquiry 2

*The way is forever nameless. Though the uncarved block is small,*

No one in the world dare claim its allegiance. Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it, the myriad creatures will submit of their own accord, Heaven and Earth will unite and sweet dew will fall, and the people will be equitable, though no one so decrees. Only when it is cut are there names. As soon as there are names, one ought to know when to stop. Knowing when to stop, one can be free from danger. The way is to the world as the River and the Sea are to rivulets and streams.



There are two important metaphors that *Laozi* uses here. I will explain the second one first. The metaphor using the river, sea, rivulets and streams can be a model for the community of inquiry. The rivulets are created by the river. Likewise the individuals are created by the community. However, this is not the end. The streams create the sea. Likewise

the individuals create the community. However, this is not the end. The streams create the sea. Likewise the individuals create the community. The community of inquiry is a creative interaction between the community and the individuals. It is not a one sided process of inquiry. This metaphor can be used to explain the relationship between the facilitator and the inquirers also. They mutually create one another. It is not a one way process. The second metaphor is that of the ‘Uncarved Block.’ This is one of the most important metaphors of *Laozi*. It is used to describe the state of

the *Dao*. Uncarved means unnamed. Unnamed means un-fixed. That is, names fix things. *Laozi* wanted to escape the state of fixing things. They produce artificial prejudices. Names seem to be real but are not. They are distinctions of convention. If we are attached to these names, our minds will become fixed. If our minds become fixed we will never experience the way. It is the same with the community of inquiry. If the inquirers are always confined to their own prejudices and are not willing to see that it is merely how they name this world, they will never get to any fruitful insight. Although the child metaphor is not used here, It is clear that *Laozi* understands the state of the Uncarved Block as the state of the child. The way of the river, rivulet, streams and sea, the way of the Uncarved Block, This is the way of the community of inquiry.

### Chapter 49 – The *Dao* of the Facilitator

*Evolved individuals have no fixed mind; they make the mind of the People their mind. To those who are good, I am good; to those who are not good, I am also good. Goodness is Power. Of those who trust, I am trusting; of those who do not trust, I am also trusting. Trust is Power. The Evolved Individuals in the world attract the world and merge with its mind. The People all focus their eyes and ears; evolved individuals all act as infants.*

The facilitator should not have a fixed mind. If he or she does, this would be detrimental to the community of inquiry. He or she should try to encompass as many views as possible. As Ronald F. Reed asserts “If questioning is to occur in a Philosophy for Children discussion, it ought to involve asking of questions where

the answers are not already known to the person asking the question.” (36) He or she must have the virtue of impartiality. He or she must also be willing to maintain her/his goodness and trust to even the most hostile groups. This is the power of the facilitator. If he or she can do this he or she will be able to attract the inquirers and focus their minds. This is the state of the infant. This is the way of the facilitator.

### Chapter 28

#### The *Dao* of the Inquirer (Philosopher)

*Know the male, Hold to the female; Become the world's stream. By being the world's stream, The power will never leave, This is returning to Infancy. Know the white, Hold to the black; By becoming the world's pattern, The Power will never falter. This is returning to Limitlessness. Know the glory, Hold to the obscurity; Become the world's valley. By being the world's valley, The Power will be sufficient. This is returning to Simplicity. When Simplicity is broken up, It*

*is made into instruments. Evolved Individuals who employ them are made into leaders. In this way the Great System is united.*

As we can see from the above, the inquirer should take all cases into consideration (The male/female, white/black, glory/obscurity). He should know how to balance all views. Believing that only one side is right is what *Laozi* despised most. This lead to false distinctions, which in turn lead to artificiality and superficiality. The attitude of the inquirer

should be like the valley and stream. It is not on top of everything but below everything. However, because of this it can comprehend everything. It is the state of non-fixation, non-prejudice. It is the state of an infant. The way of the valley and stream, the way of the infant, this is the way of the inquirer.

### Chapter 20

#### The *Dao* of Thinking for Yourself

*Discard the academic; have no anxiety. How much difference is there between agreement and servility? How much difference is there between good and evil? That one should revere what others revere—how absurd and uncentered! The Collective Mind is expansive and flourishing. As if receiving a great sacrifice, As if ascending a living observatory. I alone remain uncommitted, Like an infant who has not yet smiled, Unattached, without a place to merge. I alone seem to be overlooked. I am unknowing to the core and unclear, unclear! Ordinary people are bright and obvious; I alone am dark and obscure. Ordinary people are exacting and sharp; I alone am subdued and dull. Indifferent like the sea, Ceaseless like a penetrating wind, The Collective Mind is ever present. And yet, I alone am unruly and remote. I alone am different from the others, In treasuring nourishment from the Mother.*

What is thinking for yourself?

This was one of the topics focused on in a P4C session. Related to the above passage from the *Daodejing*, we can see that *Laozi* is against any kind of conventional fixation of thought. He takes the collective mind of all people into consideration. That is why he cannot be fixed. If we can maintain a state like an infant, a state of non-prejudice and non-fixation, we will be able to expand our thoughts more naturally without

being confined to what is thought to be the case. Thinking

for yourself is not to allow yourself to be ossified by convention and prejudice. Thinking for yourself is thinking independently and creatively. The way of the collective mind, this is the way of thinking for yourself.

### The Dao of Intellectual Safety



Confucius said: "...only after one has settled down does one feel safe, and only after one feels safe can one think, and only after one can think can one obtain."<sup>5</sup> 'The Way of Intellectual Safety', the right to keep silent, in my view, is one of the profound part of the sage's teachings. The right to silence will paradoxically end one's si-

lence. When forced to speak one may not be able to speak. This corresponds with the teachings of Laozi in the *Daodejing*. In chapter 40 Laozi says "Polarity is the movement of the Dao. Receptivity is the way it is used."<sup>6</sup> Polarity here is also translated as 'Reversal.' The movement of the way is paradoxical. When you go to one pole it will end up in the opposite pole. If you ask someone to speak it might make her/him silent. If you let her/him be silent he or she may speak up. Also the way is always receptive. It does not coerce. By not coercing it leaves things to proceed naturally. This is the way of intellectual safety. This is the way of the inquirer.

### The Dao of no Rush –

The Master said: "We are not in a hurry to get anywhere. However, that does not mean that we are not going anywhere." Laozi says in chapter 37 of the *Daodejing*: "The way never acts yet nothing is left undone."<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that you should not act. Rather it means you should not be aware that you are acting Artificial awareness of your actions gets you no where. Rather you should let things go on their natural course. Laozi says in chapter 17: "...when his [the sage] task is accomplished and his work done, the people say, "It happened to us naturally."<sup>8</sup> This is the way of no rush, this is the way of the inquirer.

### The Dao of 'Plain Vanilla' (Ordinary Rice)

..Is to read together, pick questions together from the readings, discuss together the questions, evaluate the discussion and introduce skill development exercises, as a reflective community. The topics are selected by the community and begins where the community is in its understanding. It is a process of co-inquiry, no one knows THE answer nor where the inquiry will lead. It is a self-corrective process. The community evaluates itself with the criteria of: "How did we do as a community?" (how was the listening, participa-



tion, safety of the environment?) and "How was our inquiry?" (did it maintain a focus, scratch beneath the surface, allow new understanding, challenge your thoughts, and was it interesting?) Cognitive tools such as WRAITEC are used to help the process. W: What? R: Reasons? A: Assumptions? I: Infer-

ences T: True E: Examples C: Counterexamples. These tools are used when you have fears of doubt that creep into you and hinder you from following the path of inquiry. They must not be used artificially but must be acquired naturally over a long period of time. There are also magic words that the sage had used to expel the evil spirits that may obscure the path of inquiry. To name a few: "IDUS" (I don't understand) "OMT" (One moment please) "POC" (Point of clarification) "LMO" (Let's move on) "GOS" (Going off subject). If you have fully understood the above teachings of the sages and have acquired how to use these tools and magic words to the point of spontaneity, you are ready to go on to leave for the journey of inquiry. You are on the verge of becoming an inquirer, you are on the verge of becoming a philosopher. This is the way of plain vanilla. This is the way of the inquirer.

### Notes

1. Ann Margaret Sharp and Ronald Reed ed., *Studies in Philosophy for Children* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1992) , p. 7.
2. Ames, R.T. and David L. Hall, *Thinking From the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in China and Western Culture* (New York: SUNY Press 1998, p.181)
3. Wing, R.L., *Dao of Power* . (New York: Doubleday, 1986).
4. Laozi, *Daodejing*, Trans. D.C. Lau (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001).
5. This quote is from chapter one of the *The Great Learning*. The *Great Learning* is one of the four great books of Confucianism, the other three being *The Analects*, *The Mencius* and *The Doctrine of the Mean*. The translation of the quote is mine.
6. Laozi, *Daodejing*, Trans. D.C. Lau.
7. Idem.
8. Idem.
9. Calligraphy courtesy of Chan Lee, currently a philosophy graduate student at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

### Bibliographic References

1. Ann Margaret Sharp and Ronald Reed ed., *Studies in Philosophy for Children* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1992) , p. 7.
2. Ames, R.T. and David L. Hall, *Thinking From the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in China and Western Culture* (New York: SUNY Press 1998, p.181)
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4. Laozi, *Daodejing*, Trans. D.C. Lau (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2001).