



VOORDRACHT



LEVENS-
BESCHOUWING



ECOLOGIE

The Nature of the Dao and Sustainable Development

Observations by a visitor from Europe

21-23 oktober 2011, International Daoism Forum, Hengyang City, Hunan Province



As a visitor from Europe and a friend of the Dao, I feel very honoured to have been offered the opportunity to formulate some observations on the subject of sustainability and its relationship with Daoism. I am a great admirer and long-time student of Daoism, but I realise that I cannot claim any of the deep expertise and practice accumulated by the masters, scholars and other experts present at the International Daoism Forum. Nevertheless, I will take this opportunity to give you some of my views.

My experience with sustainability and Daoism goes back to the early 1980s, when I frequently visited the island of Taiwan. Though at that time Taiwan was considered the 'economic miracle of the Far East', I was struck by the effects of decades of spectacular economic growth combined with a total neglect of the ecological factor. The air, the rivers and the soil were so polluted that you could smell and see the effects everywhere, whilst the record number of people suffering from hepatitis and the damage done to biodiversity were alarming.

At the same time, as I visited many of the intact Temples on the island, I became aware of the culture of Daoism and started to read texts by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi, both of whom emphasised the harmony between Heaven, Nature and Man or Heaven, Earth and Humanity.

These two contrasting encounters with the Chinese world were puzzling to me and I started studying in more detail what Daoism teaches us about the conservation of nature and what sustainability teaches us about that same subject. As a result, I was involved in a 3-year environmental study in Taiwan, which ultimately led to the publication of a report in 1989 called *Taiwan 2000: Matching Economic Growth with Environmental Protection*. Daoism was, however, not a major factor for the Chinese professionals participating in the study. I had to wait for 25 years to see that happen in China today. In the meantime, the United Nations report by the World Commission on Environment and Development—called *Our Common Future*—had been published in 1987. The People's Republic of China was represented on the Commission by Ma Shijun. It was in this report that the concept of sustainability was defined for the first time. I quote from the report:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Thus the goals of economic and social development must be defined in terms of sustainability in all countries—developed or developing, market-oriented or centrally planned. Interpretations will vary, but must share certain general features and must flow from a consensus on the basic concept of sustainable development and on a broad strategic framework for achieving it.

Settled agriculture, the diversion of watercourses, the extraction of minerals, the emission of heat and noxious gases into the atmosphere, commercial

forests, and genetic manipulation are all examples of human intervention in natural systems during the course of development. Until recently, such interventions were small in scale and their impact limited. Today's interventions are more drastic in scale and impact, more threatening to life-support systems and both locally and globally. This need not happen. At a minimum, sustainable development must not endanger the natural systems that support life on Earth; the atmosphere, the waters, the soils, and the living beings.

In her foreword, the Chairman of the Commission, Gro Harlem Brundtland, made the following statement:

'A global agenda for change'—this was what the World Commission on Environment and Development was asked to formulate. It was an urgent call by the General Assembly of the United Nations:

- *to propose long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development by the year 2000 and beyond;*
- *to recommend ways concern for the environment may be translated into greater cooperation among developing countries and between countries at different stages of economic and social development and lead to the achievement of common and mutually supportive objectives that take account of the interrelationships between people, resources, environment, and development;*
- *to consider ways and means by which the international community can deal more effectively with environmental concerns; and*
- *to help to define shared perceptions of long-term environmental issues and the appropriate efforts needed to deal successfully with the problems of protecting and enhancing the environment, a long-term agenda for action during the coming decades, and aspirational goals for the world community*

The Commission has taken guidance from people in all walks of life. It is to these people—to all the peoples of the world—that the Commission now addresses itself. In so doing we speak to people directly as well as to institutions that they have established.

But first and foremost our message is directed towards people, whose well-being is the ultimate goal of all environment and development policies. In particular, the Commission is addressing the young. The world's teachers will have a crucial role to play in bringing this report to them.

If we do not succeed in putting our message of urgency through to today's parents and decision makers, we risk undermining our children's fundamental right to a healthy, life-enhancing environment.

Unless we are able to translate our words into a language that can reach the minds and the hearts of people young and old, we shall not be able to undertake the extensive social changes needed to correct the course of development.

To this end, we appeal to citizens' groups, to non-governmental organizations, to educational institutions, and to the scientific community. They have all played indispensable roles in the creation of public awareness and political change in the past. They will play a crucial part in putting the world onto sustainable development paths, in laying the groundwork for *Our Common Future*.

The objective of sustainable development and the integrated nature of the global environment/development challenges pose problems for institutions, national and international, that were established on the basis of narrow preoccupations and compartmentalized concerns.

Governments' general response to the speed and scale of global changes has been a reluctance to recognize sufficiently the need to change themselves. The challenges are both interdependent and integrated, requiring comprehensive approaches and popular participation. Yet most of the institutions facing those challenges tend to be independent, fragmented, working to relatively narrow mandates with closed decision processes. Those responsible for managing natural resources and protecting the environment are institutionally separated from those responsible for managing the economy. The real world of interlocked economy and ecological systems will not change; the policies and institutions concerned must.

Although this was written nearly 25 years ago, I am afraid it still holds today and, if I look at the present situation in the world of environment and development, we still have a long way to go to achieve a true level of sustainability. Our progress is slow and it is overdue. Interestingly, of all the numerous institutions that were consulted and listed on twenty pages in the report, about one thousand in all, only four were affiliated with a religion, namely the All Africa Council of Churches, one British Christian group and two Norwegian Christian institutions. In his preface to the Series on Religions of the World and Ecology, Lawrence E. Sullivan observes:

Still, as the power to modify the world is both frightening and fascinating, this has been subjected to reflection, particularly religious reflection, from time immemorial to the present day. Today we have come to realize that we will understand ecology better when we understand the religions that form the rich soil of memory and practice, belief and relationships where life on earth is rooted. Knowledge of these views can help us reappraise our ways and reorient ourselves toward the sources and resources of life.

In the struggle to sustain the earth's environment as viable for future generations, environmental studies have thus far left the role of religion unprobed. This contrasts starkly with the emphasis given, for example, the role of science and technology in threatening or sustaining the ecology. Ignorance of religion prevents environmental studies from achieving its [sic] goals, for though science and technology share many important features of human culture with religion, they

leave unexplored essential wellsprings of human motivation and concern that shape the world as we know it. No understanding of the environment is adequate without a grasp of the religious life that constitutes the human societies which saturate the natural environment.

It is in line with this realisation that the idea of an Alliance of Religions and Conservation was created in Assisi in 1986 by his Royal Highness Prince Philip, who was then the International President of what is now the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). This was just one year before the publication of *Our Common Future* in 1987.

It is a commendable achievement of Martin Palmer, the Secretary General of ARC, that the ARC network now has affiliations with 11 faith institutions, of which the China Daoist Association, headquartered in the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, has been a very active partner since 1995, when it created the Declaration on the Environment.

With respect to Daoism and the environment, a collection of articles entitled *Daoism and Ecology* was published by Harvard University Press in 2001. One of the co-editors was Liu Xiaogan and contributors include Chinese scholars such as Chi-tim Lai, Li Yuanguo and Zhang Jiyu.

To an observer, this collection offers a wealth of insights into the relationship between Daoism and ecology. I quote a statement from the introduction:

Daoism proposes a comprehensive and radical restructuring of the way in which we conceive of our relationship to nature and our cosmic environment. This imaginative act does not readily lend itself to the solution of the problems of modern society except inasmuch as it challenges the very foundations of our economic, political, scientific, and intellectual structures. At the same time, however, as Daoism becomes more influential in the West, even as it is misunderstood, it surely exerts a positive influence with respect to understanding what it means to be embedded in a cosmic landscape. In such an understanding, 'nature' is not something outside of us to be dealt with after the fashion of a mechanic repairing a car, but is both a mental attitude to be carefully cultivated and the true condition of one's body which contains the infinite dimensions of cosmic reality within itself. Ultimately, nature is to be constructed and visualized time and again. The terrain of our most authentic ecological concern, therefore, is first and foremost the landscape of the religious imagination.

Another contributor to *Daoism and Ecology* is Kristofer Schipper (Professor Shi Zhouren), a master of the Zhengyi school of Daoism, who spent 25 years putting together the complete canon of Daoism from 1,500 works dating back to the Ming Dynasty. On the origin of the awareness of and guidelines for the preservation of the natural environment, I quote from his article:

As early as during the first centuries of the common era, Daoism developed institutions and regulations (the 'One Hundred and Eighty Precepts'; see below) with the purpose of protecting the environment and to ensure that its natural balance would not be destroyed. It purposely advocated respect for women and children, for all forms of animal life, for all plants, for the earth, for mountains, rivers, forests and sought to preserve and protect them. These rules and institutions may be the earliest significant and conscious efforts of human civilization to protect the natural environment and to ensure the adaption [sic] of culture to nature instead of the opposite.

And on the 'One Hundred and Eighty Precepts', he writes:

One of the most important documents concerning Daoist ecology is a short text called the 'One Hundred and Eighty Precepts' (Yibaibashijie). These are guidelines laid down for those who, in the early Daoist movements, held the position of the leaders of the lay communities.

There is ample evidence, as several recent studies have shown, that 'One Hundred and Eighty Precepts' antedate the great scriptural renewal of the end of the fourth century.

Among the 'One Hundred and Eighty Precepts', not less than twenty are directly concerned with the preservation of the natural environment, and many others indirectly. Here are some examples:

14. *You should not burn (the vegetation of) uncultivated or cultivated fields, nor of mountains and forests.*
18. *You should not wantonly fell trees.*
19. *You should not wantonly pick herbs or flowers.*
36. *You should not throw poisonous substances into lakes, rivers, and seas.*
47. *You should not wantonly dig holes in the ground and thereby destroy the earth.*
53. *You should not dry up wet marshes.*
79. *You should not fish or hunt and thereby harm and kill living beings.*
95. *You should not in winter dig up hibernating animals and insects.*
97. *You should not wantonly climb in trees to look for nests and destroy eggs.*
98. *You should not use cages to trap birds and (other) animals.*
100. *You should not throw dirty things in wells.*
101. *You should not seal off pools and wells.*
109. *You should not light fires in the plains.*
116. *You should not defecate or urinate on living plants or in water that people will drink.*
121. *You should not wantonly or lightly take baths in rivers or seas.*
125. *You should not fabricate poisons and keep them in vessels.*
132. *You should not disturb birds and (other) animals.*
134. *You should not wantonly make lakes.*

The 'One Hundred and Eighty Precepts' cover a very wide range of topics. The text does not, however, attempt any form of organizing them according to subject, or degree of importance, or any other principle. The emphasis on the self, on the personal relationship to the Dao, implies, also with respect to the preservation of the natural environment, that each person is responsible for the Dao, each person embodies the Dao. The preservation of the natural order therefore depends absolutely on the preservation of this natural order and harmony within ourselves and not on some outside authority. The environment is within us. This priority of the inner world is one of the great tenets of Daoism. The outside crises and dangers can only be overcome by transforming them within us, by purifying and reshaping them through the harmony of our body. All beings are transformed through it. When it has reached perfection, the body radiates harmony that is beneficial to its environment. Thus, the 'One Hundred and Eighty Precepts' never speak of protests to higher authorities, of political actions, revindications, demands for justice and peace, but only of respiration exercises, of inner harmony and individual peace. This is the only way to save the environment. True perfect nature can only be found within oneself. To regulate the world, we have to cultivate ourselves, to tend our inner landscape. Beyond, beneath, behind, and inside the 'Precepts' of the Daoist libationer, we find a whole new world of spiritual ecology.

For me, as a Westerner, these texts are extremely revealing and offer me a glimpse of what Daoism is about.

The record of achievement of the China Daoist Association in revitalising the traditional respect for nature in China through a number of fora, actions and commitments in recent years is tremendously impressive and can be summarised in the following milestones:

- In 2006, the first and new Tiejiaoshu Daoist Ecology Temple at the foot of Taibai Mountain was ritually inaugurated. Subsequently, during a workshop with monks and nuns from ten temples in Shaanxi and Gansu provinces in Central China, the Qinling Declaration was signed with a commitment to protect the environment around their sacred lands and buildings. It was also agreed to set up a Daoist Temple Alliance on Ecology Education, with each temple to have an educational facility for that purpose. The Taibai Shan Temple was the first to have such a newly constructed facility on the premises.
- In 2008, sixty-nine representatives from Chinese Daoist temples, pagodas and associations gathered together in Mao Shan, a blissful place in southern China, to discuss with international environmental organisations various ways to counter the global ecological crisis in order to build a better homeland. This impressive gathering agreed and signed the Mao Shan Declaration, a ten-year specific commitment in six major areas, thus taking the Qinling Declaration one big step forward.

- In 2009, the China Daoist Association presented the China Daoist Ecology Protection Eight-Year Plan at a major gathering at Windsor Castle in the presence of His Royal Highness Prince Philip and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and most of the faith institutes affiliated with ARC. All presented extensive seven-year plans on how they would contribute to the conservation of nature. This memorable occasion was a major milestone in reaching national consensus for the 1,500 Daoist temples in China on how to proceed for the next eight years, ending in 2017, towards fulfilling the commitments detailed in the plan.

In concluding this paper, I would like to express my gratitude and friendship to Master Ren of Lounguan Tai, who pioneered with great passion and perseverance the first Tiejiashu Daoist Ecology Temple project and who made it possible for me, a friend of the Dao, to participate right from the beginning in making his dream come true, a dream which culminated in the 2009 milestone. I am proud to have been part of the process throughout the whole period since 2005, when we first met.

None of this would have happened for me if Martin Palmer had not invited me in 2003 to join ARC in their global effort to engage the major faith institutes in the world and encourage their commitment to the conservation of nature. We both shared and continue to share a long-term connectedness with the nature of the Dao.

Allerd Stikker
Ecological Management Foundation

Allerd Stikker met master Ren,
president van de China Daoist Association

