



## CULTIVATING NATURE

By Sean Fannin

**“Outwardly go along with the flow, while inwardly keeping your true nature. Then your eyes and ears will not be dazzled, your thoughts will not be confused, while the spirit that dwells within you will expand greatly to roam in the realm of absolute purity.”**

— from the Huainanzi

### **Nature and Our Nature**

Our view of the world around us shapes how we view ourselves. The knowledge of nature gives us a way to understand the workings of life within us. From the classical Daoist point of view the observation of nature is self-observation and the philosophy of the body is nothing other than the philosophy of Nature.

The classical Chinese view of nature and the movement of life is symbolic and relative. In this view of life something can only be understood by looking at its relationship to something else. For example, it is only by reference to the darkness of night that we can understand the light of day and only through the chill of winter that we can understand the heat of summer.

Taken further, we can say that all that is manifest must be understood as a continuation of what is not manifest. The imperceptible leads to the world around us in an alternating rhythm of stillness and motion. In this way rest leads to activity and night leads to day within the constant changes of life.

We can observe this process if we know how to look. This is not so much something that must be learned, but rather uncovered or seen afresh both within us and around us. The unfolding movement of nature is always present within the rich depths of daily experience and in the ongoing movements of our own life.

No one knows where the movement of life originated and yet it is everywhere. This progressive development of life, from the unknown to the world around us, with the symbolism of numbers in chapter 42 of Laozi:

Dao gave birth to One,  
One gave birth to Two,  
Two gave birth to Three,  
Three gave birth to all the myriad things.

### Dao gave birth to One

Originally, there were no people. There was no Earth and the Heavens weren't even formed yet, there was only the Primordial Source. At some point during this time that preceded the beginning, the Primordial Source moved. This original movement can be described as qi, which within this context is primordial energy.

### One gave birth to Two

Within the original movement of qi the light and clear aspects rose to form the Heavens, while the dense, solid aspects settled to form the Earth. Heaven and Earth were thus formed out of the Unknowable.

### Two gave birth to Three

The energy of the Heavens continually flows down like water into the Earth, which gathers it in and sends it back up, forming life in general and us, humanity, in particular. Our place in nature is thus said to be between Heaven and Earth.

Three gave birth to all the myriad things

Heaven, Humanity and Earth can be seen as the three levels of existence, through which we can view all the phenomena of life. If we can understand this progression of movement, from the unknown to the world around us, we can begin to understand our own lives as a continuation of that same movement.

Heaven and Earth are seen as manifestations of the greater duality of Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang are the universal qualities of complementary opposites. They are abstract in a sense as they must be observed through their manifestations. We can never observe something that is purely Yin or purely Yang, but instead can look to their appearance within all things. For example, the Heavens are a manifestation or expression of Yang while Earth is a manifestation of Yin. The following list gives some common examples of Yin and Yang pairings.

Yin	Yang
Earth	Heaven
Cold	Hot
Night	Day
Dark	Light
Water	Fire

We can understand Yin and Yang more easily when we look at their manifestations in the world and within us, rather than as general principles. For this reason it is more convenient to refer to the manifestations of Yin and Yang when discussing the movements of nature and life.

The joining together or unity of opposites is essential to Chinese philosophy. It is through duality that the unity of life can be seen. Within the classical framework all things exist between the dual influences of Heaven and Earth.

As we explore the concepts of Heaven, Earth and the movement of qi it is important to remember that everything that we discuss is a way to describe our own experiences within our own lives. If we attempt to view these descriptions literally they become meaningless, like describing a breathtaking painting as simply "paint spread on a canvas." However, if we can relax into the simple beauty of this view of life, even for a short while, we can begin to find our place within nature and the steady rhythm of nature moving within us.

### **The Three Treasures**

Life is the organized movement between Heaven and Earth. In its purest form this is the same movement that gave birth to the universe, the original movement of qi. Within the body the same two aspects of the universe, Heaven and Earth, form and animate us.

Heaven and Earth interact and bring forth a third aspect, the movement of life in general and humanity in particular. The number three is thus used to express life, representing Heaven, Earth and Humanity. This trinity of life is called San Cai, the Three Powers. Within the body the three levels of life can be described as San

Bao, the Three Treasures of jing, qi and shen - essence, energy and spirit.

Shen is most often translated as spirit, spirits or spiritual. Spirit is traditionally understood as the light of the Heavens that is reflected within us. The nature of shen is the nature of the Heavens; pure, clear, spacious and light, like the clear light of dawn in the mountain air. The first chapter of the Huainanzi, one of the classics of Daoism, states, "Having established the free communication that permits the luminous radiance of the shen, one can come into possession of one's internal self."

It is through the shen that we can come to know our essential nature and fulfill our life according to that nature. The shen guides all functions within the body, physically, psychologically and spiritually. The attributes of shen are radiant clarity, natural, easy conduct, and calm, effortless effectiveness.

Jing, often translated as essence, essences or essential, provides the model for the building and rebuilding of the body and all of its functions, as directed by the shen. The nature of the jing is the nature of the Earth. Our jing is our connection to the Earth. It provides for our growth, development and regeneration, like the fertile valleys and fields of the Earth. This is described in the Neijing Suwen, the first classic of Chinese medicine, as "Essence is the root of Being."

The essence nourishes and anchors the shen, providing the structure and nourishment necessary for the expression of life. The attribute of essence is potential, the hidden power of life. Containing subtle skills and natural abilities, jing is the pure potential that anchors the shen and nourishes life. If our essence is strong then our potential is clear, and the radiance of the spirit illuminates our lives.

Qi is the movement of life within us; the rhythm of life is the rhythm of qi. Its movement is an echo of the communications between Heaven & Earth. Qi is the energy that allows the functioning of life through warmth, movement, transportation and transformation. It is the energy that maintains and safeguards our physical integrity, containing and preserving what is authentic to us and repelling what would be harmful to our nature. The attributes of qi within the body can be seen in the energy, warmth and vital movement of our lives. All transformations and movements within the body, whether physical or emotional, depend on the qi.

In the ideal state there is little difference between the qi of the universe and our own energy. Within the body this can be described as our Authentic Qi. It is authentic in the sense that it has not strayed from the original course of life and is authentic to the movement of Heaven & Earth.

Our charge in life is to protect our jing, keep the flow of qi smooth and even, and retain our shen. This is preserving the Three Treasures. Doing this we begin to express our essential nature, finding clarity, energy and potential in everything that we do. This internal harmony reflects the harmony of the universe and, within classical Chinese philosophy, is true health.

In peaceful calm,  
Void and emptiness,  
The authentic qi flows easily.  
Essence and spirits are kept within,  
How could illness arise?

— Neijing Suwen, Chapter 1, Larre translation

### The Harmony of Life

By viewing ourselves within the movement of life, following the currents like a skilled swimmer, we begin to gain insight into the most fundamental issue of our lives - how we conduct our lives. To conduct in this sense is to orchestrate the many aspects and qualities of life into that which is consistent with one's nature and the harmony of one's life.

The internal harmony of life is the harmony of essence, energy and spirit, the Three Treasures. They are called treasures because they are precious and fundamental to our lives. The character for treasure, bao, is a pictograph showing precious objects under the protection of a roof. Within the idea of a treasure is the recognition that a treasure must be protected and preserved.

Preserving the Three Treasures is preserving our nature.

Observing and following nature is one of the most direct ways to discover our own nature. Returning to nature is the process of developing Authenticity, the pathway to the mysterious Source of all things.

Man then models himself on Earth;  
Earth models itself on Heaven;  
Heaven models itself on the Way (Dao);  
The Way (Dao) models itself on what is natural.

— Laozi Chapter 25

### Observing Nature Exercise

To observe nature it is necessary to settle the mind and calm the body. The first step of this exercise is to let your mind gently settle, like the ripples in a pond gradually giving way to the clear reflection of the sky. Breathe slowly and deeply, comfortably extending your exhalation so that it is slightly longer than your inhalation. Relax your upper body, letting your neck and shoulders sink down. Feel your lower abdomen as you breathe and gently rest your mind in that feeling. Relax your eyes. Don't focus on anything in particular, but let your eyes take in the full range of your vision, as if you were looking off into the distance. Maintain this state for several minutes.

The next step involves observing the sky. Sit or lay back and look up at the sky. Maintain a feeling of calmness and tranquility as you watch the movements of the clouds, the openness of the blue sky, or the clear light of the stars. Let the spaciousness of the sky into your body and mind for several minutes.

Next, let your attention turn to the ground beneath you. Feel the stability and strength of the Earth. Observe the ground that is around you without analyzing it. Notice the colors and shapes of the ground, or simply feel it with your fingertips, underneath the grass, cool and solid.

After this, look at any trees around you. Trees are similar to us, taking their nourishment from Heaven and Earth and providing a bridge between the two. Observe a single tree, noticing its base and any visible roots as well as the branches and leaves. Notice how you feel as you watch the leaves and branches sway with the wind.

If there are any birds around, turn your attention to them. Notice what

they are doing and the manner in which they are doing it. Birds are often used as symbols of the shen. They are like the clear yang, light and beautiful, yet easily startled.

Finally, turn your attention to yourself. Notice how you feel with the expansiveness of the sky above you, the Earth directly below you and the companionship of nature all around you. Just observe the feeling, letting it further settle into you.

### Observing Nature

- 1- Clearing the mind
- 2- Observing the sky
- 3- Observing the earth
- 4- Observing the trees
- 5- Observing the birds
- 6- Observing ourselves

This exercise can be done everyday for a short while. It is best to do this in the same place and at the same time each day if possible. This exercise will help you to observe the rhythm of nature and develop an intuitive understanding of your place within that rhythm.

### CONCLUSION

When we sit outside and observe nature, we notice that everything alternates between activity and inactivity, stillness and motion according to the movements of life. By observing these movements within us we can begin to develop an internal constancy that remains steady and peaceful throughout the continuous changes of life. This is the harmony of life, internally expressed through the radiance of the spirit, preserved by the natural rhythm of the qi, and secured by the fundamental strength and stability of the essence.

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