The Nature of the Dao and Sustainable Development

Observations by a visitor from Europe

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As a visitor from Europe and a friend of the Dao, I feel very honored to have been offered the opportunity to formulate some observations on the subject of sustain-
ability and its relationship with Daoism. I am a great admirer and long-time student of Daoism, but I realize 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 experiences with sustainability and Daoism go 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, 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 emphasized 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 conser-
vation 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 par-
ticipating 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
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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
fires, and genetic manipulation are all examples of
human intervention in natural systems during the
course of development. Until recently, such inter-
ventions 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 interna-
tional 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
every walk of life. It is to these people—that all the peoples
of the world—that the Commission now addresses
itself. In doing so we speak to people directly as well
as to institutions that they have established.

1st 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 under-
take the extensive social changes needed to correct
the course of development.
To this end, we appeal to citizens’ groups, to non-gover-
ment organisations and to educational institutions and
to the scientific community. They have all played
indispensable roles in the creation of public awareness and
positive 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
problems poses challenges for institutions, national and international, that were established on the basis of narrow preoccupations and compart-
mentalised concerns.

Governments’ general response to the speed and scale of
global changes has been a reluctance to recognise
sufficiently the need to change themselves. The
challenges are both interdependent and integrated,
requiring comprehensive approaches and popular
participation. Yet the institutions facing these
tasks 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
institutions separated from those responsible for managing the economy. The real world of interlocked
environment and ecological systems will not change; the
policies and institutions concerned must change.

Although this was written nearly 25 years ago, I am
afraid it is still valid today and, if I look at the present
crisis in the light of recent events, I conclude that we still have a long way to go to achieve a true level of
sustainability. Our progress is slow and it is overdue.

The situation in the world of environment and development,
though this was written nearly 25 years ago, I am
afraid it still holds today and, if I look at the present
era, Daoism developed institutions and regulations
inasmuch as it challenges the very foundations of our
economic, political, scientific, and intellectual struc-
tures. At the same time, however, as Daoism becomes
more influential in the West, even as it is misunder-
stood, 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 developed and a practice, a multi-
textured and integrated view. In such an understanding, ‘nature’
seriously affects us in ways that are often difficult to
measure or assess. Yet, the Dao is the Earth, the Earth
is the Dao. The preservation of the natural order therefore
can only be overcome by transforming them within
us, by purifying and reshaping them through the
harmonizing of our body and mind, to regulate the
world, to cultivate ourselves, to tend our inner landscape.
Beyond, behind, and beside, inside the ‘Precepts’ of
the Daoist tradition is a study of the impact on
human 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 Chinese Daoist Associ-
ation in revitalising the traditional respect for nature
in China through a number of fora, actions and com-
munities is sum ma ry in the following milestones:

• In 2008, sixty-nine representatives from Chinese
universities and organisations gathered 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 ARD, that the ARD network
now has affiliations with 31 faith institutions, of which
the China Daoist Association, headquartered in the
White Cloud Temple in Beijing, has been a very active
partner since 1996, when it created the Declaration
on the Environment. With respect to Daoism and the environment, a col-
lection of articles entitled Daoism and Ecology was published by
Harvard University Press in 2001. One of the co-editors was Liu Xiaogang and contributors
include Chinese scholars such as Chi-tim Lai, Li Yuanguo and Zhang Jiyu.

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

Daoism proposes a comprehensive and radical re-
structuring 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
so much as it challenges the very foundations of our eco-

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tures. At the same time, however, as Daoism becomes
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• 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 Lougouan Tai, who pioneered with great passion and perseverance the first Tiejiaoshu 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.

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