

Coming to Terms with Timelessness



Coming to Terms with Timelessness

Daoist Time
in
Comparative Perspective

edited by
Livia Kohn

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Acknowledgments

This book is the third edited volume of the project on “Dao and Time.” As did its predecessors, *Dao and Time: Classical Philosophy* and *Time in Daoist Practice: Cultivation and Calculation*, it emerged from the 13th International Conference on Daoist Studies, “Dao and Time: Personal Cultivation and Spiritual Transformation.” Arranged by Robin Wang, the conference took place in June 2019 at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles in close proximity to the 17th Triennial Conference of the International Society for the Study of Time, organized by Paul Harris. I am deeply indebted to them both.

This volume focuses particularly on exploring the many modes in which timelessness plays out in Daoist thought and practice, notably as seen under the light of comparison with, and perspectives in, other philosophies and religions, periods, and cultures. It engages with a variety of topical themes, inspirational thinkers, historical periods, and geographical regions. Doing so, the work adds a yet completely different dimension to the understanding of time in Daoism and opens further venues of exploration, academic discussion, and personal insight.

As editor, I am deeply grateful to everyone involved in the project and particularly the contributors. Not only have they created exceptional work but they have also been wonderfully patient with the editing process. I am excited and pleased to be able to offer their work to the scholarly community in this volume.

—Livia Kohn, July 2021

Introduction

The Nature of Timelessness

LIVIA KOHN

Timelessness marks the primordial state at the beginning of the universe and the ultimate goal of the Daoist endeavor: as such it is the mode of time that most preoccupies both thinkers and practitioners. Called atemporality in J. T. Fraser's system of six major temporalities, it denotes the state of the primeval universe that existed in the "pure becoming of cosmic chaos" (1999, 27), the first fractions of a second right after the big bang about fifteen billion years ago. Consisting of nothing but electromagnetic radiation, it was without time in any form and had "no lawful physical processes" (1982, 50), characterizing a world without causation (2010, 19).

A state of elementary unfolding, timelessness is cosmic chaos, a word that originally means "abyss": the primeval emptiness or dark gorge of the universe (Fraser 1999, 60; 2010, 20). It means eternity as much as infinity, an unlimited (vertical) immediate presence and an endless (horizontal) reaching out. While in some ways dynamic, marked by "the perpetual motion of the photon and the ceaseless vibration of the electron" (1986, 13), it also means the complete absence of choice and freedom, a fundamental darkness and immersion. As J. T. Fraser says, "Only what is temporal is open to change and hence to evolution," can transform into higher and subtler levels of complexity (1986, 13).

This pure cosmic form of timelessness relates to Christian notions of God and eternity (Muller 2016, 18), Plato's ideas and unchanging forms (Davies 1995, 24), as well as the Socratic understanding of the destiny of the soul as having "to climb from the dark, the sensory, and the temporal toward the luminous, the intelligible," that is, the atemporal (Fraser 1986, 13; Lucas 2002, 145). In Christian theology it is sometimes interpreted as endless duration, sometimes as being outside time, but always associated with eternal life and the unchanging validity of religious dogmas. In classical Greek philosophy, it is a key attribute of the Heraclitean logos and the unmoved prime mover, signaling the eternal validity of the rules of numbers (Fraser 2007, 75; Smolin 2013, 9). Many religions, moreover, place

timelessness, described by Mircea Eliade as *illud tempus* (1958, ix), on a mythical plane and describe it as a completely “other time beyond our actual time, in which miraculous, primordial, mythological, and symbolic events took place or even still take place” (Franz 1981, 221).

Recognizing timelessness as a precosmic “potentiality of transcending time into blessed eternity” (Fraser 1990, 25), seekers of many religions also see it as the ultimate state of existence and envision it in different forms of paradise and otherworldly realms, places and times that go far beyond the ordinary, reaching into transcendence, immortality, and ultimate perfection (Whitrow 1981, 564; Turner 2010, 336). They speak of attaining complete oneness with the divine, classically realized in mystical union, characterized by ineffability, true knowledge, and passivity as well as a sense of immersion and self-transcendence (James 1936, 370-71).

In this idealized experiential dimension, timelessness signals a realm of complete fulfilledness, a world where one always wanted to be, perfect peace or glorious battle. There is no decay or illness, no suffering, no bodily need – only indestructible, healthy, vibrant life. Here humans can find final and true justice, the ultimate immersion in love and realization of perfection. In other words, timelessness in this sense deeply connects to the human need for refuge from the threat of the passage of time and the knowledge of the end of self (Fraser 2007, 75).

Beyond the far beginning of the universe and ultimate goal of existence, timelessness yet also appears in ordinary life. A vividly present moment without progress in immediate connection to the timespace underlying reality and reaching into the depths of the collective unconscious (Franz 1981, 221), it is to time what emptiness is to space: an openness, a gap, a break, a way of nonbeing. As absolute rest or motionless existence, it offers a pause to the soul from its constant work of self-definition and strife for greater perfection (Fraser 1990, 115).

Classically this is experienced in “a sudden, seemingly spontaneous flash of absolute power or ecstasy” (Ellwood 1980, 69), often called a mystical experience. It is overwhelming, ineffable, and transtemporal, yet full of knowing certainty. Ineffable, it cannot be described in human terms, but descriptions commonly include notions of timelessness and the sense of being grasped by something higher and greater, merged with a state both at the deep root of all existence and its ultimate goal (Kohn 2021, 254).

In other words, people in the grip of a mystical experience have a sense of being outside time and beyond the self, of being grasped by something greater and vaster, and of merging into an immeasurably larger power. They feel as if going beyond all known reality of time and space, as

if their ordinary senses have stopped functioning, while yet being in touch with the innermost secrets of the universe (Happold 1970, 45).

The same altered state of consciousness, the overwhelming sense of being fully present in a powerful and empowering way appears also in enlightenment moments in Zen (Suzuki 1956), in the peak experiences explored by Abraham Maslow (1964), in flow as defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1992), and more. While these states can be prepared but not planned, there are certain ways that allow the induction of a sense of timelessness. A prominent example is ritual, which provides a time out from personal strife or suffering, from the chaos of history: changeless and timeless, it offers a structured way to step out of ordinary time (Brand 1999, 43).

This also means that timelessness is a function of consciousness and has a place in the brain. While the left hemisphere provides linear awareness, critical analysis, technological progress, chains of causality, and other organizational structures such as timetables, the right hemisphere functions in modes of wholeness, restoration, contemplation, beauty, cyclicity, and overall integration (Sills 2004, 150; Bogen 1969, 3). It works with overarching patterns and grasps structures all at once, establishing an awareness that reaches beyond the rational, the factual, and the temporal into spheres of balance and harmony, oneness and synthesis. By connecting actively with the right side of the brain, seekers find release from linear temporality and gain a complementary view of the world, engaging in fully holistic perception, that is, “the comprehensive, complete perception of events as intertwined entities, each reciprocally influencing each other” (Sills 2004, 151; Ornstein 1980).

The right hemisphere of the brain is the internal function that opens human beings to the cosmic flow in encompassing timelessness. For example, when Harvard University brain anatomist Jill Bolte Taylor suffered a hemorrhage in her left hemisphere in 1996 and lost its function, she found that “all concepts of time and space evaporated, leaving me instead feeling open-ended, enormous, and expansive” (2009, 68). Thinking in images and resting in the eternal now, her entire self-concept shifted toward fluidity and timeless presence. She says,

My left hemisphere had been trained to perceive myself as a solid, separate from others. Now, released from that restrictive circuitry, my right hemisphere relished in its attachment to the eternal flow. I was no longer isolated and alone. My soul was as big as the universe and frolicked with glee in a boundless sea. (Taylor 2009, 69)

A number of mind-altering techniques including hypnosis and drugs such as mescaline have the same effect, if less radical and more temporary (Noreika et al. 2014, 529), as do ways of intensifying perception through various rhythmic techniques. "Regularly repeated photic or auditory stimuli tuned to endogenous brain rhythms can evoke altered states of consciousness" (Turner 1986, 242-43): the external rhythm alters or amplifies the endogenous brain rhythm that is necessary for the regulation of neural functions and opens alternate modes of consciousness.

Timelessness being cosmic and ultimate as well as experiential and a function of the brain reinforces its centrality and has led various thinkers to come to the conclusion that the entire paradigm of human temporality is rooted in some sort of monstrous illusion: all time is in fact merely an elaborate product of the human mind. Thus, for example, Lucretius (ca. 95-55 BCE) in *De Rerum Natura* says that "time cannot itself exist." Saint Augustine (354-430) notes that time depends entirely on the mind with its power of distending into past and future through memory and anticipation and as an objective phenomenon remains inexplicable. And Angelus Silesius (1624-1677) notes, "Time is of your own making; its clock ticks in your head. The moment you stop thought, time too stops dead" (Davies 1995, 23). While this may appear depressing at first sight, it yet opens the way to complete control and offers the possibility of taking charge of time: it places the self in a position of greatness. Rather than a cause for despair or hopelessness with the thought that timed reality is a pure mental construct and ultimately unreal, it offers hope and encouragement toward attaining greater and subtler dimensions of life.

This very much is the position of Daoism. Already the *Daode jing* recognizes that the emergence of ordinary timed reality is necessary as the universe gives rise to something rather than nothing yet, whatever form this reality may take, it always remains part of *creatio continua*, the eternal going out and coming back of Dao (Girardot 2008, 77). While the ultimate goal of Daoists is to realize the timeless condition of nothingness before creation in its ultimate form of immortality, they yet live in sympathy with Dao as it unfolds on earth and relish the constant cyclical interplay between chaos and the re-emergence of the world. They are well aware of the powers of the mind in creating and manipulating time, deeply versed in manifold theories and interpretations of the different modes of temporality, and engaged in a plethora of methods and techniques that allow the modification and reorganization of time. But in that they are not alone. Rather, their endeavors are echoed and matched by thinkers and practitioners of other religions and schools of thought, active in other parts of the world and different periods of time.

This Book

This book explores just how Daoists come to terms with timelessness in all these different dimensions while also undertaking close comparisons with other thinkers, religions, and cultures. It offers presentations of a more theoretical, speculative nature in alternation with those that focus on concrete life situations, presenting in turn discussions on issues of personal perception, philosophical speculation, visual representation, self-cultivation, and meaning in life.

To begin, Steve Taylor provides a summary of the different factors that influence the human experience of time as outlined by psychologists. He identifies four “laws” of psychological time and explains the psychological factors that lie behind them, working from his research into time expansion experiences (TEEs). Such experiences typically occur when a person’s normal sense of time slows down or expands significantly. They are associated mainly with accidents and emergencies, but also with mystical, psychedelic, and “in the zone” experiences during sports.

Typically linked with a sense of calmness and well-being as well as with alertness and the opportunity to take preventative action, TEEs are interpreted variously but, as Taylor concludes, tend to indicate a shift out of a normal state of consciousness into a different timeworld. They suggest that human beings’ normal experience of time is neither objective nor absolute. It is a psychological construct, generated by the psychological processes and structures of our normal self-system. Most specifically, it relates to the strong boundary of our self and the sense of duality this creates. In spiritual experiences (and most altered states of consciousness in general), this state of duality is transcended, also resulting in a transcendence of fast-flowing linear time.

Echoing this, Mercedes Valmisa asks, “What is a Situation?” She leads us in reflections regarding the ontological status of a situation inspired by two main sources: the *Zhuangzi* – a multifarious compilation from Warring States China (ca. 4th c. BCE) – and José Ortega y Gasset’s (1883-1955) *Unas Lecciones de Metafísica* (Some Lessons in Metaphysics) – the transcripts of a course on metaphysics by a Spanish philosopher of the early 20th century. Much as other ontologically subjective entities and events, situations do not preexist the intentional subject: instead, they are created alongside an act of noticing.

In Classical Chinese, *shi* 勢, commonly rendered “propensity” and the closest the language comes to our concept of “situation,” denotes a dynamic process that incorporates the conscious subjective agent as well as other entities and processes as constitutive elements. Here a situation is

not reducible to the discrete phenomena and events that we can discern within a given space-time; rather, it necessitates our thinking about it to arise. These ontological reflections are also important for a philosophy of action. They help us notice the role of attention in the creation of situations—as in the creation of worlds—hence the importance of understanding what the agent notices (Ortega's *reparar*) and fails to notice, what we privilege as worthy of our attention and what passes inadvertent among the world's plural affordances.

The *Zhuangzi* explains that the relational affordances that we actualize and reify as constituting a situation depend on what we are socialized and educated to see when looking at the world, thus situations and agents co-construct one another over time. This acknowledgment is crucial to retrain our agency in order to illuminate our own blind spots, overcome our uncritical certainties which generate absolutist tendencies, and move beyond fixed, reduced, and contingent corners from which to interpret the world.

Looking at similar issues from a different perspective, Joseph L. Pratt, in "Time and Space within Daoism's Holistic Worldview," notes that the *Daode jing* offers a holistic explanation of reality, starting from an ultimate reality of Emptiness, called the Dao. The Dao is followed by the One, a totality capable of encompassing all of conventional reality, and then by the Two, the yin-yang dynamic reflecting the basic interplay between the Dao and the One at the next essentially energetic level. From here emerge the Three, allowing for three-dimensional form and a further fundamental yin-yang dynamic between the energetic yin-yang Two and the material Form Three.

This seamless cosmology and metaphysics, ranging from an absolute nothingness to a play of form, explains how consciousness and cognition exist as the higher energetic Two in relation to form as the lower material Three. It also shows how time and space are a function of form, cognition and, most importantly, consciousness. Finally, Daoism explains how time and space have both yin and yang aspects. The yin circular aspect, the here and now, allows for a direct or immediate path to the transcendent One and ultimately to the Dao. The yang linear aspect, expressed in the standard one temporal and three spatial dimensions, is necessary for the yin circular aspect and, ultimately, for the experience of the Dao to be meaningful.

As this holistic explanation demonstrates, people can achieve a harmonious state, in Daoism called "effortless action" (*wuwei*) and in modern psychology described as state of "flow," where form, time, and space are experienced fully. This transcendent return to the Dao figures in all of

life's endeavors from walking a dog to running a business, and can be cultivated by mindfulness practices such as meditation, taiji quan, and yoga.

Equally focusing on the *Daode jing*, Andrej Fech, in "Temporality in Laozi and Plotinus," conducts a comparative study of temporal concepts in the writings ascribed to the two eponymous authors. These two bodies of text were created in different intellectual environments and epochs, and yet there are multiple correspondences in their work, including their view of the ineffable One as the origin of the world, their positing of several precosmic stages, as well as their emphasis of the importance of return.

By comparing the temporal implications of these ideas, this study argues that both sources operate with similar sets of temporal metaphors, implying both cyclical and linear motion. They also cohere in viewing time as emerging prior to the completion of physical reality. As for their differences, in Plotinus, eternity refers to the atemporal state of existence that is a hallmark of the intelligible reality prior to the emergence of the hypostasis Soul. It can be realized by a human individual only by means of contemplative return. The noetic grasp of timeless reality has no prolonging effect on one's bodily existence.

Unlike Plotinus' dichotomy of atemporality (eternity) and temporality (time), the relevant discussion in the *Laozi*, which does not posit the existence of an ideal intelligible world, is based on the distinction between long and short temporal intervals. Accordingly, the main principle of the text, the Way, endures due to its ability to perform timely return. Since here the return is not confined to intellectual understanding, but also includes ethical components, any person able to carry it out in their actions can, in principle, achieve longevity.

Remaining in antiquity but looking at more schematic visions of time, Nada M. Sekulic, in "Magic Square and Perfect Sphere: Time in Daoism and Ancient Greece," explores the visual representation of key features of time. Discussing myth, magic, and temporality in ancient cosmological philosophy and religion, she outlines common settings and differences as found in ancient Greece and early Daoism. She focuses in particular on the idea of the perfect sphere as found in Greek cosmology represented by Pythagoras, Parmenides, and Plato, then compares these notions to the explanations ancient Chinese thinkers give of magic squares such as the *Luoshu* (Writ of the Luo [River]) and the cosmology of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes). Common points include similarities to the Pythagorean theorem as well as medical ideas such as humors and phases. The main difference is the overall meaning of the imperfection of cosmos.

Another mode of the visual representation of time is the topic of Wujun Ke's "Daoist Cinematic Temporality and the Taiwanese New

Wave.” She shows just how Taiwanese New Wave directors invoke Daoist references in moments of temporal dilation to comment on Taiwanese society during the post-martial law period, a time of rapid neoliberal transformation. Though noted for their use of slowed-down cinematic time, Edward Yang’s *Yi Yi* (*A One and a Two*, 2000) and Tsai Ming-Liang’s *Stray Dogs* (*Jiaoyou*, 2013), masterpieces of the Taiwanese New Wave, are not typically discussed in terms of their references to Daoism.

This changes with this essay. It opens a consideration of Daoist cinematic temporality as discourses around durational time are necessary but insufficient to address the spiritual dimensions of time. By resurrecting Daoist thought to intervene in the homogenous, empty time of late capitalist modernity, Tsai and Yang attend to temporality on a cosmological level, emphasizing acceptance of both the mundane repetitions of daily life as well as the inevitability of change and loss. While Edward Yang’s *Terrorizers* is perhaps the most well-known representative of the New Wave for its portrayal of urban alienation and postmodernity, Yang’s final film *Yi Yi* pays homage to the spiritual dimension of secular life by invoking Zhuangzi’s butterfly dream in the context of a grandmother’s passing. Similarly, Tsai Ming-Liang is discussed in terms of slow cinema and disposability, yet he directed *Stray Dogs* with a quote by Laozi in mind. Attending to such details allows us to excavate the existence of unruly temporalities and the enduring influence of spiritual thought on secular life.

Remaining in modernity and moving on to connections with both Western and Buddhist thinkers, Patrick Laude, in “Ways of Time: Seeing Dao through Guénon, Teilhard, and Suzuki,” points out that Daoism presents a vision of time that is both cyclical and linear. Its philosophies conceive the world as manifesting in cycles of flow and return, whereas its religious visions see it as moving toward a state of harmony called Great Peace.

This raises first the question of the relationship between spiritual transformation and cosmic change, as reflected in the tension between the Daoist sense of degradation resulting from the collapse of spontaneous oneness with Dao and its millenarian tendencies. Hence the second question: Is the religious view of time descending and declining toward destruction, or ascending toward a final apogee, entropic or progressive? Thirdly, we must envisage that spiritual perception and imagination can also be focused on transcending time and reaching eternity in the present, independently from the vicissitudes of history.

The essay explores of some of the metaphysical and spiritual implications of this triadic power of time in light of the works of René Guénon (1886-1951), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and D. T. Suzuki

(1870-1966). The relevance of these authors flows not only from the considerable impact their works had on entire generations of intellectuals and spiritual seekers, but also from the way they were able to articulate and reformulate fundamental insights of Christian theology and Asian wisdom traditions in original, provocative, and seminal ways, providing invaluable tools of intellectual and spiritual revitalization.

How this plays out in religious practice is further explored in Qi Song's "Daoist Aspects of Time Perception in Hakuin's Zen Experiences." She begins by outlining the biography of one of the major Zen masters of Tokugawa Japan, Hakuin Eikaku (1686-1769), then shows how he worked with several different modes of time perception in his various Zen experiences. First of all, during the enlightenment experience of *kenshō*, time for him collapsed into a single instant and vanished completely, opening him to the underlying cosmic reality of timelessness. Then again, when suffering from Zen sickness, time in his experience was dilated and extended into long, drawn-out, and painful segments. Those two represent extreme poles that could also be described as heaven and hell, purity and defilement, oneness and division, and so on.

After learning Daoist techniques, however, Hakuin switched to a gentler and more fluid way of practice, leaving these extremes behind and focusing more on the world of stars, nature, and physicality. Working closely with the natural rhythms, he emphasized their manifestation within the body through breathing and energy guiding, notably in the ocean of *qi* and the lower elixir field. He adapted his body's patterns to natural time structures as manifest both within and without, while opening his mind as pure consciousness to flow through the different parts of the body. In this manner, he established smooth and harmonious movements, finding the true root of enlightenment deep within himself and going beyond time as a historical marker and ancestral agent.

Linking self and culture, mind and body in the context of how time creates meaning in human life is the focus of the contribution by Juan Zhao. "Synchronicity: A Modern Interpretation of Time in the *Yijing*" traces the emergence of Carl Gustav Jung's (1875-1961) concept of "synchronicity," then analyzes its relationship with the *Yijing* [Book of Changes], pointing out that it provides a good way of interpreting time (*shi*) as found here. Jung's synchronicity echoes the revolution of the understanding of time that formed part of 20th-century Western physics and philosophy. Yet he also had recourse to the ancient Chinese classic.

By working with the notion time as presented in the *Yijing*, Jung could propose his particular take on the new vision of time, leading to the theory of synchronicity. This added a whole new dimension to the preva-

lent law of causality—a way of looking at things from a more quantum-based perspective, of simultaneity and coincidence. Proposing this, Jung affirmed another dimension of science, integrating and enhancing the modern significance of the *Yijing*. Doing so, he also gave a new life to the ancient concept of time, making it accessible to, and relevant for, the context of modernity. Seeing time from a comparative perspective and in a dialogue between China and the West, Juan Zhao deepens our understanding of time as well as of the overall situation of human life. Flowing smoothly with the river of time, the human mind can become one with the entire world that makes up its environment, thus opening new and varied paths to moral improvement and spiritual cultivation.

Looking at how time plays out in life from a yet different angle, Jeffrey W. Dippmann focuses on “Immortality and Meaning in Life: A Daoist Perspective.” He points out that most Western philosophers have focused on the issue of bodily immortality and the power of death that forces us to utilize life to its fullest, knowing that it can end at any moment. An elixir of life is often seen as counterproductive since it would cause life to become a drudgery of relentless indifference and boredom.

In the Daoist tradition, the notion of *xian* involves the attainment of some sort of immortality. *Xian* come in three types: heavenly immortals who have ascended into heaven and occupy a position in the otherworldly bureaucracy, earthly immortals who are ready for ascension but remain on earth, and those who transcend this world through deliverance from the corpse and leave behind a token or substitute. In keeping with the search for meaning in life, the present study primarily focuses on earthly immortals.

By utilizing tales as found in collections of biographies and classical hagiographies, Dippmann shows that there can indeed be meaning in life for those who attain bodily immortality. For example, the *Liexian zhuan* records the tale of Boshi sheng (Master Whitestone) who, even after 2000 years, desired nothing more than a long life on earth. When queried as to why he didn’t ascend to heaven, Whitestone replied that he could not imagine enjoying himself as much in heaven as he did on earth. In contrast to the Western concerns over tedium and despair, the Daoist vision celebrates life, and offers the possibility of a continued joyous existence filled with wonder and hope.

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