

‘KEEPING TO THE CENTRE’: RU AND DAOIST  
IDEALS

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*The Doctrine of the Mean advised people to keep to the centre so as to achieve the mean and harmony ... So the Confucianists of the Song Dynasty claimed: ‘The middle is the right course of the universe; and moderation is the established principle of the world’, thence the Doctrine of the Mean became an eternal truth valid and appropriate everywhere.<sup>1</sup>*

In the Ru<sup>2</sup> tradition keeping ‘... to the centre’ involved model or exemplary conduct, with meticulous observation to all manner of familial, societal and ritual loyalties and obligations. Such was the Ru model of ‘self-cultivation’: exoteric in nature and accessible to everyone through ideal modes of interaction or behaviour. The doctrine embraced moderation and the ‘middle course’ referred to could only be achieved by the cultivated ruler who was exemplary in maintaining harmony and, in turn, an ideal system of government. Abstract, or esoteric concepts of self-cultivation are at first discernible and become more refined in the philosophical speculations of the ‘Warring States’ or Zhangou age, the period to which the emergence of Daoism can undoubtedly be traced. This paper will examine the concept of the centre in Chinese philosophical thought with particular focus on the pursuit of self-cultivation, outlining briefly the exoteric nature of the Ru model and then turning to the development of abstract notions of the self and self-

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<sup>1</sup> *Doctrine of the Mean*, translated into English by He Baihua, (Shandong Friendship Press), Preface, pp. 8-9.

<sup>2</sup> ie, Confucianism.

cultivation practices in the formative period of *dao**jia*, or Daoist philosophy.

The *Doctrine of the Mean* prescribes extreme honesty in accordance with the ‘standard set by the way of Heaven’<sup>3</sup>. The perfected system of government was paradigmatic in emulating the ‘standard set by Heaven’ and defined the middle course, the interface between Heaven and Earth:

The great norms generally accepted under the heaven include five aspects whose realisation depends upon three kinds of moral character. The relation between the monarch and his subjects,... the father and the son, ... the husband and the wife,... between brothers, and contacts with friends are the five aspects. The three kinds of moral character of sagacity, charity and character are the same.... One approaches the level of sagacity when he loves studying... the level of charity when he insists on doing good deeds, ... of courage when he has the sense of shame. When one has known these three points, he knows how to enhance his self-cultivation. When one has known how to enhance his self-cultivation he knows how to administer the people’s affairs; when one has known how to administer the people’s affairs, he knows how to administer the country.<sup>4</sup>

As such, self-cultivation could only be realised by the average individual through communal, rather than individual endeavour. Chapter 22 in fact begins: ‘Only the saint who is the most honest can develop his individuality to perfection ...’<sup>5</sup> Intrinsic to and spontaneously occurring (regardless of birthright) in only the saintly or sagely, the ordinary individual could only develop such qualities, if at all, by ‘postnatal inculcation’.<sup>6</sup> Extreme honesty also

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 20, pp. 33-34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 20, pp. 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 22, p. 37.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 21, p. 35.

conferred on the perfected individual the capacity to prophesy:

When one is extremely honest, he foresees things to happen. Auspicious omens are seen when the country is going to prosper, and portentous omens are seen when the country is going to decline. Such omens appear on the divinatory herbs and tortoise shells, and reflect in how the related persons move their four limbs. When a misfortune or good luck is to befall, what will turn out to be good is foreknown, and so is what will turn out to be bad. Therefore, the extremely honest can be compared to supernatural beings.<sup>7</sup>

Early Daoist self-cultivation texts, on the other hand, reflect a preoccupation with internalised practice, individual transcendence and transformation. The earliest of the *Guanzi* texts, the *Neiye* (which translates as ‘Inward Training’) is dated by Roth, Graham, Kuo and Rickett to approximately 300 BCE<sup>8</sup> and its treatment of the cosmology of the Dao closely parallels that of the *Laozi*. Graham posits that the *Neiye* is ‘possibly the oldest “mystical” text in China’, which grounds psychology and self-cultivation in a physiological substratum and prescribes techniques to occasion self-transcendence, longevity and optimum health.<sup>9</sup> The essay focuses on the function of the *jing* (Vital Essence), the enigmatic, incipient and sustaining force of the Dao. Through focused breathing techniques the *jing* – which is a condensed form of *qi* (Vital Energy) – becomes apprehensible to the proficient:<sup>10</sup>

By concentrating your Vital Energy like a Numen

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> Roth, Harold, ‘Who Compiled the *Chuang Tzu*’, in *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, ed. H. Rosemount Jr., (USA, 1991), pp. 88-89.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

The myriad things will all be contained within you.  
Can you concentrate? Can you unify?  
Can you know good and bad fortune  
Without resorting to divination?  
Can you stop? Can you halt?  
Can you not seek it outwardly  
But attain it inwardly?  
If you think, and think, and think further about this  
But still cannot penetrate it,  
The daemonic and numinous (kuei-shen) in you will  
penetrate it.  
It is not due to the inherent power of the daemonic and  
numinous,  
But rather to the utmost development of your Vital  
Essence.<sup>11</sup>

The state of insentience and self-transcendence achieved through controlled breathing exercises enables reunion with the *Dao* and the *De*, and engenders longevity.<sup>12</sup> In yielding insight ‘without resorting to divination’, Daoist techniques stand in contradistinction to the Ru model, which endows the adept with the ability to interpret ‘divinatory herbs and tortoise shells’.<sup>13</sup> Concentrating on the *qi*, the *jing* becomes condensed, the myriad things are sheltered within and union with the *Dao* ensues, hence the question: ‘Can you concentrate, can you unify’. Comparing this with the description of the Daoist School provided by the Grand Historian, Sima Qian (who coined the term Daoist):

The Daoist school enables man’s Numinous Essence to be concentrated and unified, enables him to move in unison with the Formless and to provide adequately for the myriad things.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91. Roth notes that lines 3-8 appear ‘almost verbatim’ in 23/3-5 of the *Zhuangzi* – one of the outer ‘mixed’ chapters.

<sup>13</sup> *Doctrine of the Mean*, translated into English by He Baihua, (Shandong Friendship Press), 24, p. 37.

<sup>14</sup> *Shih Chi*, Chapter 130, p. 3289.

and the conceptual parallels in *Laozi*, 16:37:

I do my utmost to attain emptiness;  
 I hold firmly to stillness.  
 The myriad creatures all rise together  
 And I watch their return.  
 The teaming creatures  
 All return to their separate roots.  
 Returning to one's roots is known as stillness.  
 This is what is meant by returning to one's destiny.  
 Returning to one's destiny is known as the constant.  
 Knowledge of the constant is known as discernment<sup>15</sup>

it is clear that the Daoist concept of 'centre' is grounded in the state of emptiness.

While neither breathing techniques, nor the concept of *jing* are the matters of crucial concern in the *Laozi* that they are in the *Neiye* and *Shiji*, the consonance of other themes is incredibly obvious: Firstly, 'attaining emptiness' in the *Laozi* would be equivalent to the state of insentience and self-transcendence which results from concentrating the *qi*, a process which Lau, in his translation of the *Laozi*, terms 'hold firmly to stillness',<sup>16</sup> whereas the process itself is explicitly termed concentration in the *Shiji* and the *Neiye*, the latter of which poses the rhetorical question: 'Can you stop? Can you halt?' Secondly, during the process of internalisation, the 'myriad things' become contained within according to the *Neiye*; they are 'provided adequately' for as a result of concentrating the *qi* according to the *Shiji*; while in the *Laozi* they rise together and are watched returning to their roots, a destination equated with stillness and the constant, synonyms for the Dao. Thirdly, all three texts clearly articulate the imperative of union with

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<sup>15</sup> *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, XVI: 37, translated with an introduction by D.C. Lau, (Penguin, London, 1963), p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

the Dao: in the *Neiye* the question, ‘Can you unify’ is firmly posed; in the *Shiji* it is resolutely stated that the ‘Daoist school enables ... him [man] to move in unison with the Formless’, and in the *Laozi* the self-transcendent returns to ‘the constant’.

Sima Qian goes on to describe the Daoist school as one which:

...takes no action, but it also says that nothing is left undone. Its substance is easy to practice, but its words are difficult to understand. Its methods take Emptiness and Non-being as the root, and Adaptation and Compliance as its practice. It has no set limits, no constant forms, and so is able to explore the genuine basis of things.<sup>17</sup>

The process, according to Roth, primarily results in emptying the mind of preconceptions (ie, of earth bound thoughts) and experiencing Non-being. This state paves the way for the secondary outcome, the ability to prudently act, effortlessly and spontaneously ‘through Adaptations and Compliance’. This ‘dual-process’ pervades the philosophy of the *Laozi*<sup>18</sup> and is clearly articulated in *Laozi* 16:38:

Woe to him who wilfully innovates  
While ignorant of the constant,  
But should one act from knowledge of the constant  
One’s actions will lead to impartiality,  
Impartiality to kingliness,  
Kingliness to heaven,  
Heaven to the way,  
The way to perpetuity,  
And to the end of one’s days one will meet with no  
danger.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Shih Chi*, chapter 130, p. 3292.

<sup>18</sup> Roth, *op cit*, pp. 87-88.

<sup>19</sup> *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, XVI;38, *op cit*, p. 72.

Roth hypothesises that 'Daoism' developed in three, graduating phases; the 'Individualist' which deals with individual transformation; the 'Primitivist' which propounds a simplification of social administration; and thirdly, the 'Syncretist' which proposes a complex system of government based on cosmological patterns. While this sequence is not diachronic, he demonstrates that the 'Individualist' phase preceded the other two.<sup>20</sup> These phases, which stemmed from the speculations of 'one or more master-disciple lineages' of the pre-Han period, culminated in what Roth defines as the 'Daoism' spoken of by Sima Qian.<sup>21</sup> His redaction criticism, focusing on the *Neiye* and *Xinshu Shang*, reveals that the former is the earliest Daoist source for inner cultivation techniques and that it predates even the *Laozi*. The *Xinshu Shang* reflects the continuation of inner cultivation ideology which became applied to address political concerns in the phase in which Roth locates the development of Syncretistic Daoism.<sup>22</sup>

The received versions of the *Laozi* also exhibit a preoccupation with methods of governing or rulership. The position of ruler was optimally held, according to the *Laozi*, by the sage, whose wisdom was inherent rather than inculcated. The *Laozi* appears to discredit the 'acquired' knowledge recommended by the Ru and, on face value, to advocate governing policies which repressed the subjects by depriving them of education and knowledge. In this way, with the masses oppressed, the country could be governed by *wu-wei*, non-action or non-intervention:

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<sup>20</sup> Roth, Harold D., 'Redaction Criticism and the Early History of Taoism', in *Early China 19*, edited by E.L. Shaughnessy, Vol. 19, (1994), pp. 6-7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 33-37.

The sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act.<sup>23</sup>

Although the unrefined state of the subject in such a system concurs with the naturalistic tendencies of early Daoism, the despotic overtones in this verse, gave rise to Ames' assessment of Chapter Three as a 'parody on autocratic rule'.<sup>24</sup> The concept of non-action, long considered pervasive in the philosophy of the *Laozi*, is signified by the term *wu-wei*. The concept does feature prominently in the standard received versions and, at the time these were compiled, the term *wu-wei* rendered the accepted meaning. It is absent from the *Neiye*, however, and the standard received versions<sup>25</sup> of the *Laozi* are copies of compilations which postdate the archetype by anywhere between three and six hundred years. The discovery of three older manuscripts in the Twentieth Century compels a review and total re-evaluation of the authenticity and applicability of the term *wu-wei* in light of evidence which suggests interpolation and distortion of the original meaning of the text.

The first two manuscripts were both excavated at Mawangdui in Changsha in the Hunan province in 1972. They have been labelled *Mawangdui A* and *Mawangdui B*

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<sup>23</sup> *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, XXX:9, *op cit.*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> Ames, Roger T., *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought*. (USA, 1983), p. 42.

<sup>25</sup> The three earliest versions, annexed with the commentaries of Yan Zun (fl. 53-24 BCE), Wang Bi (CE 226-249), and Heshang Gong (CE 200-500), were reproduced many times before they were 'received', and therefore are unlikely to be faithfully copies of the original compilations, let alone the *Laozi* archetype. *Lao-tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Texts*, translated with an introduction by Robert G. Henricks, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1989), p. xiv, and L. Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* (New Jersey, 1992), p. 64.



and are now the earliest extant versions of the *Laozi*. Both silk manuscripts were interred in Tomb 3 at Mawangdui in 163 BCE. The oldest of the two, *Mawangdui A*, contains the earliest renditions of various chapters of the *Laozi* and retains the use of seal script, which began to be phased out after the Qin unification in 221 BCE.<sup>26</sup> It also retains the frequent use of the word ‘*bang*’ denoting country which indicates that it was compiled before the reign of the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, Liu Bang (reigned 206-194 BCE). The word has been substituted in *Mawangdui B*, which includes the use of the word *ying* (the name of Liu Ying, who reigned from 194-187 BCE) indicating that it was compiled during the reign of Liu Bang.<sup>27</sup>

The third manuscript, the *Xiang'er* discovered at Dunhuang is dated to the later Han and is at least one hundred years older than the standard received versions. It consists of the first half of the *Laozi*<sup>28</sup> and an accompanying, incomplete commentary, the *Xiang'er zhu*.<sup>29</sup> It is believed to have been used as a catechist for new recruits to the Tianshi Dao movement founded by Zhang Daoling in the Second Century of the Common Era. Boltz finds many variations to the standard received versions of the *Laozi* in the *Xiang'er*, two of which have crucial implications for the discussion at hand.

The reference to *wu-wei* in Chapter 37 of the *Xiang'er* is consonant with the placement and wording in the received versions of the *Laozi*. The sentence in question, ‘*wu wei*

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<sup>26</sup> Harper, Donald J., *Early Chinese Medical Literature: the Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts*, translation and study, (London, 1998), pp. 19-20.

<sup>27</sup> *Lao-tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-Wang-Tui Texts*, translated with an introduction by Robert G. Henricks, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1989), p. xv and W.G. Boltz, *op cit*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>28</sup> Those numbered 1-37 in the standard version as it has been received.

<sup>29</sup> Chan, Alan K.L., *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-Shang Kung Commentaries on the Lao-tzu*, (New York, 1991), p. 2.

*erh wu pu wei*’, translates as ‘The way never acts yet nothing is left undone’.<sup>30</sup> The same line in *Mawangdui A and B*, however, renders the meaning ‘The Dao regularly lacks naming’ and uses the characters *wu* and *ming* instead of *wu* and *wei*. The term reappears in chapter 48 of the received versions, a chapter which is absent from the *Xiang’er* and is either missing or illegible in the *Mawangdui* manuscripts.<sup>31</sup> The concept of *wu-wei* is in fact not evident in the *Mawangdui* texts at all.

Although closer in date of composition to the standard received versions than to the *Mawangdui* texts, the *Xiang’er* is in some respects more faithful to the latter versions. In the line of Chapter Three previously cited, the received versions translate as ‘He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act’.<sup>32</sup> The *Xiang’er* retains the use of the double negative and parallels the *Mawangdui A* and *B* versions with the rendering, ‘If you only cause the knowledgeable not to dare not to act, there would be nothing not regulated’.<sup>33</sup>

The concept of *wu-wei*, which is absent from both *Mawangdui* versions, is promoted in the *Huainanzi* and the later *Heshang Gong* and probably represents the Huang-Lao strand of the Daoist tradition which existed from as early as the compilation of the *Huainanzi* to possibly as late as the Fifth Century CE. Bokenkamp posits that the term ‘*wei*’ meant ‘artificial or contrived’ at the time of interpolation, until it came to be used to mean ‘action’ by

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<sup>30</sup> *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, XXXVII:81, *op cit*, p. 77.

<sup>31</sup> Boltz, William G., ‘The Religious and Philosophical Significance of the “Hsiang Erh” Lao Tzu in the Light of the *Ma-wang-tui* Silk Manuscripts’, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. XLV, Part 1-3, (1982), pp. 102-103.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, XXX:9, p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Boltz, William G., *op cit*, pp. 101-104.

the time of compilation of the *Wang Bi*.<sup>34</sup> This would accord with Major's interpretation of 'wu wei' as meaning 'non striving' or 'taking no action contrary to nature'.<sup>35</sup> At any rate, the importation of the term by Huang Lao scholars in the early Han was based on a political imperative. The Huang Lao school prescribed a non-intervention method of rulership.<sup>36</sup> Four texts which were found at Mawangdui and to which *Mawangdui B* was annexed, have been linked to the Huang Lao school because of frequent references to Huangdi in one of the sections. The manuscripts (known as the *Huangdi sijing*) were collated in an arrangement which placed the *Mawangdui B Laozi* behind the other four texts. In its entirety, this collection displays an alliance with both the *Laozi* and 'legalism', developing a complementary treatment which combines the political philosophy of the latter with a cosmological strata which, according to Chan, draws almost exclusively from the *Laozi*.<sup>37</sup>

Lee Yearley interprets *wei* as 'conscious activity' in his exposition of Xunzi's ideas on the duality of the self; on the one hand responding spontaneously to strong dispositions and, on the other, applying judgement to direct behaviour ('conscious activity').<sup>38</sup> This definition supports my conviction that the original intention of the *Laozi* was to derive from the process of meditation an ability to clear or purge the mind of socially and institutionally constructed or 'inculcated' precepts and patterns. This state of pure consciousness would spontaneously evoke wisdom and genuine virtue. Chapter Thirty-Eight of the *Laozi*, for

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<sup>34</sup> Third Century CE. Bokenkamp, Stephen R., *Early Daoist Scriptures*, (California, 1997), pp. 51-52.

<sup>35</sup> Major, John S., *Heaven and Earth in Early Han Thought: Chapters Three, four, and Five of the Huainanzi*, (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1993), p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> Robinet, Isabelle, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, translated by Phyllis Brooks, (California, 1997), p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Chan, *op cit*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>38</sup> Yearley, Lee H., *Facing our Frailty: Comparative Religious Ethics and the Confucian Death Rituals*, (Valparaiso, 1995), p. 5.

example, differentiates between the ‘conscious’ display of virtue (for recognition) and the unintentional manifestation of virtue:

The highest virtue is not virtuous; therefore it truly has virtue. The lowest virtue never loses sight of its virtue; therefore it has no true virtue.<sup>39</sup>

The term, *wu wei* appears in one of the later *Guanzi* essays, the *Hsin-shu-shang*, which acculturates the concept for political and rulership use. It is the absence of such an imperative from the earlier texts that strengthens the case for a late Fourth Century BCE date of composition for the *Neiye* and enhances Roth’s contention that the application of self-cultivation techniques to engender effective rulership represents a ‘more developed stage’ in the Daoist philosophical tradition.<sup>40</sup> Such a stage can most likely be located in the early Han before a backdrop of Huang Lao scholars at the Qi-Xia Academy in Huainan. It was there that the three companion essays were most likely collated with the pre-existing *Neiye* late in the Second Century BCE and the ‘mixed’ chapters of the *Zhuangzi* possibly composed and collated with the ‘inner chapters’ to produce the earliest received version of that text. Termed ‘mixed’ because they are attributable to multiple individuals and because they are considered syncretistic in nature, they combine elements of variant ideologies. In this respect the three later *Guanzi* essays and the ‘mixed’ *Zhuangzi* chapters are commensurate (sharing numerous thematic similarities and generic terminology) with the eclectic *Huainanzi*.<sup>41</sup> The Huang Lao school to which all of these products are almost unanimously attributed, corresponds

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<sup>39</sup> Henricks, *op cit.* pp. xxvi-xxvii.

<sup>40</sup> Roth, Harold D., ‘Psychology and Self-Cultivation in Early Taoistic Thought’, in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol 51 (1991); p. 661.

<sup>41</sup> Roth, Harold, ‘Who Compiled the *Chuang Tzu*?’, in *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to Angus C. Graham*, ed. H. Rosemount Jr., (USA, 1991), pp. 79-86.

neatly with Sima Qian's late Second Century BCE description of the Daoist school:

As for its methods, it follows the general tendency of the Naturalists, picks out the best of Confucians and Mohists, and adopts the essentials of the Terminologists and Legalists. It shifts with the times, changes in response to things, and in establishing customs and in practical application it is nowhere unsuitable. The general drift of its teachings is simple and easy to hold onto; there is much achievement for little effort.<sup>42</sup>

The earliest extant source of Daoist philosophy, the *Neiye*, yields principles of self-cultivation which invert the ideals of the Ru. Where the Ru tenet of self-cultivation glorified the acquisition of knowledge and imposed conformity, the *Laozi*, in its earliest extant form<sup>43</sup> depreciated acquired knowledge and directed against contrivance. Daoist self-cultivation practices were an internalised, individual pursuit, aimed at relieving adepts of socially constructed patterns and preconceptions. During the process adepts focused on breathing techniques which resulted in a state of 'emptiness' or non-being. While the affinity with Legalism evident in the compilation of the *Mawangdui B* version of the *Laozi* does not obscure text's focus on meditation, later Daoist products attributed to Huang Lao scholars from the Qi-Xia Academy were infused with the notion of *wu wei*, a term which was applied to articulate the latter division's brand of 'non-intervention' political ideology. This has obscured the early Daoist school's focus on meditation, wherein the self becomes the centre, the pivot point for union with the Dao and the retainer of the myriad things:

When a particular thing recognises its basic character as 'no-self nature', it recognises that its being is one

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<sup>42</sup> *Shih Chi*, *op cit*, chapter 130, p. 3289.

<sup>43</sup> *Mawangdui A and B*.

with emptiness; by letting go of its own 'self' it becomes a participant in the centre of all other unique particulars. From the standpoint of emptiness, then, a thing 'is' in terms of its own 'selfhood' when it both is subordinate to all other things and at the same time becomes the centre for all other things.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Streng, Frederick J., 'Beyond Religious Symbols and Insights: Understanding Religious Life as Processes of Valuation', in *Religious Traditions: A Journal in the Study of Religion*, Vol. 10, 1987, ed. Arvind Sharma (Department of Religious Studies, Sydney) p. 83.