

BLUE PAPERS

Dé 德

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Dé 德 (*té*) is a Daoist quality and trait that refers to the way in which the Dao manifests as embodied activity in the world, activity that exerts a beneficial and transformative influence. *Dé* has been variously translated as “inner power,” “integrity,” “potency,” and “virtue,” with our preferred translation being **inner power**. However, virtue is appropriate in certain contexts, especially if we understand the latter in the ancient Hellenistic sense of moral excellence relating to our entire character and conduct, including specific virtuous qualities.

The term *dé* is perhaps most well-known through the title and contents of the anonymous fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), with the second part (chs. 38-81) of the received text referred to as the “*dé* section.” Etymologically speaking, the Chinese character consists of *chì* 彳 (“step”) and *zhí* 直 (“direct”) above *xīn* 心 (“heart-mind”), with *zhí*-direct consisting of *gǔn* 丨 (vertical stroke) above *mù* 目 (“eyes”). Looking straight ahead. Correct orientation and alignment. The variant character 惠 lacks *chì*-step, and might be further connected to *zhēn* 真 (“perfect/real/true”). We may thus understand Daoist inner power as an aligned heart-mind expressed as **embodied activity in the world**, activity that exerts a beneficial and transformative influence. Action, embodiment, movement. In addition, the *Dàodé jīng* provides its own definition: “The highest *dé* is not *dé*...The highest *dé* is **non-action** (*wúwéi* 無為), which is free of contrived behavior” (ch. 38). This may be further connected to “**adeptness/goodness**” (*shàn* 善): “The highest adeptness resembles water. Water is adept at benefiting

the myriad beings, but has no need to contend with them” (ch. 8). Mutual support and mutual flourishing. Beyond contention (*wúzhēng* 無爭).

Daoist inner power is a quality that infuses and manifests through our being. The *qi* of the Dao (*dàoqi* 道炁) becoming re-membered in the world. It is one of the ways that Daoists recognize each other. A distinctive energetic signature identifying and connecting us. As such, *dé* is related to other Daoist qualities, including divine illumination/spirit radiance (*shénguāng* 神光) and numinous pervasion (*língtōng* 靈通). Light, energy, presence.

Although Daoist accounts of *dé* tend to focus on human being and expression, there are some references to “non-human” **animals**. For example, in chapter 30 of the anonymous fourth-second century BCE *Zhuāngzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang), Jixǐngzi 紀渚子 (Master Regulated Bird-cry), an advanced Daoist adept, trains “fighting roosters” in such a way that other roosters will not engage them. The said rooster emits something like an **extended energy field** that protects him from harm. Interestingly, that same text links inner power to life-destiny (*mìng* 命), specifically as cosmic endowment and sacred connection. “Horses and oxen have four feet—this is what I mean by the celestial (*tiān* 天). Putting a halter on the horse’s head, piercing the ox’s nose—this is what I mean by the human (*rén* 人). So I say: Do not let what is human wipe out what is celestial; do not let what is purposeful wipe out what is fated (*mìng* 命); do not let desire for gain lead you after fame (*míng* 名). Diligently guard it (*jīnshǒu* 謹守), do not lose it—this is what we mean by ‘**returning to the real**’ (*fǎn qí zhēn* 反其真)” (ch. 17).

So perhaps true inner power and virtue are expressed as concern for animal freedom, wellness, and flourishing, beyond personal preference and species association. The mysterious and numinous presence of the Dao extended to and infusing all beings and everything that exists. **Being, embodiment, activity.**