

THE TAO OF ANIMALS

Training the Horse-Mind

By **Louis Komjathy** 康思奇, Ph.D., CSO

“Life between the heavens and earth is like the passing of a white colt glimpsed through a crack in the wall — *whoosh!* and that’s the end ... Having been transformed, things find themselves alive; another transformation and they’re dead. Living beings grieve over it; humanity mourns. But it is like the untying of a heaven-lent bow-bag, the unloading of a heaven-lent satchel — a yielding, a mild mutation, and the ethereal and corporeal souls (*hunpo* 魂魄) are on their way, the body following after, on at last to the Great Return (*dagui* 大歸).”

— Zhuangzi 莊子 (Chuang-tzu; Book of Master Zhuang; ch. 22)

Does life resemble a galloping horse? And is our understanding like watching that horse through a hole in the wall? Is each individual being a “bow-bag” and a “satchel” carrying disparate things, only to be untied and dispersed in the end? Is this what we discover when “knowing wanders north” (the title of the above chapter)? Here “north” corresponds to the unknown and the mysterious, the Dao (Tao; Way) in Daoist terms. While the passage includes a Daoist description of physical death, it also may be understood as the dissolution of separate identity that occurs in deep contemplative practice. Perhaps when we complete the “Great Return,” we find something else.

The contemplative path, a life rooted in interiority and silence, is about practice-realization (*xiuzheng* 修證). In the language of Daoism, it is about “cultivating the Real” (*xiuzhen* 修真), “guarding the One” (*shouyi* 守一), “returning to the Root” (*guigen* 歸根), and “realizing the Dao” (*dedao* 得道). This involves an oscillation, a play, between training, reflection, and insight. And there are many moments, many experiences along this path. Enthusiasm,

aliveness, disappointment, isolation, joy, contentment, perhaps even despair, among others. But it is all practice. It is all grist for the mill. Materials for the pearl. Ingredients for the elixir. From a Daoist perspective, everything and anything may assist us in aligning and attuning ourselves with the Dao. This is life filled with energetic aliveness, sacred connection, and numinous pervasion. It is about an orientation (*fangxiang* 方向) towards something both deep within and far beyond ourselves.

In a life of Daoist cultivation, we search for fuller understanding, for deeper connection, for more complete awakening. In the process, we may recognize that there are many contemplative analogies and metaphors. I have already spoken of a “path” and “cultivation.” We might also think of our training in terms of mountain travel, complete with “maps” to perhaps unfamiliar landscapes and remote summits. Some of these maps of Daoist practice-realization may be more well-known to you. Like “return” through non-action (*wuwei* 無為) and suchness (*ziran* 自然). Or “carefree wandering” (*xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊). Or a body composed of “elixir fields” (*dantian* 丹田).

One less familiar map of stages on the Daoist contemplative path centers on “horse training.” Like Chan/Zen Buddhists, Daoists sometimes speak of the “monkey-mind” (*xinyuan* 心猿/*yuanxin* 猿心) and “horse-thought” (*yima* 意馬/*mayi* 馬意). The ordinary mind resembles a monkey jumping to and fro and a horse galloping out of control. This is a heart-mind characterized by chaos, confusion, and disorientation. So, for present purposes, on the most basic level “the horse” represents our own disordered and untrained mind. In a conditioned and habituated state, we may believe that the apparently unending herd of thought is our mind. However, “within the heart-mind, there is yet another heart-mind” (Neiye 內業 [Inward Training]; ch. 14).



In the late medieval period, specifically in the thirteenth century, a Daoist monk named Gao Daokuan 高道寬 (*Yuanming* 圓明 [Complete Illumination]; 1195-1277) composed a series of illustrated poems and accompanying verse-commentary that I have labelled the “Daoist Horse Taming Pictures” (HTP). These are twelve poems and thirteen wood-block illustrations that frame Daoist practice-realization in terms of “horse training.” The Daoist Horse Taming Pictures are adapted from, or at least inspired by, the now-famous Chan/Zen Buddhist Ox Herding Pictures, specifically those of the monk Puming 普明 (*Fumy* 𠄎; 11th c.). In my recent book *Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures* (Columbia University Press, 2017), I discuss the historical background, monastic context, associated training regimens, as well as horse symbolism. For the purposes of this essay, I want to focus on their relevance to contemporary Daoist self-cultivation. Specifically, I would like to introduce and comment on the ten primary pictures (see figure 1), which are equine-centered.

This includes the “horse metaphor” and “horse training analogy” as a framework for understanding our own meditation practice and associated experiences. Here I will provide a “contemplative commentary” on the pictures in dialogue with personal meditation practice. Observant readers may note some divergences from my book, as I am commenting on the pictures alone in terms of present-moment reflections and application. Perhaps in a future contribution we will explore the associated Daoist views of human/animal relationships, “wildness,” and shared animality. (As I write this, my dog-companion Takota and a local stag are teaching me about observation and presence.)

To begin, I would like to suggest an “applied contemplative approach,” specifically one in

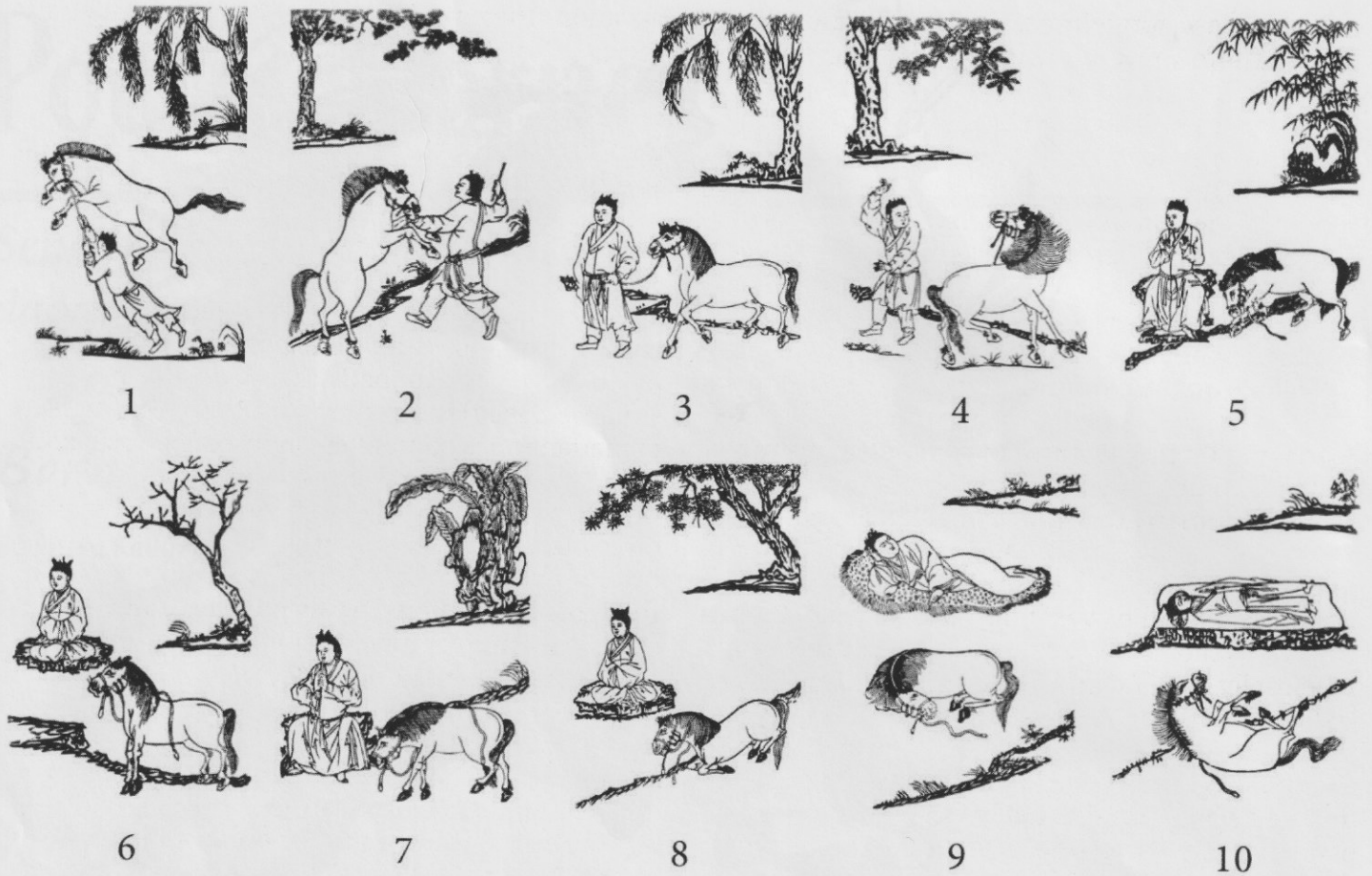


IMAGE PROVIDED BY LOUIS KOMJATHY

Figure 1, The Daoist Horse Taming Pictures

which I/you/we actively cultivate and explore “contemplative reading.” This may be done in a variety of ways, and it will unfold differently for different people and at different moments in one’s practice. At present, I would encourage you to take some time to look at each picture individually and sequentially. You might use a piece of blank paper to cover the other images. What do you see in each picture? If you have a committed meditation practice, what insights do you find in these images? If you are slightly more daring, you might meditate for a few minutes before looking at each image. This is practice informing study and study informing practice.

We might also incorporate a number of specific reflection exercises. What is the distinction between the attendant/shepherd and the horse? What does the halter-lead represent? Are all ten of the Horse Taming Pictures about formal meditation, or does the latter only commence in #5 or #6? Is there a significant difference between the postures depicted in these two stages? If every illustration relates to formal meditation, why does the standard posture only appear in No. 6?

To add some additional content, the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures were originally untitled. However, drawing on parallels with the Ox Herding Pictures of Puming and the content of the HTP poems, I have proposed the following titles:

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|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Untrained | 6. Unhindered |
| 2. Training Begins | 7. At Leisure (I) |
| 3. Restrained | 8. At Leisure (II) |
| 4. Training Continues | 9. Resting Together |
| 5. Trained | 10. United in Forgetfulness |

So, on the most basic level and as a general map of Daoist contemplative practice, one often begins in a state of internal psychospiritual chaos. One’s horse-mind is “untrained.” Recognizing this existential fact, one becomes committed to “training” the horse-mind. This involves a series of moments or “stages,” perhaps alternating, perhaps sequential, in which one moves through “higher levels” of practice-realization, until training is complete. “Complete” in the sense of accomplished, fulfilled, integrated, and whole. Not finished. One has fruition. The latter, perhaps unexpectedly, involves

complete ease, forgetfulness, and unification/unity. While a more conventional reading would see these ten stages as the culmination of a contemplative life, in lived and living practice it is equally plausible to apply them to any given situation or life-event. That is, something may occur that leads to complete psychological disruption, so we again find ourselves as “untrained.” Or perhaps it is only mildly challenging, so “training continues.” We may thus engage and utilize the Horse Taming Pictures as a framework for both various moments and our overall life on the contemplative path.

The Horse Taming Pictures in turn utilize the metaphor of an untrained horse for the chaotic and ordinary human heart-mind, specifically for uncontrolled thought. This is consciousness characterized by defilements, excessive intellectualism, hyper-emotionality, vexations, and so forth. From a Daoist psychological perspective, there are various potentially harmful and negative psychospiritual states (e.g., anger, fear, worry) that I will not outline here, but we should note that these have distinct energetic signatures, spiritual imprints, and relational effects. Simply stated, you know your degree of disharmony/harmony, at least this is what we discover through dedicated and prolonged meditation practice. In Daoist cultivational contexts, this also relates to spirit (*shen* 神), as the heart is considered the psychosomatic center of human personhood and the storehouse of spirit/consciousness. So, in some sense, the untrained horse-mind is characterized by spiritual disorientation. However, as training progresses, the horse-mind begins to be reined in and to settle down.

There is another possible meaning of “the horse” here. It may be understood as our innate nature (*xing* 性), our original connection with and endowment from the Dao. The character for innate nature consists of *xin* 心/↑ (“heart-mind”) and *sheng* 生 (“to be born”): It is the heart-mind with which we were born. Clear, pure, connected. Daoists often refer to this as “original nature” (*benxing* 本性), “original spirit” (*yuanshen* 元神), or even “Dao-nature” (*daoxing* 道性). So, while one might be tempted to see the “horse-mind,” the “mind-as-horse,” as negative, it in fact represents power, possibility, energy, and so forth. If at least provisionally harnessed and directed through training, it manifests as true nature. We may thus make a distinction between ordinary mind/habituated nature and realized mind/original nature. From a Daoist perspective, only the latter is fundamentally real, but many people live in various and alternating degrees of delusion/re-

alization. The point of contemplative practice is to return us to our original nature, to (re)awaken our sacred connection with the Dao. This is the numinous presence pervading each individual being and all of existence. It is accessible at any given moment. While practice may activate or strengthen it, it also may manifest spontaneously. Like an unexpected infusion. Something like grace.

The Horse Taming Pictures are rooted in and express a Daoist contemplative perspective, specifically one in which Daoist apophatic or quietistic (emptiness-/stillness-based) meditation is primary. This type of meditation is contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic. Often referred to as “tranquil” or “quiet sitting” (*jingzuo* 靜坐), this method/non-method of meditation involves simply sitting in silence. One breathes naturally through the nose and allows any thoughts or emotions to dissipate naturally. While often involving “emptying” and “stilling” the heart-mind, apparently “taming the horse-mind,” it may be better understood as “sitting-in-stillness.” We are not searching for stillness inside of ourselves: We are in/of stillness. The stillness of innate nature merges with the Stillness of the Dao. Quiet sitting practice, and “horse-mind training” by extension, may appear to be developmental, but it is actually a return to what we fundamentally are, the sacred ground of our being. In terms of both the original HTP context and their contemporary relevance, this may be understood as a movement from turbidity-and-agitation (*zhuodong* 濁動) to clarity-and-stillness (*qingjing* 清靜).

One key issue here involves degrees of effort in practice, including the relationship between “effortful activity” (*wei* 為) and “non-action” (*wuwei* 無為). The former is artificial, calculated, or contrived behavior, while the latter is a key Daoist principle and approach related to “effortlessness,” in the sense of essential and appropriate movement and responsiveness. A spontaneous merging. Interconnected participation. Being taken along. Wuwei relates to what may be referred to as a Daoist “quietistic approach.” While this is a central element of the Horse Taming Pictures, they also utilize an “alchemical approach.” From the latter perspective, and within the contours of authentic training, some amount of effort is required. This is often referred to as “firing times” (*huohou* 火候). During certain phases of practice, one must “increase the fire,” engaging in more intensive practice and exerting strong determination. At other times, one must “decrease the fire,” even to the point of only practicing periodically and sometimes discontinuing formal practice altogether. There are many reasons for this, including allowing

deeper stabilization to occur and/or clarifying one's true affinities and aspirations. Sometimes diligence and unrelenting work are required for progress; at other times, only slack will be beneficial. The opposite is also true. And "progress" itself may become a hindrance.

Moving into deeper engagement with the Horse Taming Pictures, specifically as a map of stages on the Daoist contemplative path, we may reflect on and apply the visual and material dimensions of its "horse-mind training program." In the first step on the contemplative path, or perhaps one does not even realize that the journey has commenced, one often lives in a state of almost complete agitation and turbidity. Personal habituation, familial obligation, and social conditioning are all that one knows. Perhaps all that one is (appears to be).

Untrained

We are bewildered, erratic, and unstable. We may even believe that this is who we are, that it is unalterable. A sense of disharmony prevails. Our psychological condition is like a horse galloping out of control; we may try to hold on to the halter-lead, but the horse-mind drags us in every and any possible direction. So, we may begin to sense that some degree of discipline is required.

Training Begins

Not knowing which tactic will be effective, we experiment with different approaches, attitudes, and methods. Perhaps we attempt to control our thoughts through personal effort, even applying harsh physical discipline. We use a crop or switch to admonish, correct, or punish the horse-mind, but it rears up in revolt. The mind is fighting with/in itself. We begin to realize that ordinary mind cannot rectify ordinary mind. Contending, fighting, and struggling are futile. We must find another way.

Restrained

We abandon harsh discipline and excessive control. Perhaps we begin to understand the Daoist emphasis on "non-contention" (*wuzheng* 無爭). And the application of "softness and weakness" (*rouruo* 柔弱), also referred to as "flexibility and yielding." We gain a glimpse of calmness, and there is some

repose from the chaos and instability. We are able to guide the horse-mind with less effort, but we must still hold onto the lead. Our expanding consciousness, our awareness, observes and perhaps regulates our psychological states. We begin to recognize that emotional and intellectual activity may be modified and transformed. Any and every condition is impermanent. But we still lack formal practice with clear guidance and experiential confirmation.

Training Continues

Without this root in practice-realization, we lose the reins and our moods oscillate wildly. However, having discovered consciousness as distinct from cognition, recognizing that we are not our thoughts, we are less attached to mind-fluctuations. Although outsiders may think that the horse-mind is rising up in revolt, that our thoughts remain chaotic, we are in fact dancing and playing with our dispositions. They no longer control or distract or harm us. We interact with them in a state of carefree openness and relaxed acceptance, even curiosity. From this point forward, we no longer need to hold onto the lead or actively guide the horse-mind. We now realize that attempting to control thought or simply acknowledging the detrimental effects of psychological agitation will not suffice. We need a more committed approach and formal practice.

Trained

We begin exploring and experimenting with seated meditation. Perhaps we begin with a gentler and more welcoming posture like sitting in a chair or on a meditation bench. The posture is less important than the silence discovered. Our mind settles down further: The apparently endless fluctuations of ordinary consciousness begin to subside. We have fully released the halter-lead, but there still is the possibility of reengagement. Timidity and doubt may characterize this moment on the contemplative path. Perhaps we do not fully trust our minds, contemplative approach, or the specific method, so we consider exerting further control. Instead, we refrain, beginning to move into deeper disengagement, effortlessness, non-interference, and open receptivity. We continue to simply let go. The horse-mind has become subservient, or, perhaps more accurately, sublimated. Thought is integrated into the larger field of the heart-mind. In this increasing emptiness and spaciousness, spirit becomes more present.

Unhindered

We move into deeper contemplative practice and deeper contemplative states. Our body becomes more relaxed and open, and energetic integration pervades our being. We are now able to sit comfortably in a formal meditation posture, usually the modified “Burmese” posture, for longer periods of time. This includes various forms of “sealing,” such as using the ziwu hand-configuration (mudra). The horse-mind stands at attention, but mental activity has decreased substantially. The horse-mind is no longer moving, let alone galloping. Perhaps it stands guard over our meditation practice. Clarity and stillness deepen.

At Leisure (I)

We continue to practice formal meditation, but a contemplative approach begins to extend to other activities. Perhaps we include some form of music practice. In the case of traditional Chinese instruments, Daoists often play the flute or zither, which are viewed as having the potential to express one’s state of mind. On a deeper symbolic level, perhaps we encounter the “piping” and “music” mentioned in chapter two of the Book of Master Zhuang. Or Bo Ya’s Zither: “High Mountains” and “Flowing Waters.” Or perhaps we learn to play the “stringless lute” and “flute without holes,” both references to deeper states of energetic integration and meditative absorption. The horse-mind, our habituated thought pattern, is gradually beginning to lie down, to settle more fully. In leisure and seclusion, we listen to something else, to something more. We are becoming more attuned to the sonorous patterns of the Dao.

At Leisure (II)

Thoughts and emotions dissipate further. Relaxation deepens. Here meditation becomes more natural, more effortless. We are at ease and comfortable sitting. It is just part of our being and life. The horse-mind becomes even calmer. Intellectual activity is now becoming so settled that it almost disappears. Thoughts are less frequent and perhaps subtler. We continue the process of disengaging the mundane, of returning to our innate nature through/as/in stillness.

Resting Together

At this stage of the contemplative journey, a meditative disposition, characterized by deeper interiority, serenity and presence, extends beyond formal seated meditation. This may include reclining postures or even “sleep exercises.” This usually involves lying on the right side, with the right hand under the right ear and the left hand resting on the inner thigh. Such is the sleeping posture of Daoist immortals. The associated posture is highly restorative and results in greater energetic integration and vitality. Here the horse-mind has completely settled down. We enter a state of deep rest and harmony, to the point where psychological states and cognitive content are largely absent. The accompanying poem begins with an allusion to the opening of chapter two of the Book of Master Zhuang, which speaks of the body resembling “withered wood” (*gaomu* 槁木) and the heart-mind like “dead ashes” (*sihui* 死灰). This is a deeper state of emptiness and stillness in which physiological activity decreases to the point of being almost imperceptible. Ordinary mental and emotional tendencies are relatively inactive. As capacities and tendencies, they simply abide with us. This is a deconditioned state/non-state. Still, the horse-mind remains alert, at least in potentiality.

United in Forgetfulness

We now enter a state of complete dissolution and meditative absorption. The illustration appears to depict the attendant and horse sleeping next to each other. However, the accompanying poem mentions “death.” Although it appears that egoic identity and habituated thought patterns continue to exist, that they are dormant, they have in fact become “united in forgetfulness.” *Yi* 一 (“one/oneness/unite/unity/unification”) and *wang* 忘 (“forget/forgetting/forgetfulness”) may refer to both Daoist contemplative practice and contemplative experience. In addition, like “Mystery” (*xuan* 玄), “One” is another name for the Dao. By “guarding oneness,” we merge with “the One.” In this (non/trans)unitive state, personal and separate identity disappear. This is meditation as death, and death as meditation. Dying to the familiar and to the known. Death of the ego. The horse-mind has become horse-nature. Innate nature and original spirit manifest in/as/through the Dao. This is numinous pervasion (*lingtong* 靈通) as the culmination of the Daoist contemplative path. The path that takes us home.

BIO

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