

Zìrán 自然

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Zìrán 自然 (*zì-ján*; “suchness”), more literally meaning “self-so,” is a key Daoist quality, state, and trait. It also has been translated as “naturalness” and “spontaneity.” Although sometimes used later to render the Buddhist *zhēnrú* 真如 (Skt.: *tathātā*), “suchness” remains a viable and preferred approximation. *Zìrán* is closely connected with *wúwéi* 無為 (“non-action”). When coupled, *wúwéi* is the Daoist approach and practice leading to the state of *zìrán*.

On the most basic level, *zìrán* refers to the **Dào** 道 (Tao/Way), the sacred and ultimate concern of Daoists. As the anonymous fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) tells us, “The Dao follows its own suchness” (*dào fǎ zìrán* 道法自然) (ch. 25). We may thus think of *zìrán* as being-so-of-itself, as-isness, and pure being. It is about Reality as it is and beings in their own lives. It is about experiencing life in its immediacy, its present-moment unfolding and revealing. The precondition for such encounters is open receptivity, attentive listening, and expanded awareness, rooted in contemplative practice. Relaxed present/presence.

Zìrán also refers to **Nature** as a whole. It relates to the universe and its cycles as a manifestation of the **Dào**, infusing the emanation and differentiation without diminishment. As Nature, *zìrán* is associated with other Daoist descriptions, including *dàjiàng* 大匠 (“Great Carpenter”; cosmological process), *dàkuài* 大塊 (“Great Clod”; earth), *tiāndì* 天地

(“heavens and earth”), *tiānxià* 天下 (“under-the-sky” [world]), and *zàohuà* 造化 (“transformative process”). This is sometimes compared to a “bellows” (*tuóyuè* 橐籥), the universe as an ongoing and unceasing sacrificial ritual. Daoists view the universe as an amoral and impersonal *process* based in yīn 陰 -yáng 陽 interaction. In the earlier mentioned “pattern-equation” (*fǎ* 法), cosmos follows Dao, earth follows cosmos, and humans (should) follow earth. Cosmological attunement and resonance.

Zìrán also relates to “innate nature” (*xìng* 性), the heart-mind with which we were born. This is our original and inherent connection to the Dao. From a Daoist perspective, innate nature is stillness (*jìng* 靜), the ground of our being aligned with and manifesting the Dao-as-Stillness. *Zìrán* may, in turn, be connected to various other key Daoist technical terms. One of the most important is *pǔ* 樸/朴 (“simplicity”), which is also translated as “uncarved block” and “unadorned/unhewn simplicity.” The primary character consists of *mù* 木 (“tree/wood”) and *pú* 朮 (“thicket”). This relates to “uselessness” (*wúyòng* 無用), the inability to be made into and used as an instrument for others’ purposes. Innate nature, as suchness and simplicity, is analogous to an ancient gnarled tree, alive and flourishing in its own wild place, in its own bioregion, ecosystem, and watershed. Thus, the Daoist cipher:

靜 • 性 • 樸

So, *zìrán* relates to Daoist inner power (*dé* 德), an aligned heart-mind expressed as embodied activity in the world. This is a subtle and mysterious presence that exerts a beneficial and transformative influence. As Daoists understand the highest *dé* as *wúwéi* 無為, *zìrán* reveals Nature as essentially nourishing and innate nature as fundamentally well. We dwell in *zìrán*, and *zìrán* dwells in us.