# A Gratitude Journal Based on the Daoist Water Metaphor and the Associated Prinicples for Harmonious Classroom Environments

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**Abstract**

This article explores the application of the Daoist water metaphor within the classroom environment through the reflective practice of writing a gratitude journal. It first outlines the water metaphor as a symbolic expression of the Dao, and how gratitude journals based on this theme cultivate harmony in classrooms through fluidity, humility, and trust. It then focuses on the author's experience of writing a gratitude journal based on the Daoist water metaphor through infusing it with the associated Daoist principles of the unintentional virtue of *De*, the complementary duality of *Yin-Yang*, the cosmic energy of *Qi*, the self-so-ness of *Ziran*, the non-assertive action of *Wuwei*, and the unblemished purity of *Pu*. In doing so, it illustrates how gratitude journaling based on the Daoist water metaphor and its associated principles cultivates a 'water-like' adaptation to pedagogical circumstances, and which nurtures unconditional kindness, gentle respect, as well as a reverence for the weaving together of intuitive insights and logical analysis in ways that engender harmonious classroom environments.

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## Introduction

In my journey toward creating a harmonious and contented classroom, I have found deep resonance in the reverence of Daoist philosophy for the natural and self-regulating order of the universe. The ineffable yet omnipresent Dao is quintessentially symbolized by the quiet power and spontaneous adaptability of water. This millennia-old tradition of appreciation for the characteristics of water can be a transformative guide for teachers who wish to move with the natural currents of embodied learning and personal-professional growth.

Daoist-inspired observers during China's tumultuous Warring States period (c. 476 - 221 BCE) found enduring lessons in the natural behavior of water. They reflected on how it permeated the smallest fissures of rocks, how springs turned into streams that became mighty rivers, which eventually reached the sea, and all by occupying the lowest place of the terrain. This inspired a deep and enduring gratitude for water as the ultimate expression of the Dao's humility, adaptability, and compassionate strength. This symbolic reverence persists as a global Daoist legacy today.

Inspired by the potential of Daoist thought to bring harmony to contemporary classrooms, I undertook a reflective gratitude journal based on the Daoist water metaphor and its associated principles. This methodological choice was aimed at nurturing pedagogical approaches that were both guided by the Daoist water metaphor and informed by the Daoist principles of the unintentional virtue of *De*, the complementary duality of *Yin-Yang*, the cosmic energy of *Qi*, the self-so-ness of *Ziran*, the non-assertive action of *Wuwei*, and the unblemished purity of *Pu*. Another central aspect of this Daoist vision was to balance intuitive insights and analytical intelligence with equitable reverence for their synergistic relationship, such that they would coalesce into a unified and dynamic whole.

Ultimately, a harmonious classroom is intended to engender a resilience that would approach daily challenges not as obstacles, but as opportunities that would adapt and flourish in the educational environment. It is also hoped that such would become sustained beyond the classroom, and enable engagements with the world that are compassionate, moderate, and tolerant.

## The Daoist Water Metaphor

The influence of conceptual metaphors to shape perceptions of abstract domains is well-established (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In classical Daoist thought, water served as the central conceptual

metaphor through which the nature of the Dao and its attendant principles were comprehended and communicated (Allan, 1997). It is this enduring metaphorical tradition that permeates the intentional and reflective practice of my gratitude journal practice in this article.

The essence of the Dao (meaning 'the Way') underlies all creation, and yet it is indefinable and immeasurable, given that it transcends intellectual categorization. The first words of the seminal classic of philosophical Daoism, the *Dao De Jing* (meaning the 'Classic of the Way and its Virtue'), begin with the assertion: "The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way" (Chapter 1). Consequently, as Fung (1948) observes, the Dao "cannot be told but only suggested" (p. 30). Therefore, to bridge this gap between the ineffable and the comprehensible, Daoism turns consistently to metaphor. Among these, water is preeminent and functions as the central, tangible symbol through which the nature of the Dao can be intuitively grasped and communicated (Yu, 1998; Chen & Holt, 2002; Lu, 2012; Castillo, 2016). The Dao De Ching describes it as: "[The] highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefitting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the Way" (From Chapter 8).

As the main metaphor underlying the mystery of the Dao's essence, water illustrates its manifestations, which arise through its innate qualities of spontaneity, adaptability, and persistent cyclicality. When water encounters topographic obstacles such as stubborn rock formations, it does not impulsively confront them, but instead it flows around them while gradually dissolving in a patient and continuous manner. If water becomes entirely obstructed, it transforms itself into a cascading descent or percolates imperceptibly through subterranean pathways to continue its journey toward the sea.

Upon reaching the sea, water enters a regenerative phase whereby it evaporates into the atmosphere as vapor, condenses into clouds, and returns once more to the earth as rain. In this perpetual cycle, water humbly nourishes ecosystems while sculpting landscapes through gradual erosion, which leaves behind meandering rivers and sculpted cliff faces as the only visible testament of its omnipresence. It is this unbounded recursiveness and unobtrusive selflessness that enshrine water as a sacred symbol in Daoist thought. Water prevails and sustains all life through not being assertive and in seeking no recognition. These qualities explain why water embodies the consummate expression of the ineffable Dao. When these qualities of water are infused within the pedagogical process, harmony is not imposed through punishments and rewards. Rather, it is cultivated by a teacher who embodies fluidity,

balance, humility, and trust as a natural process of mutual flourishing and interconnectedness.

### The Gratitude Journal Based on the Daoist Water Metaphor

Wayne Dyer (2004), the late spiritual teacher, observed that optimistic self-perception often precipitates inner fulfilment and natural flourishing, which he expressed as: "Change the way you look at things, and the things you look at change" (p. 173). A gratitude journal is a way of putting this insight into practice, given its propensity to transform abstract and fleeting feelings of gratitude into more integral and sustained aspects of everyday life. By consciously articulating affirmative narratives of gratitude, they naturally dissolve deeply ingrained perceptual biases that subconsciously downplay positive experiences (O'Connell, O'Shea, & Gallagher, 2017). My gratitude journal was written during the Spring of 2024, when I taught an academic English writing course for freshman students at the Sichuan University—Pittsburgh Institute. I expected it to be a challenging course for us, given that the students had no prior experience with academic English writing. However, my approach aimed to turn the challenges into opportunities by adopting a positive mindset, whereby I extended this psychological foundation by writing a gratitude journal in which I would reflect on my experiences through the lens of the Daoist water metaphor and its associated principles. It soon became a contemplative daily practice whereby the philosophical foundations began to reveal themselves in my daily life as a teacher. Like water, my teaching style no longer required the force of intervention, because I came to value consistency. It also taught me to look beyond my egoic perceptions and to trust our authentic natures more. In that trust, I found a gratitude as deep as a stream flowing through a mountain canyon, washing away the mud of the ego and purifying the interconnectedness that flows within us all.

It was comprised of two interconnected approaches. The first was in reading the *Dao De Ching* and reflecting upon its metaphorical expressions of water, while the second was in writing the entries as expressions with a sense of gratitude for how these positively influenced my perceptions of classroom circumstances. These were handwritten into a little notebook intended only for my observation. In doing so, I could be more candid and transparent with myself. I also did not force myself to write every day, because I discovered that when I forced myself to write, the expressions tended to lack contemplative depth. I therefore only wrote when I desired to, and on those occasions, the words seemed to rise effortlessly from the subconscious depths of my mind and revealed more novel insights. The readings of the *Dao De Ching* took place

mostly in the early mornings for about an hour, and the journaling was mostly in the evenings or whenever insights came to me unexpectedly. I discovered that it was especially useful to infuse the journal entries based on the Daoist water metaphor within their associated Daoist principles of the unintentional virtue of *De*, the complementary duality of *Yin-Yang*, the cosmic energy of *Qi*, the self-so-ness of *Ziran*, the non-assertive action of *Wuwei*, and the unblemished purity of *Pu*. We now turn to the reflections of the journal within the context of the water metaphor and its associated principles.

### The Unintentional Virtue of *De* (德)

The unintentional virtue of *De* is uncontrived and in alignment with the ineffable spontaneity and undifferentiated oneness of the Dao's essence. The *Dao De Jing* elucidates the unintentional virtue of *De* in the following paradoxical terms: "A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue, and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue, and that is why he is without virtue" (Chapter 38). This suggests that *De* is not a deliberate pursuit of righteousness, which, from a Daoist perspective, is merely another form of ego. Rather, it is because it is unconscious of itself that it is authentic virtue. This Daoist notion of *De* is reflected in the humility of water, which flows ever downward and prefers the obscure depths of tranquil lakes and subterranean streams, which are places shunned by those pursuing the superficial heights of pride, status, and self-interest. Thus, the altruistic nature of water exemplifies the Daoist view of *De*. As such, it encourages a depth of character which is expressed through unconditional kindness, environmental respect, and the cultivation of modesty, flexibility, clarity, as well as soft yet perseverant strength (Lee, Yang, & Wang, 2009). I reflected on the nature of *De* in the following journal entry:

> Today's classroom felt more like a gently flowing stream than a competitive marketplace. Whenever students began to struggle with a frustration that clouded their thoughts, my initial impulse was to carve a path for them to fix it on their behalf. Yet the Daoist perspective of the unintentional virtue of *De*, from a pedagogical point of view, is an unassuming power that arises from presence, rather than force, and that skillful teaching lies in yielding. When I encouraged the students not to regard their struggle as a blockage but as a divine intervention to change their direction as would a stream facing a boulder, I observed their minds begin to flow around the difficulties. They became calmer, more self-confident, and less dependent on my validation every step of their learning process. I noticed their moments of joyful engagement

> arising naturally from deep within as though they were fountains bubbling up from an unseen source. *De* is thus the authentic power that arises when we stop forcing and start nurturing a trust in the inherent wisdom of the process, and that my role is to witness and gently guide that sacred flow.

Reflecting on the unintentional virtue of *De* cultivated a pedagogical humility reminded me that my instructional style had become excessively teacher-centered, and that I could transition from being a "sage on the stage to a guide on the side" (King, 1993, p. 30). This shift to a lower and more receptive position smoothed the flow of the pedagogical process and created a natural synergy that cultivated more authentic mutual trust and respect. I let go of my old attachments to authoritative teaching styles, while observing them dissolve and float away like silt in a current of water. In the spaces that replaced my old teaching styles, classroom interactions became more joyful encounters without the loss of discipline and enabled more meaningful and equitable forms of pedagogical engagements.

### The Complementary Duality of *Yin-Yang* (陰陽)

The harmonious balance of *Yin-Yang* complementary duality is illustrated in the *Dao De Ching* as: "The Way begets one, one begets two, two begets three, three begets the myriad creatures. The myriad creatures carry on their backs the Yin and embrace in their arms the Yang and are the generative forces of the two" (from Chapter 42). Here, 'one' represents the all-inclusive universe, 'two' represents the complementary duality of *Yin-Yang*, and 'three' represents the relationship between heaven, earth, and humans, which together produce the myriad creatures that embrace the mutually harmonious dynamic of *Yin-Yang*.

Around 100 AD, during the Eastern Han Dynasty, the influential Chinese dictionary *Shuowen Jiezi* (陽文解字) by the scholar Xu Shen symbolically defined *Yin* as the shady side of a hill and *Yang* as its sunny side. From this foundational image, the concepts evolved to encompass broader cosmic principles: *Yin* came to represent femininity, passivity, cold, darkness, wetness, and softness, while *Yang* represented masculinity, activity, heat, brightness, dryness, and hardness. These were not seen as opposing forces, but as complementary ones, and in recognition that "through the interaction of these two primary principles, all phenomena of the universe are produced" (Fung, 1948, p. 155). In other words, the *Yin-Yang* principle is not a dualism, but rather "an explicit duality expressing an implicit unity" (Watts &

Huang, 1975, p. 36). This suggests that while the Dao's essence is undifferentiated and unfathomable, the dynamic interplay of *Yin* and *Yang* is the unifying principle that underlies the harmonious manifestation of its comprehensible periphery, which comprises the immense diversity of all living and non-living things (Zhang, 2002; Kohn, 2008; Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2001; Lee, Yang & Wang, 2009). Moved by the complementary duality of *Yin-Yang*, I wrote:

> The classroom, when seen as a flowing stream, reveals *Yin* and *Yang* in much the same way as does water. Here, the *Yang* of bright and rushing curiosity and the *Yin* of deep and receptive introspection flow as complementary currents. In the classroom infused with *Yin-Yang*, the quiet students are not negated but valued as hidden sources of contemplation, while the vocal students are like sunlit ripples which give form to that which lies below. When discussions grow heated, it is like water encountering rocks that shape the current into further graceful patterns. Yielding to this allows the *Yang* of tension to weave itself between the rocks, and when it flows into the *Yin* of the calm pond which lies beyond, insights emerge through clear water. While the lesson plan is the intended channel of the river, true learning is the patience and adaptability of the water itself. To teach with gratitude is to honor in equal measure the *Yin* of flow and *Yang* of form, the *Yin* of silence and the *Yang* of speech, and the *Yin* of insight and the Yang of logic, such that, like water, both *Yin* and *Yang* become a harmonious feature of pedagogical cultivation.

When the *Yin* and *Yang* of teaching are in balance, the digestion of knowledge and the appreciation of its interconnections coalesce into a functional wholeness of scholarly talent. *Yang*-oriented, intellectual approaches focus outwardly on the acquisition of external knowledge, while *Yin*-oriented, intuitive approaches turn inward toward the true self. Both are indispensable in a Daoist-inspired pedagogy, harmonizing teachers and students with the Dao itself. When *Yin* and *Yang* dance together as one, they inspire an extraordinary creativity which unifies logic and intuition. This synthesis extends beyond the classroom, blending the pedagogy into an interconnected oneness with the cosmos. In recognizing that excessive *Yang* grows rigid and brittle, while excessive *Yin* becomes formless and weak, comes the realization that the optimal place of focus is the tranquil interface between them. This is the peaceful sanctuary of the innermost self as the calm center around which the boisterous world spins, much like the still eye of a cyclone amid howling winds. In a Daoist-inspired pedagogy, this represents the balanced interchange between the rigid entanglements of excessive rigor and the sludgy ineptitude of unwarranted passivity. It is on this middle ground that logical thought and intuitive insight blend harmoniously.

### The Cosmic Energy of *Qi* (氣)

*Qi* is the cosmic energy that arises from the synergistic interplay of *Yin-Yang*, and is one of "the most important, cherished, and widely applied concepts in Chinese intellectual history" (Wang, 2021, p. 66). Also understood as breath, vital energy, and life force, it is described as "the concrete aspect of Dao, the basic material building block of the universe, [as well as] the fundamental stuff of nature" (Kohn, 2016, p. 21). This energetic substance ebbs and flows throughout the universe in unlimited abundance while binding all things into an integrated whole. The *Dao De Jing* alludes to the intangible yet inexhaustible nature of *Qi* as being synonymous with the Dao in terms of: "The Way is empty, yet use will not drain it" (from Chapter 4). Aligning with its subtle currents is to experience a profound sense of interconnection "with everything and every being on the planet and in the universe" (Bai & Cohen, 2008, p. 43). This prompted a deeper journal reflection of *Qi* as follows:

> If the prevailing currents of the stream of learning are the Qi of the water itself, then a classroom can be a watershed whereby the energy of curiosity moves through rising, pooling, seeping, and carving paths through the terrain of the mind. Today, I observed the students relax and gather their thoughts like raindrops that pooled their potential into streams of creative reasoning. That transition from confused depletion to energized clarity was not just intellectual—it was also the flow of *Qi* finding its natural path. As a teacher, I tend to the stream without insisting on the direction of the water. I recognize that still moments are not voids, but deep pools where *Qi* gathers until it emerges as a waterfall of novel ideas that seem to come from nowhere. Once becoming aware of *Qi*, it can be noticed in the patience that wears down resistance, in the adaptability that flows around obstacles, and the nourishing presence that makes the minds of students receptive to their own inner springs of insight. To teach with an awareness of *Qi* is to evaporate as questions, condense as insights, and forever flow toward the ocean of deeper understanding.

The attunement to the vital energy of *Qi* can cultivate a pedagogical environment that is self-generating and self-regulating, and which reduces undue anxiety and stress. In such *Qi*-infused classrooms, action tends to flow with greater spontaneity, gentleness, and authenticity, which in turn embody the Three Treasures of Daoism (*Sanbao* 三寶), which are compassion, frugality, and humility. With this, the classroom atmosphere becomes lighter and more joyful, which in turn nurtures a shared disposition of positive energy among all present. The underlying current of this, as Culham and Lin (2020) clarify, is that "when one is in

a balanced mood and has a positive relationship with other people and the environment, the body's *Qi* flows smoothly" (p. 117). With this, the classroom becomes a flourishing microcosm of the universal harmony of *Qi* and whereby teaching and learning align both naturally and efficaciously.

### The Self-So-Ness of *Ziran* (自然)

The Daoist principle of *Ziran*, often translated as 'self-so' or 'natural spontaneity,' describes the primordial existential suchness inherent within the flow of all existence. Etymologically, it combines *zi* (self) and *ran* (so-ness), and thus points to that which is 'of itself' in terms of being authentic and unobstructed by external constructs and social pretenses. As such, *Ziran* is the uncontrived, spontaneous, self-generating, and harmonious alignment with the Dao. It manifests as the inner tranquility that characterizes the entire natural world, and such that, as the *Dao De Jing* observes: "the Way never acts yet nothing is left undone" (from Chapter 37). Therefore, *Ziran* is not a passive theoretical backdrop, but rather an active, spontaneous, and authentic process of self-so-ness which is experienced as the indestructible and authentic core of all sentient beings and non-sentient entities. Water is a good metaphorical example of the Daoist principle of *Ziran*, given its innate spontaneity, suchness, self-generative-ness, and self-so-ness. The Dao can, therefore, be observed in the intrinsic formlessness of water and in its non-contentious adaptation to whatever the prevailing shape of its environment happens to be at any given time. While contemplating the naturalness of *Ziran*, I wrote:

> True teaching is the practice of Ziran through encouraging the self-so flow of understanding so that the insights of students bubble up in natural ways like springs of crystal-clear water. As the teacher, I regard my task as not to channel this water, but to merely stop obstructing its path. Today, the classroom discussion drifted from the path that I had intended, but I yielded and observed where the current of the discussion wanted to go. What initially seemed a detour became a deeper channel that revealed unexpected and very insightful perspectives. Therefore, I consider authentic learning to be much more than what arises from the inner landscapes of the students, and much less so from my directive impositions. In adapting to the pedagogy of *Ziran*, I now just clear the space and then step back and trust the process, because I have realized that I am not the creator of the river, but only a witness to its journey. In surrendering control in this way, I allow it to be the natural phenomenon of its intrinsic suchness.

Applied to the classroom, *Ziran* means balancing teaching and learning with a trust in the innate receptive depth of the students' pedagogical engagement. In doing so, the classroom, then, becomes not a channel to be dredged and straightened, but a living watershed. A teacher inspired by *Ziran* acts as a riverkeeper who does not force the current to flow but tends to the entire ecosystem by clearing obstructions, ensuring clean sources, while trusting the water's inherent course toward the sea. Similarly, a teacher would not compel learning to happen but would instead provide supportive and unobstructed conditions that allow intuition and self-discernment to rise from within. This approach understands that embodied learning is like the purity of a mountain spring that flows not from being coerced. Similarly, learning is not forced but arises from a natural upwelling of readiness from within the primordial receptivity of the students.

### The Non-Assertive Action of *Wuwei* (無為)

The term *Wuwei* is derived from two Chinese words, wu (not) and wei (action). When directly translated from Chinese to English, the term *Wuwei* is often referred to as 'non-action,' and for this reason, it is sometimes misinterpreted as implying states of apathy or laziness. Correcting this common misinterpretation of the term *Wuwei*, Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2001) point out that it is "acting in a way that is natural, unforced, and unselfconscious" (pp. 360–361). It is described by Komjathy (2013) as "non-interference and non-intervention" (p. 21) and by King (2015) as "a state of mind to be maintained while acting" (p. 55). As such, Wuwei is a Daoist principle that treasures actions that are not assertive, not meddlesome, and not disruptive toward the natural order. Actions that are inspired by *Wuwei*, therefore, tend to be guided by peaceful, uncluttered, and calm states of mind which are attuned to the Way and which flow without resistance toward, and undue interference with, the spontaneous unfolding of all circumstances. One of several descriptions of *Wuwei* in the *Dao De Ching* is: "the sage knows without having to stir, identifies without having to see, accomplishes without having to act" (from Chapter 47). To express my gratitude for the non-assertiveness of *Wuwei*, I wrote:

> To teach in alignment with *Wuwei* is to be as water is. This requires a mastery of the skill of tending to its current without the artificial striving that occurs when one goes against its flow. Today, I felt the need to get through all the items on my lesson plan, but along the way, points of confusion arose among the students, and I needed to clarify some aspects in greater detail. So, I resisted the urge to push ahead. I changed my perspective of the lesson plan from being an irrevocable

> list of 'must do' activities to a simple list of gentle suggestions, and to let my teaching yield to the current of the minds of the students. With that, many ideas were offered and refined without my intervention. Therefore, *Wuwei* became the valley that held the stream of our classroom activities without the need for grasping onto a compulsion for direction. By releasing control of the current of learning, I made the space for a deeper pedagogy to emerge. Indeed, the Dao of learning cannot be forced and can only be followed. And today, I followed it by getting out of its path.

The principle of *Wuwei* thus serves as a powerful critique of forceful intervention and carries pragmatic pedagogical implications. It reminds teachers and students that excessive control is like attempting to dam a river with brittle stones, and that doing so merely induces the flood it seeks to prevent. A more yielding approach, by contrast, works like deep and resilient banks of a river, which guide its flow without resisting it and thereby create the space for spontaneous and authentic resolutions to emerge. This is also evident in many pedagogical contexts, where relinquishing forceful control over the currents of learning can allow for more organic and sustainable outcomes to arise. The ultimate wisdom of *Wuwei* is that by ceasing to struggle against the inherent flow of reality, existential friction is substantially lessened. The classroom becomes less of a battleground and more of a harmonious pedagogical flow with the deeper currents of learning, where actions are not meddlesome and accomplish more by forcing less.

### The Unblemished Purity of Pu (樸)

The unblemished purity of *Pu* is like the purity of unhewn wood, which exemplifies our true selves in terms of our original and eternal nature. Commonly translated as the 'uncarved block,' it evokes the unblemished purity of our inborn nature and primordial unity with the Dao. The *Dao De Jing* notes: "The nameless uncarved block is but freedom from desire" (from Chapter 37). In other words, *Pu* is the stabilizing and pacifying phenomenon that quietens down the agitation of the world, which is born of artificial desire. *Pu*, therefore, signifies the unconditioned state of latent potential and unlimited intuitive wisdom that precedes the superimposition of ego-driven distinctions and social artifice. It represents both the foundational essence of the authentic self and its inseparable oneness with the Dao. This primordial state is powerfully illustrated by the metaphor of the newborn infant, whose mind, like uncarved wood, is "uncalculating and free from all pretenses" (Ho, 2009, p. 90). The infant embodies *Pu* because it exists without the delusion of separation and remains uniquely unaffected by external

circumstance. Thus, *Pu* is not a lost ideal, but a persistent, intrinsic radiance that is merely obscured, yet never extinguished, by the clouds of conditioning. In appreciation of the gentle simplicity of *Pu*, I wrote:

> To have gratitude for the 'uncarved block' of *Pu* is to honor the original clarity of every student and to respect it as being the eternal spring of the original self before it was artificially submerged through the well-intended yet homogenizing conduit of social channeling. Today, a student offered an unpolished yet beautifully direct remark that was a pure flow of perception. My immediate instinct was to shape it and to carve it into a form that could be polished. However, I paused because I realized that carving would force the unblemished purity of that meandering spring into something like a common waterpipe. So, I simply mirrored its clarity by nodding and saying, "I can see what you mean." After all, my role as the teacher is not to sculpt, but to be the still and clean space where the thoughts of the students can be reflected without distortion. I now consider every excessively rigid expectation to be an artificial carving and every overly preconceived form to be a restrictive dam. Teaching in the spirit of *Pu* means to honor the simple truths of the nascent understandings of students and to be the undisturbed forest that shelters that undistilled genuineness.

The unblemished purity of our inborn nature, as the primordial and tranquil water of the authentic self, is relevant to a Daoist-inspired pedagogy. It could be considered as the subterranean source of the visible educational waters, which can be accessed by forms of introspective self-cultivation, such as journalling, which harmonizes the flow between depth and surface. Although these deep and intuitive waters are often overlooked, their significance for education is that they invite teachers and students to turn their reflections inward toward their abundant and often untapped wellsprings of wisdom that lie within. Journaling with a sense of gratitude is a guide back to the clear and still pool of the true self from where unique talents and innate wisdom naturally arise and flow into the world. This path of inner discovery is the highest form of spiritual cultivation and is one that remains profoundly relevant to contemporary Daoist-inspired educational practice.

## Conclusion

This article shared reflections based on the Daoist water metaphor and its associated principles through a gratitude journal, which was instrumental in harmonizing the classroom environment. It began with contemplations of water as a metaphorical expression of the Dao and how a gratitude journal can align one's teaching experiences

with its ineffable yet omnipresent essence. Doing so contributed to more genuine levels of compassion, moderation, and humility, which instilled an intrinsic sense of mutual trust, helped wash away old attachments to ineffectual and authoritative styles of instruction in a similar manner to how water effortlessly flows over jagged rocks without getting itself entangled in them.

Flowing from this foundational metaphor was the unintentional virtue of *De*, which helped to cultivate a classroom atmosphere whereby virtue arose naturally from its non-coercive presence, and much in the same way that water nourishes without claiming credit for doing so. This invisible efficacy freed me from the need for performative authority, and for authentic influence to emerge not from title or control, but from the integrity of simply being present and responsive, much like a clear pond that naturally reflects its surroundings without judgment.

In harmony with this unintentionally virtuous flow was the complementary duality of *Yin-Yang* through which came the realization that the classroom environment is interrelated like the ebbs and flows of tides, and where the engaging moments and quiet struggles are similarly innate and inseparable parts of a natural unfoldment whereby situations have an innate tendency to align themselves more spontaneously with the Dao. In similar ways that the retreat of a tide reveals essential aspects of the shore, periods of struggle were no longer regarded as shortcomings but as being necessary for revealing the true contours of understanding, which prepare the space for new waves of positive engagement.

The cosmic energy circulating through this balance was *Qi*, which manifested as a shared sense of focus and vitality that emerged organically and was free from forced intensity. With this, the classroom no longer felt like a field of scattered and competing pedagogical aspects but rather a unified space of collective presence whereby concentration felt less demanding and more like a natural current that everyone was flowing within.

Emanating from this aligned energy was the self-so-ness of *Ziran*, whereby the classroom atmosphere became less influenced by artificial emulations of externally imposed conceptual expectations as to how it should be, given that in nature there is no sense of 'should' because everything is just as it is. Like water finding its own level or a stream carving its unique path through stone, the rhythm and direction of learning began to follow more naturally. Planning became less about rigid adherence to a syllabus and more about providing a nourishing terrain through which this naturalness could become manifested.

The natural expression of this authenticity was the unforced

action of *Wuwei*, which underlined the realization that nothing needed to be imposed or forced, and that with less needless interference and meddling, the classroom dynamic became more natural, contented, and harmonious. With this, my preparation shifted from excessively proactive interactions toward cultivating a deep familiarity with the material such that I became flexibly sensitive to each moment. I noticed that the most effective interventions became subtle redirections that worked like gentle currents that guided the flow of the pedagogical process without interfering with its essential course.

The primordial source to which all this returned was the unblemished purity of *Pu*, or the 'uncarved block', which revealed that the most profound pedagogical presence arises from the innate authenticity within each person and from which the pure and unhewn potential of both teacher and student arises. Therefore, the highest responsibility of a Daoist-inspired teacher is to nurture this uncarved state, and to create a space wherein the integrity of the student's original nature is protected from the fragmenting pressures of excessive standardization, comparison, and forced shaping, and from which wisdom can become manifested within the inherent patterns of its own grain.

This pedagogical journey mirrors the essence of the Dao as an organic flow that begins with and returns to original simplicity, and which expresses itself as a complete cycle of natural education. Here, the role of the teacher transforms from being a director to a cultivator who trusts the innate intelligence of the pedagogical process as water trusts its own course. By embodying this non-coercive presence, the teacher becomes a conduit through which the Dao flows. Such a teacher holds the space for a variety of opinions and learning preferences, circulates a shared focus, yields to natural rhythms, acts without force, and is the guardian of the unhewn potential within each student.

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All quotations from the *Dao De Ching* in this article are from the Lau (2009) translation.

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