Chapter 4

Harmony in a World of Conflict and Crises: What We Can Take from Laozi’s Notion of Harmony

One of the main purposes of this chapter is to avail the wisdom of Laozi in the midst of the turmoil and unrest in the present world as well as to engage scholars from both the East and the West in a broad cultural and philosophical dialogue. What follows is a discussion on the contemporary significance of the philosophy of Laozi.

Global Warming and “Dao Follows the Natural”

In recent years, the so-called “global village” has increasingly become a reality—a reality directly opposed to the conceptions of the cosmos and of heaven and earth expressed two thousand years ago by Laozi and Zhuangzi. Still, the past century has seen two world wars, and divisions and conflict continue to exist all over the planet. Thus, conflict and dialogue also continue to be important concerns for all people of the world.

Since ancient times, as we saw in Chapter 2, humankind has found itself faced with three kinds of conflicts: the conflict between humans and nature, the conflict between humans, and the conflict humans experience within themselves. In our present age, while we enjoy the many benefits of a technological civilization, these conflicts have only amplified. The conflict between humans and nature has reached a state in which humans, to a yet unprecedented degree, are plundering the natural resources of the earth that needed to sustain our existence. We only need to reflect on our own experience to profoundly understand the extent of the damage humans have inflicted on the earth: We are constantly faced with images of endless deforestation and of landscapes being devoured at a rapid pace; the rivers and streams which used to bustle with boats are now drying up day by day, and the intimate relation with the nature of our childhood years has been lost. In recent years, all regions of the world are suffering the effects of climate irregularities and

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ecological deterioration. At a time when water scarcity throughout the world is posing health and terrorist threats, millions of people become increasingly in danger of losing their homes due to rising sea levels. The fact as it stands is that global warming will severely affect all of our lives in the near future, and humankind is the main culprit causing it.

We have been educated to adopt a spirit of conquering the earth, but today’s efforts to subdue the world and to put all things into the service of humans may well provoke a grand retaliation by nature. Jin Yuelin (金岳霖) once wrote in an essay written in 1943 that a strong desire to subjugate nature, as if in constant combat against it, prevailed in the West. This attitude resulted, on the one hand, in anthropocentrism, and, on the other hand, in the idea that nature is submissive. According to Jin, the unilateral subjugation of nature seems to have stirred the tenacity of human nature, but we should be careful and prudent since such subjugation cannot be freely continued without ramification. The laws of nature will not simply be annulled or suspended in order to benefit humans or to please our will. If we continue trying to conquering nature in an obstructive fashion, nature will strike back mightily against us; it will not take long until the first cracks will appear and the earth will be shaken by floods and quakes.¹

The “shaking of the earth by floods and quakes” that we saw with the major Tsunami in 2004, as well as the current melting of ice at the North Pole, should remind us of Jin Yuelin’s warning words of more than sixty years ago. The alarming intensification of the earth’s aging process by global warming should also bring to mind Laozi’s renowned words: “Humans follow the earth; the earth follows heaven; heaven follows Dao; Dao follows the natural” (Chapter 25). Indeed, in order to counter the one-sided anthropocentrism of modernity, we need to open up again to this mindset of “respecting the naturalness of heaven and earth.”

Unilateralism and “Arriving at the Same Destination on Different Paths”

In the course of the past century, the conflict between humans and nature has become an unprecedented drama. Led by industrialized nations, the efforts for