

清靜經

Scripture of Clarity and Tranquility

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Background

The 清靜經 (Qing Jing Jing), probably written during the 700-800's CE (although it could have been orally transmitted long before being written down), is a combination of Daoist and Buddhist ideas. This very short text (less than 400 words, only 1/13 as long as the Dao De Jing) draws heavily from both the Dao De Jing (DDJ) and the Buddhist Heart Sutra. Although some attribute the entire document to Lao Zi (the name given to the author of the DDJ) because of the lines "Lao Zi said", it is argued below that these are probably introductions to summary "quotes" from the DDJ, and so the true author is unknown. Its title is variously translated as "The Scripture/Canon/Book/Sutra of Purity/Clarity and Tranquility/Stillness/Calmness" (pick any combination), for reasons explained below.

The Translation Process

Often, translators just try to get the general "feel" of what the Chinese is trying to say, and then write an English sentence that means about the same thing. What I tried to do was to preserve as much of the original Chinese as possible by always using each symbol in the English sentence, and an exact translation of each symbol wherever possible, with as few added English words as possible. This sometimes results in sentences that are somewhat stilted in English, but that I hope retain more of the original Chinese way of thinking. I also tried to use the same English word for the same Chinese symbol whenever possible, so that the English reader could better see what the writer was trying to say. Occasionally more than one English meaning for a symbol fits equally well, and the translator must pick just one. However, I sometimes took both meanings and combined them into a single phrase (such as "heart/mind"). Exact translations are interpreted when they either don't make as much sense literally, or when the resulting phrase would be awkward in English.

Definitions

Some of the terms that are used repeatedly are best discussed beforehand for clarity :

道 Dao (Tao) : in the DDJ, Dao is both the natural way of things and the process of following that way; it is left untranslated so that readers may "fill in the blank" for themselves as they read; "the Dao" is used as little as possible because in English that implies that Dao is more of a thing than a process

德 De (Te) : most often described as "virtue", "integrity", or "(inner) power", De is described in chapter 49 of the DDJ as "goodness" or "virtue" and "honesty" or "trust"; it is also left untranslated so that readers may "fill in the blank" for themselves

天 "heaven" : a complex concept, this symbol has connotations of the sky, nature, and that which is the source of existence, as well as that of being a celestial god-like spirit, and that which controls our destinies

天地 "heaven and earth" : everything, the universe, all that is

萬物 "ten thousand creatures" : "ten thousand" as used here does not refer to a specific number, but means "innumerable" or "myriad"; together the symbols are perhaps better thought of as "all creatures and things" (and people); note that the symbol for "creatures" 物 is not the symbol used in Buddhism to represent "beings"

心 "heart/mind" : usually translated as either "heart" or "mind" (the symbol means both), it seems that the ancient Chinese may have considered the heart to be the place of understanding, perception, and awareness, so "heart/mind" seems to be the best translation

得 "realize" : literally "obtain" or "gain", both Daoism and Buddhism tend to agree that enlightenment (or whatever you want to call it) is not something you can "get" or "have", so "realize" is used here instead

真 “true” : not “the truth” or the “only truth”, but that which is real and genuine

And there are four concepts that appear repeatedly :

清 “clear”, “clarity” : often translated by others as “pure” and “purity” (the symbol means both), this symbol does not represent any kind of moral or ethical purity but rather a purity and clarity of the heart/mind

濁 “turbid” : while this is not a common English word anymore, it is the best word to use for this symbol, as it has connotations of that which is physically unclear, unsettled, muddy, murky, turbulent (and then by association to mental states as well – agitated, muddled, confused, etc.)

動 “active” : also has connotations of movement, action, and change

靜 “tranquil”, “tranquility” : also means “peacefulness”, “calmness”, and is often translated by others as “stillness” (in the sense of an *inner* mental/emotional stillness); in Buddhism it can also mean “lack of strife”

There are two places that start out with the phrase “Lao Zi said” – the first starts the document, and goes on to say :

1. The great Dao is without form, yet it creates and nourishes heaven and earth.
2. The great Dao is without feeling, yet it moves the sun and moon.
3. The great Dao is without name, yet it forever supports the ten thousand creatures.
4. I do not know its name. If I tried to name it, I would call it “Dao”.

1) The phrase “great Dao” appears in chapters 18, 34, and 53 of the DDJ. While the DDJ never explicitly says that Dao is without form or creates heaven and earth, these are reasonable conclusions. Chapters 14 and 25 describe something (probably referring to Dao) as being formless, and chapter 1 says that something (probably referring to Dao) created heaven and earth.

2) The symbol used for “feeling” can also mean emotion, desire, passion, or sentiment and does not even appear in the DDJ, nor does the DDJ say that Dao has anything to do with the sun or moon. And in the Daoist *Xing Zi Ming Chu*, the first line says that “Dao **starts** from feelings”, using the same symbol for feeling!

3) Dao is said to be “without name” in chapters 1, 32, and 41 of the DDJ, and is said to : be the mother of the ten thousand creatures (chapter 2), be the ancestor of the ten thousand creatures (chapter 4), and create, clothe, and support the ten thousand creatures (chapter 34).

4) In chapter 25, there are the lines “I do not know its name” (*verbatim*, using the exact same symbols!), “Its symbol is called Dao”, and “If I tried to make its name...” (where the underlined words are the same symbols as used here).

Thus, other than the second sentence, this section appears to be mostly a combination of direct quotes and a summary of ideas from the DDJ.

The second place “Lao Zi said” appears is near the end, and it goes on to say :

1. The superior scholar does not strive.
2. The inferior scholar is fond of striving.
3. A man of superior De does not use his De.
4. A man of inferior De clings to his De.

1) “Scholar” specifically refers to the “educated intellectual elite” of Chinese society (such as Confucius, for example). The “superior scholar” is mentioned in chapter 41 of the DDJ. The concept of “striving” is used many times in the DDJ, and means to make vigorous effort to achieve something, perhaps competing against others to get it. While the DDJ does not specifically say anything one way or the other about scholars striving, striving is definitely something a “sage” would not do (chapters 22, 66, 81), and so it is reasonable to assume that a “superior scholar” would not either.

2) The “inferior scholar” is also mentioned in chapter 41.

3) “Superior De” is mentioned in chapters 38 and 41, and this entire line is *verbatim* from the opening of chapter 38! See footnote R for more comments about this line.

4) Chapter 38 goes on to say that a person of inferior De “does not lose” De (thus “clinging” to it).

So again, it appears that the lines following “Lao Zi said” are a combination of direct quotes and summary of some ideas from the DDJ. This seems to argue against the idea that the Qing Jing Jing is claiming that Lao Zi is the author of the entire document.

In general, the Qing Jing Jing starts out very Daoist and ends very Buddhist, altho due to the nature of written Chinese many words can be interpreted as either Daoist or Buddhist. In particular, 道 seems to be used to represent both “Dao” and the Buddhist “Way”.

Definitely Daoist

道 is Daoist Dao : as discussed in the previous section, the description of Dao at the beginning as being without form or name, creating heaven and earth, and supporting the ten thousand creatures is all very consistent with the ideas presented in the DDJ.

In addition, there are two lines in the DDJ which use “clarity”, “turbidity”, “activity” or “tranquility” together in the same sentence :

Chapter 15 : Who can take turbidity and use tranquility to slowly and gently make it clear?

Chapter 45 : Clarity and tranquility makes the world proper and correct.

Both of these lines are in the earliest known DDJ manuscripts, dating back to about 300 BC. In addition, the line following the line shown from chapter 15 uses “activity”.

All in all, the Qing Jing Jing directly or indirectly references chapters 1, 2, 4, 15, 18, 25 (twice), 32, 34 (twice), 38 (three times), 41 (four times), 45, 53 and 61 of the DDJ, including quoting two sentences verbatim (from chapters 25 and 38).

Finally, “heaven and earth”, “ten thousand creatures”, “heart/mind”, “scholar”, “striving”, “returning” (see footnote C), and of course “Dao” and “De” are all used extensively throughout the DDJ (and are not included in the above list of chapter references!).

Maybe Daoist, maybe Buddhist

All of the following symbols seem to have an equal likelihood of being used in their “ordinary” sense or being used in a “Buddhist” sense. Either there is no strong reason to choose one over the other, or there is not much support for the Buddhist interpretation. So in the translation, any sentence using these symbols is repeated, showing both meanings of the symbol. Note that in some of these, 道 may be referring to the Buddhist “Way”.

觀 : the common usage of this symbol is to “see”, “look”, or “observe”, and is used several times in the DDJ; in Buddhism it means to contemplate or meditate upon, but with the connotation of investigating or examining a concept in order to see things as they really are (see footnote F)

化 : this normally means to “transform” and is used several times in the DDJ; in Buddhism, it can mean to convert to Buddhism by instruction or teaching (see footnote N)

真 常 : while this can be translated in many ways (see footnote M), in Buddhism “true and eternal” might be a euphemism for nirvana (the mental/emotional state of a lack of suffering)

真 道 : while this would commonly be translated as “true Dao”, it is also possible that in Buddhism this means the “true Way” (the true Buddhist path, that path that leads to the truth, etc.)

得 道 : this can mean both to “realize Dao” and in Buddhism to “realize the Way” (in either case, to realize perfection, enter nirvana, reach enlightenment, awaken, etc.)

Probably Buddhist

All of these symbols have some reason for being considered “more likely” Buddhist, but in the interest of fairness are still given as duplicated sentences in the translation. Note that in the last two, 道 is very probably referring to the Buddhist “Way”.

著 : this normally means “attached”; the concept of attachment is very important in Buddhism, and although this is not the symbol traditionally used by Buddhism for “attachment”, it also does not appear in the DDJ

慾 : while this symbol ordinarily means “desire”, and is not the symbol usually used by Buddhism for “desire” (a major concept in Buddhism), it is not used in the DDJ and it is part of the Buddhist phrase “six desires” (see footnote D)

貪 : this symbol also ordinarily means “desire”, but does not appear in the DDJ, and in Buddhism this is specifically one of the “three poisons” (see footnotes E and T)

悟 : this usually means to “comprehend” (and is not used in DDJ); in Buddhism, it means to “awaken” (it is said that Buddha described himself as “awake”)

生 死 : simply translated as “birth” and “death”, in Buddhism this is one term for “samsara”, the endless cycles of birth and death (reincarnation)

悟 道 : while this would normally be translated as “to comprehend Dao”, in Buddhism it literally means “to awaken to the Way”, or awaken to the true nature of reality

聖 道 : while this could be translated as “sacred Dao”, in Buddhism the “holy Way” is also an abbreviation for the noble eightfold path (see footnote P)

Definitely Buddhist

These one symbol words and two-symbol phrases all have meanings that are exclusively Buddhist in nature. In addition, none of these appear in the DDJ (except the single symbol for “non-existence”, which commonly means “not”, “un-”, or “without”).

眾 生 “all living beings” : a very common Buddhist phrase

苦海 “ocean of misery” : the whole world is seen as a sea of suffering, and Buddhism is the ship that allows one to cross it to nirvana

六慾 “six desires”, 三毒 “three poisons”, 空 “emptiness”, 無 “non-existence”, 煩惱 “afflictions”, and 苦 “suffering” are all explained in the footnotes.

All words or phrases that are translated with a Buddhist interpretation are marked in blue in the text.

老君曰	Lao Zi said :
大道無形	The great Dao is without form,
生育天地	Yet it creates and nourishes heaven and earth.
大道無情	The great Dao is without feeling,
運行日月	Yet it moves the sun and moon.
大道無名	The great Dao is without name,
長養萬物	Yet it forever supports the ten thousand creatures.
吾不知其名	I do not know its name.
強名曰道	If I tried to name it, I would call it “Dao”.

夫道者	Now : all that which Daos
有清有濁	Is clear, is turbid,
有動有靜	Is active, is tranquil.
天清地濁	Heaven is clear, earth is turbid.
天動地靜	Heaven is active, earth is tranquil.
男清女濁	Male is clear, female is turbid.
男動女靜	Male is active, female is tranquil. ^A

降本流末	Descending from the source, flowing to the extremities, ^B
而生萬物	And the ten thousand creatures are born.
清者濁之源	That which is clear is the origin of turbidity.
動者靜之基	That which is active is the root of tranquility.

人能常清靜	When people are able to be constantly clear and tranquil,
天地悉皆歸	Heaven and earth will always return ^C to everyone.

夫人神好清	Now : the human spirit is fond of clarity,
而心擾之	But the heart/mind disturbs it.
人心好靜	The human heart/mind is fond of tranquility,
而慾牽之	But desires interfere with it.

常能遣其慾	Be able to constantly discard your desires,
而心自靜	And your heart/mind will naturally be tranquil.
澄其心	Settle your heart/mind,
而神自清	And your spirit will naturally be clear.
自然六慾不生	Then naturally the six desires ^D do not arise,
三毒消滅	And the three poisons ^E subside and are extinguished.

所以	Therefore :
不能者	He who is not able to do so –
為心未澄	This is because his heart/mind has not yet settled,
慾未遣也	His desires have not yet been discarded!

能遣之者	He who is able to discard them –	
內觀其心	Within : he looks at his heart/mind,	Within : he contemplates ^F his heart/mind,
心無其心	And sees that this heart/mind is not his heart/mind.	

外觀其形
形無其形
遠觀其物
物無其物

Outside : he looks at his form,
And sees that this form is not his form.
In the distance : he looks at his things^G,
And sees that these things are not his things.

Outside : he **contemplates** his form,
In the distance : he **contemplates** his things^G,

三者既悟
唯見於空
觀空亦空

He who actually comprehends these three,
Only finds **emptiness**^H,
And sees that **emptiness** is also empty.

He who actually **awakens to** these three,

空無所空
所空既無
無無亦無
無無既無

If that which is **emptiness** was not actually empty,
Then that which is **emptiness** would actually be **non-existent**.^I
And if **non-existence**^J was not also **non-existent**,
Then **non-existence** would not actually be **non-existence**.^K

湛然常寂
寂無所寂
慾豈能生

In this way, there is deep and profound constant stillness^L.
If that which is stillness was not actually still,
How can it be that desire is able to arise?

慾既不生
即是真靜
真常應物

Once desire does not arise,
Immediately there is true tranquility.
That which is true and constant
is to cooperate with all creatures;
That which is true and constant
is to realize your own nature.

That which is **true and eternal**^M
is to cooperate with all creatures;
That which is **true and eternal**
is to realize your own nature.

真常得性

By being constantly cooperative, constantly tranquil,
You realize constant clarity and tranquility!
In this way, using clarity and tranquility,
You gradually enter true Dao.

You gradually **awaken to the true Way**.

常應常靜
常清靜矣
如此清靜
漸入真道

既入真道
名為得道
雖名得道
實無所得
為化眾生
名為得道
能悟之者
可傳聖道

Once you have entered true Dao,
You are named as realizing Dao.
Although you are named as realizing Dao,
In truth there is nothing to realize.
Only when your actions transform **all living beings**
Are you named as realizing Dao.
Only he who is able to comprehend it^O
Can transmit sacred Dao to others.

Once you have **awakened to the true Way**,
You are named as **realizing the Way**.
Although you are named as **realizing the Way**,
Only when your actions **convert**^N **all living beings**
Are you named as **realizing the Way**.
Only he who is able to **awaken to it**^O
Can transmit the **holy Way**^P to others.

老君曰
上士無爭
下士好爭
上德不德
下德執德

Lao Zi said^Q :
The superior scholar does not strive.
The inferior scholar is fond of striving.
A man of superior De does not use his De.^R
A man of inferior De clings to his De.

執著之道
不明者德
眾

He who clings and is **attached** to them
Does not understand Dao and De and **all living beings**.^S

所以不得
為有妄心
既有妄心
即驚其神
既驚其神
即著萬物
既著萬物

Therefore :
He who has not realized true Dao –
This is because he has a foolish heart/mind.
Once he has a foolish heart/mind,
Immediately his spirit is alarmed.
Once his spirit is alarmed,
Immediately he becomes **attached** to the ten thousand things^G.
Once he becomes **attached** to the ten thousand things^G,

He who has not realized the **true Way** –

即生貪求
既生貪求
即是煩惱

Immediately insatiable **desire^T** and seeking arise.
Once insatiable **desire** and seeking arise,
Immediately there are **afflictions^U**.

煩惱妄想
憂苦身心
便遭濁辱
流浪生死
常沈苦海
永失真道

Afflictions and foolish thinking
Worry and **suffer^V** your body and heart/mind.
Then you fall into turbidity and disgrace,
Drifting from birth to death,
Eternally submerged in the **ocean of misery**,
Forever losing true Dao.

Drifting thru **the cycles of birth and death**,
Forever losing the **true Way**.

真常之道
悟者自得
得悟道者
常清靜矣

The Dao of that which is true and constant
Is naturally realized by he who comprehends.
He who realizes and comprehends Dao
Is constantly clear and tranquil!

The **Way** of that which is **true and eternal^M**
Is naturally realized by he who **awakens**.
He who realizes and **awakens to the Way**

A : Chapter 61 of the DDJ says : “The female always uses tranquility to conquer the male”

B : There is no subject in the original Chinese! Presumably, this is referring to Dao

C : “returning” is mentioned extensively in the DDJ, and means returning to one’s source, true nature, or original state of pure and unformed potential

D : In Buddhism, the six desires are generated by the five senses and our thoughts

E : In Buddhism, the three poisons are desire (or greed), anger, and ignorance of the causes of suffering; see T, U, and V below

F : The common usage of this symbol is to “see”, “look”, or “observe”; in Buddhism it means to contemplate or meditate upon, but with the connotation of carefully investigating or examining a concept in order to see things as they really are

G : 物 can mean “creatures” or “things”, and is usually translated as creatures (as in “the ten thousand creatures”), but “things” (possessions) seems to make more sense within the context of this sentence

H : In Buddhism, “emptiness” is a core concept that all things (including the self) have no independent, enduring substance; it can also represent a viewpoint that denies the belief in both existence and non-existence (see J and K below)

I : In other words, “emptiness” could not exist

J : In Buddhism, “non-existence” is an important concept that does not mean that things (including the self) “do not exist” but are illusory or “not ultimately real”

K : In other words, “non-existence” does not exist. NOTE : this and the previous five lines are exceptionally difficult to translate, due to multiple uses of 無 and 空 in the same lines. In addition (to make any sense), 無 must be used both in the common sense of “not” and the philosophical sense of “non-existence” (simplistically, this line and the previous one literally read “not not also not” and “not not actually not”). Finally, the “if...then” format of this line and the previous three has been assumed. Either there was a lost verbal, cultural, or written background that helped to interpret and explain these terse lines (as well as the next three), or there have been transcription errors and/or changes over the centuries. However, this line in particular (if it is translated correctly) is very Buddhist, as Buddhism tends to reject the idea of absolute existence and non-existence in favor of “emptiness” (see H).

L : This symbol also has connotations of silence and calmness (very much like 靜 “tranquility”), and is probably also referring to an inner, mental/emotional stillness

M : 真常 could mean “true and constant”, “true and eternal”, “the true constant”, or possibly even “the constant truth” or “the eternal truth” (these last two are unlikely because of the syntax of the last use of this phrase, in the 4th sentence from the end of the document); in Buddhism, 真常 (“true and eternal”) might possibly be a euphemism for nirvana (a state of lack of suffering), and makes sense within the context of the sentence

N : That is, convert to Buddhism by instruction or teaching

O : “it” is literal, presumably referring to Dao or the Buddhist Way from the previous and next lines

P : In Buddhism, 聖道 (“holy Way”) could also be an abbreviation for the noble eightfold path

Q : Some sources apparently preface this line with 太上 “The most exalted...”

R : This entire line is verbatim from the opening of chapter 38 of the DDJ! This line and the next are translated this way because 1) most translators agree that chapter 38 is referring to *people* who have “superior De” and “inferior De”, 2) the previous lines in this text are referring to scholars, and 3) the presence of “he who” in the line after next.

S : The last two symbols (“all living beings”) of this sentence are traditionally considered the first two symbols of the next sentence. However, with these two symbols removed from the next sentence, its structure becomes identical to the above sentence “Therefore : he who is not able to do so”, matching in the first three symbols and the last one. In addition, the number of symbols in the next sentence then drops from an extremely high and unlikely nine symbols (four and five being most typical, six the largest) to a reasonable five.

T : In Buddhism, this symbol for “desire” (also often translated as “greed”) is the first of the three poisons mentioned above (see E), and has a sense of voraciousness; “seeking” presumably refers to searching for things that satisfy those desires

U : “affliction” is a major Buddhist concept that generally represents any negative mental/emotional states that agitate or cloud the mind; the three poisons (see E) are also called (in English) the “three fundamental afflictions”

V : “suffering” (dukkha) is a major Buddhist concept that is very complex and hard to translate into a single word, as it ranges from uneasiness to agony; in addition to physical pains and illnesses, it includes any kind of mental or emotional anguish from (for example) anxiety/frustration over not having the things we desire and fear of losing the things we have, etc.

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