

# Is Resilience the Precondition for Retaining the Sustainability of a Vision According to the Old Master? (A Case Study of Laozi: Dao De Jing, Chapter 20)<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The idea of a sustainable vision 恆道 *héng dào*, introduced by the Old Master (see Fellner 2011a), raises the matter of both its sources and the preconditions for its retaining. Introducing a re-interpretation of a text of the Chapter 20 of the Dao De Jing (in Mawangdui version), the present contribution establishes the idea of resilience as one of the fundamental preconditions for retaining a sustainable vision and, at the same time, as a concept significantly shaped by events taking place during the prenatal and perinatal period of a person's life. The fact that it is possible to interpret the text of the Chapter 20 with reference to these foetal origins raises the question of whether the Old Master's thought could be characterized by what is today called "resilience thinking", or else, whether he did recognize what is nowadays known as "psychophysiological resilience" as the principal precondition for the sustainability of a vision.

**Key words:** *sustainability, resilience, foetal origins, contextual linguistics, cultural semantics, Laozi, Dao De Jing*

## Introduction

In my contribution to the 2nd International Daoist Forum in Hengyang in 2011, I proposed to accept an alternative interpretation of the Dao De Jing's archaic character 恆 *héng* with reference to the concept of "sustainability" (Fellner 2011a).<sup>2</sup> However, in doing so I was also aiming to show that, according to the Old Master's (Laozi) text, sustainability is only retainable in the heart. This notion corresponds with the Old Master's thesis stating that a sustainable vision 恆道 *héng dào* is not a realised one, as well as it provides an argument for promoting the famed Daoist principle of 無爲 *wú wéi* (mostly translated as "non-interference" or "non-action").

However, what sort of sustainability did the Old Master have in mind? Sustainability is widely understood in terms of using renewable resources. Nevertheless, the term "sustainable" generally refers to the ability to maintain a certain rate or level,<sup>3</sup> which is, after all, also what the word "sustainability" mostly conveys when applied in both the walks of ecology and economics as well as in a vast portion of humanities. However, is it possible to extend such definition of sustainability to a person's individual capacities? And, at the same time, is this not what the Old Master had—either consciously or intuitively—always been aiming for?

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<sup>2</sup> Accessible from: [http://www.ekocentrum.eu/usr\\_files/f177/Sustainability%20and%20Old%20Master\\_sep.pdf](http://www.ekocentrum.eu/usr_files/f177/Sustainability%20and%20Old%20Master_sep.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Viz Oxford Dictionaries: „Able to be maintained at a certain rate or level“ (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sustainable>).

"Forget sustainability - it's about resilience!", exclaims the headline of Judith Curry's commentary<sup>4</sup> on Andrew Zolli's famous article called "Learning to Bounce Back", which was published in 2012 in the New York Times.<sup>5</sup> The stance expressed here illustrates a shift in accentuating what is fundamental and crucial for retaining sustainability in this fragile world, regardless of what the particular crisis scenario might entail (let us name just a couple of recent examples such as the impacts of the hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, USA, or the disastrous accident in the nuclear plant in Fukushima, Japan). All the more, resilience is a concept encompassing the human factor to a substantial degree. It does not only allow for a person's individual skills and characteristics but it is also a basic precondition for maintaining sustainability. Indeed, did the Old Master anticipate all this?

The topic of sustainability would appear to be in a way embedded in nearly all the chapters of the Dao De Jing, with each of them touching upon the issue in a continuous succession of new contexts, as if in pursuit of exploring its every potential source (cf. Fellner 2011a, 2011b). Still, what we might today readily denote as "resilience thinking" could well be one of the not-at-all-inconsequential sources for the Old Master.

## Material and Method

Let us take a look at the Chapter 20 of the Dao De Jing. A starting point of the proposed alternative translation is the version of the Dao De Jing from the manuscripts unearthed in Mawangdui (马王堆) in 1973 (*Mawangdui Han mu boshu* 1980, Henricks 1989, Gao Ming 1996). All relevant Chinese characters contained in the text were analysed in their components as a basis for their semantic or genealogical analysis, and for developing hypotheses about the possible original meaning of the characters. The components of characters in the Chinese seal script (篆文), or archaic script (古文), in the script on bronzes (金文) and also on the turtle shells and bones (甲骨文) were constantly taken into account (for details see Fellner 2011b).<sup>6</sup> Contemporary literature on the topic of resilience represents another source for the proposed discussion (cf. e.g. Mandel 2003, Flynn & others 2006, Paul 2011, Franklin & others 2012, etc.).

## Results and Discussion

According to its commentators and translators, the Chapter 20 of the Dao De Jing is usually viewed as Laozi's confession on what sets him apart from others (Sehnal 2013), or, put more specifically, what distinguishes Daoists from other people (Jingwei 2011)<sup>7</sup>. However, let us examine the chapter's text a little further. The initial entry is already quite surprising:

絕學无憂 *jué xué wú yōu*

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<sup>4</sup> Accessible from: <http://judithcurry.com/2013/05/29/forget-sustainability-its-about-resilience/>.

<sup>5</sup> Accessible from: [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/03/opinion/forget-sustainability-its-about-resilience.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/03/opinion/forget-sustainability-its-about-resilience.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>6</sup> Complete results of this analysis, most often incorporated into the "sinogram" (for this term cf. Bellassen & Zhang 1997), are part of textbooks "Chinese taught via Dao De Jing", prepared continually since 2006 at St. John's College; the sinograms relating to individual chapters of Dao De Jing were also published separately (cf. Fellner 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010a,c, 2011c, 2012, 2013a,b, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> „The Daoist, not-contesting in conduct, is relaxed and care-free.“ (Jingwei 2011, p. 34).

Its translation might be as follows:

**"There has been enough of learning—and now, no weeping above all!"**

This is followed by two rather confusing questions:

唯與呵丕相去幾何 *wēi yǔ hē qí xiāng qù jǐ hé*  
美與亞丕相去何 *měi yǔ yà qí xiāng qù hé*

**"All that nodding or threats—is there any difference at all?  
And things of abundant beauty and all things lowly—are they not alike?"**

And the first part of the Chapter 20 of the Dao De Jing concludes with a rather surprising statement:

若人之所畏 *ruò rén zhī suǒ wèi*  
亦不可以不畏人 *yì bù kě yǐ bù wèi rén*

**"They say there are things men shun in horror!  
Yet just so there are people  
You cannot but fear."**

Interpreting the foregoing text requires us to understand who is actually the person speaking in the entire Chapter 20 and what particular situation is being described here. As the introduction seems to suggest, the message here is that the time intended for learning is over, and, further on, that the speaker of the Chapter 20 is for some reason unable to see what distinguishes nodding from threatening and the beautiful from the marginal, but that, at the same time, they do see that there are people who can only be feared. What does this possibly convey about the speaker's situation?

However, the next part seems to suddenly switch to an entirely different topic altogether:

望呵 *wàng ā*  
丕未央才 *qí wèi yāng cái*

**"Ah, if it only were!"  
Except there is no end to it!"**

Does this express a wish for something to end already? However, what would it be?

The following text apparently does not provide any further specifications and instead describes what a lot of people do:

眾人毘毘 *zhòng rén xī xī*  
若鄉於大牢 *ruò xiāng yú dà láo*  
而春登臺 *ér chūn dēng tái*

**"The masses of people there are all keyed-up,  
Like a peasant for a sacrificial ox,  
Like a passion steaming hot."**

However, in stark contrast with the foregoing, the speaker of the Chapter 20 goes on describing their own, utterly different, circumstances:

我泊焉 wǒ bó yān  
未佻 wèi tiáo  
若嬰兒未咳 ruò yīng er wèi ké

**"All alone here I am bound,  
Still without signs,  
Like a newborn before its very first cry."**

But where is it that I am bound, still without a sign of change? And what does the strange image of a newborn before its very first cry mean? What is the speaker of the Chapter 20 actually talking about? Immediately afterwards, the speaker continues, adding:

纍呵 lèi ā  
佻<sup>8</sup>无所歸 āi wú suǒ guī

**"Ah, how hard this is!  
Yet for what has once been conceived there is no return."**

What is meant by concluding that there is no return for what has once been conceived? What could be hidden between the lines? Nevertheless, with a prompt "cut", the text comes back to the alleged indulgences of many:

眾人皆有餘 zhòng rén jiē yǒu yú

**"All the throngs out there, indulging in excess!"**

Another "cut" follows, sharing the speaker's opinion on the matter:

我獨遺 我愚人之心也 wǒ dú yí wǒ yú rén zhī xīn yě

**"All alone I am left here with my moonstruck heart."**

Then, however, (following a caesura marked here with the particle 也 yě) comes a somewhat unexpected and, perhaps, significant shift! Nevertheless, the text reveals only the following:

沌沌呵 dùn dùn ā

**"Ah, what a strain!"**

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<sup>8</sup> The sinogram 似 sì is commonly quoted as an equivalent (e.g. *Mawangdui Han mu boshu* 1980); in the Chapter 4 of the *Dao De jing*, the sinogram 佻 āi in MWDB alternated with the sinogram 始 shǐ in MWDA. Our translation, too, takes the possibility of this alternation into account.

The exclamation is nevertheless followed with yet another comparison between what "they" do and what the "I" of the Chapter 20 thinks about it:

鬻人昭昭 我獨若悶呵 yù rén zhāo zhāo wǒ dú ruò mèn ā  
鬻人察察 我獨閨閨呵 yù rén chá chá wǒ dú mǐn mǐn ā

**"The spring chicken are done with it in one stroke, but I am left with nothing to do here but to suffocate!**

**The spring chicken rush into things right away, but as for myself, it knocks me sideways!"**

Then the aforementioned principal shift begins to gain momentum:

忽呵 其若海 hū ā qí ruò hǎi  
望呵 其若无所止 wàng ā qí ruò wú suǒ zhǐ

**"Ah, and all of a sudden! And it is like a sea!  
Ah, if it only were! And it cannot be stopped!!!!"**

It seems that something indeed changes a great deal here...But what is it?  
However, instead of an explanation, the text proceeds with yet another comparison between what "everybody else" does and what "I" do or think:

眾人皆有以 zhòng rén jiē yǒu yǐ  
我獨門元以鄙 wǒ dú mén yuán yǐ bǐ

**"All the people (around) have a purpose here,  
But me alone—standing in a doorway—I am no good here!"**

We are now getting to the very conclusion of the Chapter 20, which might possibly unravel a piece of the preceding text's meaning. It reads:

我欲獨異於人而貴食母 wǒ yù dú yì yú rén ér guì shí mǔ

**"Longing to be alone and different from others,  
Dearest to my heart is the mother who feeds me."**

However, has the conclusion of the Chapter 20 indeed brought the much expected unravelling? And has it conveyed it whole?

We are still facing a lot of unsettled issues here. However, let us now—in our quest to unravel the message behind the entire chapter—still purposely add other provocative questions:

What does the image of Mother–Provider (食母 shí mǔ), appearing at the very end of the chapter, mean? Is it indeed some mysterious Mother feeding all (Krebsová 1971, Král 1971, Feng & English 1972, Lynn 1999, Chohan and others 2002, Čarnogurská & Bondy 2005, Klaus 2009, Čarnogurská 2009, Jingwei 2012, Sehnal 2013, etc.)?<sup>9</sup> Or, are there any other, perhaps less speculative, alternatives? Could it also be—let us say—a depiction of a

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<sup>9</sup> Alternatively, the "feeding mother" is also equated to the Dao (e.g. Jingwei 2012).

mother feeding her baby with her milk, or—even before that—feeding a foetus through the umbilical cord?<sup>10</sup>

And could we understand the contrast between "them/others" and "I/me" repeatedly established throughout the Chapter 20 as the contrast between "what is done out there", i.e. the external, and "what the self does inside", i.e. the internal? Here, inside—is this to mean the inside of a mother's womb? After all, the image of a "newborn before its first cry" (嬰兒未咳 *yīng er wèi kē*) might also refer to the state of a foetus right before birth.

Could the phrases such as "all alone here I am bound and still without signs" (我泊焉未佻 *wǒ bó yān wèi tiáo*) refer to the state of a foetus before birth? And could, as the case may be, the phrase "still without signs" (未佻 *wèi tiáo*) describe the state of a woman in labour who is "so far without contractions"?

On a similar note, could the exclamations such as "Ah, what a strain!" (沌沌呵 *dùn dùn ā*), "And it is like a sea!" (其若海 *qí ruò hǎi*), or "And it cannot be stopped!" (其若无所止 *qí ruò wú suǒ zhǐ*) refer to a beginning labour?

And could we then interpret the phrase "but me alone—standing in a doorway—I am no good here" (我獨門元以鄙 *wǒ dú mén yuán yǐ bǐ*) in terms of "but me alone—right at the gate of the womb—I am no good here"?

We could continue posing more questions along these lines, however, the chief one still remains unanswered: Why is the Old Master talking about this topic at all?

Recent research confirms that the psychological, physiological, emotional and spiritual resilience of a person is substantially influenced by events taking place during pregnancy and birth and which start sustainable adaptive neural mechanisms supporting the survival of a kind (Mandel 2003), including neural mechanisms such as those forming the base for stress resilience (Franklin & others 2012). Simply put, a number of experts agree that events before birth potentially represent a significant factor overpowering even our genes or the environment in which we are subsequently raised (Kristof 2010, Paul 2011 etc.).

We do not venture to suggest that the Old Master immediately anticipated conclusions reached by the contemporary science of foetal origins or by the prenatal and perinatal psychology. Nevertheless, the importance of prenatal and perinatal period for developing resilience as a basis precondition for survival and sustainability has been established beyond any doubt. And sustainability of a vision had always been the Old Master's primary focus (cf. Fellner 2011a, 2011b).

This perhaps somewhat shocking excursion into the womb, on which we have set out by proposing the present alternative interpretation of the Chapter 20 of the Dao De Jing, may indeed be a "lesson in resilience" by itself. Let us now have yet another look on the text from this perspective. Indeed, when birth is near, the foetus is at the end of all the primal learning about the world. The introductory sequence of the Chapter 20 addresses this with the following line: "*There has been enough of learning—and now, no weeping above all!*" This is actually the first life lesson on accepting the fact that nothing lasts forever, which is also one of the postulated principles of the so-called resilience thinking (Grohol 2011).<sup>11</sup>

However, aside from things which within the safety of a mother's womb might appear relative (see the "nodding" or "threatening" stated in the following sequences, or what is "of abundant beauty" or "lowly") there are also things which are better acknowledged in time (for example, "people you cannot but fear"). After all, the confrontation between "others" and "I",

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<sup>10</sup> The possibility of such interpretation has already been pointed out by Waley (1997, p. 43). In a footnote, Waley writes: „The image may equally well be that of a child in the womb, ‘feeding on the mother’.“

<sup>11</sup> According to Grohol (2011), accepting that all things are temporary represents a first necessary step in building resilience.

so vividly depicted in the Chapter 20, encompasses the capacity to realistically assess one's situation—another principle of resilience thinking (Grohol, op. cit.).

Consequently, the Chapter 20 provides a number of accounts of the subsequent difficulties: "*How tiring is this!*", "*I am left with nothing to do here but to suffocate!*", "*As for myself, it knocks me sideways!*". However, a certain degree of pressure wrought by unfavourable circumstances often represents a factor building skills and capacities necessary for overcoming such events in future. At the same time, it is also the next step in building primary resilience (Grohol, op. cit.). The strain of birth also represents the first stress acid test endured to a varying degree by each of us as soon as during the perinatal period.

There is no source of surety other than the mother to whom a child is bound by the umbilical cord. "*Mother who feeds me*", as the conclusion of the Chapter 20 puts it. Outside a maternal womb, each newborn meets with the challenges posed by the need to build entirely new contacts and gradually also by the necessity of distinguishing between various life goals and issues. Nevertheless, **until the umbilical cord is cut, the mother is the only guarantor of all sustainability**. Therefore, the period before a child is born, before the mother begins to breast-feed him/her and, also, before a child gets its name, is the matter here. This brings us back to the classic theme of the Old Master that he so boldly tackles already in the Chapter 1 of the Dao De Jing, which reads:

道可道也 非恆道也

A sustainable vision  
Is not the vision to be seen

名可名也 非恆名也

Likewise a sustainable name  
Is not the name to be asked for

無名萬物之始也

After all, anything that is conceived  
Does not yet possess a name

有名萬物之母也

It does not get its name  
Until its mother begins to breast-feed it

*(the Mawangdui version of the text)*

Thus, the vision that matters to the Old Master (恆道 *héng dào*) in the Chapter 20 unravels—as it seems—its primary sources: the same sources which are nowadays denoted using expert terminology such as, for example, "psychophysiological resilience" (Mandel 2003), and whose formation substantially overlaps with the period of a person's prenatal and perinatal development.

## In Place of a Conclusion

All I really need to know, I learned in kindergarten, as Robert Fulghum wrote (1988). All I really need to know, I learned from the mother who feeds me, glosses the Old Master, with his head already at the gates of a womb. Is it not true that at this precise moment we are already endowed with what is capable of equipping us for our journey through life?

In place of a conclusion, let us now once again read our alternative and somewhat non-traditional interpretation of **the Chapter 20 of the Dao De Jing** in the Mawangdui version:

## 20. BOUND BY THE UMBILICAL CORD

絕學无憂

**There has been enough of learning—and now, no weeping above all!**

唯與呵忒相去幾何

**All that nodding or threats—is there any difference at all?**

美與亞忒相去何

**And things of abundant beauty and all things lowly—are they not alike?**

若人之所畏

亦不可以不畏人

**They say there are things men shun in horror!  
Yet just so there are people you cannot but fear.**

望呵

忒未央才

**Ah, if it only were!  
Except there is no end to it!**

眾人配配

若鄉於大牢

而春登臺

**The masses of people out there are all keyed-up,  
Like a peasant for a sacrificial ox,  
Like a passion steaming hot.**

我泊焉未佻

若嬰兒未咳

**Alone, I am bound here, still without contractions,  
Like a newborn before its very first cry.**

纍呵 佻无所歸

**Ah, how tiring this is!  
Yet for what has once been conceived there is no return.**

眾人皆有餘

**All the throngs out there indulging in excess!**

我獨遺我愚人之心也

**All alone I am left here with my moonstruck heart.**



沌沌呵

**Ah, what a strain!**

鬻人昭昭 我獨若悶呵

鬻人察察 我獨閏閏呵

**The simpletons out there are done with it in one stroke, but I am left with nothing to do here but to suffocate!**

**The simpletons rush into things right away, but as for myself, it knocks me sideways!**

忽呵 其若海

望呵 其若无所止

**Ah, and all of a sudden! And it is like a sea!**

**Ah, if it only were! And it cannot be stopped!!!**

眾人皆有以

我獨門元€€以鄙

**All the people around have a purpose here,**

**But me alone—right at the gate of the womb—I am no good here!**

我欲獨異於人而貴食母

**Longing to be alone and different from others,**

**Dearest to my heart is the mother who feeds me.**

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