

The Monotheist Laozi.

Arshad Masood Hashmi

Department of Urdu, Jai Prakash University, Chapra, India

E-mail: hashmiam68@gmail.com

Abstract

The enclosed article, “The Monotheist Laozi” seeks to explore Laozi’s *Dao De Jing* through a comparative theological framework, with particular emphasis on its affinities with Islamic spirituality and Sufi metaphysics. The paper argues that Laozi’s vision was essentially monotheistic, and that later ritualistic and polytheistic interpretations were historical accretions rather than original doctrine. The study employs a comparative exegetical method, drawing on both primary Daoist sources and Qur’ānic concepts such as *istighnā*, *taqwa*, *sulook*, *ḥaqīqah*, *ma’rifah*, and *faḍl*. It also considers Indo-Islamic perspectives, particularly Maulana Abul Kalam Azad’s recognition of Laozi as a prophet-like figure. The *Dao De Jing* presents the *Dao* as an absolute, ineffable source of all existence, with spiritual practice emphasizing humility, self-effacement, and alignment with its natural order—paralleling the Qur’anic notions of *tawḥīd* and *taslīm*. In governance and ethics, the Daoist sage embodies restraint, moral integrity, and intuitive action, showing that true authority and freedom arise from ego-effacement and surrender to a transcendent principle.

Keywords: dao de jing; daoist; laozi; monotheist; theological

Introduction

This study examines the philosophy of the *Dao* as articulated in the *Dao De Jing*, focusing on its metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. It explores how the Daoist emphasis on humility, self-effacement, and non-interference (*wu wei*) aligns with broader themes of unity and surrender, drawing parallels with the Qur’anic concepts of *tawḥīd* (divine unity) and *taslīm* (total submission), and considers the implications of this alignment for spiritual practice and ethical leadership.

Engagement with the concept of *Dao* within Islamic, especially Urdu intellectual discourse, may be traced back to translation practices of the late twentieth century. The Urdu translation of Yusuf Husain Khan (1987), was limited in its ability to convey the philosophical density and metaphysical nuance of Daoist thought. Subsequent annotated translations and interpretive studies (Hashmi, 2022) marked a significant shift in approach, emphasizing conceptual depth and comparative frameworks. These studies increasingly highlighted resonances between the *Dao De Jing* and certain foundational elements of Islamic spirituality. Situated within the broader traditions of Urdu scholarship—particularly Qur’anic exegesis, Sufi metaphysics, and comparative religion—Laozi’s text has thus come to be read through a monotheistic hermeneutic that aligns it, in significant respects, with Islamic theological discourse.

This study is primarily conceptual and comparative, relying on textual analysis of the *Dao De Jing* and Islamic theological concepts, without engaging empirical or historical evidence of practice. Its focus on philosophical parallels may oversimplify

complex cultural, historical, and doctrinal differences between Daoism and Islamic thought, and it does not account for the diversity of interpretations within either tradition.

This study employs a comparative exegetical method, juxtaposing Laozi's philosophy with Islamic sources, especially the Qur'ān, Hadith traditions, and Sufi metaphysics. The hermeneutic approach taken here is religio-philosophical, focusing less on philology and more on metaphysical, ethical, and theological parallels. The comparison is based on conceptual and thematic parallels between Daoist and Islamic thought. Key criteria include: the metaphysical principle of unity (*Dao* and *tawḥīd*), the ethic of surrender or non-interference (*wu wei* and *taslīm*), and the qualities of an ideal agent or leader. Textual units are selected passages from the *Dao De Jing* that discuss the nature of the *Dao*, self-effacement, and governance (e.g., Qur'ān, chapters 22, 52), and Qur'ānic verses that emphasize divine unity, submission to God, and ethical conduct (e.g., Qur'ān. 2:2, 3:159, 57:20). These Qur'ānic references collectively emphasize divine unity, the necessity of submission to God, and the cultivation of ethical and righteous conduct in human life. While the Qur'ān emphasizes submission to a singular, sovereign God and adherence to divinely ordained ethical conduct, Daoism advocates alignment with the impersonal *Dao* through naturalness and effortless action, highlighting different but parallel paths to cosmic harmony.

The interpretive steps involve: close reading of the original passages, identification of conceptual correspondences, and analysis of functional equivalences in ethical and spiritual guidance.

The philosophical and poetic complexity of the *Dao* underscored the need for an authoritative exegesis of the *Dao De Jing*. Yusuf Husain Khan's 1987 Urdu translation, based on an unspecified English edition, proved inadequate, rendering key Daoist terms obscure and imprecise. Despite the prominence of James Legge's English version at the time, the Urdu translation failed to capture critical philosophical nuances and interpretive subtleties, limiting its effectiveness for scholarly engagement.

Subsequent years saw the publication of more carefully annotated translations and interpretive commentaries, both philological and literary, which shed new light on the text. Through the studies like "Islam in Imperial China: Sinicization of Minority Muslims and Synthesis of Chinese Philosophy and Islamic Tradition" (Fathil, 2019), it became increasingly evident that the *Dao De Jing* shares notable affinities with certain foundational aspects of Islamic thought. Urdu, as a language deeply embedded in the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the subcontinent, possesses a rich corpus of Qur'ānic exegesis, theological treatises, and writings on spirituality and metaphysics. Within this context, comparative engagements with the *Dao De Jing* are both intellectually fruitful and culturally significant. What proved particularly striking was the observation that the text not only echoes some of the essential teachings of Islam but also reflects points of convergence with Sufi metaphysics and spiritual praxis.

Results and Discussion

Regardless of the scholarly debates concerning the historical period of Laozi and the composition of the *Dao De Jing*, my firm position is that the text and its Master present the vision of one God in a decidedly monotheistic context. Both Chinese and Western exegetical traditions recognize that the text points toward a divine principle beyond all categories of polytheistic belief. Over time, however, Laozi himself was elevated to divine status, particularly when the so-called Daoist religion (*Daojiao*) was systematized during the Later Han period. Yet it must be emphasized that this was a

later construction, not the essence of Laozi's philosophy. Indeed, the institutionalized religion that came to be known as Daoism gradually became entangled with superstition, animism, magical practices, and sorcery, thus obscuring the original monotheistic depth of the *Dao De Jing*.

In its purest and most authentic form, the *Dao De Jing* is uncompromising in its negation of gods, deities, ancestor worship, and ritualistic formalism. Instead, it affirms a Supreme Being—absolute, eternal, unconditioned—who is nothingness in Itself yet the primal cause of everything. This Being is never begotten, nor does it beget; it brings forth creation not by producing entities directly but by initiating a process in which the One gives rise to Two, and the Two generate the myriad beings. This metaphysical unfolding bears a striking resemblance to the Islamic conception of Allah: unbegotten and not begetting, yet the origin of all creation. The description of Dao in this sense reveals its closeness to the Qur'anic affirmation of God as the Absolute, the Necessary Existent, and the ultimate source of all that exists.

One of the most significant dimensions of this parallel may be traced to the Qur'ān, where it is repeatedly emphasized that submission to Allah must be undertaken without expectation of worldly results or rewards. This principle is expressed through two key concepts in Arabic: *istighnā* and *taqwa*. Both terms are central in describing the spiritual disposition of prophets and the ethical orientation of believers. The Qur'ān presents *istighnā* not merely as an abstract notion, but as a distinctive mode of life consistently exemplified by the prophets. It reflects an orientation that seeks divine grace alone, unconditioned by material gain or immediate outcomes. The scriptural narrative illustrates this quality in the lives of several prophets: Noah, Hūd, Šāliḥ, Lot, Shu'ayb, Jesus, and culminates in the life of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). In each instance, *istighnā* is portrayed as integral to prophetic character, signifying steadfast reliance upon God's will and blessings rather than human acknowledgment or reward. The Prophet Muḥammad himself embodied this principle throughout his life, demonstrating that prophetic mission rests upon absolute trust in divine providence and independence from worldly validation. Even after going hungry for days, he never asked anyone for food or other necessities, and he rested on nothing more than a thin straw mat. It is narrated by Umar ibn al-Khattab that,

I entered the room of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, while he was lying on his side over a mat. I sat down as he drew up his lower garment and he was not wearing anything else. The mat had left marks on his side. I looked at the Prophet's cupboard and I saw a handful of barely in a small amount, the same of mimosa leaves in the corner, and a leather bag hanging to the side. My eyes started to tear up, and the Prophet said, "What makes you weep, son of Khattab?" I said, "O Prophet of Allah, why should I not cry that this mat has left marks on your side and I see little in this cupboard? Caesar and Khosrau live among fruits and springs, while you are the Messenger of Allah and His chosen, yet this is your cupboard." The Prophet said, "O son of Khattab, are you not pleased that they are for us in the Hereafter and for them in the world?" I said, "Of course? (Elias & Elias, 2023).

These qualities are consistently associated with prophets, sages, and saints—or, in Islamic terminology, the *awliyā'*. A *walī* (pl. *awliyā'*) is understood as one who embodies selflessness, detachment from greed and desire, and an unwavering readiness to accept the guidance and decree of the Supreme Being. In a similar vein,

the Taoist *sheng ren* represents an individual who has unconditionally submitted to the Dao, living in harmony with its transcendent order.

Shari'ah (religious principles/exoteric path), *Tariqat* (esoteric path), *Haqiqat* (mystical truth), and *M'arfat* (*unio mystica*) are basic principles of Sufism. The Islāmic concept of *shari'ah* is well defined following the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet. It is a universal aspect of Islām whereas the other three are the ways for union with God. *Tariqat* can safely be called the *Dao* or Way of Laozi wherein submission to the Supreme Being is required without any condition. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958), one of the most important leaders of the Indian Independence Movement, Islāmic scholar, exegetic, and a prolific author has written in his exegesis of the Holy Qur'an that Laozi was a prophet of China, who was the founder of *Tariqah* (esoteric path) which is very much like *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) and Vedanta in essence.

Dao introduced Chinese life to deep spiritual immersion and internal meditation. On the one hand, there was depth and complication in religious and moral concepts, on the other hand, new doors of delightful thought and tenderness were opened (Azad, 1964, pp. 261).

Maulana Azad has further written that Laozi's divine teachings of meditations for union with *Dao* couldn't develop as a religion though it had the potentials of *Haqqaniyat* (Absolutism).

The second Qur'anic term *Taqwa*, literally Righteousness or Piety, 'to fear' or 'to protect', has a broad meaning. The Holy Qur'an refers to this term as "the effort to protect oneself from the Wrath of Allah and to fear and respect His Presence" (Saber, 2024). This term which appears more than 250 times in the Qur'an, is also described as God-consciousness or God-fearing piety. Abu al-Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979) identifies *taqwa* as the basic Islāmic principle of God-consciousness, together with brotherhood, equality, fairness, and justice, on which the true Islāmic society is established. Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) systematically elaborated the significance of *taqwa* in his Quranic commentary, which is characterized by an emphasis on political activism. One of the 20th century's great Muslim scholars, Prof. Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) identified it as "the most important single concept in the Quran," an inner vision that helps humans overcome their weaknesses (Rahman, 2009, pp. 20). Considering all the verses describing *taqwa* in the Qur'an, one of this century's great Muslim scholars summarizes that

... perhaps the best way to define *taqwā* is to say that, whereas action belongs to man, real and effective judgement upon that action, as well as the standard whereby that action is to be judged, lie outside of him. Similarly, in the case of the collective performance of a society, both the final criterion of judgment upon it and the judgment itself transcend that society. When a man or a society is fully conscious of this while conducting himself or itself, he or it has true *taqwā* (Rahman, 2009, pp. 20).

In essence, the Qur'ānic concept of *taqwā* extends beyond the common understanding of piety or God-consciousness; it signifies a state of selfless and unconditional surrender to the Divine will. While engaged in the task of translating the *Dao De Jing* into Urdu, I found it impossible to resist drawing parallels between this Qur'ānic principle and the Dao as envisioned by Laozi. Both, in their respective traditions, represent the very core of spiritual life.

Laozi persistently advocates an attitude of self-effacement and submission to the Dao, portraying it as the ultimate and unchallengeable authority that governs the cosmos, the state, and the individual. Just as *taqwā* requires the believer to relinquish self-interest in favor of divine alignment, Laozi calls for an unreserved yielding to the Dao, where human will is subsumed into the rhythm of the Absolute. This convergence highlights not only the universality of the ethic of surrender but also the profound ways in which Islamic spirituality and Daoist thought intersect in their vision of human existence attuned to the transcendent.

The term *Dao* was translated into Urdu as *sulook* (Hashmi, 2021). This word is related to the Sufi traditions where it is used for the path of the mystics which leads to a connection with God. The one who treads on this way is called *sālik*, the seeker. Thus, *sālik* is a person who has no worldly greed, no envy, and no desire for honor; the one who nourishes wisdom in his heart. He is a true *Daoist* in his nature. The literal meaning of *sulook* is to walk on a path of nearness to God and to be attracted towards the Hereafter. The one who acquires the knowledge of the Almighty through these means is called a seeker. The reformation and purification of the inner morality with the adherence to the *Shari'ah* deeds in the outward appearance is also called *sulook*. It creates the ability to acquire inner morality. The first step of *sulook* is asceticism and piety (*taqwa*). It is observing and seeking the essence of Allah from everything. The one who acquires this knowledge is a seeker, a perfect human being. The purpose of this knowledge is self-purification, fulfillment of noble morals, and sincerity. Only through the way of conduct can morals such as miserliness, jealousy, hypocrisy, arrogance, and self-aggrandizement be eradicated, and such a sense of brotherhood, sincerity, and humility will develop which can lead to good morals. All worldly associations are to be disconnected from the self. One has to be separated from human bondage. The goal is not to discover miracles, but to prepare for death before death, to prepare for a journey of no return.

There are different sources of success in this method, which include the essence of God, asceticism, patience, trust, withdrawal from worldly affairs, attention, contentment, divine pleasure, remembrance of God, and meditation. It leads to the spiritual path toward direct knowledge of the Supreme Reality, *Haqīqah* which begets a reward called *Ma'rifah*, i.e., *Tariqah* leads to *Haqīqah* which is the way to *Ma'rifah*, a *faḍīlah* or in the Daoist terminology *De*, or virtue. *Haqīqah* is knowing the al-Haq (the Absolute) which is *Dao*. *Faḍīlah* is derived from the Arabic word *Faḍl* which means virtue or grace. John T. Platts' dictionary (1959) has used the following words for the meaning of *faḍl* and its derivatives:

... to exceed; to become redundant; to surpass or excel,' &c.), s.m. Excess, superabundance, exuberance; increase, gain; superiority, excellence; virtue; superior learning or knowledge, learning, wisdom; — a free gift, gratuity; grace, bounty; favour; benefit (Platts, 1959, pp. 782).

In this context, knowledge encompasses both outward, worldly learning and inward, self-knowledge. Within the Islamic tradition, it is firmly held that neither of these forms of knowledge can be attained independently; both are contingent upon the divine grace (*faḍl*) of Allah. Moreover, it is believed that this *faḍl* is ultimately bestowed in the Hereafter upon those who remain steadfast in their devotion to God throughout their lives. Thus, the concept of *faḍl* acquires a profound spiritual significance, one that may be meaningfully compared to Laozi's principle of *De*. The original title comprises three key terms: *Dao*, *De*, and *Jing*. *Dao* is generally understood as "the Way," *De* signifies the virtue or blessing derived from following this path, and *Jing* refers to a

scripture, book, or sacred text. The central philosophy of the *Dao* revolves around the principle of the turning process—that is, refraining from unnecessary interference and allowing things to follow their natural course. Since the text emphasizes the significance of this principle and its associated virtues, I have rendered (into Urdu) the title as *Fazā'il-e Tark-e 'Amal* (The Virtues of Non-Action).

In Islamic thought, related notions such as *ma'rifah* (gnosis), *faḍīlah* (virtue), and *ḥaqīqah* (ultimate truth or reality) illuminate the pathways by which human beings orient themselves toward divine knowledge and moral excellence. These categories, in turn, provided me with a conceptual lens through which to approach Laozi's use of *De*. Far from being a purely ethical or social virtue, *De* embodies the manifestation of Dao within the individual and the cosmos, much as *faḍl* and *faḍīlah* represent the reflection of divine grace and virtue within the life of the believer.

This convergence is further underscored in Derek Lin's translation (1994) of verse 21 of the *Dao De Jing*, where he observes:

The Tao is the infinite field of limitless potential. Therefore, the manifestation of inherent power and great virtue of all things can only follow the Tao and come from the Tao. If we were to regard the Tao as a "thing," it would be indistinct and unclear. The Tao embodies the mystery and the unknown. No matter how close we get to it, it will remain forever beyond complete comprehension. It will always be one step beyond total clarity (Lin, 1994).

Read through an Islamic interpretive framework, this can be understood as a recognition that virtue (*faḍīlah*) and divine favor (*faḍl*) are inseparable from alignment with the transcendent source—whether named Dao in the Daoist tradition or Allah in the Islamic one. Such resonances suggest not only the universality of these principles but also the possibility of an enriching dialogue between the two traditions of thought. The literal meaning of *ma'rifah* (or *ma'rifat*) is “to recognize” or “to know.” In Islamic religious discourse, this recognition is not merely intellectual acknowledgment, but rather the profound awareness of God that arises from an awakened consciousness. It entails a state in which the human being becomes deeply cognizant of the relationship between the Creator and the created. Such recognition is not passive; it is an active, conscious discovery that transforms one's perception of existence.

From the Islamic perspective, true knowledge of Allah does not lie in grasping His essence—an endeavor beyond human capacity—but in perceiving His signs (*āyāt*) scattered throughout the cosmos. This epistemology privileges contemplation (*tafakkur*), reflection (*tadabbur*), and meditation over abstract or speculative knowledge. In this way, *ma'rifah* is inseparable from a lived, experiential process in which the awakening of the inner self and detachment from worldly attachments create the initial capacity for higher cognition. Such detachment facilitates a deeper engagement with reality, enabling the individual to meditate upon creation as a mirror of the Divine.

When cognition, reflection, and contemplation become the focus of one's spiritual life, the seeker's constant orientation towards the Divine engenders an inner transformation. Through this process, the individual begins to recognize the Creator within the fabric of creation itself. The outcome of such sustained reflection is the emergence of a renewed personality—an existence shaped not by ego or material desire but by proximity to the transcendent. In Islamic terminology, such a person becomes an *ʿĀrif* (gnostic, one who truly knows) or a *Walī* (saint, friend of God). In

Daoist thought, a similar archetype is embodied in the *sheng ren* (the sage), who lives in effortless harmony with the Dao.

Thus, *ma'rifah* is not simply intellectual knowledge, but a transformative process of recognition that bridges the human and the divine. It is through this recognition that the individual transcends the limitations of worldly existence and attains a state of inner illumination, virtue, and harmony with the Supreme Reality.

Beyond the basic parallels between Islamic belief and the teachings of Laozi, another factor that shaped my understanding of the *Dao De Jing* was the way Laozi has been represented in Urdu sources. In several writings produced within the Indo-Islamic intellectual tradition, Laozi has been revered as a kind of Chinese prophet, a sage whose message bears striking resemblance to prophetic teachings in Islam. This interpretive stance provided me with a framework to approach the *Dao De Jing* not merely as a philosophical treatise but as a sacred text, one that can be appreciated from an Islamic theological perspective.

Toshihiko Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism* (1984) remains a seminal work in this area, drawing illuminating comparisons between the metaphysical language of Ibn al-'Arabī and the Daoist worldview. Yet Izutsu's work, while groundbreaking, situates Laozi's thought largely within the realm of philosophical mysticism. When the *Dao De Jing* is approached explicitly from a religious standpoint, it reveals dimensions that extend beyond philosophy into the domain of faith. The text consistently exhibits signs of a coherent spiritual system grounded in the conception of a single, ultimate reality—one that can be interpreted as a monotheistic vision of the Divine.

While the Qur'ānic theme emphasizes submission to a singular, sovereign God and ethical conduct, comparative analyses such as Izutsu's *Sufism and Taoism* (1984) show that mystical traditions from different cultures (Islamic Sufism and Daoism) can converge on similar metaphysical insights about the ultimate reality and the human path to unity with it, even though their starting points and theological frameworks differ. Izutsu explores (1984, pp. 1–25) structural parallels between Islamic Sufism and Daoist thought, highlighting convergences in metaphysical and mystical approaches despite differing theological frameworks.

In sum, while the Qur'ān emphasizes submission to a singular God and ethical conduct, Daoism—and as Izutsu (1984) shows, Sufism as well—illustrates that diverse spiritual traditions offer parallel paths toward harmony with the ultimate reality, differing in method but converging in insight.

The later development of Daoist religion (*Daojiao*), with its pantheon of deities, ritual structures, and elements of popular worship, should be understood as a historical accretion rather than a faithful reflection of Laozi's original teaching. Just as Islamic thought distinguishes between the purity of prophetic revelation and later cultural or sectarian elaborations, so too the elevation of Dao into a polytheistic or ritualistic framework belongs to a subsequent stage in Chinese religious history. To attribute these later innovations to Laozi himself would be a distortion. His text, in its earliest form, stands closer to a discourse of spiritual purity, humility, and surrender before the Absolute.

The *Dao* designates a transcendental, supra-experiential reality that resists all determinate description. Laozi therefore articulates it through metaphor and negation rather than discursive definition. From this radical indeterminacy, all beings emerge as manifestations of the *Dao* itself. As the generative source of life and the sustaining principle of the cosmos, the *Dao* is dependent on nothing beyond itself and is thus described as the mother of the universe. It is simultaneously origin and return, nameless, without precedent, ineffable, and ultimately incomprehensible. Though

concealed in its operation, its creative potency gives rise to individual beings, nurtures them, and brings them to completion. In this sense, the *Dao* functions as an absolute ontological ground, a conception that invites comparison with the Qur'anic affirmation of divine unity (*tawhīd*), wherein all multiplicity proceeds from and returns to a single, indivisible source:

Unknown in its identity,
it may be called the *Dao* or the Great;
being great, it is boundless;
being boundless, omnipresent;
being omnipresent, eternal;
and being eternal, the point of return.
(*Dao De Jing*: Verse 25. Hashmi, 2022, p.68)¹

Within Daoist metaphysics, the integration of the empirical self with the primordial principle constitutes a central concern. This orientation privileges simplicity, humility, and self-effacement, and seeks liberation through unconditioned alignment with the *Dao*. Such alignment presupposes the suspension of ego, pride, prejudice, desire, and instrumental rationality. In comparative perspective, this movement toward self-nullification bears structural affinity with the Qur'anic ethic of *taslīm*, the conscious surrender of the self to divine will, wherein true freedom is attained not through assertion but through submission.

Can you adopt the style of silence
until clarity arises within you?
Can you remain content without interference,
until action naturally becomes appropriate?
(*Dao De Jing*: Verse 15, Hashmi, 2022, p.69)

The Daoist ideal of *wu wei* (non-interference) further clarifies this convergence. Rather than denoting passivity, *wu wei* signifies action purified of egocentric intention, calculation, and coercion. Human agency, in this state, operates in harmony with the spontaneous order of the *Dao*. A parallel may be observed in Islamic spirituality, where authentic action (*ʿamal*) acquires value only when grounded in submission to God's will, rather than in desire or self-interest. In both traditions, ethical efficacy arises from alignment with a transcendent order rather than from autonomous human agency.

The *Dao De Jing* thus advances not merely a program of individual spiritual cultivation but a comprehensive vision in which inner discipline and outward conduct are governed by fidelity to an ultimate principle. Its aim is the realization of the order of the *Dao*—the order of nature itself—as the regulating norm of both personal and social life. As Roth (1999) notes, the culmination of this process occurs when the self, having attained the *Dao* through meditative absorption, returns to its primordial state, transformed to such an extent that ordinary consciousness no longer functions as the primary locus of agency. When such realization characterizes an individual vested with spiritual or political authority, it yields ethical integrity, justice, and self-transcendence, uncorrupted by domination or ego. Action in this condition is intuitive, spontaneous, and consonant with what Islamic discourse would describe as living in harmony with divine command.

¹All translations are from the Urdu version (Hashmi, 2022) translated from the English rendition by Duyvendak (1954).

Discrimination is not His way;
He favors no one over another.
He dwells at the center of every soul's vision and heart,
And every soul is but a tender child in His care.
(*Dao De Jing*: Verse 49, Hashmi, 2022, p.69)

It is therefore not surprising that the outcome of such an experience would have been distinctive for members of the ruling class who adhered to the teachings of Laozi. The divine guidance derived from this experience was understood to be effective not only in the sphere of governance but also in leading to spiritual contentment, inner expansion, and the fulfillment of the self. In any case, by relinquishing inquiry, desire, convention, and self-interest, such an individual remains spiritually connected to all that exists within the natural order and comes to embody a range of exemplary qualities. Only then does he merit the role of ruler and leader.

He does not display himself,
and thus, remains luminous.
He does not claim self-sufficiency, and thus remains trustworthy.
He does not afflict himself, and thus remains pure.
He does not exalt himself, and thus becomes a leader.
Having no personal aim,
he himself does not become an object of ambition.
(*Dao De Jing*, Verse. 22, Hashmi, 2022, p.70).

Such a person effaces his individual existence within the cosmic *Dao*—the Mother, the limitless, the boundless, and the infinite—thereby relinquishing personal will and authority. Whether king or commoner, such an individual is described as a *sheng ren* (sage or perfected person). The defining practical characteristic of this state is the embodiment of *wu wei yi*, action through non-interference. One of the greatest poets of the subcontinent, Allama Sir Muhammad Iqbal, summarizes this in the following Persian verse:

Gar fina khwahi ze khud aazad shu
Gar baqa khwahi bakhud aabad shu
Az khudi andesh wa mard-e kaar shu
Mard-e Haq shu haamil-e asraar shu (Iqbal, 1915, pp. 101-102)
(If thou wouldst live, become full of Self
Think of Self and be a man of action!
Be a man of God, bear mysteries within!) (Iqbal, 2018).

Seen through this lens, the *Dao De Jing* emerges not only as a philosophical classic but also as a scripture that speaks to the universal religious quest for unity, transcendence, and selfless submission to the Supreme Being. Such an interpretation situates Laozi within a comparative framework in which the affinities between Islam and Daoism become strikingly apparent, particularly in their shared insistence on surrender, humility, and the transcendence of ego in relation to the Divine.

Laozi frames the spiritual journey of affirmation and confession through a preliminary act of denial. This paradigm parallels the Islamic articulation of faith, where belief is expressed through the testimony *lā ilāha illā Allāh*—“there is no god but God.” The Islamic formula requires the negation of all other deities before the affirmation of

the One God; in a similar manner, Laozi negates all ways and paths except the one that leads to the Dao. This formulation may be read as a monotheistic conception of a Supreme Reality, characterized by humility, self-effacement, and unconditional submission to the Absolute. It simultaneously rejects ancestral worship, polytheistic devotion, and ritual restrictions—an orientation that finds resonance with the spiritual core of Islam.

Once this submission to Dao is affirmed, Laozi envisions an organic order unfolding across the universe, the polity, and the individual. Central to this vision is the dissolution of ego, understood as the renunciation of self-centered human activity and the realization of divine virtue. The *Dao De Jing*, therefore, functions not merely as a text on spiritual experience, but as a treatise on self-cultivation and moral transformation. Its teaching moves beyond mystical insight to emphasize an all-encompassing unity wherein the individual is bound in steadfast commitment to Dao, allowing Dao to remain the ultimate source of authority over worldly affairs. Interpreted in this light, Laozi's conscious call to attune oneself to Dao resonates with the Islamic ethos of submission, humility, and theocentric order.

Conclusion

The analysis suggests that the Dao De Jing embodies a vision of one transcendent Supreme Being, unconditioned and unbegotten, resembling the Qur'ānic conception of Allah.

1. Monotheism in Laozi: Laozi negates polytheism, ancestor worship, and ritual formalism, presenting Dao as eternal, absolute, and the primal cause of all existence.
2. Parallels with Islam:
 - a. *Istighnā*: Prophets embody detachment from material reward, relying solely on divine providence. This is mirrored in Laozi's teaching of submission to Dao.
 - b. *Taqwa*: Qur'ānic God-consciousness resonates with Laozi's ethic of humility, surrender, and non-assertion (*wu wei*).
 - c. Sufi parallels: Concepts of *sulook* (path), *ḥaqīqah* (ultimate truth), *ma'rifah* (gnosis), and *faḍl/faḍīlah* (divine grace/virtue) align closely with Dao and De.
3. Cross-cultural reception: In Indo-Islamic intellectual circles, Laozi was often regarded as a sage-prophet whose teachings resembled Sufi and Vedantic traditions. Maulana Azad described Laozi's way as akin to *Tasawwuf*.
4. Theological synthesis: The Dao De Jing can be read as a scripture of self-effacement, surrender, and submission, akin to the Islamic testimony *lā ilāha illallāh*.

These reading challenges the dominant scholarly position that Daoism is inherently polytheistic, suggesting instead that later ritualistic accretions obscured Laozi's original monotheistic essence. The Dao De Jing, when approached from a religious lens, reveals not merely a philosophy of nature but a theology of transcendence. Its insistence on humility, surrender, and non-attachment parallels the Qur'ānic ethos of *taqwa* and the Sufi path of *sulook*.

Thus, Laozi emerges not only as a Chinese philosopher but as a spiritual teacher whose insights converge with the monotheistic traditions of Islam. This study affirms the possibility of interfaith dialogue where Daoist and Islamic spirituality meet in their shared vision of the Absolute.

References

- Azad, A. K. (1964). *Tarjuman-ul-Qur'an*, Vol I. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Duyvendak, J. J. L. (1954). *Tao Te Ching, the book of the way and its virtue*. London: John Murray.
- Elias, A. A., & Elias, A. A. (2023). *Hadith on Akhirah: Umar weeps at the poverty of the Prophet*. Daily Hadith Online. <https://www.abuaminaelias.com/dailyhadithonline/2019/10/02/umar-weep-for-prophet/>
- Fathil, F. (2019). Islam in Imperial China: Sinicization of Minority Muslims and Synthesis of Chinese Philosophy and Islamic Tradition. *Kemanisuaan*, 26.167-187.
- Hashmi, A. M. (2021). *Fazael-e tark-e amal*. Applied Books. <https://www.scribd.com/document/927993789/Fazael-e-Tark-e-Amal-Tao-Te-Ching>
- Iqbal, S. M. (1915). *Mathnavi Asrar-e Khudi*. Lahore: Union Steam Press.
- Iqbal, S. M. (2018). *The Secrets of the Self (Asrar-i Khudi), a Project Gutenberg e-book*. Gutenberg.org. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/57317/57317-h/57317h.htm#FNanchor_13_13
- Izutsu, T. (1984). *Sufism and Taoism: A Comparative Study of Key Philosophical Concepts*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Khan, Y. H. (1987). *Tao Te Ching* (Urdu tr.). Delhi: Sahitya Akademi.
- Platts, J. T. (1959). *A dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English* (Vol. 2). Sampson Low, Marston & Company.
- Rahman, F. (2009). *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Roth, H. D. (1999). *Original Tao: inward training and the foundations of Taoist mysticism*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- Saber, R. (2024). Understanding Taqwa: deep-rooted fear and reverence of Allah. *Learn Quran online, Arabic & Islamic Studies Online | IQRA Network*. <https://iqranetwork.com/blog/understanding-taqwa-reverential-fear-of-allah-as-expressed-in-the-quran/>
- Tao, Y. & Yu, F. (2013). Foreignization of a Tao Te Ching Translation in the Western World. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4 (3), pp. 579-583.
- Tao Te Ching, *English by Derek Lin, Terebess Asia Online (TAO)*. (n.d.-a). <https://terebess.hu/english/tao/DerekLin.html#Kap21>
- Waley, A. (1955). *The Nine Songs*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.