

# ***“Dao” and “Brahman”: A Brief Comparison of Cultivation Beliefs in China and India***

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## **Abstract**

The highest category in Chinese philosophy is DAO, while in Indian philosophy, it is BRAHMAN. Belonging to Eastern thought, there is a certain consistency in the concepts of cultivation in China and India: since Plato, the Western philosophical tradition has been enthusiastic about the pursuit of BEING; in contrast, the concept of DAO in Chinese philosophy and the concept of BRAHMAN in Indian philosophy both embody the Eastern emphasis on BECOMING. The goal of Chinese cultural cultivation is "harmony between heaven and man", or "harmony between Tao and man", while in India, it is "union of Brahman and self". To achieve their respective goals, Indian culture uses YOGA as its primary practice, while Chinese culture has developed QIGONG. These cultural elements are distinct from the West world. However, the developing directions of Chinese and Indian cultures also differ significantly. From a morphological perspective, BRAHMAN is associated with GROWTH, while DAO is associated with WALKING. It is important to emphasize that the original meaning of the word DAO is simply ROAD (as a noun), and later it acquired the meaning of WALKING (as a verb). Therefore, we can consider that the characteristic of Chinese philosophy emphasizes "walking in the world, developing in motion", while the characteristic of Indian philosophy is "transcending the human world, reaching towards the higher world". Chinese philosophy and Indian philosophy are two major representatives of Eastern philosophy. In contrast to the philosophical tradition of ancient Greece, they both emphasize practice and realization while downplaying argumentation and reasoning.

Keywords: Dao, Brahman, Cultivation Beliefs, Yoga, Qigong

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## Introduction

For Westerners, "Dao" and "Brahman" are two abstract and mysterious concepts from Eastern culture. For many Chinese people, however, due to the elusive nature of "Brahman", they tend to regard it as a concept on par with "Dao". This simplistic comparison may lead to overlooking the differences between "Dao" and "Brahman". Clearly, these two concepts have different connotations. More importantly, due to the differing understandings of "the highest existence" in Chinese and Indian cultures, they also have different thoughts and methods regarding the practice of spirituality.

## What is "Dao"?

In the Chinese language, "Dao" is a concept with very rich connotations: it can function as both a noun and a verb; it can refer to concrete objects as well as abstract concepts. This is a concept that is difficult to be translated into Western languages. On the other hand, many ordinary Chinese people may not fully understand its most fundamental meaning.

In fact, the original meaning of "Dao" is "road" or "path". In today's Chinese characters, this word consists of two parts: one part represents walking, while the other part represents a person's head. We cannot definitively determine whether the original meaning of this character is related to "head", but it is undoubtedly connected to "walking". Clearly, the concept of "Dao" as "road" is very concrete, and initially, it did not carry any religious or philosophical connotations. For example, in the *Analects*, there is a phrase "任重而道遠", where "道遠" refers to "the long journey". In the *I Ching*, there is a line that says "履道坦坦", meaning "the path is broad and smooth". In both of these examples, "Dao" simply refers to "road", without any abstract meaning. In these instances, "Dao" can refer to both "the path a person walks" and "the course of flowing water".

Additionally, in ancient Chinese, "Dao" has two verb usages: first, "Dao" can mean "to guide", a meaning derived from its association with "road"; second, "Dao" can also mean "to express" or "to narrate". Since both "walking" and "expressing" are process-oriented actions, "Dao" can be used not only to indicate "physical movement" but also to signify "the act of verbal communication".

By the Spring and Autumn period, the Chinese began to refer to the orbits of stars as "Tian dao" (the Way of Stars) and the principles governing human activities as "Ren dao" (the Way of Humanity). In this way, "Dao" evolved from its original meaning of "the path of walking" to encompass meanings such as "orbit" and "principle". The connotations of orbit and principle involve the rules of change in things, leading to the emergence of philosophical significance in the concept of "Dao" (Wang, 1987).

During the pre-Qin period, Daoism was the school that discussed "Dao" the most, which is why it derives its name from this concept. However, it is important to note that "Dao" is not exclusive to Daoism; in Confucian thought, "Dao" also occupies the highest level. For early Confucians, represented by Confucius, their starting point was "Li" (ritual propriety), and their core idea was "Ren" (benevolence). While "Dao" can be regarded as "the highest existence", it was not the concept most frequently discussed by early Confucians. This began to change only after the transformation of Confucianism during the Song Dynasty. Confucius stated in the *Analects*, "To hear the Dao in the morning is enough; I could die in the evening."

In this statement, "Dao" refers to "the highest truth". However, during the pre-Qin period, Confucian scholars tended to focus on tangible aspects of the world, such as how to govern society and improve interpersonal relationships, rather than discussing transcendent existence extensively. As a result, discussions of "Dao" among pre-Qin Confucians were relatively limited. This may lead to some misunderstandings, but historically, "Dao" has never been a concept monopolized by Daoism.

Buddhism is an external religion, and it originally did not have the concept of "Dao". However, during the development of Buddhism in China, translators, in order to help followers better understand Buddhism, awkwardly translated certain concepts from Indian thought into "Dao". For example, the concepts of "Bodhi" and "Nirvana" were difficult for ancient Chinese people to comprehend, so ancient translators directly translated them as "Dao". In Buddhist thought, the term "Bodhi" is closer to "awakening" or "wisdom", making its translation as "Dao" clearly inappropriate. "Nirvana", on the other hand, originally means "extinguishment", and in Buddhism, it refers to a special state achieved after stopping the cycle of "rebirth", which also does not have a strong connection to the concept of "Dao" in Chinese culture. Later Buddhist scholars gradually recognized the errors in this translation. For instance, Master Kuiji expressed quite directly that "the ancient idea that Bodhi is Dao is incorrect". However, on one hand, this "incorrect" translation is not entirely undesirable, as it helped the Chinese accept Buddhism more quickly; on the other hand, certain Sinicized Buddhist sects, such as Zen Buddhism, favor the use of the concept of "Dao". This may be because Zen thought is closer to Daoist teachings (i.e., those of Laozi and Zhuangzi) and further away from ancient Indian thought. In fact, many Chinese Buddhist researchers believe that the frequent appearance of "Dao" in Chinese Buddhism may not necessarily relate to Indian culture; rather, it could be a borrowing from the thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi by Chinese Buddhists (Li, 2015).

Chinese scholars generally believe that by the Song Dynasty, the development of Chinese philosophy increasingly exhibited the characteristics of "convergence of Three Teachings". This means that after the Song Dynasty, Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism mutually absorbed and utilized each other, ultimately forming a situation where "you have me within you, and I have you within me". Among these, the transformation and development of Confucianism is particularly noteworthy. Specifically, the new Confucianism that emerged during the Song Dynasty was especially keen on discussing the concept of "Li" (principle), and in the tradition of Chinese philosophy, "Dao" and "Li" are two closely related concepts. Chinese thinkers typically regard "Dao" as the highest level of existence, while "Li" is a secondary level of existence; "Dao" is the more abstract "Li," and "Li" is the more concrete "Dao". Therefore, in the early stages of its development, "Li xue" was also commonly referred to as "Dao xue". We can also say that after the Song Dynasty, the core concept that Confucians focused on was no longer "Ren" (benevolence), which Confucius emphasized, but rather "Dao" or "Li", concepts that were not extensively addressed by pre-Qin Confucians. This shift is certainly related to the influence of Daoism and Buddhism on Confucianism. On the other hand, at the inception of Confucianism, "Dao" was regarded as "the highest truth", although early Confucians did not place much emphasis on this concept.

In summary, throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, Daoism, Confucianism and Buddhism all have placed great importance on the concept of "Dao". Moreover, there is a consensus among "Three Teachings" that "Dao" represents the "highest existence" in Chinese philosophy. Clearly, in the context of Chinese philosophy, the status of "Dao" is akin to that of "being" in Western philosophy or "Brahman" in Indian philosophy.

## What is "Brahman"?

If a person has not grown up in the soil of Indian culture, it may be difficult for him/her to fully understand the connotation of "Brahman". This presents a similar dilemma for both ancient and modern Chinese people. From the perspective of Chinese culture, we may only be able to simply understand it as "the highest existence", because there are almost no concepts in our culture that correspond to it. "Dao" and "Brahman" represent the "highest existence" in their respective cultures, and in this regard, they can indeed communicate. However, on the other hand, "Dao" and "Brahman" reflect the differing ways of thinking in Chinese and Indian cultures in various aspects. While they may be equivalent in status, they differ in many details.

Although Buddhism originated in India and, as a branch of Indian culture, has profoundly influenced Chinese culture, it is undeniable that Buddhism did not bring the concept of "Brahman" into Chinese philosophy. As a heterodox tradition within Indian religion, Buddhism's understanding of "Brahman" differs significantly from that of mainstream Indian religions. Moreover, it has never explicitly claimed that "Brahman" is the "highest existence".

We cannot claim that Buddhism represents the entire thinking of Indian people, nor can we assert how closely Chinese Buddhism is related to traditional Indian meditative thought. The key point is that Chinese Buddhism is a highly localized sect of Buddhism, and concepts that are difficult for the Chinese to understand have been filtered out by translators and practitioners. In this context, it becomes relatively challenging for Chinese people to grasp the meditative thinking of the Indian tradition.

For Indians, the goal of spiritual practice is to strive for unity with "Brahman". According to Indian thought, achieving this state allows one to transcend the cycle of rebirth. This way of thinking can be found throughout the Upanishads, which also provide methods for their spiritual practices, including yoga. However, it is important to note that the yoga described in the Upanishads differs significantly in form from the contemporary practice of yoga as a form of exercise.

According to the Indian populace, there are a total of 108 Upanishads; however, scholarly research indicates that many of these "Upanishads" are not strictly considered as such, and only thirteen are regarded as ancient and reliable. Upanishads emphasize two key concepts: "Brahman" and "Atman". The thought of the Upanishads posits that "Brahman" is the origin of the universe, while "Atman" is often synonymous with "Brahman". The Upanishads also assert that "the universe is Brahman, and Brahman is the true self." The goal of human spiritual practice is to realize that "I and Brahman are one", meaning that the soul of individual life and the essence of the universe are fundamentally the same. If one can achieve this realization, liberation can occur immediately in this life, rather than waiting until after death. This concept of "liberation" appears quite similar to the notion of "Nirvana" in Buddhism. We can also argue that the goal of Buddhist practice is not far removed from the state indicated by the Upanishads. However, Buddhists are generally reluctant to acknowledge the similarities between the two, which is why the Upanishads and mainstream Indian religious thought hold little significance in Chinese Buddhism.

In the thirteen Upanishads, according to my own research, at least five of them discuss yoga. The yoga described in these texts is not about physical postures but rather refers to a meditative practice. From the perspective of the authors of the Upanishads, yoga serves as a

method to help individuals achieve unity with "Brahman". This meditative activity is seen as a means to transcend the individual self and realize the oneness with the ultimate reality.

After the thirteen Upanishads, another significant text in Indian religious history emerged: the *Bhagavad Gita*. This work introduces three types of yoga, among which "Jnana Yoga" specifically explains the method of achieving unity with "Brahman". In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the divine instructs humanity that "Jnana Yoga" leads to liberation through the realization of the oneness of "Atman" and "Brahman". The divine states that yogis employ various methods; they do not become elated by the attractive qualities of external things, nor do they feel dejected by the unpleasant. They come to understand that "Brahman" is complete, flawless, and equivalent to all. By realizing this, they attain unity with "Brahman", transcending the cycle of rebirth and achieving eternal happiness.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the divine also presents necessary means for achieving this state. For instance, it advises humanity to strive for tranquility and to work towards overcoming emotional disturbances. Through a state of calmness, practitioners can gradually reach a condition of "desirelessness", which, in the eyes of the divine, signifies the preliminary achievement of "Jnana Yoga". As for the methods to attain tranquility, the teachings of the *Bhagavad Gita* are largely consistent with those found in the Upanishads. The essence of this method involves first adjusting the body to a proper state—stable and still. Following this, the practitioner uses their mind to control their senses, ensuring that the various sensory perceptions are not disturbed by external objects. At the same time, one must manage various thoughts, leading to a diminishing of desires. In this way, the practitioner's mind can ignite the spark of wisdom, much like a convex lens igniting a match, allowing "Brahman" to manifest. This process embodies the essence of "Jnana Yoga".

Regarding the concepts of "Brahman" and "yoga", Buddhism and mainstream Indian religions have different understandings. Buddhism does not emphasize yoga in the same way; however, its meditation practices can be viewed as a form of "Buddhist yoga". In Buddhism, "Brahman" is not considered a "Supreme Being", which distinguishes it from mainstream Indian religions and also from traditional Chinese thought. In brief, I personally believe that the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama do not recognize a supreme existence akin to "Brahman". However, in the later development of Buddhism, many sects introduced concepts that can serve as substitutes for "Brahman". In this sense, they somewhat diverged from the original teachings of the Buddha. Chinese Buddhism, particularly represented by Zen, appears to be quite unique. While it may stray further from the original thoughts of Siddhartha Gautama, it has also been influenced by early Buddhist ideas. Of course, my perspective is not based on any particular religious belief.

### **A Comparison of “Dao” and “Brahman”**

We can assert that the concepts of "Dao" and "Brahman" embody two different tendencies pursued by Chinese and Indian philosophies, respectively. In this context, we need to pay attention to two aspects: on one hand, as Eastern philosophies, both Chinese and Indian thought present characteristics that are distinctly different from Western (particularly ancient Greek) thinking. On the other hand, it is crucial to emphasize the clear distinctions between Chinese thought (Dao) and Indian thought (Brahman). These differences can be interpreted through their unique ways of character construction. We will discuss this issue in the last section, where I will utilize the differences in character/word formation to explain the varying

concepts of practice in Chinese and Indian philosophies. In this section, I will first attempt to compare the differences between Eastern and Western philosophies.

As we all know, the mainstream tradition of Western philosophy was founded by Plato. However, in this regard, history seems to have played a small joke on us. In Greek, the term "philosophy" literally means "love of wisdom". In its original sense, "wisdom" is something that is constantly changing, and any activity can produce "wisdom", meaning that "wisdom" is not necessarily a systematized "thought". Unfortunately, almost simultaneously with the emergence of the term "philosophy", the Greeks confused "wisdom" with "universal knowledge". As a result, although philosophy nominally remains a discipline of "loving wisdom", it has gradually transformed into a discipline of "pursuing knowledge". This shift has led Western philosophy to increasingly focus on the accumulation of knowledge and the construction of theories, while neglecting the dynamic and practical nature of wisdom. This phenomenon has, to some extent, influenced the direction of Western philosophy, creating significant differences between it and Eastern philosophy, particularly the thinking patterns found in Chinese philosophy.

This cannot be regarded as a "mistake" on the part of Western thinkers, as the reason lies in the fact that "wisdom" often exists in a state of "concealment". One can "sense" its presence, but it is difficult to express it clearly in words or thoughts. Therefore, the question of "what exactly is wisdom" is almost one without an answer. Fundamentally, "knowledge" and "wisdom" are different: "knowledge" is relatively fixed and concrete, capable of being clearly articulated, while "wisdom" itself cannot be expressed through language. Wisdom can manifest as "knowledge", but it is not "knowledge" itself. We can have "knowledge about wisdom", but "knowledge about wisdom" is merely a form of "knowledge"; it does not equate to "wisdom itself".

The ancient Greeks equated the "love of wisdom" with philosophy, which indicates that from the very beginning, they recognized the distinction between "wisdom" and "knowledge". It is said that "in their language, episteme denotes knowledge, while sophia and phronesis represent wisdom." Furthermore, Plato even expressed that "wisdom... is, in any case, related to movement." We can sense that the ancient Greeks may have had a distinction between "knowledge" and "wisdom": "wisdom" is concealed and elusive, while "knowledge" serves as something that reveals or provides a pathway to "wisdom". This nuanced understanding reflects their deeper philosophical inquiry into the nature of these concepts and their interrelationship (Yu, 2005).

Plato believed that the goal of philosophers is wisdom; however, due to the elusive nature of "wisdom" itself, he inevitably equated "wisdom" with "knowledge" in his writings. Aristotle continued Plato's line of thought and further categorized "knowledge" into different levels, thus transforming the essence of philosophy from "the love of wisdom" into "the pursuit of universal knowledge". This shift fundamentally shaped the basic form of Western philosophy. It is well-known that the core of Western philosophy is ontology, which is the study of Being. Undoubtedly, this represents a form of "static knowledge", rather than "dynamic wisdom". This distinction highlights a significant divergence between Western philosophical inquiry and the more fluid and experiential understanding of wisdom often found in Eastern philosophies (Yu, 2005).

I agree with many Chinese scholars who argue that ontology is a unique aspect of Western philosophy. While there are also forms of "first philosophy" in Chinese and Indian

philosophy, these do not manifest as ontology. The Chinese and Indians are not particularly enthusiastic about exploring Being; instead, they are more concerned with the dynamic nature of Becoming.

I do not wish to judge the merits of Eastern versus Western philosophy. However, the Western philosophical tradition since Plato has been keen on exploring Being, which may have significant implications for the development of Western culture. In the history of Chinese philosophy, there is a prominent slogan "knowledge and action should be unified" which emphasizes that knowledge should serve the purpose of practice, suggesting that independent knowledge holds little value. In contrast, such an attitude may not be a consensus in Western culture. If Platonic thinkers are pursuing "static knowledge", how do they confront this "moving" world? Clearly, Western thinkers require some form of strength to help them navigate reality, and this strength is difficult to derive from "static knowledge". Consequently, throughout Western history, philosophy and religion have become two mutually supportive yet relatively independent systems. They function like two legs helping individuals move forward, with philosophy addressing the problem of "knowledge" and religion addressing the problem of "action". Religion, centered around faith, does not prioritize the pursuit of knowledge as its highest aim, while philosophy focuses on the quest for knowledge but leaves a space for faith. At least on the surface, it appears that the two can coexist without interfering with one another. This dynamic reflects a complex interplay between the pursuit of knowledge and the need for practical guidance in the lives of individuals within Western culture.

In the Eastern world, however, such a situation does not exist. If we are sufficiently familiar with Eastern culture, we can easily observe that Eastern philosophy and religion are often difficult to distinguish. When discussing Confucianism, it can be challenging to determine whether it is primarily a philosophy or a religion. Returning to the differences between Eastern and Western cultures, the pursuit of Eastern philosophy (and religion) is not about "static knowledge"; its fundamental aim is "cultivation" or "practice". Whether in Chinese philosophy or Indian philosophy, both share a commonality in contrast to Western philosophy: individuals must engage in continuous self-cultivation throughout the process of seeking knowledge. The ideal person is not merely a scholar rich in knowledge but someone who embodies transcendence. A transcendent person may not necessarily possess extensive "static knowledge", but they certainly possess "wisdom".

In summary, Eastern philosophy (and religion) pursues a form of "dynamic wisdom", which determines that in Eastern culture, philosophy and religion cannot exist as entirely separate domains. Throughout Chinese cultural history, scholars have held varying views on the relationship between "knowledge" and "action", but there is a consensus that "knowledge" and "action" are inherently interconnected and cannot be divided.

### **Cultivation Beliefs of Chinese and Indian People**

We can basically say that any civilization has some kind of pursuit of "transcendence", but Eastern and Western cultures have different understandings of "how to achieve transcendence". According to many Chinese scholars, the transcendence pursued by Western culture is an "external transcendence", while the transcendence pursued by Chinese culture is an "internal transcendence". In this regard, we can consider that Indian culture is similar to Chinese culture. That is to say, both Indians and Chinese tend to believe that a person can seek a connection with the divine through their own efforts, and that a person can realize their

transcendent aspirations from within themselves; whereas Westerners need to first acknowledge an "external" God, and then rely on His power to be liberated from suffering. Of course, our judgment of Western culture may seem somewhat simplistic and arbitrary; in reality, the mystical currents within Western religions may also have tendencies toward "internal transcendence". However, this issue is not of great significance; we can generally confirm that both Chinese philosophy and Indian philosophy belong to the category of philosophies that pursue "internal transcendence".

Western religions have a tradition of "expecting a savior", especially for grassroots believers, where an "external" God is very important, and they entrust their ultimate happiness to this "external" God. However, in Eastern religions, well-educated followers generally have the awareness that only you can save yourself, meaning that you must establish a connection with the divine through your own efforts, and that the "sacred existence" is originally one with mortals, or at least, they may potentially be one. This kind of belief is relatively common among both Chinese and Indian people. So, within Eastern culture, are there several differences between China and India? How do we understand these differences? Below, this article will attempt to clarify the different connotations of "Brahman" and "Dao" from the perspective of word formation, and on this basis, I will strive to explain what the differences are in the concepts of practice between China and India.

From the perspective of word formation, "Brahman" is derived from the Sanskrit word "Brih", which means "to grow". (Radhakrishnan & Moore, 1989) We can associate the dual connotation of "Brahman": first, it is related to movement; "Brahman" is associated with Becoming rather than Being, which distinguishes this concept from Western philosophical concepts. Second, since "Brahman" develops from the meaning of "growth", if humanity seeks to connect with Brahman, their efforts may be directed vertically rather than horizontally.

If we compare "Dao" and "Brahman", we arrive at an interesting conclusion: "Dao" is related to "walking", so the Chinese pursuit of "Dao" unfolds on a horizontal plane. To be more specific, when Chinese people pursue "transcendence", they cannot disregard the human world. In contrast, "Brahman" is related to "growth", so the Indian pursuit of "Brahman" resembles an elevation in a vertical direction. This is reflected in reality, as Indian practitioners throughout history have tended to leave their families, viewing various worldly matters merely as shackles and bonds, without any substantial meaning.

For the Chinese, the Indian attitude towards the worldly life is difficult to accept. This is precisely why Indian Buddhism faced significant resistance when it first entered China, as it required practitioners to leave their families and shave their heads. For the Chinese, shaving one's head and leaving one's family are seen as disrespectful to Confucian ideals. Confucianism has a characteristic focus on human relationships; while it also emphasizes the importance of "transcendence", the "transcendence" pursued by Confucianism is always based on interpersonal relationships. In other words, according to Confucian ideals, a person must first manage their relationships with others and become a moral exemplar through this process before they can achieve transcendence over the worldly life. Clearly, this way of thinking is quite different from Indian traditions. However, even after Buddhism "conquered" China, this concept within Chinese culture did not change. Even the Zen patriarch Huineng expressed in his writings: "If you leave the world to pursue enlightenment, you will ultimately gain nothing".



In my view, the excessive emphasis on worldly affairs in Chinese culture is one reason why yoga did not gain popularity in ancient China. For ancient Chinese people, the most important practice was "Qigong". Literally, "Qigong" refers to practitioners using certain techniques to achieve a form of communication between the "qi" within themselves and the "qi" of the external world. Clearly, the "qi" here belongs to the worldly realm. In terms of form, Yoga and Qigong have some similarities, but their underlying philosophies are completely different. As a term, "yoga" fundamentally means connection, primarily referring to the connection between the practitioner and the "Supreme Being", which in this context refers to "Brahman" (Wen, 2018). In simple terms, "Yoga" seeks connection, while "Qigong" seeks communication. These two practices reflect the different understandings that Chinese and Indian people have regarding the concept of the "Supreme Being" within their cultures.

## **Conclusion**

Chinese people understand the "Supreme Being" as "Dao", while Indians interpret it as "Brahman". Based on these different understandings, practitioners in China and India exhibit distinct styles of practice. The Chinese pursuit of "Dao" resembles a form of "horizontal movement", as they will not abandon their attachment to worldly matters (perhaps only Zhuangzi is an exception). In contrast, the Indian pursuit of "Brahman" resembles a form of "vertical transcendence", where they aspire to establish a connection with a higher existence. We can also appreciate the differences in their styles of practice through two common forms of practice in China and India. The most common ancient Chinese practice is "Qigong", where "qi" exists in the human world or Nature, and concepts like "Brahman", which are ethereal and abstract, do not appear in Qigong. On the other hand, the most common form of practice in India is yoga, which fundamentally refers to the connection between the individual and Brahman. This concept has almost never existed in traditional Chinese practices, and Chinese people are generally reluctant to accept such an idea.

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