

USEFULNESS COMES FROM WHAT IS NOT 6. Space, Time, Motion, Being

1. This is verse #11 from the Tao Te Ching, the ancient Chinese Taoist text,

Thirty spokes will converge
In the hub of a wheel;
But the use of the cart
Will depend on the part
Of the hub that is void.

With a wall all around
A clay bowl is molded;
But the use of the bowl
Will depend on the part
Of the bowl that is void.

Cut out windows and doors
In the house as you build;
But the use of the house
Will depend on the space
In the walls that is void.

So advantage is had
from whatever is there;
But usefulness rises
From whatever is not.

Another translation expresses the meaning of those last four lines very succinctly:

We work with being,
But non-being is what we use.

2. What I particularly like about this poem is the way it brings that cold, impersonal non affecting concept emptiness or void home to us as beings struggling to realize the possibilities of our lives under very affecting conditions.

The Buddhist use of the word emptiness is much richer in meaning than this poem would suggest, but we can begin to explore its profound ramifications from this practical approach to it.