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載營魄抱一能無離乎	Can we embody our spirit as one without division
專氣致柔 能嬰兒乎	Can we concentrate on breathing gently like a newborn
滌除玄覽 能無疵乎	Can we cleanse ourselves to be without minute flaws
愛民治國 能無知乎	Can we care for people and manage a state without knowledge
天門開闔 能無雌乎	Can we open and shut the heavenly gates without receptivity
明白四達 能無為乎	Can we comprehend things in four directions without action

Pinyin Transliteration

zǎi-yíng-pò-bào-yī-néng-wú-lí-hū
 zhuān-qì-zhì-róu néng-yīng-ér-hū
 dí-chú-xuán-lǎn néng-wú-cī-hū
 ài-mín-zhì-guó néng-wú-zhī-hū
 tiān-mén-kāi-hé néng-wú-cí-hū
 míng-bai-sì-dá néng-wú-wèi-hū

Rhyming Pattern in pre-206BCE Phonetic Rhyme Groups

ㄗ 之 - ㄓ 耕 - *ak* 鐸 - *uk* 幽 - *it* 質 - ㄓ 蒸 - *a* 魚 - *ai* 歌 - *a* 魚
 ㄓ 文 - ㄓ 物 - *it* 質 - *auk* 藥 ㄓ 蒸 - ㄓ 耕 - *e* 支 - *a* 魚
uk 幽 - *a* 魚 - *in* 真 - *am* 談 ㄓ 蒸 - *a* 魚 - *e* 支 - *a* 魚
 ㄓ 物 - *in* 真 - ㄗ 之 - ㄓ 職 ㄓ 蒸 - *a* 魚 - *e* 支 - *a* 魚
in 真 - *ai* 歌 - ㄓ 微 - *ap* 盍 ㄓ 蒸 - *a* 魚 - *e* 支 - *a* 魚
an 陽 - *ak* 鐸 - *it* 質 - *at* 月 ㄓ 蒸 - *a* 魚 - *ai* 歌 - *a* 魚

Prosody

This verse is unusual in that it has only a single stanza of mostly octosyllabic lines with the same foot-rhyme – *ɣsa* 乎, a questioning particle, throughout. The only exception is the nonasyllabic introductory line with the theme of the verse, “one,” taking the central place. “One” is further highlighted by the void between the two quadrisyllabic halves of the following five lines.

The second half of the first line, *nɿə-ma-ŋe-ɣsa* 能無離乎, rhymes exactly with that of the last, *nɿə-ma-raj-ɣsa* 能無為乎. Likewise the latter halves of the intervening lines also rhyme: *nɿə-ʔeŋ-ŋe-ɣsa* 能嬰兒乎, *nɿə-ma-tsheh-ɣsa* 能無疵乎, *nɿə-ma-tre-ɣsa* 能無知乎, *nɿə-ma-tshe-ɣsa* 能無雌乎.

Annotation

“One” in the first line refers to wholeness, unifying body and spirit. It may not be an accident that Laozi places it in the middle to connote balance, the absence of duality. Its prominence is pronounced by its central placement in the opening line of a stanza that seems to be a list of guidelines for inner cultivation.

The second line alludes to meditation, where we focus on effortless breath to unify body and mind. However, when the character 氣 is taken to mean “pneuma,” or “vital energy,” the line could also be read as “Concentrate on the supple pneuma like a newborn.” The third line reminds cultivators of Dao to be scrupulous in their daily activities, but the fourth line speaks exclusively to rulers about the virtue of “inaction,” Laozi’s basis for action. He urges them to exercise the lightest touch. The second stanza speaks more about “inaction.” “Cosmic gate” 天門 in the fifth line connotes our orifices, access to the “cosmic Dao”, which requires a receptive and quiescent femininity 雌. The sixth line refers to taming our small intelligence, cleverness, passion, and desire, in order to return to a vacuous mind to receive the great cosmic Dao.

The second stanza states the three basic principles for the six actions listed above: Never take ownership of a creation; never insist or rely on one’s position; never dominate those one nurtures. The doers of “obscure virtue” leave no trace of their virtuous deeds.