

Taoism, Fatherhood and Nonviolence

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The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The Name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

Tao Te Ching, (Ch. 1)

The above opening lines from the Tao Te Ching state the obvious that is too often forgotten; that which gave rise to the universe is ineffable. Existing before language, it is beyond name. Dwelling in the infinite, it is boundless and indefinable. Yet the entire universe in all its wondrous order and diversity can from “That,” and it is that transcendent oneness to which all things ultimately return and are reconciled.

Since becoming involved in peace education several years ago, I have developed an interest in Taoism and its application to conflict resolution. Taoism is a philosophy associated with the Buddhist religious tradition. The Chinese word Tao (pronounced "Dow") literally means "Way." The primary scripture of Taoism is the Tao Te Ching, an eloquent text ascribed to the rather obscure Chinese Philosopher Lao Tzu who lived in the sixth century BCE. Lao Tzu resided in the province of Honan and was curator of the imperial archives at Loyang. Legend has it that he was asked to write down his teaching of the eternal Tao before departing to spend his last days in the desert (Feng and English, 1997).

While Taoism is commonly considered a branch of Buddhism, the scripture of Taoism does not refer in any of its chapters to Buddha's “Four Noble Truths” or to his “Eight Fold Path.” And rather than emphasizing moral law and erudite learning as you find in Confucianism, Taoism sees academic knowledge as a potential distraction to spiritual growth, choosing to focus almost entirely on spiritual enlightenment, the path to which, according to Lao-Tzu, involves cultivating the intuitive, feminine side of human nature. For compared to other scriptures, the Tao-Te-Ching is unique in its frequent use of maternal and

feminine images. As it says in the Tao-Te-Ching, chapter six: "The valley spirit never dies. It is woman, primal Mother." In this context, "valley" expresses the quality of fertility, but also of that which is lowly and humble. Chapter 22 makes use of what in western culture are generally considered to be feminine characteristics: "Yield to overcome; Bend and be straight; Empty and be full," advice that runs counter to the assertive, stereotypical masculine approach to problem solving and the resolution of conflict. Moreover, in Chapters 25 and 52, it is not God the Father who brings forth Creation. Rather, it is the mysterious feminine power of the universe that gives rise to multiplicity as symbolized by the phrase "ten thousand things."

Something mysteriously formed,
 Born before heaven and earth,
 In the silence and the void,
 Standing alone and unchanging,
 Ever present and in motion.
 Perhaps it is the mother of ten thousand things.
 I do not know its name.
 Call it Tao.
 For lack of a better word, I call it great. (Ch 25)

The beginning of the universe
 Is the mother of all things. (Ch. 52)

Many of the principles expressed in Taoism are cross-cultural, as demonstrated by several passages in Christian scripture that are noticeably Taoist in the sense that they are paradoxical and "invert" the worldly value system we so readily accept. Take for example the words of Jesus when he says that, in the kingdom of God, "Many who are last will be first, and the first, last" (Matt. 19: 30, RSV). Indeed, this is what is depicted as happening in the Christian nativity story. For in the Gospel of Luke, who are the ones chosen to receive the announcement of Christ's birth? Not the kings or powerful military leaders; not the legal experts or philosophers of the day. No, those privileged to hear the birth announcement were the shepherds who were among the lowest in the social order of the day. Jesus again spoke like a Taoist when he told his disciples to become like a child again (Mark 10: 15, RSV), and also when he said: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11, RSV).

In addition, the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas includes the following parable, where Jesus likens the kingdom of Heaven to a woman whose grain spills by accident from a vessel as a result of a broken handle, leaving her to discover emptiness.

The Kingdom of the [Father] is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking along [a] distant road, the handle of the jar broke and the meal spilled behind her [along] the road. She did not know it; she noticed no accident. When she reached her house, she put the jar down and discovered that it was empty. (Text adapted by Elaine Pagels and Marvin Meyer)

From a Taoist perspective, the handle in this parable is a symbol for attachment, for it is the handle to which one latches hold. The breaking of the handle represents non-attachment, which is the path to discovering material emptiness, and ironically, spiritual fullness -- one's spiritual nature, which is non-physical, non-corporal, and therefore "empty" in relation to the material world. That the figure in this parable is a woman and that her discovery of the lost grain occurs by accident speaks to the unplanned, spontaneous way the kingdom of heaven is revealed, and it takes a feminine perspective to recognize the accident as profoundly significant, as a purely intellectual or practical assessment of the event would see it as little more than a careless mistake. ¹

Several years ago I was a member of a Sunday school class at a mainstream protestant Church. On Mother's day the class leader decided to have each person in the class share personal reflections about their Mother. This discussion turned out to be highly meaningful and enjoyable.

A month later the same class leader decided to engage in a similar discussion about fathers. To everyone's surprise there was noticeable hesitation as we waited for one of us to begin the sharing of memories. After considerable silence one person said he never knew his father very well because he was frequently away on business. Another commented on the psychological distance between him and his father. I mentioned a story my Dad once told me, how as a young man in Rochester, New York he ran after a runaway baby carriage, the brakes of which had failed causing it to accelerate down a steep hill toward a set of railroad tracks. But his reward for saving the baby's life was to be accused by the infant's mother of trying to kidnap her child.

¹ Maternal images and teachings that emphasize lowliness, humility and emptiness are present in both Christianity and Taoism, but these similarities often go unrecognized.

My father was the principal of the high school I attended. He would awaken me early enough every morning so I wouldn't cause him to be late, as he had to arrive at school a half an hour earlier than the students. I also recalled how my father did not adjust well to retirement and subsequently suffered from depression. Like many fathers of his generation, his expression of love was reserved and offered to reinforce successful effort, expressed with a firm handshake rather than a hug. In the end, we all realized how difficult it was to reflect on the relationship each of us had with his or her father in contrast to the experience we had on Mother's Day a month earlier. Later that day I asked myself, why was the pain of separation and relational distance so apparent when each of us spoke of our respective fathers, while such apprehension had been virtually absent during our discussion on Mother's Day?

Psychologists give rather complex explanations for tensions that often exist between children and their father. Sigmund Freud blamed competitive hostilities between father and son on the Oedipus complex. Others suggest that a person feels innately closer to one's mother because it is the mother who carries the child in her womb. There are also those who maintain the relational distance towards fathers is due to our patriarchal culture, which traditionally has seen the father as breadwinner and disciplinarian and the mother as nurturing homemaker -- these stereotypical roles being reinforced by deeply ingrained religious beliefs.

Regardless of the explanation you prefer, it is a common experience that the child-father relationship is often more distant and reserved than the relationship between child and mother. This distance may result in conflict between father and child that follows a person into adulthood. In my case it was disagreements over long-term goals, managing money, planning for the future and advancing my career. As I shall now explain, applying the maternal principles expressed in Taoist philosophy can help heal the conflicts that emerge from the relational distance that often characterizes the bond between father and child.

Yin and Yang

The primary symbol of Taoism and Chinese philosophy in general is known as the yin - yang (see figure 1). This symbol depicts the complimentary flow of opposites co-existing in a condition of mutual give-and-take when interacting in the universe. People in



Figure 1

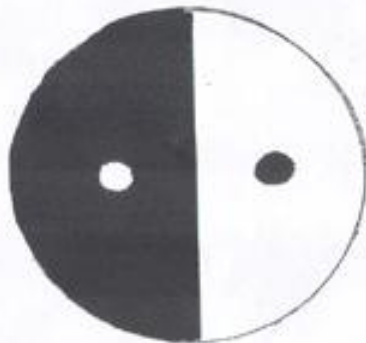


Figure 2



Figure 3

Western cultures frequently ascribe Good and Evil to the white and black sides of this image, but such values are not part of the Taoist interpretation. Rather, the “yin” or black side represents mystery, intuition, and the female principle, while the “yang” or white portion symbolizes clarity, intellect and the stereotypical masculine side of life. The large dots of opposing color in each side of the symbol reveal that the complimentary opposites are not separable but are forever interdependent. This prevents the Taoist duality from being interpreted and applied simplistically.

When lecturing on Peace Education I like to re-draw this symbol to represent different types of interactions between people. Figure 2 represents an uncompromising condition where interacting parties or individuals have “dug in their heels” and are unwilling to bend from their respective positions. In politics, when this happens in government, we call this “gridlock.” Figure 3 depicts opposing sides or forces in a state of violence. This, of course, includes physical violence, but also psychological violence as exhibited in acts of intimidation, harassment, discrimination, bullying and verbal abuse.

In our patriarchal culture men are expected, and perhaps conditioned, to behave more like is being depicted in figure 2; that is, strong, assertive, somewhat intimidating, and unyielding. A man who empathizes with his adversaries and who exhibits characteristics of flexibility and a willingness to compromise, as represented in figure 1, is often seen as weak and lacking in leadership ability. This assertive expectation of masculinity contributes significantly to the relational distance experienced between a father and his children. Furthermore, given that assertiveness and intimidation can easily lead to violent confrontation, it may also partially explain why far more men are incarcerated for violent crime than are women.

Taoist teachings, like Zen Buddhist philosophy and the life and teachings of Jesus, are laden with paradoxes.² One of the most surprising paradoxes is that Taoism, with its emphasis on harmony, humility, yielding to overcome, and seeking to cultivate the feminine side of human nature, is the philosophy out of which the oriental systems of martial arts were

² Zen Buddhism is well-known for its puzzling “Koans,” which often take the form of paradoxical riddles meant to disengage the disciple’s intellect. Many of Jesus’ sayings are also “koan-like,” the most striking being the verse in the 9th chapter of the Gospel of John where Jesus says: “... I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see might be made blind” (John 9:39).

born. Many are those who have asked how a martial component could co-exist with Taoism. There are three explanations that can be given for this paradox.

First, the social/political system in China for many centuries was highly feudal, with territorial warlords competing for land and power. Self-defense was therefore seen as a necessity, especially for monastic communities who in the eyes of the provincial authorities suspiciously kept to themselves behind temple walls. The martial techniques applied, however, were not based on offensive or on aggressive tactics, but rather on learning to take the hostile energy being encountered and turning it against one's opponent. The result is an approach to self-defense, which applies the paradoxical teachings found in Taoism. One literally learns the value of "yielding" to overcome an aggressor, as taught in the following verses in the Tao Te Ching:

Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water,
Yet for attacking the solid and strong, nothing is better;
It has no equal.
The weak can overcome the strong;
The supple can overcome the stiff. (Ch 78)

The softest thing in the universe
Overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.
That without substance can enter where there is no room. (Ch. 43)

A leaf, when young is supple and soft, in death it is brittle and breaks.
A tree, when young bends with the wind, when it is old, it is hard and stiff.
Therefore hard and stiff is the disciple of death,
Bending and yielding is the disciple of life. (Ch.76).

There is a saying among soldiers:
I dare not make the first move but would rather play the guest;
I dare not advance an inch but would rather withdraw a foot.
This is called marching without appearing to move,
Rolling up your sleeves without showing your arm,
Capturing the enemy without attacking,
Being armed without weapons. (Ch. 79)

Secondly, in Taoism violence is primarily defined by one's inner mental and emotional state rather than by outer behavior. As one Taoist saying expresses it: "For the heart that is one with nature, though the body contend, there is no violence. But for the heart that is not one with nature, though the body be at rest, there is always violence." Violence therefore, like harmony, is understood in Taoist philosophy more as an internal psychological

condition. To shift into a mode of self-defense does not constitute violence if one's heart is free from anger.

In the rare instances where Lao Tzu does condone combat, he speaks of it with great reservation.

Good weapons are instruments of fear; all creatures hate them.
Therefore followers of Tao never use them.
The wise man prefers the left.
The man of war prefers the right.

Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not a wise man's tools.
He uses them only when he has no choice.
Peace and quiet are dear to his heart,
And victory no cause for rejoicing.
If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing;
If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfill yourself... (Ch. 31)

Furthermore, in contrast to the patriotic enthusiasm that is often exhibited by the public when soldiers are sent off to war, the Tao Te Ching likens victory in war to a funeral.

When many people are being killed,
They should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow.
That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral. (Ch. 31)

Third, the martial training that one received in Taoist temples was seen as a metaphor for removing conflict from within oneself and waging an inner struggle to resist and overcome anger, revenge, impatience, passion, envy, and hatred.

A good soldier is not violent.
A good fighter is not angry.
A good winner is not vengeful,
A good employer is humble. (Ch. 68)

A brave and passionate man will kill or be killed.
A brave and calm man will always preserve life. (Ch. 73)

Thus from the Taoist point of view, when dealing with conflict the true enemy is not outside oneself. Rather it is the demons of fear, anger and hatred one harbors within.

To defeat this inner enemy a person must awaken what in Chinese philosophy is called "Chi." Chi refers to a person's inner strength, a force that is distinctly different from one's outer physical strength. The outer physical strength fades with age, but the Chi can actually become stronger as one matures, enabling a person to endure the trials of life and acquire great social influence, which can last well beyond death. The word chi, like the

words “pneuma” in Greek and “ruach” in Hebrew, refer to both spirit and breath. These words represent the life energy, the influence of which is in direct proportion to one’s virtue. It is virtue that strengthens Chi and gives rise to foresight, a determined will, a focused energy and clarity of mind. This clarity is achieved to the degree one is able to set aside anger, fear, vengeance and selfish desire. In doing so, a person remains free from negative aggressive energy and thus can perceive clearly the path to balance and reconciliation. Again to quote the Tao-Te-Ching:

In caring for others and serving heaven,
There is nothing like using restraint.
Restraint begins with giving up one’s own ideas.
This depends on virtue gathered in the past.
If there is a good store of virtue, then nothing is impossible. Ch. 59

And through the foresight provided by the development of chi, one can cultivate the awareness needed to avoid the dangers that may potentially lie ahead.

Peace is easily maintained;
Trouble is easily overcome before it starts...
Deal with it before it happens.
Set things in order before there is confusion. Ch. 64

Father-son reconciliation

In the mid 1990’s I had the opportunity to meet and talk at some length over lunch and dinner with American Poet Robert Bly. For several years Bly toured the US and held highly successful men's conferences. One purpose of these conferences was to help men express their innate aggressive energy in constructive ways and to overcome fear of their more sensitive, feminine side. According to Bly, both men and women have had to deal with shame, and they are afraid of being shamed. Women are much better at expressing their feelings, while men are reluctant to be open and thereby tend to repress their shame. Bly also believes a man has to be socialized into being a nurturing father. For reasons rooted in evolution and survival, such behavior, he points out, is not common among primates. It is much easier to train a man to be a warrior than to socialize him into being a nurturing father.³

Bly further asserts that men are afraid of women and of the “feminine male.” Men must learn to become sensitive and expressive, to re-channel and vent their anger and

³ See *Interview with Robert Bly*, www.pbs.org/kued/nosafeplace/interv/bly.html

aggression but in ways that do not cause harm. He is also an advocate of mentoring; men of maturity must help guide young boys into adulthood. Today, such mentors for young people are often provided through the arts and through participation in athletics. The ancient Taoist system of education, with its philosophical emphasis on the maternal nature over the paternal, and integrated with the martial arts, may have survived through the centuries because it met the needs of male development. The Taoist masters served as mentors who could guide the instruction of students in the ways of virtue, philosophy, self-confidence, restraint, and artistic expression.

Another purpose of Robert Bly's men's conferences was to facilitate reconciliation so as to close the relational distance between father and son. This relational distance is rooted not only in the father's patriarchal role as disciplinarian, but also in the perception that, in contrast to a mother's abiding love, a father's love is expressed conditionally based on successful achievement. In an effort to begin the process of reconciliation, a father attending one of Bly's men's conferences could bring his son at no cost. A son could then be present to hear his father express how significant and meaningful the experience of fatherhood has been in his life. Reconciliation between father and son is important both for psychological well-being and to bring closure and completeness to the father-son relationship.

My Dad and I were fortunate to have reconciled our differences during his later years in life. I was present to see his body and outer strength fade, the acceptance of which was difficult for my once athletic father. Our reconciliation occurred in life, particularly during his struggle with bone cancer, but the reconciliation process was ultimately fulfilled in death, as after his passing, I could at last feel completely united with him. It was as if his physical body was the obstacle, his outer strength getting in the way of our full embrace. Now that his body was gone, there was no barrier left between us.

As my mother, brother and I planned his funeral, I silently asked to know if my Dad was indeed at peace. I initially resolved that this question could never be answered, until, on my return flight home, I gazed out the window of the plane and to my astonishment, saw on the clouds below a rare event. It was a rainbow in the form of a complete and perfect circle.

A month later, my father appeared to me in a dream, and I knew then that his "chi," his inner strength did not die. My Dad had awakened me at last, only this time, it wasn't to go to school.

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical references are from the Revised Standard Version and checked against the Alfred Marshall Interlinear Greek-English New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975).

Martial images as metaphors for inner struggle are also found in Christian writings attributed to the Apostle Paul, as illustrated in the following quote from his letter to the Ephesians:

Stand, therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. (Ephesians 6:14-17)

According to the Tao-Te-Ching, one is to “Keep the strength of a man, but keep a woman’s care,” for in dealing with conflict, the enemy is not outside yourself, but within you. One must therefore learn to balance and live in harmony with the “Yin” and the “Yang.”

I would now like to play 5 video excerpts that dramatized a few of the simple, eloquent, and profound teachings of Taoism.