

Water Flows Downhill: The Tradition of Taoism

Introduction

Once there was a stonemason carving away at a block of stone, sweating away in the sun. As his day went on, he became hotter and hotter and began to lose his temper as he swung his hammer against the chisel. He looked up impatiently at the sun and thought, *if only I could be the sun instead of sweating it out down here.*

Before he could complete the thought, however, something miraculous happened and he did indeed become the sun, shining up on high in the blue sky. It felt great for a little while until some clouds came along and obscured his view of the earth below. *Clouds have it all, he thought, they can take away the power of the sun.*

Before he knew it, he became a cloud that separated the sun from the earth and he felt the moisture of the water droplets and a delightful floating feeling. But then came a strong wind and it blew him clear across the sky and there was nothing he could do about it. *Being a cloud isn't all it's cracked up to be, he thought, if only I could be the wind.*

Naturally, he then became the wind, blowing clouds across the sky, creating ripples on lakes and bending tree branches backwards with his gusting power. But then he came upon a large stone block that he couldn't even make tremble, no matter how hard he blew. *This rock is superior to me in strength, he realized and at once became the stone block.*

He felt the wind pushing against him in vain and felt content that no one could push him around anymore. Yet even as he enjoyed the

feeling of strength and stability that came with being a stone block, he had a rude awakening as the hammer of a stonemason came thumping down on him. He lost a fragment of stone and thought, *if only I could be that stonemason, he's got all the power...*

One.

Taoist tradition traces its roots back to the Yellow Emperor, who may or may not have existed sometime around 2400 BCE.

In point of fact, that genealogy makes Taoism much YOUNGER than it probably actually is. The Yellow Emperor, Huang Ti, is credited with inventing—besides Taoism—a compass, a calendar, Chinese music, a lexicon of all existing gods and demons, Chinese medicine, martial arts, and China itself. He is also considered the ancestor of all Han Chinese. Of course he DID live to be a hundred years old and then discovered the secret of immortality!

In other words, he probably IS a myth. Yet, fact is, all those things do exist and did come from the place we nowadays call China.

Though the central Taoist text, the Tao Te Ching, dates from roughly the time of Confucius (551-470 BCE), the sources of Taoism are prehistoric shamanism. Part of the idea of balance so compelling and so central to Taoism lies in the ancient belief that heaven, earth, nature, and humankind share sympathetic magic—that all things are basically the same and are influence by each other. The belief teaches a balance from the individual person to the family to the society to the earth and to the gods.

The kings of ancient China appear to have had little to do besides being very careful in their personal actions—including diet and clothing—because their actions so intimately affected the balance of the earth (Armstrong 73).

It is, at least on the surface, an odd fact that sympathetic magic, one of the oldest of human ideas, reflects a rational way of being in the world.

It just goes to show that what goes around comes around in more ways than one. Oddly—in matters of the spirit—ancient wisdom is sometimes the best.

Allow me to throw in a caveat here: It's always dangerous when we explore ideas from other cultures. There are two ditches we can fall into—on one side of the road is the ditch of merely dismissing the ideas of other cultures as exotic. The ditch on the other side of the road is embracing the ideas merely because they ARE exotic. Both forget the essence: that all ideas are human. And it's this fact that makes looking at world religions valuable.

Religions reflect the cultural assumptions from which they spring. The ancient Chinese kingdoms from which Taoism arose strove for peace and tranquility, proper action, and proper attention to ceremony. People are people, of course, and their actions did not always live up to the ideal. Yet the ideal of balance got a name, Dao, or The Way.

So the essence of Taoist thinking is order. Order in oneself; order in the family, order in the society, and order in the universe.

The thing that interests me most about Taoism is that as a philosophy, it looks to DISCOVER order and to find ways to fit into that order. In this it is the opposite of the predominant Western idea of IMPOSING order. (Again, we don't want to fall into ditches at the side of the road, but there appears to be a basic difference here.)

Taoism becomes, then, one of the oldest recorded versions of what we nowadays term "earth-centered" traditions.

To quote chapter 52 of the Tao Teh Ching,

Every being in the universe
is an expression of the Tao. (The Way)
It springs into existence,
unconscious, perfect, free,
takes on a physical body,
lets circumstances complete it.
That is why every being
spontaneously honors the Tao.

The Tao gives birth to all beings,
nourishes them, maintains them,

cares for them, comforts them, protects them,
takes them back to itself,
creating without possessing,
acting without expecting,
guiding without interfering.
That is why love of the Tao
is in the very nature of things.

(Steven Bachelor translation)

(<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/taote-v3.html#51>)

Two.

Fu Xi is the Noah figure in Chinese mythology, emerging after a flood to re-people the earth. Purportedly, he discovered calligraphy by studying the marks on a turtle's back. Or perhaps a dragon's back. The stories vary. He is often depicted as having the lower body of a snake.

If a human being did exist who gave rise to the legends, he existed sometime around 3300 BCE, something along the lines of nine hundred years before the Yellow Emperor.

Fu Xi's great interest was the nature and meaning of change. Taoists formulated the idea that the universe is a balance of yin and yang, and this gave rise the famous symbol of Taoism.

Tradition tells us that Fu Xi created the oldest of Taoist texts, I Ching, the Book of Changes.

Now, I have to admit that I'm a great lover of the I Ching. It is often considered in the category of the Tarot or runes, as a foreteller of the future. But this is a mistake. (It's also a mistake in the case of the Tarot and runes, but that's another sermon. Or two.)

In writing this, I consulted the I Ching—which is generally done by throwing three coins—and and got hexagram number 38, “opposition” or “estrangement.”

Now, within that, I read such wisdom as, “If your horse runs away, do not chase it. It will return to you.” And “the champion bites his way through the wrappings; if one goes to him, how could that be a mistake?” And “as one travels, rain falls; then good fortune comes.”

The commentary, more ancient wisdom, reads, “from self-reflection comes direction; mirroring leads to acceptance.”

Now, I don’t have the foggiest notion what the Chinese text really says, but I’m fascinated by the fact that “opposition” and “estrangement” are quite different concepts yet make perfect sense when put together: if we look at opposition as estrangement, we have created a very different way of seeing oppositional forces.

And this is one of the central points of the I Ching. All situations lead to their opposites and then back again. All is change. Our role is to be aware of the nature of change and the opportunities for good and bad which this eternal change offers. If we look below the surfaces, we will see quite a different world.

As an example, allow me to tell you a Taoist story about a horse. And though it sounds a bit sexist, ask a horse person if you don’t understand:

Once there was a great king who decided to get his daughter the best horse in the kingdom as a gift. The king called his chief advisor for advice, and the advisor replied, “I know just the person to find such a horse. I’ll contact him.”

Soon the advisor came to the king and said, “The horse expert I told you about found the greatest horse in the kingdom, a black stallion.”

The king was delighted. He immediately sent word to purchase the horse. And he told everybody about the marvelous black stallion that he was going to give to his daughter.

When the horse arrived, however, it was a gray mare.

The king was outraged and sent for his chief advisor. When the advisor arrived, the king said: “Look at this horse! It’s nothing like you promised. I am going to have you executed. Any last words?”

The chief advisor took one look at the horse and began laughing. When finally he could control his laughter, he said, “Ah, the horse expert has gone beyond even his thinking when I knew him. Now he sees to the essence of things without seeing their outer appearance.”

So the king gave his advisor a temporary reprieve and gave the horse to his daughter.

And it turned out to indeed be the greatest horse in the land, its appearance that of a gray mare, its essence that of a black stallion.

<http://www.tomthumb.org/horses.shtml>

Three.

One of the oddities of Taoism is that its influence is so pervasive that it has almost disappeared itself. Confucianism is based in Taoist thought, even though Confucians would later persecute Taoists. When Buddhism came to China, the two beliefs melded to form Chen Buddhism, or what we call Zen. Also, Taoism has had a few very rough opponents besides the Confucians, including Kublai Kahn and the Communist Party, both of which attempted to eradicate Taoism. Besides those problems, Taoism is itself split between what is called “religious” Taoism and “philosophical” Taoism.

On the philosophical side is one of the greatest texts in human spirituality, the Tao Te Ching, or “Book of The Way and Its Power.” The text was purportedly written by Lao Tzu, which translates as “old man” or “old master.” It is probably a collection of much older wisdom sayings. (I read a bit from it earlier.)

The Tao Te Ching teaches inner transformation through alignment with the universe—that is the Tao, or The Way.

Water runs downhill. Wood has a grain. A pot is useful because it is a physical object that creates emptiness.

Human action that is aligned with the Tao is called Te. And the highest form of human action is wu-wei (“no action” out of harmony with nature’s laws), “stillness.” This is contrasted with lu-wei, which is the usual human busyness and inattention to the flow of the universe that produces little result.

We could argue that Lao Tzu was a noble failure. He was, after all, writing the Tao Te Ching to convince rulers to act in deeply introspective ways. History has shown that far more rulers follow the teaching of Machiavelli than Lao Tzu. Yet, the Tao Te Ching has become one of the greatest of spiritual writings because it has been taken. . . metaphorically: we are all, after all, rulers of the kingdom of our selves.

In chapter 30 the Tao Te Ching we learn:

He who knows how to guide a ruler in the path of Tao

Does not try to override the world by force of arms.

It is the nature of the military weapon to turn against it wielder.

Wherever armies are stationed, thorny bushes grow.

After a great war, bad years invariable follow.

What you want is to protect efficiently your own state,

But not to aim at self-aggrandizement.

After you have attained your purpose,

You must not parade your success,

You must not boast of your ability,

You must not feel proud.

(Translation by John C.H. Wu)

Four.

Religious Taoism is rather a different kettle of fish. The practices of religious Taoism are what have made rulers nervous, especially exercises and meditative practices designed to regulate “ch’i,” or “qi,” the eternal energy of the universe.

Nowadays any bookstore sells books and CDs on Chi Gong and Tai Chi Chuan. As these practices have moved into popular culture, they have been watered down, and the religious aspect of them has been downplayed. So: buyer beware. It’s best to study with a teacher.

As a little demonstration of ch’i, if you’re so inclined, hold out your hands, and turn the palms to face each other. Put them as close together as you can without them touching. Now: DON’T use your imagination. Really see if you feel anything. Any heat. Notice. Then, begin very slowly to separate your hands. Notice how far you can get them and still feel warmth. Electricity.

This is what Taoists call ch’i. this is the energy of the universe. And it can be harnessed for good. Or ignored for ill.

Feng-shui, another Taoist practice that has become a little too popular and a little too divorced from its actual religious practice, is a method of aligning our living arrangements with the natural flow of ch’i.

Acupuncture is the practice of opening channels of ch’i that have become blocked and therefore made us sick.

What we in the US call Chinese medicine is the Taoist practice of aligning ch’i flow through the use of herbal medicine and healthy foods.

The thing about all these Taoist practices is that they don’t require BELIEF or faith for them to work. And therefore they get repackaged and removed from their roots. It’s great that acupuncture works to relieve pain, even if the patient doesn’t know a thing about Taoism. And it’s great that Feng-shui makes your

home look well-decorated, even if you don't know a thing about the philosophy behind Feng-shui. But I would argue that we do ourselves a disservice not knowing the roots of these practices.

Yes, they work. But they are part of a much larger and more profound human experiment in consciousness. I think we owe it to ourselves to know the profundity of this tradition.

Conclusion

Allow me to conclude with another classic Taoist tale:

Once there was a man out for a walk in the afternoon. With a start, he noticed that a shadow was walking by his side.

He walked faster. The shadow walked faster.

He began to run. The shadow began to run, too, just as fast as he.

Then the man noticed a terrible noise: there was the din of shoes on the pavement, and the faster he ran, the louder the noise became. The noise slowly drove him mad.

The man ran and ran and still the shadow was there and the terrible noise got worse and worse.

Finally, exhausted, he fell and died.

Now here's the question: What would have happened had the man, instead of running, sat down under the shade of a tree?

Sources

Deng Ming-Dao, The Living I Ching: Using Ancient Chinese Wisdom to Shape Your Life

Tao Teh Ching translation:

<http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/texts/taote-v3.html#51>

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Taoist tales: <http://www.taoism.net/sanctuary/gateways/pureland.htm>