

Religious Awareness in Laozi

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The Search for Life

To strive for Ultimate Emptiness,
To hold on to Profound Tranquillity,
I contemplate the vitality
of all creatures in the universe coming
and returning to their Origin.
This returning to their Origin is called Tranquillity,
which is entering into one's True Self.
To enter into one's True Self is Constancy.
And to know Constancy is Enlightenment.
(Laozi, Chapter 16)

For the Chinese philosopher Laozi, *Tao* denotes the ultimate reality towards which all things under heaven gravitate. All life and being return to *Tao*, by which they have been formed and in which they find their final resting place. Laozi's idea of a "returning to their Origin" and "entering into one's True Self" is a kind of integrity of life related to Ultimate Concern. In this integrity of life one experiences that life from the beginning to the end transcends itself, which is to go beyond one's own *tao*. Thus searching for and committing oneself to "the vitality of *Tao*" enables a person, of necessity, to transcend the self and be liberated from its restrictions and limitations. This process requires the renunciation of all that would hamper union with *Tao*. The admonition to "return to their Origin"...and "enter into one's true self" gives evidence, albeit in symbolic language, of the presence of a religious awareness in Laozi.



***Tao*: Symbolic Religious Awareness of Laozi**

Paul Tillich writes in his *Dynamics of Faith*: "Man's most

fundamental concerns must be expressed in symbolism, for only through symbolic language can he express these concerns in their fullness." Laozi's "fundamental concern" is the sublime *Tao*, the Origin of all life and thought. This *Tao* which can neither be charted nor named--but if a name must be given, let *Tao* suffice-- is the "signification" of Laozi's search, which also becomes his life commitment. And this commitment to move towards what is transcendent in life is indicative of his faith, for "once a person makes of a thing a matter of unconditional concern, he has already invested it with 'divinity'". Laozi's concept of *Tao* actually is related to Ultimate Concern and the name *Tao*, to a certain extent, assumes a sacred character. Furthermore, the reality of *Tao* is much deeper and larger than the very name given it. The reality of *Tao* is the Origin of all creatures in the universe and all creatures are destined to return to their Origin which is *Tao*. In this sense *Tao* reveals a kind of transcendental or religious dimension of its own being. Laozi uses symbolic language to express his experience of this transcendental dimension of *Tao* in the realm of human concern. His symbolic language is capable of conveying a message which can stimulate people to reflect on the purpose of life, and consequently, imparts hope.

In Chapter 62 of the *Tao Te Ching* we find the following:

Tao embraces all creation,
The good man's treasure,
The bad man's refuge.

Here *Tao* is seen as the principle for all virtuous activity, the object and purpose for cultivation of the spirit. The ultimate aim of human life is to be in union with *Tao*; namely, *Te Tao* (得道). If one is in union with *Tao*, it means one returns to one's own Origin and enters into one's True Self. One reaches a transcendental horizon of *Wu Wei* (無爲), the state of actionless action and effortless effort.

Laozi's Interpretation of Tao

Laozi brings a prophet's awareness to his explanation of *Tao*. His message was meant to confront people and wake them up, to challenge them to break through the restrictions imposed by conventional patterns of conceptual thinking, and to open up a new path, a way back to a more simple and authentic way of

life. *Tao* is indeed the Source of all that exists, having brought all things into being, but *Tao* is also elusive and evasive; it has neither shape nor form. One can only come to the realization of its hidden presence, an inner awareness that *Tao* exists.

Something there is, whose veiled creation was
Before the earth or sky began to be;
So silent, so aloof and so alone,
It changes not, nor fails, but touches all:
Conceive it as the mother of the world.

I do not know its name;
A name for it is *Tao*... (Chapter 25)

Tao itself is like something
Seen in a dream, elusive, evading one.
In it are images, elusive, evading one.
In it are things like shadows in twilight,
In it are essences, subtle but real,
Embedded in truth. (Chapter 21)

They call it elusive, and say
That one looks
But it never appears.
They say that indeed it is rare
Since one listens,
But never a sound.
Subtle, they call it, and say
But never gets hold.
These three complaints amount
To only one, which is
Beyond all resolution.

At rising it does not illumine;
At settling, no darkness ensues;
It stretches far back
To that nameless estate
Which existed before the creation.
Describe it as form yet unformed;
As shape that is still without shape;
Or say it is vagueness confused:
One meets it and it has no front;
One follows it and there is no rear. (Chapter 14)

Tao is a void, used but never filled:
An abyss it is, like an ancestor from which all
things come
... A deep pool it is, never to run dry!
Whose offspring it may be I do not know:
It is like a preface to the Heavenly King. (Chapter 4)

While *Tao* may be without form or shape, still it contains and holds within itself everything that is, and is intrinsically related to all existing things. It is the Origin of all being, drawing all things to itself, attracting them to imitate and to experience *Tao* in their day to day life and, consequently, to be in union with *Tao*. To be in union with *Tao* leads all creatures to simplicity which is one of the principal characteristics of *Tao*. Laozi stresses that the meaning of human life is the search for *Tao* through the process of contemplating "the return of all beings to their Origin" and to follow *Tao* and not to contradict *Te* which is the manifestation of *Tao* in the universe. (Chapter 51)

How does the metaphysical concept of *Tao* exert a practical force in the life of human beings? Laozi speaks of *Te* as the manifestation of *Tao* in the concrete world. *Te* is not identical with *Tao* but is related to it as multiplicity flowing from a unity; or to use other words, *Te* is the function of *Tao* or that which makes "*Tao* operative" in the world. (Chapter 40)

Te*: The Function of *Tao

The Chinese character chosen to signify *Te* helps us to clarify this relationship of *Te* as the operating principle of *Tao*. In classical Chinese the character for *Te* (德 : virtue, power, moral force) is interlinked with another character *Te* (得) which has the same sound but means to "get or obtain". This character, in turn, is allied with two others: *tong* (通) which means "through" and *yong* (用) "to use". The composite meaning of these three characters taken as a whole defines the *Te* and *Tao* relationship. Actually, we can understand better the relationship between *Tao* and *Te* in light of the *Tao Te Ching* (Chapters 21 and 51). For instance, the following texts, "*Te* which is omnipresent takes form only in accord with *Tao*" (Chapter 21) and "To follow *Tao* and not to contradict *Te*" (Chapter 51), help us to realize that *Tao* is essence and that *Te* is function. Only through *Te* does *Tao* reveal its presence in the universe.

With this distinction of *Tao* as essence and *Te* as function, we learn that only through cultivation of *Te*, or virtue in our life, are we following *Tao* and are in communication with *Tao*. The so-called cultivation of *Te* means returning to simplicity and to the True Self as Laozi says in Chapter 65:

Te is so deep and reaching far,
It causes a return of things to their Origin.

According to Wang Bi "a return of all things to their Origin" means going back to simplicity and to the True Self. To follow *Tao* is to commit oneself uncompromisingly to life's ultimate purpose, and thereby to become one with *Tao*, in and through *Te*, and is precisely the aim and object of all religious activity. A person becoming aware of *Tao*, shapes his or her life according to its moral imperatives and thus comes to live on a higher spiritual plane. One no longer feels the need to control things or manipulate people outside oneself, but humbly submits to the ultimate source of all life, which is also the ultimate object of religious concern--"the good, the true and the beautiful"--the *Tao*.

The Transcendental Dimension of *Tao*

Paul Tillich says: "Faith is awareness: to be aware that the total life experience has a transcendent dimension. Faith is also affirmation: to affirm that beneath all apparent phenomena there is another vast world of reality." These words resonate with those of Laozi who, in reflecting on the course of life, affirms that *Tao* is everywhere, and he unfolds a way of living that "joins one's life to *Tao*", and which enables one "to dwell within it and become one with it". Thus is a person able to escape the narrow confines of a self-centered life hemmed in and limited by inconsequential activity. In opening up a real possibility of living in harmony with *Tao*, Laozi's teaching comes to grips with the fundamental principle underlying all natural religion. He offers a way of transcending the self that moves one towards the ultimate in human experience. But before the ultimate can be experienced, it is first required to arrive at a state of radical quietude and peace. The Holy Scriptures of Hinduism describe such a state in this manner:

It is not the knowledge of the senses, nor is it relative knowledge, nor yet inferential knowledge. Beyond the senses, beyond the understanding, beyond all expression...it is pure unitary consciousness wherein awareness of the world and of multiplicity is completely obliterated" (from Louis Dupre's *The Other Dimension*, quoted from the *Upanishads*, p. 51, p. 497).

Laozi invites one to "strive for Ultimate Emptiness", and "to hold to Profound Tranquility." (Chapter 16) He means by

this that one should enter into a state of emptiness and tranquillity in order to experience a "return to the Origin". The return, he says, is through contemplation. In contemplating *Tao* one seeks a "return to one's True Self". Active contemplation makes *Tao* accessible. By returning to the Origin and entering into the state of tranquility through contemplation, one is able to discover one's own True Self and thus become a part of that which never changes. *Tao* is by definition that which never changes for it is of the very nature of *Tao* to remain unchanging. Laozi also makes it clear that every human existence in the course of life must eventually transcend itself and return to Ultimate Source. This is the way of *Tao* that all life must follow, for life is itself a "transcending process".

When Laozi speaks of the awareness achieved through contemplating the "returning to the Origin" or "entering into one's True Self", he sees it as the end product of a transforming process that must take place within the individual, and he calls it "enlightenment".

Tao Te Ching gives us the following description:

To know what never changes is called "enlightenment"
 Knowing what never changes is to be open-minded,
 To be open-minded is to be without prejudice,
 To be without prejudice is to be complete,
 To be complete is to reach the heavenly,
 To be heavenly is to be in *Tao*,
 To be *Tao* is to be forever. (Chapter 16)

Enlightenment here is set out in stages. To know, i.e. contemplate, the *Tao*, which never changes and which begets all things, leads one to an interior enlightenment that cannot be brought about by means of crass activity. The knowledge that results illumines all reality, enabling one to break through the confines of self to accept all things in an embrace that excludes nothing and rejects nothing. This is the first stage of enlightenment, which Laozi calls "open-mindedness".

The second stage of enlightenment is "to be without prejudice"; that is, divested of all self-interest, a person is disposed to embrace all living things in an impartial and unbiased manner.

The third stage, "completeness", speaks of moral wholeness and a condition of personal integrity which disposes one not only to be forgetful of self but attentive to others.

The fourth stage is "to reflect the virtue of heaven". This means that the will has been purified and purged of all motiva-

tions that are earthly and base, and one's virtue becomes authentic and transparent, reflecting the virtue of heaven itself.

The fifth and final stage of enlightenment is *Tao*. "To be united with *Tao* and one with *Te*." This is to act in accord with heaven and not on one's own. To experience *Tao* and be permeated by its all pervading presence is "to enter into the realm of utter emptiness". In this stage one lives "in harmony with and is identified with *Tao*." Such a person will find no obstacles in the way to returning to what is unchanging--to radical simplicity, absolute truth, and complete authenticity. And this is what it means to live forever. It is for us to allow our life-force to flow freely and follow the heart's authentic promptings "so that though one dies yet one will not perish."

Laozi's teaching of the journey "to return to the Origin and "to enter into one's True Self" and ultimate union with the transcendent *Tao* finds its equivalent in Western mysticism's search for the "Way of Perfection". The Western mystical experience also takes place in the course of a person's life and it, too, liberates one from the prison of self, breaking through the walls of limitations and restrictions. It is described by St. John of the Cross in his *Ascent of Mount Carmel* as "becoming one with the Lord".

In order to possess all things, long to possess nothing.

In order to become all things, yearn to become nothing.

In order to know all things, strive to know nothing.

In Western Christian spirituality the way to perfection is marked by three consecutive stages: the purgative, illuminative, and unitive way. This same pattern is also to be found in the experience of those who in "contemplating *Tao*" move through the transforming process to become one with the transcendent.

A Summary

The interior life of the human spirit according to Laozi is defined by the search for the ideal human life. Finding this way of living will enable a person to become one with the transcendent *Tao*. The ultimate aim and goal a person seeks in life is to enter into the sacred and transcendent realm of the spirit, where forgetfulness of self is finally attained. Here a person's spirit is transformed by *Tao* and lives in *Tao*. *Tao*, in turn lives within that person. As Laozi has said:

If you follow *Tao*,
 you will be of *Tao*.
 If you work through its moral force,
 you will be given this force.
 ...With joy then does *Tao* receive those
 who choose to walk in it.
 With joy too does the moral force uphold those
 who choose to use it well. (Chapter 23)

Those united with *Tao* will follow the way of Nature, which is the way of *Tao*, and live free from selfishness in all its forms. No longer will you be anxiously grasping at life to control it, but, forgetful of self, you will allow *Tao* to act in and through your very being. To achieve the state of self-forgetfulness, one must pass through a process of purification, "to embrace Ultimate Emptiness" and "to hold on to Profound Tranquility". In such a state the heart will strive for interior stillness, resisting all selfish desires and rash actions... "Can you keep the inner depths of your heart pure, without fault or stain?" (Chapter 10). Only with a pure heart can a person follow the path of contemplation to "return to the Origin" and "enter into one's True Self", and experience the never changing *Tao*. "The True Self is found through contemplation and purification." Having arrived at union with *Tao* then will one's life become transparent in the fullness of its light. As Laozi says:

Use outlook and insight,
 use them both
 and you are immune:
 for you have witnessed eternity. (Chapter 52)

One who sees clearly and is free of selfish desire is easily able to see through to the very source of life and can return to its radical simplicity and truth. Thus does one walk with *Tao* in the unitive way, with *Tao* pervading one's entire life and being.

Laozi's concept of life does indeed have a transcendental or religious dimension. And if I have chosen here to compare *Tao* with the classical Christian Way of Perfection--the purgative, illuminative and unitive way--it is only to point out the strong resemblances these two forms of asceticism have with each other. Laozi's descriptions of the transcendent *Tao* resonate well with the Christian concept of God, "Who makes all things holy by His presence". Eastern mystics who write of their experience of *Tao* and the Christian mystics who speak of their own experience of God in the depths of their being have much

in common. And the awareness of both Christian and Taoist mystics that "God (*Tao*) lives in all beings" and "moves and works in all things," speaks to all humanity of a state of grace wherein our ultimate concerns are met and the deepest aspirations of a searching heart are fulfilled.

When the tongues of flame are en-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire,
And the fire and the rose are one.
(T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*)

And all shall be well and
All manner of things shall be well.
(Julian of Norwich)

Endnotes

1. The following English translations of Laozi have been used in the English translation of Edward Chau's article:
 - 1) *The Sayings of Laozi* by R.B. Blakney, Confucius Publishing House, Taipei, Taiwan.
 - 2) *The Way of Life* by Witter Bynner, Perigee Books, New York, N.Y.
 - 3) *The Way and Its Power* by Arthur Waley, George Allen & Unwing, Ltd., London.
 - 4) *Tao-Te-Ching* by Stephen Mitchell, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, N.Y.
 - 5) In certain instances, the author made his own translation.
2. The quotations from Louis Dupre's *The Other Dimension* and Paul Tillich's *Dynamic of Faith* are translations from the Chinese editions of these books.

