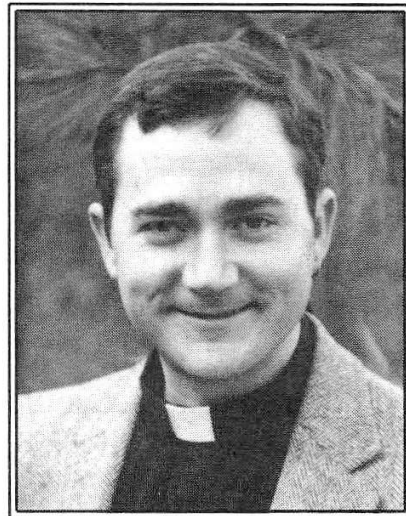


The Way of Non-Direction: Insights on Spiritual Direction from the Tao Te Ching

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Often in my ministry I find words from the Hindu *Upanishads* or the Taoist *Tao Te Ching* popping into my head, sometimes at exactly the right moment. In ruminating on some of these “little revelations” I have started thinking about what insights other traditions not normally associated with Christian spiritual direction might have to offer to its practice. I have decided to limit my comments to one tradition from which I have drawn much spiritual nurture and counsel: Taoism.



Taoism (pronounced “Dowism”) is a native religion of China, and has as its principal scripture the *Tao Te Ching*, a book of Chinese philosophical poetry containing 81 pieces, written some time between the seventh and the fourth centuries B.C.E. According to tradition it was written by a quiet librarian named Lao Tzu.

The person who practices Taoism sees one’s self as equal to all other created things, and in fact, gleans all wisdom from observing nature. Nature is correct. Humans think too much and that gets us into trouble. Nature reveals the essence of the Tao. The Tao is a part of Nature, or more accurately, nature is part of the Tao; and therefore the Tao is not personified like the Christian God. It is impersonal, like a principle or a force. This might sound negative, and irreconcilable to a Judeo-Christian concept of God. The sparrow, for instance, does not have a “personal relationship” with God. She does not perceive God as a personality but as the

very web of being in which she moves and of which she consists: the wind beneath her wings, the worm in the ground, the dry sheltered branch in the storm. Similarly, the Taoist follows this example and perceives God not as a personal deity, but through the web of his or her experience of the world and through the nature of things.

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By observing nature, the Taoist understands the Way of the Tao, and seeks to walk in that same way. Generally regarded as being good at this is often referred to as a “sage,” whose function was often to guide people into spiritual truth, similar in some ways to the ministry of the spiritual director. Like a carpenter who knows that it is easier to saw with the grain of the wood than against it, the sage knows that when one lives in cooperation with Nature and the Tao, one’s life can be free from stressful striving, and one can find contentment by resting in the “Way” things are.

“Sin” in Taoism is going against the grain, and one’s punishment is immediate and in this world: a life of stress and struggle. “Salvation” is going with the flow, finding a life of freedom and security, because one knows how the universe works and can cooperate with it. There is no “guilt” language in the *Tao Te Ching*. The Tao’s love is universal and unconditional. It is not for the enlightened only, or the holy or even the moral. The Tao is there for all. “It is the good person’s treasure,” Lao Tzu writes, “and the bad person’s refuge... Why did the sages of old value the Tao so much? Because when you seek, you find. And when you sin, you are forgiven.”

Taoism and the Spiritual Life: Being & Non-Being

The *Tao Te Ching* speaks of matter and spirit as if they were partners, one incapable of functioning without the other. Taoists speak of spirit as “non-being,” implying something that exists in objective reality, but which possesses no physical manifestation, or

“being.” Synonyms for spirit “non-being” are emptiness and non-existence. Meister Eckhard in the Christian tradition spoke in similar terms when he said that “God is a being beyond being and a nothingness beyond being.” (Matthew Fox, OP., *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*. Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1983.)

This unitive vision of spirituality is difficult for Westerners reared with pervasive dualism. Lao Tzu asks, as if speaking directly to us, ‘Being both body and spirit, can you embrace unity and not be fragmented?’ (Poem 10)

To illustrate his vision, Lao Tzu presents non-being as absolutely necessary for physical realities to “function,” and vice versa, saying, “Thirty spokes join together at one hub, but it is the hole in the center that makes it operable. Clay is molded into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that makes it useful. Doors and windows are cut to make a room, but it is the empty spaces that we use.” (Poem 11)

The first time I read these verses, chills ran down my spine. I felt that I had been told a great secret that was the most obvious thing in the world: the relationship between matter and spirit. One is not dominant. “Existence and non-existence produce one another.” Lao Tzu explains, “Existence is what we have, but non-existence is what we use.”

In addition to non-being, which is thing, or noun-oriented, Lao Tzu also offers a matching concept which is action, or verb-oriented: non-action. The Chinese word for non-action is *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei* literally means “not doing,” but it has many applications.

With this concept, Lao Tzu speaks directly to 20th century Westerners and our fast-paced culture. He tells us, “If you spend your life filling your senses and rushing around ‘doing’ things, you will be beyond hope.” It is difficult for some of us to slow down and not feel guilty.

Instead, Lao Tzu asks a difficult question: “When Heaven gives and takes away, can you be content to just let things come or go? And even when you understand all things, can you simply allow yourself to be?” (Poem 10)

Lao Tzu promises, “Who can wait for the storm to stop, to find peace in the calm that follows? The person who is able to wait patiently in this peace will eventually know what is right.” (Poem 15)

Slowing down enough to hear the voice of the Spirit, or to observe the Way of the Tao, is in my experience one of the most important spiritual disciplines of all. An old joke reminds us that Westerners say, “Don’t just sit there, do something!” while Eastern wisdom says, “Don’t just do something, sit there!”

The value of not-doing is every bit as great as the value of non-being or spirit, and the health of our non-being /spirit is utterly dependent upon our ability to not-do.

Taoism and Spiritual Direction

THE POWER OF WATER. The *Tao Te Ching* concerns itself greatly with leadership, both political and spiritual. Not surprisingly, Lao Tzu astounds us with a parable about the power of water:

In the whole World nothing is softer than water.
Even those who succeed when attacking
the hard and the strong cannot overcome it
Because nothing can harm it.
The weak overcomes the strong.
The soft conquers the hard.
No one in the World can deny this
Yet no one seems to know how to put it into practice. (Poem 78)

The ability to be strong in the way that water is strong is a mystery that Lao Tzu says no one can quite grasp, and yet it is nonetheless the only way to be truly successful. Even though no one “knows how” to do it, truly spiritual people seem to evidence this power without trying: “The sagely person is like water,” Lao Tzu says. “Water benefits all things and does not compete with them. It gathers in unpopular places. In this it is like the Tao.” (Poem 8)

Learning to be like water involves the practice of *wu-wei*. Unlike just learning “not-doing” as we discussed above, *wu-wei* calls us to a deeper understanding that might be called “not-forcing.”

The Taoist watches nature and sees that what nature does—eroding mountains, growing forests, making rivers, birthing cubs—is accomplished effortlessly. Being one with the Tao, nature goes its own way and forces nothing; and yet grand works and great beauty result. *Wu-wei*, therefore, isn’t inactive at all, but is activity at its

most efficient, because it accomplishes without effort. When the sage, recognizing oneness with the Tao, acts upon his or her environment in the spirit of the Tao, then, as Thomas Merton writes,

His [or her] action is not a violent manipulation of exterior reality, an “attack” on the outside world, bending it to his conquering will: on the contrary, he respects external reality by yielding to it ... a perfect accomplishment of what is demanded by the precise situation.

When it comes to the issue of leadership, especially spiritual leadership and spiritual direction, Lao Tzu asks us pointedly, “Loving all people and leading them well, can you do this without imposing your will?” This is a great and important question for us, who are surrounded by traditions notorious for spiritual coercion. Unfortunately, we often unwittingly perpetuate the cycle of coercion. It is easy for us to think that the answers we have found after our own many years of search and struggle are the “right” answers for everybody. But Taoism suggests that, like water, all things simply flow out and return, void of any notions of “right” or “wrong.”

The key to being successful in spiritual leadership, according to Lao Tzu, is to not try. “Therefore the sage, not trying, cannot fail,” says Lao Tzu. “Not clutching, she cannot lose.” Likewise in our own spiritual lives, “the truly good person does not try to be good.” Goodness needs to come naturally, effortlessly, like breathing or hearing. The sage is not concerned with being good, or even with being a good spiritual director. He or she does not give it a thought. It is not a goal. The goal is to respond humanely—as a human would—to whatever situation life gives.

This advice is congruent with the attitudes of other spiritual directors I know, but I have rarely heard these principles expressed so clearly or evocatively. Most spiritual directors would not dream of “forcing” their directees into a practice before they are ready, nor would most initiate violent interventions into the lives of their

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directees. But it is sometimes difficult to articulate why we believe this.

A gift of the *Tao Te Ching* is giving us not only words to describe our experiences, but illuminating what we already know. Lao Tzu might be speaking specifically about a spiritual director when he writes, ‘The sage who leads says: “I practice ‘not-doing’ and the people transform themselves. I enjoy peace and the people correct themselves. I stay out of their business affairs and the people prosper. I have no desires and the people, all by themselves, become simple and honest.”

NON-ATTACHMENT. Lao Tzu also advocates a good spiritual direction technique by suggesting that we let directees make their own discoveries. Instead of telling them what they need to know, it is far more effective for directees themselves to make the associations and to experience the epiphanies.- As Lao Tzu says, “The best leader puts great value in words and says little, so that when his work is finished the people all say, ‘We did it ourselves!’”

It is best for us not to put too much stock in developmental theories or personality systems, since in pursuing the effectiveness they offer, they can sometimes blind us to what is going on for directees in the here and now. Lao Tzu warns: “When you organize, you must of necessity use names and order. But given that, you must also know where to leave off naming and structuring. Knowing when to stop, you can avoid danger.” (Poem 32)

It is difficult for us to simply let go of the end result, to not strive or push a directee, especially if we are impatient with his or her progress. We may have somehow come to believe that conversion is an instantaneous occurrence. In reality, however, this is almost never the case. Conversion is a slow, difficult process; the seeds that were planted years ago slowly take root, and even more slowly blossom. Much of the time we may not even be aware of just when conversion is occurring because in a sense it is happening underground like the developing seed. As directors, we need to trust that the Spirit constantly whispers to all people, and needs little help from us.

We would do well to relinquish our attachment to the outcome of a single session or even the duration of a directee’s involvement with us. This is difficult because as we sit with people, hear their struggles, and get to know their foibles, we begin to love

them. We care so much for the people we minister to that we are often unaware of the ways we attach ourselves to their “progress” and growth.

Lao Tzu counsels that we should give of ourselves to others without any hope of success or fear of failure: “The sage makes good on his half of the deal and demands nothing of others.” The sage is not concerned with getting anything back because with the Tao all things flow out and return.

This is not to say that we should not care about people; rather we should not be attached to immediate results. To care, to love, to invest ourselves in others is part of what makes us human and holy. Lao Tzu says, “The sage’s heart is not set in stone. She is as sensitive to the people’s feelings as to her own. She says, ‘To people who are good, I am good. And to people who are not good? I am good to them, too.’ This is true goodness. ‘People who are trustworthy, I trust. And people who are not trustworthy, I also trust.’ This is real trust.” (Poem 49) If we can learn this kind of trust in the nature of things, I believe we can be more effective listeners and companions.

HUMILITY. Perhaps the most important truth Lao Tzu has to teach spiritual leaders is humility. Potential directees come to us because we are “people in the know,” who they often believe are “spiritually advanced” and able to help them begin the journey.

The truth, which most if not all spiritual directors know well, is that we are all beginners; much of what we have come to know simply reveals how little we actually do know. Lao Tzu tells us, “Those who know, do not speak. Those who speak, do not know.” (Poem 56) Those concerned about directing with integrity and holiness find that spiritual maturity simply increases our awareness of our shared humanity and leads to a more compassionate rapport with the directee. As the Christian mystic Mechtilde of Magdeburg says, we should live “welcoming to all,” expecting to learn as much from our directees as we hope they may learn from us. (Sue Woodruff, *Meditations with Mechtilde of Magdeburg*. Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1982.)

The goal for any spiritual director is to maintain a genuine and vital relationship with God and the universe, and then to attend to others’ spiritual lives. Lao Tzu tells us that “One who is well

grounded will not be uprooted. One who has a firm embrace will not let go.”

Both grounding and embracing are essential. Grounded in our tradition, we will not be led astray; embracing the traditions of others, we inherit vast wisdom. My spiritual experience as a Christian need not be divorced from my study of Taoism. Cultivating relationships with the wisdom of other traditions informs and enriches our practice in so many ways: by adding to our repertoire of God-images, by enlarging our understanding of how others experience the divine presence, and by augmenting our world-view with other models and potentialities. Nothing external impacts us as greatly as taking in the wisdom of others—be it a directee’s observations or the great Lao Tzu’s—and allowing those seeds to germinate deep in the soil of our own spiritual garden.

Non-being, non-action, non-attachment, and humility; Lao Tzu promises that those who cultivate these things “will have true goodness. Cultivate these in your community, and goodness will catch on. Cultivate these in the World, and goodness will fill the Universe.”

