

DAO IN THE DALES



A CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

Notes on a presentation given by Paul Underhill at Dao in the Dales Inaugural gathering, Settle, 24th September 2008

(Some sources have been acknowledged, some haven't.

Some names have been omitted to prevent any possible libel action!)).

TAOISM

Scope

This is a vast subject and so I want to consider some of the basic Taoist concepts that I've found relevant. Hence whether 'A' can be 'not A', the dissolution of 'self' and that our reality is really an illusion, whether a hard white stone can really exist, that the observer undoubtedly affects the observed etc, are left for another day. Let's keep it simple

Equally, only the principles of Taoism (and, where appropriate, Buddhism) are considered – any religious overtones are excluded.

Lonnie Jarrett opines that "*Practitioners of healing arts and sciences must recognize that the models on which they organize their perceptions of the world are merely stories made up by human beings and do not constitute 'reality'*". The Taoist 'reality' has been compiled over many thousands of years and comprises all dimensions within creation – it pervades all aspects of Chinese historical development such as art, politics, war, medicine, martial arts etc. As the West increasingly becomes involved in business arrangements with China, I would advise anyone thinking of doing so to acquaint themselves with the '36 Stratagems (of ancient China)' - they may stand a better chance of getting a successful deal.

But it must be remembered that a philosophy is only the map, not the terrain; "*a finger that points at the moon is not the moon*"

Western Science on the other hand, as we are presented it by modern scientists such as ***** and ***** , rely upon the physical manifestation and the visible spectrum of that creation; “*but where’s the evidence*” we hear them cry – perhaps they ought to realize that possibly their model is not complete and that truly the “*absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*”.

However, other accepted modern ‘gurus’ such as Alexander (of ‘technique’ fame), ***** with his views of ‘the now’ and ***** with her ideas of nutrition, quantum physicists with their new views on ‘string theory’, as with many others, owe so much to the ancients whose knowledge they have repackaged for contemporary consumption.

So the following is simply a view taken by this mortal, based on what seems reasonable and tested over thousands of years – no more and no less. Take it or leave it – as the Sage says: “*I know nothing*”.

Definition

Taoism is a philosophy that espouses a natural order in the Universe, from the world of sub-atomic particles to the movement of galaxies. It underpins everything, organic and inorganic, and the changes they undergo. Tao is the ultimate reality as well as the ‘Way’ that humans should follow encompassing compassion, humility and moderation. In fact, as Chapter 25 of the Tao te Ching says, even giving it a name diminishes it.

History and approach

Taoist thought, like those of so many other ancient cultures, has its roots in very ancient Shamanic practices; this is evident in the classics that we enjoy today such as the I Ching, that can trace its roots to over 5000 years ago, and its (only slightly younger) contemporary, the Neijing, The Yellow Emperor’s Classic of Medicine.

However, Taoism sensibly took form around 500BCE with the writing of the Tao te Ching, reputedly by Lao Tzu. As the legend goes, he was so disgusted with warfare and hedonistic way that people lived, he was about to leave the realm on the back of an ox – but the Gatekeeper persuaded him to write down his thoughts before he left.



Subsequently, it developed with the historical interplay between its somewhat esoteric concepts and the more structured and Confucian schools of thought: thereafter subsequent development is very

interesting, most notably from Taoists such as Chang Tzu and Mencius and later under the complementary influence of Buddhism.

The underlying concept of acting in concert with nature has many parallels with virtually all of the ancient civilisations: the Druids, Egyptians, the ancients of North and South America, and so on. And even at the time of Lao Tzu, Heraclitus was saying much the same in Greece and contemporary with this the famous Chinese General Sun Tzu was using much the same philosophy in his “art of war”.

Taoism became a principle plank in the philosophy which underpinned medicine, the martial arts, politics, warfare and all other aspects of life in China up to relatively modern times. However, much of the ancient writings often lapses into specific conventions of that time and place which can obscure relevant meaning to the Western 21st century reader. Therefore, of most interest is how the abiding principles of Taoism can be used today in an ever-complicated world where many think, arguably, that we have largely (in the West) lost the ability to commune with the natural world.

Accordingly, the remainder of this passage concentrates on the contemporary application of some of the more relevant principles involved.

So what is the natural order of things?

This cannot be considered other than through subjective eyes, and therefore not something that I want to get into – I might be accused of being moralistic! However, we are a product of a Universe that nurtured our development as a species for billions of years and brought us to a state where we existed, in a sustainable manner, in harmony with nature - until a few hundred years ago.

It could be argued that this was the point where mankind, largely through technology and science, departed from the natural way and that the two paths have been on a divergent course ever since. Just because we can (in this new age of apparent enlightenment), does that mean we should? But, again, that might be considered to be a moralistic view!

Yin/Yang

Yin and Yang are the cornerstones of Taoist. They are the two polarities that emerged from the 'original Qi' and which are combined in the I Ching to describe how the Universe works.



Yin is expressed as contracting, passive, cold, water, dark, receptive, the Moon, female, emotions, etc. Yang is expansive, active, hot, fire, light, giving, the Sun, male, creativity, etc.

Yin and Yang:

- are two aspects of the whole
- are divisible
- are interdependent
- counterbalance each other
- are mutually convertible

Their existence leads to constant movement and change (something on which I Ching (Book of Change) is based). Whereas in the West we see change as being linear and deductive (by inferring particular instances from a general law), the East sees it as being cyclical and inductive (by inferring a general law from particular instances – such as the interaction of opposites).

So if all change is cyclical, then there is no end to it; the corollary, therefore, is that it is the 'process' that's important and not the 'end', 'target' or 'objective' – T S Eliot had it that "*What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from*". This has a profound effect on how the Taoist mind works, as we'll see later in the Eastern concept of time, and leads us to see that '*the path itself is actually the destination*'.

Within Yin, there is Yang and within Yang, there is Yin. There is no absolute Yin or Yang; they are relative to one another. They will always change at the extremes, e.g. Yin will become Yang and Yang will become Yin. Ice, water and vapour are all the same thing, but manifest in different forms; the sea evaporates to form clouds which then create rain which falls to create sea – so the Yin Qi becomes the Yang Qi in a perpetual cycle.

Interestingly, there is the thought that Yin will precede Yang and, indeed, eventually will always overcome Yang. Ghandi, a constant drip on a stone, a tree growing round its metal cage etc are all examples of this. Chapter 43 of the Tao te Ching says that we all know this but somehow few of us believe it.

Paradox

The "T'ai-Chi", or "Supreme Ultimate", is the symbol that represents the interplay of Yin and Yang, the two opposing, but interdependent qualities governing the universe - there can be no dark without light, no down without up, no cold without hot, no good without evil, no form without function.

Two basic rules for human conduct, which seem paradoxical to us in the West, were developed in Taoism as a result of this continuous interplay of opposites:

- Whenever you want to achieve anything, you should start with the opposite. The Tao te Ching says:

*In order to contract a thing, one should surely expand it first
In order to weaken, one will surely strengthen first
In order to take, one will surely give first
etc*

For instance, *'if you seek peace, prepare for war'*

- Whenever you want to retain anything, you should admit in it something of the opposite. Again the Tao te Ching opines:

*Be bent and you will remain straight
Be vacant and you will remain full
Be worn and you will remain new*

Notwithstanding what I said in the 'Scope', consider the idea that as they cannot exist without each other, then Yin is Yang and vice versa; in real-life terms, this means that 'loss' is the same as 'gain' – *'If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same'* – are we culturally able to do this?

Balance

Balance can be static or dynamic; however, as everything changes, maybe the static is simply a slow form of dynamic.

We all instinctively know the meaning of balance – a feeling of physical steadiness, emotional calmness – or, when something has gone as far as it needs and then stops, when you've had a good meal but not too much, when an orchestra is in tune with itself, when a golf swing executes a perfect drive, or when you take a stone and it 'clicks' perfectly into a dry-stone wall that you're building. When this state is in balance with the Tao, with creation, with nature, then we have a sense of perfect harmony, and we get the *'feeling of accomplishment and delight'*.

But if this balance of Yin and Yang is compromised, then we have a state that is in conflict with nature, the Tao. Can you think of any such situations in the world today, either in your own personal physical/emotional state, the society that we live in or the world as a whole?

Let me start you off with a discussion between the Yellow Emperor, Shih Huang Ti, and his Chief Minister, Qi Bo, given in the Neiijing some 5000 years ago:

"Why is it that people nowadays do not live as long as they used to and what can be done about it?"

Qi Bo replied, "This is in part because in the past, people practised the Tao, which is the way of life. They appreciated the principle of balance in all things, of the flow of yin and yang, of the ceaseless, eternal transformation of the universe."

"I see," said the Yellow Emperor.

"But these days," continued Qi Bo, in one of the earliest pieces of medical advice recorded, "people have changed their way of life. They drink wine as though it were water, indulge in destructive activities, drain their jing [the body's essence, centered on the kidneys] and they deplete their qi [life energy]. They do not know the secret of conserving their qi or their vitality. Seeking emotional excitement and monetary pleasures, people disregard the natural rhythm and order of the universe. They fail to regulate their lifestyle and diet and sleep improperly. So its not surprising that instead of living well over a hundred years they look old at fifty and die soon after."

Have you had time to consider the imbalances that you are experiencing today? Can you think of any other examples from today where we have built in imbalances that didn't exist, say, in the self-sufficiency that existed a few hundred years ago (maybe the increase in population and its consequences: food consumed out of season or indigenous source, use of non-replaceable resources and the consequent effect on the planet etc)?

Imbalance results in 'dis-ease'. On the personal level, imbalance leads to illness; my Taiji teacher, Tew Bunnag, will ask someone "*and at what stage did you decide to become unwell?*" In our society we have genetically modified foods, embryo manipulation even between separate species, and so on.

It is interesting that Tew, albeit in the context of Taiji, calls for us to consider position, direction and proportion – three aspects that define a vector to a mechanic, but which to us could become a mantra for the way we should live.

Emptiness

The Tao te Ching encourages us to seek the 'centre' for this sense of balance. What does this mean? Perhaps Chapter 11 helps:

*Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the centre hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes that make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;*

Usefulness from what is not there.

This is difficult for us to understand in the West, that emptiness has a value, that “*without its nothingness it would be nothing*”. And as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart put it, “*Silence is very important. The silences between the notes are as important as the notes themselves*”. Stillness of body and mind allow the man-made imbalances to dissipate and allow the harmony of the Tao to come into us – meditation is a great way to re-establish balance in our lives.

An experiment in the USA some years ago tested smokers to test, blindfolded, which brand of cigarette they most preferred – the unlit one came out top. Have you ever tried drinking from an empty cup? I recommend it.

**LET’S NOW MOVE SIDWAYS WITH OUR THOUGHTS AND
CONSIDER HOW WE MOVE THORUGH THIS CURRENT LIFE:**

Qi

Qi is the executive of the Tao; it is the basis if all things in the Universe: time, space, matter and even the nothing itself. Often inadequately translated as ‘energy’, Qi is more like a potentiality. As one of today’s Acupuncture gurus, Lonnie Jarrett, put it:



“modern (western) views of Qi as energy are motivated in part by a culturally founded desire to understand a nonmaterial, functional concept as a thing rather than as a relationship”

A great Chinese philosopher, Zhang Dai who lived in the 11th century, expounded that “*the universe is a body of Qi – when Qi integrates it forms matter and manifests as myriad of things – when matter disintegrates It returns to its nebulous state of Qi.*” He also mentioned that Qi and matter are constantly and endlessly acting and interacting with one another. This concept has more recently been embraced by modern-day Quantum Physics, and the even more recent “string” theory, which purports that the essential nature of matter, the atoms and molecules, is nothing more or less than an array of various energies organised in particular patterns. This underpins the concept that Qi, the all enveloping power of the Universe, is not only all-powerful (and hence it is wise to “go with the flow” of it), but also a power that we can use to improve our lot.

Medically speaking, Qi can be thought of in a number of ways; on a more abstract level, it can be thought of as the interplay between feeling and intention, but on a more physical plane Qi is seen as having a number of functions, namely:

- Movement (eg. bowels, blood flow, emotional flexibility etc)
- Protection (eg. immune system, a 'thick skin' etc)
- Transformation (eg. digestion, ability to change emotions etc)
- Retention (eg. stops piles, keeps happy memories etc)
- Warming (eg. warms our bodies and our hearts)
- Lifting (eg. stops 'sagging' and lifts our spirits)

and when it is in imbalance we get:

- Deficiency
- Collapse
- Rebellion
- Stagnation

do you recognise any of these in your own lives?

So by embracing this concept of a 'life-force' (which, incidentally, is recognised by virtually all civilisations but our own), we cannot only explain many of the things that Western society/science has difficulty with, but also help ourselves to achieve a greater state of balance (which, after all, is what it's all about).

A deeper and more complex view of how Qi behaves is comparable to how a wave moves in the sea – a wave (energy) may move thousands of miles but the physical component that enables this (water particles) may only move a few feet. So maybe we as physical entities don't 'move' as such, but that our 'essence' moves manifesting the Qi in form as it goes, thus giving the impression of physical movement – but maybe that falls into the 'too difficult' category for this particular paper.

Change

Much has been written throughout history on the concept of Change:

- *It is not necessary to change – survival is not mandatory* (Edward Deming)
- *It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent, but the one that is the most responsive to change* (Charles Darwin)
- *In order to improve you will need to change - but not all change brings improvement* (anon)
- *Everything passes, all things come to he who waits, etc* (anon)

These are fine - in particular circumstances. More encompassing ideas, however, are also familiar:

- *History repeats itself* (anon)
- *What goes round comes round* (anon)
- *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (Alphonse Karr 1808-1890)

Looking even further back into history, there is a more fundamental concept of change that was first documented almost three thousand years ago:

- *To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven* (Ecclesiastes III c.900 BC)
- *There is nothing permanent except change* (Heraclitus 540 – 475 BC)

We've already see that the Taoist concept of change is that it complies with certain universal laws and that it is inevitable. François Jullien, the notes Sinologist, in "The Propensity of Things – Towards a History of Efficacy in China", says:

"At the end of the whole chain of connections which accounts for the great process in which the world is engaged, the term "propensity" designates both the particular circumstances characterizing the various stages in the process and the particular tendency (or disposition) produced in each case"

Effectively, he is describing the Chinese concept that:

Propensity for Change = Tendency + Circumstance

What does this mean? An example may be - don't take a horse to water and expect it to drink – first make it thirsty (and then try to stop it!). So there is a 'natural' process that allows change to occur – to do anything different results in the expenditure of effort similar to trying to 'push water uphill'. In modern parlance, we achieve more by 'going with the flow', similar to the way water flows around a rock (water being the medium that is traditionally associated most with the Tao); supple bends with the wind whereas the rigid breaks.....

This 'natural' process depends very much on the 'essence' of a situation – let us consider this:

Essence

Huainanzi, in the 2nd century BC, said:

"It spontaneously follows from the propensity of things that a boat floats on the water and a cart rolls along the ground".

Everything has its 'essence'. Drop a stone or cork in the sea and they will respectively sink and float – they won't be accepted by the parent medium (namely water) because they do not share the same essence; a drop of water however, will be accepted and instantly absorbed by the sea. So we see mismatches of essences, such as culture changes in companies, Christian armies in Muslim countries, etc – is it any surprise that they don't work?

Occupy before moving

If, as we have already seen, Yin precedes Yang then form precedes function. Can we be so astute? Sun Tsu, in his 'Art of War' opined that: "*The victorious troops seek confrontation in combat only after they have already triumphed; whereas the vanquished troops seek to win only once battle commences*".

Likewise, the Taiji Classics: "*If your opponent offers no motion, you should follow and remain still. If your opponent changes even slightly, you should already be responding accordingly*".

In the West we throw ourselves forward and arrest our movement by sticking a foot out. What happens when the foot is prevented from moving? – we trip and fall on our faces. In the Taiji walk, however, we keep the weight on the back foot while we put down the front foot - then we transfer the weight to that foot when we feel it is safe to do so. Hence balance is maintained at all times and you don't trip – as the Taiji Classics have it: "*walk like a cat*".

Time and the Now

Going back to the horse that won't drink and the need to make it thirsty, and the need to occupy the space before moving, then clearly time is an element in making the circumstances appropriate for the change to occur 'naturally'.

We, in the West, believe ourselves to be 'human beings' but, in today's frenetic atmosphere of life, we are becoming more 'human doings' – 'time is the enemy'.

Chuang Tsu tells a story that has resonance with today's lifestyle:

There was a man who was disturbed by the sight of his own shadow and so displeased with his own footsteps that he determined to get rid of both. The method he hit upon was to run away from them.

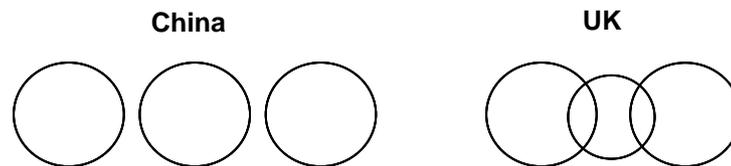
So he got up and ran. But every time he put his foot down there was another step, while his shadow kept up with him without

the slightest difficulty.

He attributed his failure to the fact that he was not running fast enough. So he ran faster and faster, without stopping, until he finally dropped dead.

He failed to realize that if he merely stepped into the shade, his shadow would vanish, and if he sat down and stayed still, there would be no more footsteps.

We have become conditioned by the influence of the 'past' and the 'future' to the point where they have simply become the two aspects of the 'now'. In 1967, Cottell asked various cultures around the world to assign different meanings to past, present and future in what was known as the 'Circles Test'. The outcome was as follows:



Whereas in the East they view the past and the future as being separate from the 'now', we in the Western world more or less live the 'now' engrossed in anything but. This has many implications for us as a culture, not least of which is in the field of health. The two predominant emotions in our society are worry (possibly from expectations of the future, largely fuelled by so-called social 'norms' and fear/doubt/uncertainty from the world of advertising etc) and frustration (possibly from perceptions of the past moulded by so-called moral guardians such as religion and the media etc); these damage the Spleen and Liver respectively, the combination of which lead to so many of the increasing number of 'Western' or 'unexplained' illnesses from which we suffer (see Dr Nick Read's book 'Sick and Tired') such as eating disorders, obesity, hypertension, ME, fibromyalgia, MS, etc

The corollary is that we may be healthier simply by taking a different view of time. A thought with which to finish:

*A student was showing a
Chinese exchange friend how to
move quickly through the
Underground in London*

*"There" he said, at the end of
a rushed journey
"that saved 2 minutes"*

The Chinese student replied “and what are you going to do with them?”

TO CONCLUDE, LET US CONSIDER A GENTLER WAY FORWARD:

Connect not Attach and ‘letting go’

One of the fundamental parallels with Buddhism is the idea that we should connect with everything and not become attached; the Buddhists would refer to them as the five aggregates or Skandahs – form, feelings, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness. However, just taking it at its simplest level, the concept that everything is perishable means that, in time, we shall have to let go of everything. If we are attached to them (maybe a relationship, career, money, health, a wish etc) then the act of detaching from them as they leave us (or us them) only adds to our suffering; conversely, if we simply connect with them then parting doesn’t pull us with them when they go. For instance, in Taiji this is a very important lesson and therefore deflecting a blow from an opponent is done with the back of the hand rather than holding tight onto them.

The reduction caused in our flexibility by attaching not only will lead to ‘stagnation’, again a major source of illness, but also a reduction in our potential. The Tao te Ching, such as in Chapter 32, in order to approach the Tao urges us to be like an ‘Uncarved Block’ where all potentials are present, but none is manifest; Schrödinger’s cat would be a modern analogy. So we need to give up all attachments, including expectations and perceptions, and empty ourselves to allow the Tao to enter. In the ‘real world’ in which we live, this may be too much to ask for most of us, so are there any homilies that we can cling on to?

Enough is enough

Chap 29 of the Tao te Ching teaches us of the acceptance of ‘what is’:

*Do you think you can take over the universe and improve it?
I do not believe it can be done.
The universe is sacred.
You cannot improve it.
If you try to change it, you will ruin it.
If you try to hold it, you will lose it.
So sometimes things are ahead and sometimes they are behind;*

Wu Wei

Rounding off this rapid (and superficial) look at Taoism, we finish with possibly the defining concept which can encompass everything else – the concept of ‘Wu Wei’

The literal meaning of Wu Wei is "without action" and is often included in the paradox *wei wu wei*: "action without action" or "effortless doing". It does not mean “doing nothing”, but rather the “(conscious)act of not doing”.

It is not to be considered to be inertia, laziness, or mere passivity, but rather through spontaneous and effortless action of going with the stream, and not by struggling against it, we achieve the aim of achieving a state of perfect equilibrium, or alignment with the Tao and, as a result, obtain an irresistible form of "soft and invisible" power.

Chuang Tsu’s tells the story of Prince Wen Hui’s cook:

I follow the natural grain, letting the knife find its way through the many hidden openings, taking advantage of what is there, never touching a ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

A good cook changes his knife once a year because he cuts, while a mediocre cook has to change his every month because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and have cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the edge is as if it were fresh from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints. The blade of the knife has no thickness. That which has no thickness has plenty of room to pass through these spaces. Therefore, after nineteen years, my blade is as sharp as ever. However, when I come to a difficulty, I size up the joint, look carefully, keep my eyes on what I am doing, and work slowly. Then with a very slight movement of the knife, I cut the whole ox wide open. It falls apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there with the knife in my hand, looking about me with a feeling of accomplishment and delight. Then I wipe the knife clean and put it away

Wu Wei, then, is behaviour occurring in response to the flow of the Tao, that is refraining from activity contrary to nature..

In Taiji we comply with the Classic’s instruction that ‘4 ounces can move 1000 pounds’; this is where a powerful strike can be diverted from it’s intended destination by a small force and, in the process, be used against the progenitor of the strike. This concept of ‘Yielding’ is extremely powerful in all aspects of our life – physical, emotional and spiritual. Chapter 43 of the Tao te Ching describes it thus:

*What of all things most yielding (water)
Can overwhelm that which is of all things most hard (rock).
Being substanceless it can enter even where there is no space;
That is how I know the value of action that is actionless.*