

## TAOIST THEMES IN TEACHING

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The Taoist themes presented here are based on the thought and expression of Chuang Tzu (399-295). They transcend the mundane world yet are always in the depth of life.<sup>1</sup>

Nature is the basic principle of Taoism. The element in nature that most closely reflects Taoism is water. Water moves spontaneously and is in constant flux and incessant change. To give expression to Tao is to be in harmony with nature. For human beings, harmony with nature means acting spontaneously according to one's true nature. Emphasis in Taoism is on following one's nature, nourishing it and adapting to the environment in which one happens to be. This view of living and reality is dynamic and ever changing. It does not need change from without but leaves the empowerment for transformation to the things themselves. This flowing, ever changing reality is called Tao and is a cosmic process in which all things are involved. Chuang Tzu's interest is in how to live and how to respond to all things, as Tao. In this way one not only releases oneself to the world but is freed from the world.

With this basic introduction to Taoism we now turn to the world of teaching. In teaching, sixteen themes emerge as reflective of a Taoist approach.<sup>2</sup> All of the themes operate together, a controlling center cannot be identified anywhere. They are an interrelated system. Mutual arising is the key.<sup>3</sup> Taoist Themes:

Spontaneity  
Incessant Change  
Unity of all Things  
Non-Action  
Indifference  
Humor  
Inner Life  
Simplicity  
Noncompetitive  
Complementariness  
Avoiding Social Obligations  
Letting Things Alone  
Harmony  
Wandering  
Forgetting  
Detachment

Spontaneity, as the principle of action of Tao, when present in human action will be in harmony with Tao. It is through intuition that one comes to know that it is not necessary to force anything but merely adapt one's actions to the movements of Tao. Spontaneity is the flow in the classroom. Spontaneity lets the life of things emerge and be lively. The teacher prepares lectures for a class meeting prior to that time, organizing and elaborating upon the material to be presented. Creating an outline of the train of thought is helpful, noting key points to introduce. The outline is thematic, it is comprised of themes that the teacher can amplify.

When it comes time for class, the teacher enters the classroom and creates the lecture in the here and now, spontaneously off the top of one's head. The teacher creates the lecture there in living color. This spontaneity of the expression is a flowing movement of change and creativity, there is no loss of continuity. The teacher presents one theme and then amplifies it, then another and another. Questions pop up and they are addressed, participation is invited and students respond. Discussion emerges and each participant becomes a part of the flow, together they are the flow.

With trust in spontaneity, one will say the right thing at the right time. The exchanges that happen in class are free and spontaneous. Spontaneity enlivens the participation, the flow of creativity in action at that moment. By presenting themes and amplifying them spontaneously the teacher's participation is the open invitation to join the ongoing flow of the moment. Being in the flow one does not have to think up what to say, it arises naturally. Spontaneity thought about is spontaneity stopped. Others in the class enter into the flow and find that they too can learn to trust spontaneity, to join the conversation and become one with the others in that moment of creativity.

In spontaneity the teacher is truly there. The teacher is present to the students, alive and in the now. Spontaneity happens of itself. With spontaneity everything happens by itself and does not have to be controlled. One thought follows another without hesitation. Thoughts do not wait to arise, participation engages the imaginative and the world opens up.

Incessant change keeps things interesting. The teacher works out the outline of a lecture, enters the classroom and creates it then and there but each time it is presented it is different. One is different each time and the moods of both teacher and the students are not always the same. The students are different each time and in each class meeting. Mixing into this the influences brought into play by the cultural diversity of students, opportunities for a range of different kinds of questions may arise from the same lecture, time and again. Each time new students arrive, new perspectives arrive with them.

Nothing in a classroom remains truly constant. About the time a teacher thinks something is worked out, not surprisingly, it changes. It changes in part because learning occurs every time a lecture is presented, changing things yet again. In many ways, it is not the same lecture, it grows and evolves. One makes new connections spontaneously each time the lecture is presented. Each time it is different from the time before. One learns to vary presentations and in this way reaches an increased number and a wider range of students. Students do not always respond in the same way and they do not all learn in the same way. Students are different and their learning styles are different.

Unity of all Things means that both the teacher and the students are learning and they learn from each other. The teacher is teaching and being taught not only through the material but from dialogue and exchange with the students. The teacher connects the students with the subject being studied and with each other. Teaching and learning are one.

Non-Action is not doing anything unnatural. Not doing anything contrary to nature one remains in harmony with Tao. The teacher does not do anything unnatural. It is natural to help students. The teacher says at the beginning of each course, "I am here to help." The teacher is there for the students. They come to know and understand that. They can trust what the teacher says and does. The teacher's words and actions are one. The teacher does not force students to do anything. Each seeks their own "level." The teacher attempts to learn what students are interested in and connects those interests with the subject matter. If the teacher has the student's interest, attention is there. Where interest is there attention will be.<sup>4</sup> In this way the teacher does not have to worry about motivation.

Indifference means that the teacher does not get caught up in things. Indifference does not mean that there is an indifferent attitude that one does not care. To the contrary, it means that one does care. Here indifference is meant to imply that one is nonjudgmental, that the teacher does not interfere with the natural development of the students. In the classroom, the teacher is there to help students take things up in their own way, to make their own discoveries.

Humor lightens things up. An appropriate use of humor relieves tension and sets students at ease. Teachers that can make a pun of something understand it. You have to understand it to make a pun of it. Humor has a certain aliveness to it and more often than not the Taoist teacher is no stranger to self-depreciation. If one can have fun with one's own foibles and fears, the students are not as reluctant or fearful of facing their own, of being human.

Inner life is where connections are made. This is where personal

change happens. The teacher cultivates inner life connections in and among students from which community arises.<sup>5</sup> The contemplative moments are at times the most revealing, surprising and at the same time comforting. Meditative awareness contributes to and enriches an unspoken dimension.

Simplicity is not taking on more than can be done. In teaching one teaches what comes naturally, “for me that happens to be philosophy, philosophy of life.” Too often people take on more than they can handle and they become stressed. Once stress sets in they cannot help others or themselves. Stress is counter to spontaneity. If one is present, the other is absent.

Noncompetitive allows students to work at their own pace. In class the teacher does not arrange activities that put students in competitive situations. Competition divides. Competition may be of value in athletic situations or in other specific contexts. But in a learning context, it does not foster the open and free exchange. As a teacher, it is important to respond to students with helpful comments or suggestions rather than making critical remarks. Critiquing is and in all likelihood will be taken as a form of attacking. If one person attacks another, one takes oneself off balance. Through cooperation and with helpful comments, even when one does not agree with the other, movement continues. Rather than critiquing one might say, “I am seeing it this way what do you think?” With this approach each can take up the dialogue in their own way. This carries an impact. It frees each other to think and be. With a helpful comment it is possible to assist others in finding their own direction. In teaching one does not set the class for divide.

Complementariness rather than contrariness is the approach the teacher embodies. Each student has something to offer. Differences in viewpoint are a part of and enrich the whole. This theme works well with noncompetitive. Complementariness implies that each participates and contributes to the whole. It is a holistic perspective which allows spontaneity to emerge and the energy to carry the liveliness of the class along with each new contribution made.

Avoiding social obligations at first sight might seem confusing for those who are community-oriented. For a teacher it is natural to teach. The teacher is there and available but avoids social obligations that take away from teaching. This does not mean that the teacher does not have social interaction or social skills. It means that one stays with simplicity. Becoming entangled does not help, it overloads and it dilutes the teaching. As noted before the teacher does not take on more than one can do to the best of one’s abilities.

Letting things alone the teacher finds that in the classroom it is best not to try to force things on students. When students are ready they will

learn. The teacher is truly there for them. One finds that students can be self-regulating. This means that if material, presentations, projects or group interaction is set in a certain way students can work on their own with minimal guidance. Students who begin to move off target will self-correct when they see other ways of doing things. This theme works well with non-action.

Harmony is when the teacher is in the flow of things. It is when all things naturally fall into place. It is when students are learning and the teacher is learning. Harmony is different than balance, which implies opposition. Harmony is being in peaceful and respectful coexistence with the students and the unity of all things.

Wandering is another theme that at first sight might be confusing. The teacher wanders through the lecture spontaneously. The lecture is not a straight and narrow highway. It is a path. One tells stories to exemplify points. Students many times remember the stories more than anything else because they are a way of synthesizing the thought. The teacher even wanders around the room while giving a lecture.

Forgetting is something the present writer is getting pretty good at. This theme goes well with humor. It is called self-forgetting. When you are truly in the classroom you are not there. When you are maintaining smooth movements and momentum in a lecture and are in the flow of it, you are not thinking of yourself.

Detachment is letting go or letting things alone. The teacher does not become engaged in most situations. This theme works well with self-forgetting in that one is detached from oneself to be with others. It also works well with avoiding social obligations in that one does not take on more than one can do to the best of one's abilities which is the theme of simplicity. The teacher remains detached so as to help the students. If one becomes too close to students one cannot. Detachment helps one in letting things alone.

The interpretative path of these sixteen themes is without form. It spontaneously disperses in all directions simultaneously at once. This is not the way we think of things but the way we experience them in child-like spontaneity. The teacher utilizes disciplined spontaneity.<sup>6</sup> One who has learned the discipline through study and refined it through practice relies on spontaneity to bring it about. If a teacher had to think up every move to make spontaneity would be stopped. A teacher is a guide to help students develop the ability to think on their own not only in the current situation but in the very depth of life-skills as well.

## Notes

- 1) Tao is worldly with Lao Tzu. For Chuang Tzu it is transcendental.
- 2) In teaching I do not merely use these sixteen Taoist themes, I embody them. I live them. I find the first three are basic to Taoism: spontaneity; incessant change; unity of all things.
- 3) This is not a technique. These themes are qualities that a teacher is and lives.
- 4) The Writing Caruso, in *Experiential Method: Qualitative Research in the Humanities Using Metaphysics and Phenomenology*, by Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), p. 124.
- 5) When teaching teachers I look for personality, compassion, thoughtfulness and care.
- 6) Sunnie D. Kidd and James W. Kidd, *Person to Person Inspiration* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 82.