

IN OUR OWN WAY, TAO

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Every day we are barraged with sights, sounds and information about other countries, their people, their cultures, their trials, tribulations and celebrations. On Saturday mornings we can watch television shows broadcast in different languages. With the advent of mass media and technology, everywhere you look there is a “meeting between” going on, a meeting between East and West, between leaders of state, between ways of life. We are attempting to communicate and to learn to live together. This is the opportunity for a cross cultural pollination.

There is much we can learn from one another about the shortcomings of our own ways. From the Western perspective, we can tell you there are dangers inherent with the ideology of industrialization, when transplanted, transforms only a part of human consciousness. This loosens the ties to legend, myth and communal times of ritual and celebration. Traditional heritage left by generation upon generation of predecessors is uprooted, re-orienting entire nations and disrupting many age-old rhythms of life. Transformation abounds.

The West is action-oriented, the East, in-action-oriented. Western thought was born of logic and analysis. Eastern thought is alogical, holistic and unifying. Western philosophies use high-sounding words, abstract argumentation and complicated theoretics to convince the reader. Eastern philosophers turn to metaphor, stories and examples to express their truths. Each leads to a different way of life. The emphasis here will be a meditative reflection upon where reading Chuang Tzu on the naturalness of life and freedom rings true in the West.¹

In the West our lives are being depleted of opportunities for spiritual and mystical resonance with the eternal and the infinite. With priority given to technology and the rush toward open-ended progress, the pace of life is becoming inhuman and endangering the natural rhythms of life. Ascribing to the view of human consciousness as a computer-like system designed for information storage and retrieval dulls and inhibits the intuitive dimension of human reality, cramping and diminishing our visionary powers. The technology we have created has established a new relationship to time, disrupting the natural rhythms of life. It has created a contrived time, a fallacy, a way of living founded upon the principles of mechanized efficiency and productivity. Tunnel vision prevails. Knowing has become factual and seeing anatomical. The hands of the clock have a firm and relentless grip upon the hands of destiny. Rhythms are no longer deeply felt and experienced as the natural expression of life but are fixed, static,

monotone. The naturalness of life's rhythmic flow has given way to an endless repetitive, circularity measured by the sweep of the second hand.

The fullness of life is not something we can measure. It is a quality which unfolds at its own pace. To distort or interrupt this pace reveals itself in disharmony. Harmony is healthy, the blending and meshing of variety, woven smoothly and gently into a togetherness. Harmony is essential for a comprehensive understanding of a fulfilling and humane approach to living where life rhythms reveal the interconnectedness of nature, the world, the human being and the unity of all things in the universe. The rhythms of life are a natural expression of existence itself. Natural, healthy rhythms are a balance between the person and environment. The quality in life is the by-word, spiritual affinity with Tao, the way.

In the East, harmony is an essential approach to living, allowing natural rhythms to emerge. This encourages an awareness of our interrelatedness and includes the full multidimensionality of existence. Nothing is forced into categories or predefined realities. Each is allowed to be as it is, savored for its individuality and given room to reveal itself as it is and in its relation to the whole. There is a whole field, a horizon of meaning which provides any single experience, object, idea or person with particular meaning. Everything is interconnected, interdependent and seen in a holistic light. The natural expression of this life is given in harmony with the surrounding environment, the seasons, growth, movement and ceaseless change. Life is not static, it flows. The rhythms in personal and social existence must be respected and revered, they are universes of meaning, living realities, organic entities.

With Tao, a reflective, meditative self-awareness is a prerequisite to understanding nature. The rhythm in life displays a living value system. This calls us to be in touch with this beat, to re-awaken to the organic rhythms of the land, nature and our own being. These rhythms are in our work, in our relationship to the tools we use, the connection between our head and hands. For example, a professor teaching in a university moves differently and in another realm of time than a farmer. Their relation to the physical environment and its importance in each of their lives may be worlds apart but the spirit that moves them the same. Here is Chuang Tzu's key, naturalness in being and freedom from the things of the world.²

Western consciousness has been reduced to a reasonable facsimile, conceived as a computer function for information storage and retrieval. Information has always been stored but today's over emphasis on the computer function as a model for human consciousness has cut it loose to become free floating in a flood of rationality. Computers are not only the technological companions of today's reality, they are its creators. Even the *Tao-te ching* is available on a disc. Is this truly the way of the Tao? A re-

grounding of our being brings us into contact with the organic rhythm of a vital and living essence, Tao. That is not available on a disc!

This is not to say that all computers and other technologies of today should be discarded. Here we must heed Chuang Tzu when he speaks of how the true person does not retire from the world or reject society and its inventions.³ There are those who cannot free themselves because they are bound by things. People who live from paycheck to paycheck on credit cards and charge accounts are so ensnared in today's play now, pay later plan that they are living on a borrowed future. The soul on the highway is in hock up to its ears! Chuang Tzu's way is freedom, freedom from the world.⁴ In the West these are truly a mystic's words. Here, we try to own more, "have more," possess more. Instead, we are owned by our possessions, bound by things.

With a deeper and fuller awareness of how the quality of life unfolds in a natural pace, one breathes fully, deeply and re-awakens to the sleeping mysteries of life. To be in balance, in tune with the harmonies of the environment, moving with natural rhythms no longer forced and swept along in a flood of rationality is the way and it is possible, even in the technological wasteland typical of much of modern life.

To live in balance means to reside in the qualitative resonance, to welcome the poetical nature of life's expression and to counterbalance any over emphasis on the analytical, categorical, syncopation of today's rhythms. Rhythms are the inbreathing, outbreathing expression of life. Organic time is living time, meditative, contemplative, beyond the ticking clock. The tick of the clock on the wrist must not drown out the rhythm pulsing within the wrist. Human life is lived in time and space. This relationship is not only an influence on our conception of reality but is an expression of it. Rhythms are a way of life, where the transcendent timeless, a Taoistic time, is the indwelling resonance with nature and life. To appreciate the infinite, the eternal and the magical mysteriousness of the Tao, our relation to the vast array of human experience and meaning, is our potential. It is not so much a question of capturing but one of re-creation and co-creation with Tao.

Today's world is top-heavy with time. Much of it has evolved into the factory suburb metronome syncopation of analytic and rational computer time. Is there an alternative? There is, one called the handmade future. This is a transhistorical time, a calendar punctuated by birth, death, suffering, re-generation, celebration, re-newal and re-creation.

The notion of a handmade future carries with it an ecological consciousness, just as the times in which we live are the creation of collective humankind throughout history. This approach calls for us to first

slow down to begin to catch up with ourselves. To do this one is given time for re-discovery, re-awakening and re-kindling the natural expression of the human spirit. In contemplative meditation one comes into touch with the ebb and flow of consciousness, of life. Rhythm is repetition with alternating novelty, not a mere cycle. It is an alternation between birth, death and becoming, a transformation, a unity with diversity. The rhythm of the heart is the natural beat.

As our lives unfold and the interrelatedness of events provide a direction and a new way of moving, a feeling of our connectedness, of being a part of this flow of humanity surfaces. To live fully in the present is not only to embody a heritage but to bear witness to the promise of a future. The promise is a magnet which draws us into its future fulfillment and realization. This is re-generation, a co-generation with Tao, one in which we have a handmade future.

Today's technological albatross, unlimited progress, has provided an opportunity to re-evaluate, re-think and re-feel our spiritual dimension. The rhythm of spirituality reveals an intimate relationship between the meaning of one's life and experience with Tao. The ways we travel, walking, bicycles, buses, taxis and automobiles all introduce a different relation to time. Each is an influence upon the quality of life. For example, never have we been so aware of the connection between time, distance and money as in a taxi. That clicking box demands more attention than the glaring eye of the television!

By way of contrast, consider when growing a garden. One comes to awareness of the direct connection between the hands and the stomach as one works with the vitality of living. There is an intimacy, a resonance through planting, growing, harvesting, celebrating and resting. These are natural rhythms, seasons come and go. A deeper respect, regard and revelry emerges from participation and cooperation with nature bringing to flower and fruit the promise held within the seed. This is an invitation to take into account the pace of our day to day hustle and bustle and come into accord with other more elemental organic rhythms. When daily activities are co-mingled and guided by these rhythms, life's emphasis is different. The personal, the cultural and socially shared are constantly interrelating and moving through one another, together with Tao. A handmade future is a natural timeless bridge to span the abyss between our traditional heritage and modernity. Our spiritual rhythm is an in depth founding, a far cry from today's instant junk. Quality creates and sustains the balance of a spiritual rhythm, the inexhaustible richness of an unexplainable resonance. Quantity does not. The human being can once again be the instrument of tuning. The re-vitalization of the spirit will keep our hands-on the handmade future.

Simply put, our meeting together here today is the opportunity to learn from each other about our ways of life, seemingly so opposite in so many ways but interwoven by the common unknowable thread of life, each in our own way. In the West where everything has a purpose, a usefulness in the efficient production of the ever increasing “more,” we would do well to ponder Chuang Tzu’s little millipede who says “Now all I do is put in motion the heavenly mechanism in me—I’m not aware of how the thing works.”⁵

Notes

- 1) *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
- 2) *Ibid.*, pp. 114-118.
- 3) *Ibid.*, fn. 14, p. 136.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 84.
- 5) *Ibid.*, p. 183.