

## **“FINDING BALANCE WITHIN THE FLOW”**

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May 20, 2018

This morning's reading comes from Adbusters Magazine, a magazine which wants (in their words) "to change the way we interact with the mass media and the way in which meaning is produce in our society." The following is from an untitled column by Chris Tenove, in the October, 2002 edition:

“Study after study has found that material wealth is not a strong indicator for happiness. In the 1970's, social psychologist Philip Brickman's research at Northwestern University show that, after their initial euphoria, even lottery winners report levels of happiness that are virtually the same as the rest of us. In North America in the last half-century, a period of enormous growth in income and spending, self-reported happiness has stayed constant -- or declined. It seems that once a country reaches a certain threshold of average, basic-needs spending power, more wealth makes very little contribution to the happiness of its citizens.

Why is that the case? Psychologists have found that people rapidly acclimatize to today's new luxury and turn it into tomorrow's necessity. An extra thousand square feet of living space and the latest cell phone are great at first, but they soon lose their power to bring us joy. We adapt to luxury the way the pupil of an eye responds to light. As a result, to continue to increase your happiness through consumption, you have to continually increase the rate at which you consume. Social scientists call this phenomenon the "hedonic treadmill," and any gambling addict can tell you it's a losing proposition.”

Once there was a young student of religious philosophy who decided to take a course on Eastern religions. The first week was spent on Buddhism, and the student learned about finding enlightenment through renouncing desire. The second week started out, and the teacher began by talking about finding enlightenment through balance and flow. The student became more and more agitated because the teacher seemed to be going off on a completely different tangent and wasn't talking about Buddhism at all. Finally she interrupted the lecture to express her frustration. The teacher listened, then told the young student, "I understand your difficulty. Last week, I was talking about Buddhism. That was Zen..." the teacher said. "That was Zen, but this is Tao."

At once the student was enlightened.

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Although eastern religions such as Buddhism and Taoism had their origins in ancient China over 2500 years ago, they are largely unknown in the west. Perhaps this is because while the West focuses mainly on personal salvation as a goal, the East has a different aim – that of enlightenment. Rather than following God's will or trying to get to heaven, eastern religions focus on right living or seeking oneness with the universe. In some ways, I think our own faith shares the goals of eastern religion. After all, Unitarianism itself was heavily influenced by eastern religions during the Transcendentalist movement of the 1830's and even now most of us are looking for some sort of intellectual enlightenment that gives purpose to our lives today rather than promises of salvation in the hereafter. Whether or not we believe in a personal relationship with God, most of us seek meaning that is grounded in human experience rather than being received from On High. But like the student I talked about earlier, we may find it hard to know where to begin when exploring eastern religions.

I have found that the religion which most closely resonates with my own beliefs is Taoism. Most of us are familiar with the Yin-Yang symbol, but the underlying concepts such as Wu Wei, and the even the Tao itself are not as well understood by many. Still, these concepts may inform our Unitarian Universalism and offer a way of finding balance amid the changing circumstances that make up our lives.

Taoism itself is somewhat older than its cousin, Buddhism, and its origins are lost in mystery. The basic text of Taoism is the Tao Te Ching, written twenty five hundred years ago. No one knows anything about their author, and the writings are usually credited to Lao Tse, which means simply "The Old Guy." I suspect the author would approve of this. After all, one of the verses reads, "The Taoist Master may set an example for all beings. Because he has nothing to prove, people can trust his words. Because he doesn't say who he is, people recognize themselves in him." The Tao Te Ching itself is a set of 81 poems (for lack of a better word) that offer a way of looking at the world, and of being in the world that allows us to live simply, to effect change without effort, and to reduce our anxiety about things beyond our control.

Because people are most familiar with the Yin-Yang symbol, this is a good place to begin our exploration of Taoism. The Yin-Yang symbol represents the duality inherent in the world. Female and male, positive and negative, growth and decay, it's from the interaction of these polarities that relationships arise. Unlike western religions which teach us to value one polarity over the other – say, Light over Darkness or Good over Evil, Taoism teaches that there

are no absolutes. This is the meaning of the "eye" in each of the "tadpoles" that make up the symbol. There is no absolute or pure goodness – nor utter evil, for that matter. All light casts shadows. Growth that is not balanced by decay is like a cancer.

Once we recognize this, we are on our way to finding balance in our own lives. When we pursue one side of a polarity exclusively, like pleasure over pain, risk losing our equilibrium. This is the meaning behind today's reading: our quest to accumulate things in the pursuit of happiness doesn't really make us any happier in the long run. Eventually we return to our original level of contentment. But so long as we continue to pursue happiness in this way, we do run the danger of changing the basic equilibrium between our desires and the earth's resources. As we continue to pursue this course, the decreasing sustainability of the world will ultimately result in greater *unhappiness* for us all.

The good news is that while increased consumption doesn't necessarily increase happiness, reduced consumption doesn't necessarily reduce happiness, either. While we may miss having a newest iphone or latest fashion in the short run, our long-term happiness isn't dependent on having these things. In the longer run, giving them up results in a more equitable distribution of resources and creates greater overall happiness as more people's basic needs are met.

Recognizing these basic equilibriums doesn't mean that we should sacrifice basic necessities, any more than we should glorify pain or pursue evil or injustice. Rather, we should acknowledge that these things are also a part of life, and the capacity for these things exists within ourselves. The most dangerous people in the world are those who are so self-righteous that they don't recognize their own shadow sides. As the Tao Te Ching states, "When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly. When people see some things as good, other things become bad."

Finding balance within the flow means maintaining equanimity amid the course of shifting circumstances. There is a famous story of a farmer whose horse ran away. His neighbor tried to sympathize, but the farmer merely said, "so it goes." When the farmer's horse returned with a filly in tow, the neighbor rejoiced, but the farmer merely said, "so it goes." The farmer's son broke his arm trying to tame the filly, and shortly afterward an army came through, conscripting all able-bodied young men for war. The son was passed over because of his broken arm, and to each of these things, the farmer merely responded, "so it goes."

So it goes. Taoists have a basic trust in the universe because they see good and bad as relative, and as traveling in cycles. Even though the yin-yang symbol is actually unmoving, it is also dynamic, evoking the spinning cycles of circumstance. Short term situations tend to balance out in the long run, and every condition contains the seeds of its opposite.

Just think – if Obama had never been President, Donald Trump would almost certainly have been elected. And if not for Trump, we wouldn't have the current wave of Resistance. The pendulum swings, the wheel turns, and the cycle continues.

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This interplay of opposing polarities and the continual unfolding of cycles and successions is a function of what is known as the Tao. Some people have compared the Tao to God, quoting the Tao Te Ching: "There was something formless and perfect before the universe was born. It is serene, empty, solitary, unchanging, infinite, eternally present. It is the creator of the universe."

The Tao may be comparable to God, but in the same way it may be more analogous to the interdependent web, because it doesn't have personal or humanizing characteristics. There is a tendency to think of our seventh principle, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, as an environmental statement, in that our lives are dependent on others in ways that we may never know. But it goes farther than that. As the Tao Te Ching states, "The Tao flows everywhere. All things are born from it, yet it doesn't create them. It pours itself into its work, yet it makes no claim. Since it is merged with all things and hidden in their hearts it can be called humble. Since all things vanish into it and it alone endures, it can be called great."

Seeing the interdependent web in this way opens the concept to new possibilities. The Tao Te Ching begins, "The tao that can be named is not the eternal Tao." Similarly, the interdependent web is vaster and more intricate than we can name, or even conceive. It is not made up of just every thing in the universe, but also of every *relationship* in the universe. And yet, as the Tao Te Ching says, "It never does anything, yet through it all things are done."

If this sounds confusing – well, it is. We live in a confusing world, amid a flow of events that lie largely beyond our control. We watch helplessly as the President wrecks yet another carefully negotiated international alliance. We view with anger and grief yet another school shooting. And we hold a new grandchild for the first time, prepare our gardens for planting, celebrate love, strive for happiness, work for justice. But the Tao Te Ching asks, "Do you want to make the world better? It can't be done. The world is sacred. It can't be improved. If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it. If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it. The Master sees things as they are, without trying to control them. She lets them go their own way and resides at the center of the circle."

And yet... Still, we acknowledge that are called to work for peace and justice. We are pained when we see others in pain – this is the gift and the burden of our humanity. We sometimes feel that we have been wronged ourselves. We want to set things right, to make the world better for ourselves and others. What hope is there?

A Taoist might suggest that a better question would be to ask what it is that we are hoping for. Success? As the yin holds within it the seeds of the yang, achieved success holds the seeds of future failure. Peace? Ah, but peace often contains the seeds of future resentment. Should we hope for happiness, or does that mean simply staving off future sorrows?

Present conditions, what ever they are, contain the seeds of future events. Thus, the Tao Te Ching counsels, "as the giant pine tree grows from a tiny sprout, the journey of a thousand miles starts from beneath your feet. Therefore, prevent trouble before it arises. Put things into order before they exist. If you rush into action, you will fail. If you try to grasp things, you will lose them. Forcing a project to completion, you will ruin what was almost ripe. Therefore the master takes action by letting things take their course."

This "actionless action" is what is known as wu wei. It's not the same as passivity, nor does it mean giving up in the face of opposition. It means rather to go with the flow, to use the momentum of events to work towards one's goals, much as a ju-jitsu master uses his opponent's energy and strength against him. It is written, "In the pursuit of knowledge, every day something is added. In the practice of the Tao, every day something is let go. Less and less do you need to force things, until finally you arrive at non-action. When nothing is done, nothing is left undone."

Wu wei is the art of seeking the path of least resistance, much like a stream does when flowing down a mountain. In fact, this is one reason that Taoism has been called "The Watercourse Way." The Tao Te Ching tells us, "The supreme good is like water, which

nourishes all things without trying to. It is content with the low places that people disdain. Thus it is like the Tao... all streams flow to the sea because it is lower than they are. The sea's humility gives it power."

This humility is important, because it is essential that we let go of our own desires and expectations if we are to act in accordance with the Tao and effect those small changes which may lead to greater results. "The Taoist master," it is written, "gives herself up to whatever the moment brings."

In some ways, this philosophy is summed up in the bumper sticker, "Think globally, act locally." Be aware of events in the wider world around you, but focus on your own affairs. I think about our own spiritual forebears, Michael Servetus and John Murray, who didn't set out to found a new faith, but simply spoke their truths and the people listened. Similarly, Rosa Parks did not set out to change the world. She simply refused to submit to the indignities of an racist and unjust system. But through her, the world was changed.

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In the end, however, the perhaps only thing we can truly change is ourselves. This may be the ultimate wu wei. We can't increase our happiness by buying more or bigger or better stuff, any more than we can avoid sorrow by locking ourselves away from the world. Furthermore, life is not fair when it comes to doling out rewards and punishments, and too often our response to injustice or misfortune is to ask, "why me?"

But an act our wu wei, or actionless action would be to ask, "why not me?" This simple change, from *why me* to *why not me*, allows us to go from bemoaning our fate or seeking blame to accepting our situation and allowing ourselves to move forward. Often there is no why, for life is full of happenstance, and often the only answer to the question *why* is *why not*.

Once we move past blame, we can begin taking responsibility in a literal sense, in that we find ourselves "able to respond" to the situation. It is a respond-ability that comes from our affirmation of how things are in the present, not our dreams of how things once were, or might be in the future. To close with a final quote from the Tao Te Ching: "If you realize that all things change, there is nothing you will try to hold on to. If you aren't afraid of failure, there is nothing that you cannot achieve."

There is nothing you cannot achieve, that is in accordance with the Tao.

Amen, Shalom, and Blessed Be.