

The Teacher as Taoist

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Abstract

Eastern philosophies addressing education (including Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) focus on virtue and wisdom instead of wealth, prominence, and status. Because of this, these philosophies align well with many of the contemporary ideas related to humanistic ideals, holistic views, inter-disciplinary instruction, and constructivist education. Of the eighty-one chapters in the *Tao*, this essay focuses on eleven that not only give an overall impression of the *Tao*'s philosophy but also show how it best relates to contemporary educational issues. The chapters of the *Tao* are first discussed as they directly relate to Taoism, then they are specifically connected to the field of education.

“When I hear, I forget
When I see, I remember
When I do, I understand”
--Ancient Chinese Saying

Eastern philosophies addressing education (including Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism) focus on virtue and wisdom instead of wealth, prominence, and status (His Holiness the Dalai Lama, 1998). Because of this, these philosophies align well with many of the contemporary ideas related to humanistic ideals, holistic views, inter-disciplinary instruction, and constructivist education. At the crux of these philosophies is the *Tao Te Ching*, the ancient Chinese book of wisdom reputedly authored by Lao-tzu. In order to understand how the teachings of Lao-tzu can benefit educators in this culture, a brief history of the *Tao* is necessary as well as a short overview of its major points. Then, a more detailed look at selections from the eighty-one chapters of the book can show specifically how these thoughts are not only useful, but among the most logical and humane educational philosophies.

Approximately twenty-five hundred years ago, during the Golden Age of ancient China, a wise sage named Lao-tzu is thought to have written the eighty-one chapters of the *Tao Te Ching*. Though modern scholars disagree if the book was actually written by one person or is a collection of writings by many, the ideas in the book encompass the full range of Taoist philosophy (Creel, 1970). Taoists hold that understanding develops from instinct and that one must respect lofty virtue, deep sincerity, a love of stillness, devotion to a worthy teacher, and wide learning. It is important to note that even though Taoism is a philosophy and a religion, its implications for education do not include the promotion of Taoist religious practices. Its philosophy is not dependent upon belief in certain gods or prophets. Instead, it focuses on

individuals; a wise individual is unassuming, simple, and not egotistical. Moderation, according to Taoism, means to transcend passion, not suppress it (Nagel, 1994).

Taoist philosophy, though different on several accounts than Confucianism, is similarly based on the central idea of yin and yang. The yin represents earth and the yang represents heaven. Taoists believe that all things contain yin and yang and it is their blended influence that promotes harmony. It is this constant balancing that is at the heart of Taoism and, ultimately, in the interest of the best teachers. All excellent educators allow for give and take and realize that the ability to shift perspective is one of the greatest tools a teacher can utilize (Chan, 1964).

Of the eighty-one chapters in the *Tao*, I have chosen to focus on eleven that not only give an overall impression of its philosophy but also show how it best relates to contemporary educational issues. I will first discuss the chapters as they directly relate to Taoism, then I will connect those meanings specifically to the field of education.

Chapter One: The Way is nameless; the name is not the Way

In the *Tao* it is important to maintain individuality. One should not follow the dictates of any one group. Instead, follow the dictates of a carefully developed personal philosophy. Names can be limiting since other people's definitions are attached to those names. Such names can evoke unnecessary and unwarranted reactions to implied meanings that may or may not be true (Nagel, 1994).

As it relates to educational philosophy, it is appropriate that this is the first chapter of the *Tao*. Too often teachers, administrators, and/or parents align themselves with a certain philosophy of teaching and hold on to it so tightly that they exclude all other approaches. Many holistic educators, for example, were undone by strict adherence to certain philosophies (Miller, 1997). Since all named teaching practices have political implications (such as democratic education, radical education, liberalism, and the pedagogy of the oppressed), the wisest of all teachers would not choose to give a particular name to his or her style of teaching. Instead of using labels such as authoritarian or humanist, taking the best aspects from all approaches will result in the finest possible teacher an individual can be. Too often educators rely on a quick fix method of philosophy. They sometimes expect someone else to enlighten them without taking the necessary steps towards realizing their own Way.

Chapter Forty-Two: Harmony is to be achieved through the blending of the passive and the active-the YIN and the YANG

As discussed earlier, one of the basic principles of the *Tao* is the concept of balancing life. This balance is achieved through the yin and yang. It is important to discuss this concept now because it is closely related to the ideas in Chapter One concerning the Way. A clear and direct path to the Way must be found through balance. Again, an over-reliance on any one philosophy is not wise. No philosophy can be all things to all people in all situations. Instead, one must strive to find the balance in all things.

Wise teachers learn to balance activities that require gathering and analyzing information in "linear ways (yang)" with other activities that involve "creativity, emotional expression, and

personal insight (yin)” (Nagel, p. 125). Students gain from having a balance of both types of experiences. As a teacher I try not to rely on any one instructional approach to. Though I realize that some material is better suited to direct instruction, I also recognize the need for students to create their own meanings and organize ideas for themselves. Teaching this balance in all things in life is one of the many purposes of education. Too often students learn the polar opposites of either being overly dependent on a teacher or not caring at all what that teacher has to say. Good teaching finds the balance that students can take with them throughout their entire lives.

Chapter Forty-Eight: The pursuit of the Way is not like the pursuit of information

Learning is increased by effort day by day but growing in the Tao occurs in effortless ways. Things should occur naturally. At the end of a successful day, the good learner and/or teacher should note that all things flowed (Nagel, 1994).

This chapter holds many of the answers to the question “what is teaching?” Good teaching is not pouring information into the heads of students and expecting them to spit back answers. The good teacher instead lets students learn naturally. It is a difficult concept for many students who want to be spoon fed information as a result of being conditioned by years in school (e.g., “What do we need to write down? Is this going to be on the test? Tell me exactly what to write to get an ‘A’”). Good teachers, though, realize that giving a lecture cannot change students’ philosophies concerning education. These are ideals that are deeply held as the result of a lifetime of experience. In this vein, students need to be allowed to experience their own Way, instead of being led to someone else’s. Trying to lead someone else to your own conclusions is difficult, especially if the material is not factually based. Students need to make their own, informed decisions. I try my hardest to present alternative viewpoints to my students so that they can consider them. I do not try to make them accept those views, but I understand that if they have not even considered them, then their own decisions are not completely valid.

Chapter Sixty-Two: The Tao never rejects a bad person

The *Tao* holds that there is no such thing as a bad person, only one whom has made poor decisions. Likewise, there is no such thing as a good person, only one whom has made good decisions. Keeping this view in mind, teachers should accentuate the positive and eliminate those things that are negative. All people are worth knowing but some people need affection and kindness when they seem to deserve it least (Nagel, 1994).

This chapter of the *Tao* speaks directly to the following educational question: Are students inherently good, bad or neither? The Tao holds that no one is good or bad, they simply make good or bad choices. This is an important view for teachers to take as well. I strive to be the type of educator who does not judge students as being bad and in need of reform. I also do not want to wear rose-colored glasses and assume students are perfect and turn my back on inappropriate behavior. Instead, as an educator I focus on the decisions people make that result in them being perceived as bad or good. Teachers can help students see what alternative decisions can be made. They learn what good decisions students have already made and build on those. They model good decision-making. The attitude that children are inherently bad can only result in negative energy in the classroom and inevitable self-fulfilling prophecies. The belief that

children are inherently good can lead to unrealistic expectations and disappointment. Instead, focus on helping children make the right decisions so that they can go through life in a more positive way. The knowledge that leads to correct decision-making is that knowledge that is most worth knowing.

Chapter Four: Application breeds learning; dig deeply

When interest is high, substance is easily retained. Positive motivation is critical in promoting deep and lasting learning. Substance must also be understood in terms of its usefulness. It must be accompanied by active participation in the experience of gathering, using and sharing information (Nagel, 1994).

This chapter and the following discuss the notion of “what is knowledge” in different ways. According to chapter four, knowledge should be personal. If a student cannot relate to what is being taught, that student cannot be expected to remember it, let alone fully understand it. A strength of good teachers is the ability to make material relevant to those being taught. In order for students to be drawn into a lesson, they must see how it connects to their world. On the surface it is difficult for a sixteen-year-old to understand how *King Lear* could possibly relate to them. After discussing revenge, familial mistrust, and greed, it all becomes clear. This type of teaching, unfortunately, does not occur in the classrooms where teachers simply tell students what it is they should know. The true power of teaching, however, is making the knowledge personal so that the students want to learn more on their own. I am never as satisfied as when a student comes to me and says they have explored other works by an author we have read in class. I know that I have touched that person in such a way that they have taken responsibility for their own learning. It is an amazing and wonderful thing for a teacher to experience.

Chapter Seventy-One: When you don't know, say so

The wise person will admit a lack of information when appropriate. It is impossible to know everything. If you claim to know all there is to know, you have stopped trying to learn (Pi, 1979).

This chapter of the *Tao*, like the previous chapter, gets to the root of the question “what is knowledge?” I believe that knowledge is not something to be quantified and stored so that you can bring it out later to impress people. Knowledge should be something that is arrived at through collaboration. Whether you are reading a book (and thus collaborating with the author) or discussing an issue in class, knowledge should not be the private domain of an individual. It is meant to be shared and discussed. Because of this, it is very likely that teachers will be faced with questions to which they have no answers. It is also likely that students will discover ideas and/or concepts unknown to the teacher. Students respect the teacher who admits not knowing an answer. They are also very attuned to those teachers who bluff their way through discussions concerning topics about which they know little. Teachers should provide insight, provoke thinking, and support ways to obtain information. These are the ways knowledge is created, not through simply telling the students what you know (or in some cases, do not know!).

Chapter Thirty-Two: The Way cannot be mastered

This concept is closely aligned with chapter seventy-one. In the Tao, mastering the Way is never the final goal since the Way cannot be mastered. Instead, it is a life long journey of learning and experience that constantly ebbs and flows. We should always learn from our mistakes and we should never be fooled into thinking that we cannot make them (Nagel, 1994).

A teacher can never hope to have students actually “master” all the content in any given area. No one can expect to do that in one area over an entire lifetime, let alone in five or six areas over the course of one school year. Many teachers, however, believe that they must fill their students’ heads with a certain amount of knowledge by a certain date or that they have failed those students. Instead of trying to spark interest, they push to finish textbooks, do projects, and write papers. Not that these goals do not have merit, but if a student is not confronted with the impetus to want to learn more, they will never start down that path once a teacher is gone. Likewise, many teachers believe that they are the “master” of whatever content they are teaching. To think this, as stated earlier, is ill informed. We are all teachers just as we are all students.

Chapter Seventy-Seven: Excellence is its own reward

Chapter Seventy-Three: There is victory in non-competition

These two chapters are grouped together because they speak directly to the notion of evaluation. Chapter seventy-three asserts that since every day should be seen as an opportunity for growth, there is never the chance to lose. Following the paths of least resistance can bring great rewards. Chapter seventy-seven stresses the notion that excellence is reward in itself and that credit should be shared among all who do the work together. Bragging detracts from collective achievement. In a learning community, there are no winners if even one member loses (Nagel, 1994).

Compared to the Western tradition, these Eastern notions of evaluation are radically different. Instead of stressing a competitive, grade driven process of evaluation that leads to students becoming “obedient to the authority of government and economic leaders” (Spring, p. 53), the Tao promotes cooperation and encouragement. My philosophy has become a necessary combination of these two opposite approaches. While I prefer to involve all students by fostering an encouraging and safe academic environment, I am also bound by the grading system demanded by schools. Grades, however, too often switch a student’s focus away from the learning and towards a supposed outcome. Even students who are motivated to do better because of the incentive of high grades can be distracted. I have had Advanced Placement English students plagiarize papers and cheat on tests because of the pressure to achieve a certain grade. A devaluation of grades and more emphasis on actual learning creates an ideal learning environment. This, however, is difficult given the current structure of education, which is, from kindergarten through graduate school, intensely grade driven. I try to give my students more responsibility for grading. Often, they are tougher on themselves than I would be on them. Instead of grading and then moving on to the next task, I give students time to revise and re-evaluate their work. They have time to ask questions and reflect on what they have done before

moving on to the next project. This is my way of helping students make good decisions instead of poor ones.

Chapter Ten: Do not be authoritarian

Wise teachers have authority but it is not gained from being authoritarian. They are respected as a fellow learner who is working towards the betterment of all society. They insist on self-reliance and cooperation (Nagel, 1994).

Good teachers work together with students to find resources, share ideas, check out opinions, and do research in order to build on experience. They do not rule with an iron fist thus making students afraid to attend class. They do, however, keep the control that is necessary to create the best possible learning environment. Too many teachers create classrooms of extremes. Either they have lists of rules to be obeyed or they let students have free reign. My philosophy is to instead create an atmosphere of trust and respect that breeds its own discipline. It is not an easy task to achieve, but once you reach that mark, it is well worth the effort. I work hard at including all students so that everyone can see that I respect all views, not just a select few. I also confront those who treat others with disrespect. I do not simply ignore the behavior, hoping that it will subside. Disciplining students is one of the things that most distracts from instructional time. It is more prudent to spend more time at the beginning of the year fostering a safe environment that will remain for months to come, than it is to create rules quickly that may or may not be followed. This also gives you a reputation so when other students come into your environment, they know that it is a place to show respect.

Confronting students in an aggressive manner never works. Even if a student backs down, you as the teacher have lost the trust of all students. Confrontation can also lead to violence and that is the worst possible thing for the safety of your class. Teachers need the respect of their students but it is something that must be earned, not forced.

Chapter Nineteen: Reduce selfishness, have few desires

Expanding efforts in a multitude of arenas means that energy and time can be lost to the development of the Tao. Wise teachers and students find pastimes that complement those interests related to teaching and learning. They do not spend time regretting the lack of material possessions, but instead work at getting along without them (Nagel, 1994).

It cannot be convincingly argued that the field of education is financially secure. Most schools need additional funds for textbooks, computers, desks, libraries, and building maintenance. Too often, however, battles for money and materials overshadow the actual teaching in the classroom. After working for years in public schools, I have learned to make due with what I am given. I can teach *Huckleberry Finn* just as well as I can teach *The Red Badge of Courage* or *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. I would love not to be worried by financial matters when teaching but I accept it as a reality.

It is odd to me that the ways of the Tao are seen by some to be a radical departure from current educational practices. It is respectful, nurturing, calm, and personal. It stresses

cooperation and promotes self-worth. These ideals should be not only what all teachers say they want, but they should constantly influence actual practice in their classrooms.

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