

Now, Tao
Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

“What’s this you’re writing?” asked Pooh, climbing onto the writing table.

“*The Tao of Pooh*,” I replied.

“The how of Pooh?” asked Pooh, smudging one of the words I had just written.

“*The Tao of Pooh*,” I replied, poking his paw away with my pencil.

“It seems more like the ow! Of Pooh,” said Pooh, rubbing his paw.

“Well, it’s not,” I replied huffily.

“What’s it about?” asked Pooh, leaning forward and smearing another word.

“It’s about how to stay happy and calm under all circumstances!” I yelled.

“Have you read it?” asked Pooh. ¹

The 6th Century was a wonderful time to be a person interested in spiritual matters. There was an explosion of spirituality all around the world. This was the era of the great Hebrew prophets of the Bible, the Buddha’s life and ministry, the preparation of the major scriptures of Hinduism, such as the *Upanishads*, the *Yoga Sutras*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Zoroastrianism developed in Persia, Athens was in its Golden age, Confucius developed his thinking in China, and at the same time, the Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, the figure credited with developing what would become known as the *Tao te Ching*, or “The Way and Its Virtues,” was supposed to have lived.

As in all religions, and perhaps particularly among those who grew up beside and from the same roots as one another, Taoism is not monolithic by any means. In China, it apparently is most strongly connected with the book called *I Ching*, and is strongly flavored with folk magics, ritual, special deities, as well as the concept of the philosophical recluse living simply, in harmony with nature.

Over time, most major Western articulators of Taoism, including Huston Smith and Benjamin Hoff, have drawn more on the expressions of Taoism as set forth in the *Tao te Ching*. This is most likely because the *Tao te Ching* is a text whose simplicity and beauty is nonetheless hallmarked by a uniquely powerful spiritual effectiveness. It is a handbook for the open-minded and practical spiritual seeker, as its wisdoms often include straightforward directives. *The I Ching* is extremely cryptic and is used largely for making predictions. This morning, we will center our thoughts on the wisdom of the *Tao te Ching*.

¹ all readings from *The Tao of Pooh*, by Benjamin Hoff. Penguin Publishing, NY NY, 1982

It is, I think, one of the greatest appeals of most Eastern traditions that they comment directly and frequently on day-to-day living. Confucius saw the present as being out of step with the past. Therefore, he encouraged a great deal of reflection and respect for ancestors and their ways, and considered the Emperor as the mediator between heaven and earth. He also advocated elaborate systems of behavior, both courtly and governmental. Of Confucius, it was said, "If the mat was not straight, the Master would not sit." The Buddha, on the other hand, felt that attachment to the world led inevitably to suffering and that the goal should always be to seek ways to be set free of the limitations of this world, seeking *Nirvana*, which translates most literally as "no wind."

Taoists see this view of earthly life as limiting and negative as the formalistic views of Confucianism. Taoism says that earth is a reflection of heaven, and that suffering arises when we try to make things happen outside of their true inner nature, when we try to shove round pegs into square holes or teach fish to fly. "The Tao...is the deep source of everything – it is nothing and yet it is in everything. It smoothes round sharpness and untangles the knots."

We were discussing the definition of wisdom late one night, and we were just about to fall asleep from it all when Pooh remarked that his understanding of Taoist principles had been passed down to him from certain Ancient Ancestors.

"Like who?" I asked.

"Like Pooh Tao-Tse (Pooh DOWdsuh), the famous Chinese painter," Pooh said.

"That's Wu Tao-tse."

"Or how about Li Pooh, the famous Taoist poet?" Pooh asked cautiously.

"You mean Li Po," I said.

"Oh," said Pooh, looking down at his feet.

Then I thought of something. "That doesn't really matter anyway," I said, "because one of the most important principles of Taoism was named after you."

"Really?" Pooh asked, looking more hopeful.

"Of course – P'u, the Uncarved Block."

"I'd forgotten," said Pooh.

The predominating metaphor of Tao is of water. Even here, as the metaphor shifts to "uncarved block," or things-in-their-natural-state, the image of water is evoked for the mind, which operates as P'u is still and calm, a reflecting "mirror-mind." We said that Tao says that earth is the reflection of heaven; with P'u mind, our minds open to the Way. After all, as the *Tao te Ching* reminds us, "The Tao/is the breath that never dies. It is a Mother to All Creation. It is the root and ground of every soul – the fountain of Heaven and Earth, laid open. Endless source, endless river/River of no shape, river of no water/drifting endlessly from place to place...it never ends and it never fails."

This unutterable Oneness – "The Tao which can be named is not the Tao" – is the essential teaching of Taoism. The notion of P'u, or the Uncarved Block, is that things in their natural state

manifest their unique power – the power of their inner nature – but when you try to force change, that true power and nature is lost.

Let's look at an example of *P'u*, allowing Benjamin Hoff and his wonderful interpretation of Winnie-the Pooh texts, to teach us. At one time, Pooh, Rabbit and Piglet were lost in the Hundred Acre Woods. Rabbit, being Clever, was leading them home and refused to admit they were lost. They came again and again to a large sand pit, and each time they did, Rabbit would say something like, "Ah, now I know where we are..."

"How would it be," said Pooh slowly, "if, as soon as we're out of sit of this Pit, we try to find it again?"

"What's the good of that?" said Rabbit.

"Well," said Pooh, "we keep looking for Home and not finding it, so I thought if we looked for this Pit, we'd be sure to not find it, which would be a Good Thing, because then we might find something that we weren't looking for, which might just be what we were looking for, really."

..."Try," said Piglet [to Rabbit] suddenly. "We'll wait here for you."

Rabbit gave a laugh to show how silly Piglet was, and walked into the mist. After he had gone a hundred yards, he turned to walk back again...and after Pooh and Piglet had waited twenty minutes for him, Pooh got up.

"...Now then, Piglet, let's go home."

"But, Pooh," cried Piglet, all excited, "Do you know the way?"

"No," said Pooh. "But there are twelve pots of honey in my cupboard, and they've been calling to me for hours. I couldn't hear them properly before, because Rabbit would talk, but if nobody says anything except those twelve pots, I think, Piglet, I shall know where they're calling from. Come on."

And with that, they went home. You see, it is in the nature of Pooh-bears that they should hear honey calling to them. Allowed to simply be present to their inner nature, Poohs and honey can always find one another again. So it is with everything. Once we become still and calm, we reflect the nature of heaven in our own particular, natural way.

Let us now look at one of the most central ideas in Taoism – *Wu wei*. Translated most directly, *Wu wei* means "without making, causing, or doing." Benjamin Hoff points out that the symbol for *Wu wei* developed from the symbols for a clawing hand and a monkey – no tampering with things, no Monkeying Around.

Here the metaphor of water shows itself perhaps most directly. *Wu wei* is the efficiency of water flowing. It does not stop to move rocks out of its way, or trim the grass at the edge of a stream, or put effort into separating the fish into those it will carry with it and those it will throw out onto the shore. Tao flows over and around, seeking the path of least resistance, and carrying or not carrying as it is in the nature of things to be carried or left where they are.

Wu wei. Do without doing.

Which leads me to a last consideration of living according to Tao, or the Way. In the *Tao te Ching* it says, “The sage’s way of Tao is the way of water. There must be water for life to be, and it can flow wherever. And water, being true to being water, is true to Tao. Those on the Way of Tao like water need to accept where they find themselves; and that may often be where water goes: the lowest places, and that is right. Like a lake, the heart must be calm and quiet having great depth beneath it.”

Benjamin Hoff does a wonderful job of describing how our busy Westernized lives resist the message of Tao. We do not simply allow ourselves to be where we are – we are always rushing and trying to be somewhere else. If we are sad, we take a pill or watch a funny movie or get busy doing something to distract ourselves. If we are at the Post Office, where we really are in our minds is at the grocery store, and when we are at the grocery store, we send our minds home to do housework. When we are young we rush toward our adulthood; when we are older, we sometimes fantasize of other days. If you follow the Way of Tao, you allow yourself to be where you are. Let’s talk for a moment about the ‘Bisy Backson,’ as Hoff calls them, drawing from Christopher Robin’s misspelling of “Busy, Back soon.”

The Bisy Backson is almost desperately active. If you ask him what his Life Interests are, he will give you a list of physical activities, such as:

“Skydiving, tennis, jogging, racquet-ball, skiing, swimming, and water-skiing.”

“Is that all.”

“Well, I (gasp, pant wheeze) think so,” says Backson.

“Have you ever tried chasing cars?”

“No, I – no, I never have.”

“How about wrestling alligators?”

“No...I always wanted to, though.”

“Roller-skating down a flight of stairs?”

“No, I never thought of it.”

“But you said you were active.”

At this point, the Backson replies, thoughtfully, “Say, do you think there’s something...wrong with me? Maybe I’m losing my energy.”

...A way of life that keeps saying, “Around the next corner, above the next step,” works against the natural order of things and makes it so difficult to be happy and good that only a few get to where they would have naturally been in the first place – Happy and Good –and the rest give up and fall by the side of the road, cursing the world, which is not to blame but there to show the way.”

The *Tao te Ching* is, in my personal opinion, the most beautiful and restorative religious text I have ever read. It has the virtues of being simple, beautiful, and practical. Anytime I read it, I am refreshed and I regain the clarity of heaven, which the Tao says is my natural state. Quiet yourself and know your inner nature. Let who you are determine your path and your action. Do without doing, or remember to be a human being rather than a human doing. Stay with the present moment, the present experience, your present form. Allowing the Way of Tao to infuse your life can help you find the balance that is a possession you have never lost, only overlooked.

*What holds, what you can trust
is the same as this quietness –
and it is light-hearted.*

*This quiet light-hearted silence
Is the key to being free from emotion.*

*The sage never abandons the Tao
He never lets its weight out of his sight.*

*He may live in a fabulous house,
But he never gets up wanting to.
And though there are always temptations,
She stays unswayed, and smiles.
Losing the weight of the Tao
Means you lose your root;
And when you can't sit still,
You lose the source.*

In the coming week, may you channel the wisdom of Pooh, live in the clarity of the moment, and may heaven shine through you.

Amen.