The Tao Te Ching: An Invitation to the Path of Least Resistance
Delivered at UUCV by Marjorie Speirs
June 26, 2016

My talk today is the last of three loosely-related sermons, the first of which described “natural piety,” a term that I borrowed from the poet, William Wordsworth. The second sermon discussed the Gospel of Thomas, an early Christian document that did not make it into the Christian canon, in which I found parallels with Wordsworth’s natural piety.

As it has been a while since I delivered the first two sermons, I will recap by stating that I understand natural piety to be a quality of reverent alertness or attention, which leads to consciousness of the Divine in all of nature and recognition of the unity of all creation.

For Wordsworth, this recognition was achieved not through reason, but through what he called “wise passiveness,” which was for him, a childlike presence and reverence, free of dogma or theological argument.

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus described us as entering and returning from a place of light. Similarly, Wordsworth described us as coming “not in utter nakedness/But trailing clouds of glory.../From God who is our home.” Also, like Wordsworth, Jesus, in the Gospel of Thomas, taught that one had to be as a child to experience the Kingdom of heaven, which was not a future event, but something available to all who had the eyes to see it. For Thomas’s Jesus, failure to be aware of the Kingdom was a failure of perception.

Today, I am going to talk about the Tao Te Ching, another spiritual text in which I have found Wordsworthian echoes.

The Tao Te Ching is a collection of 81 short poems, written sometime between 500 and 200 BCE, and traditionally attributed to the Chinese sage Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu, is said to have been born around 604 BCE, and to have been a curator of the royal library of the Zhou dynasty. According to legend, he left society at the age of 160 to live in the mountains, and was asked by a border guard, who recognized him as a sage, to record his wisdom before beginning his retreat.

The result was the Tao Te Ching.

Many scholars question whether Lao Tzu was actually a historical figure, positing instead that the Tao Te Ching is a compilation of sayings from various sages originating in the fourth century BCE. Whether written by many sages or one, however, the Tao Te Ching forms the basis for Taoist thought, and has also influenced schools within Buddhism and Confusianism.

I think that it has lessons for us.

“Tao Te Ching” is translated variously as “The Book of the Way” or “The Book of the Immanence of the Way” or “The Book of the Way and of How it Manifests Itself in the World.” The Tao Te Ching itself suggests that this “Tao” or “Way” is indescribable. It begins:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name. (1)

Again, from the Tao Te Ching:

The Tao is like a bellows:
it is empty yet infinitely capable
The more you use it, the more it produces;
the more you talk of it, the less you understand. (5)

1 There are over 100 English translations of the Tao Te Ching (Bebell and Fera 133). I have chosen to use Stephen Mitchell’s translation, because of the poetry of its language and because, as Damian Bebell and Shannon Fera explain in their “Comparison and Analysis of Selected English Interpretations of the Tao Te Ching,” it is the version often recommended for first-time western readers. The numbers in parentheses correspond to the number by which each poem is identified.
Despite these protestations that the Tao is unknowable, the Tao Te Ching goes on to describe the Tao:

Since before time and space were,
The Tao is.
It is beyond is and is not. (21)

The Tao Te Ching provides a further description in another verse:

There was something formless and perfect before the universe was born.
It is serene. Empty.
Solitary. Unchanging.
Infinite. Eternally present.
It is the mother of the universe.
For lack of a better name,
I call it the Tao.
It flows through all things,
inside and outside, and returns to the origin of all things. (25)

It seems, then, that the Tao is both a process and that which is created by the process. All things are partial expressions of the eternal Tao, which brings them into existence, cares for them, and lets them return to their origin.

Again, from the Tao Te Ching:

Each separate being in the universe returns to the common source.
Returning to the source is serenity.
If you don’t realize the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow.
When you realize where you come from, you naturally become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king.
Immersed in the wonder of the Tao, you can deal with whatever life brings you, and when death comes you are ready.

Thus, like Wordsworth, who would have us remember the “clouds of glory” that we trail with us at birth, the Tao Te Ching teaches: “Just realize where you come from:/this is the essence of wisdom.”

In another parallel, the Tao Te Ching, like Wordsworth and the Gospel of Thomas, rejects dualism, embracing instead what in Taosim is called “mutual arising,” as symbolized by the taiji, (display picture) which represents yin and yang, the two polar energies of the universe.

The white section of the taiji represents yang, masculine assertiveness, light, fire, warmth, heaven, and sun, while the dark side of the taiji represents yin, feminine receptiveness, dark, cold, earth, and the moon. The small circles within the interlocking shapes represent yin and yang as they interpenetrate one another.

Taoists see the universe as in a constant evolution from yin to yang and back again. As soon as one aspect reaches its fullest point, it begins to diminish, and the other aspect begins to increase. Through this mutual arising, yin and yang create the Tao. The one cannot exist without the other. Thus, Alan Watts, who explicated Eastern philosophy for Westerners, concluded that “[t]he yin-yang principle is not . . .what we would ordinarily call a dualism, but rather an explicit duality expressing implicit unity.”

As stated in the Tao Te Ching:

When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly.
When people see some things as good, other things become bad.
Being and non-being create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other. (2)

Thus, the Taoist understands that each part of life depends on all others, and that opposites depend upon one another for their meaning. This is, in fact, the interdependent web that our UU principles teach us to respect.

The teachings of the Tao Te Ching were elaborated upon by a sage named Chuang Tzu, who is
estimated to have lived in the fourth century BCE. Some view Chuang Tzu as being to Lao Tzu what Paul was to Jesus, a follower who interpreted the words of his master. Chuang Tzu distrusted logic and believed in knowing through intuition.

Like Lao Tzu, he understood the ultimate problem with describing the Tao: “If it could be talked about,” he wrote, “everybody would have told his brother.” In his text, Chuang Tzu explored mystical transcendence. In one of his most famous conundrums, he recounts his butterfly dream:

Once I, Chuang Tzu, dreamed I was a butterfly and was happy as a butterfly. Suddenly I awoke, and there was I, visibly Tzu. I do not know whether it was Tzu dreaming that he was a butterfly or the butterfly dreaming that he was Tzu.

As suggested by the above passage, Chuang Tzu experienced all of life as in a constant dance and understood that the Tao takes many shapes, none more valuable than another, as it gives rise to life.

As described by Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, Taoism is essentially an attitude toward life. One who wishes to live in harmony with the Tao does so by being receptive and quiet, and living a life of simplicity, communion with nature, denial of selfishness, and mystical union with the Ultimate.

Such a life fosters what the Tao Te Ching calls the three treasures: simplicity, patience, and compassion. These treasures help us to accept what we cannot change, maintain our equilibrium no matter what transpires, and to ultimately live a life in harmony with the Tao.

For a Taoist, to live wisely is to live in a way that conserves life’s vitality by not wasting it on friction and conflict. The philosophy of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu revolves around what Taoists call wu wei, which translates literally as “inaction,” but in Taoism means “pure effectiveness.”

It is important to note that the non-action of wu wei is not passivity, but is instead the refraining from acting against the natural flow of things or against the Tao. One scholar has called wu wei a “spontaneous form of both conscious and unconscious adeptness along the lines of least resistance.”

Thus, wu wei is the essential principle of the Tao Te Ching, which teaches:

The gentlest thing in the world
Overcomes the hardest thing in the world.
That which has no substance
enters where there is no space.
This shows the value of non-action. (43)

In practicing wu wei, the Taoist is like the Tao itself:

The Tao never does anything,
yet through it all things are done.
If powerful men and women
could center themselves in it,
the whole world would be transformed
by itself, in its natural rhythms.
People would be content
with their simple, everyday lives,
in harmony, and free of desire. (37)

Thus, wu wei is a kind of harmony with, or centering in, the Tao.

In the words of Chuang Tzu, “Nonaction does not mean doing nothing and keeping silent. Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be satisfied.”

In his introduction to his translation of the Tao Te Ching, Stephen Mitchell explains:

Nothing is done because the doer has wholeheartedly vanished into the deed; the fuel has been completely transformed into flame. This “nothing” is, in fact, everything. It happens when we trust the intelligence of the universe in the same way that an athlete or dancer trusts the superior intelligence of the body. Hence Lao-tzu’s emphasis on softness. Softness means the opposite of rigidity, and is synonymous with suppleness, adaptability, endurance. Anyone who has seen a t’ai chi or aikido master doing not-doing will know how powerful this softness is.

You know this feeling. We have all felt it, although probably not as often as we would like. These are the times when we are in perfect alignment with life itself. When we are present without self-consciousness.
Chuang Tzu also speaks of this vanishing into the deed:

If the shoe fits, you forget your feet. If the belt of office fits, you forget your waist. . . . Begin with what fits and never let it not fit, then you can forget about fitting.

In seeking alignment with the Tao, Taoists use flowing water as a model. Thus we read in the Tao Te Ching:

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. (8)

The scholar of religion, Huston Smith, explains:

[Taoists] admired the way [water] supports objects and carries them effortlessly on its tide. Poor swimmers flail against it while good swimmers float motionlessly, knowing that it will support them if they don’t fight it. . . . Water is unobtrusive and adaptive; it assumes the shape of its containers and seeks out the lowest places. Yet despite its accommodations, it subdues what is hard and brittle. Its currents carve canyons from granite, and melt the hills we call eternal. (136)

“Poor swimmers flail against it while good swimmers float motionlessly, knowing that it will support them if they don’t fight it. . . .” I love that. How much of our time do we spend flailing, when we could be floating?

“Do you have the patience,” the Tao Te Ching asks, “to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear?/ Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself?”

This is not the first impulse of the Western mind, is it? Could we refrain from striving and doing until the correct action – one that will involve the least conflict and resistance—becomes clear? How would this change our lives?

What if we were to heed these words?:

Fill your bowl to the brim and it will spill.
“Open yourself to the Tao, then trust your natural responses; and everything will fall into place.” (23). So teaches the Tao Te Ching.

“Can you,” it asks:

. . . coax your mind from its wandering
and keep to the original oneness?
Can you let your body become
supple as a newborn child’s?
Can you cleanse your inner vision
until you see nothing but the light? (10)

Can you cleanse your inner vision/until you see nothing but the light? This is really challenging stuff.

And I think it is worth the challenge.

When I am frustrated or scared or angry, reading the Tao Te Ching helps me to remember that I am a part of a mystery much bigger than myself and that on a cosmic level, things are unfolding exactly as they should. When I am able to center myself in the Tao, to remember where I come from, and to remain still before acting, I am better able to deal with the challenges of this human plane.

I am not saying that I am good at this. It is something that I must learn over and over again. I am simply saying that the Tao Te Ching helps me to move me in the direction of spiritual peace.

I have only been able to give you a small taste of the treasures contained in the Tao Te Ching, and much of what you have heard may have washed right over you.

If I have piqued your interest, I recommend Stephen Mitchell’s translation as very accessible for Westerners.

I believe that you will find the Tao Te Ching to be a beautiful and moving companion on your journey through the holy mysteries that we call life and death.