

***IS BLACK AND WHITE BLACK AND WHITE?
On Reality as Tao, Te, Chi, Yin, and Yang***

Sermon by Rev. Jack Donovan, March 5, 2017
Unitarian Universalist Church of St Petersburg

READINGS (see addendum)
Meditation *Tao Te Ching (The Power & Its Way)*
Readings from *Book of Burial* and the *Classic of Rites*, & *Chuang-Tzu*

SERMON

Coming from another culture, Chinese Confucian and Taoist scripture and teachings can seem quite obscure. But we ponder such beliefs of other people and peoples to see if they might have an understanding of life and of how to live it that might enhance our understanding and living. That is one of the intentional religious practices that is unique to Unitarian Universalism among the religions as far as I know, with the exception of Buddhism – another truth-seeking religion.

That practice is formalized in our denomination with the words, “We covenant to affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Our way to that purpose is mapped out with the additional covenantal statement that we will draw from many sources – really, all the world’s wisdom traditions - in that search.

It is possible in other religions, also, to go very high and very deep. The great French Jesuit priest and scientist Teilhard de Chardin once wrote (and I paraphrase from memory), “In meditation at last I went down deep within myself until I reached a final step where the fountain of my being came up beneath my feet and I realized my oneness with my Source.”

Most religious institutions do not affirm and promote such deepening, much less a widening search. Teilhard had earlier been banned by the pope from publishing his writings and sent off to China as a missionary. Perhaps his spiritual; growth was because he was a contemplative. Perhaps it was because he was a highly accomplished paleontologist, enchanted by the findings of evolutionary science back through the mystery of time that suggested to him an evolving future. Perhaps it was exposure to Chinese religious traditions that got him to go deep within himself to his Source and his strength. Each path is worthy. All of them together seem very powerful.

These days, many people around the world are paying attention to the religions of China – Taoism and Confucianism particularly – even the Chinese. Perhaps it’s because of enhanced communication and contact, perhaps

because these religions were forged in response to troubled times and our times also show signs of trouble.

I first came into direct contact with the Chinese religions when I served the U.S. State Department as a Social Welfare and Refugee Adviser in Vietnam during the war. I had thought of Vietnam as primarily Buddhist. But the religious practices of the people varied a good deal more than that. The Vietnamese folk religion of ancestor worship dominated religious practice, interwoven with the influences of Taoism, Confucianism, and Chinese Buddhism, much as it is in China.

In the royal city of Hue where I lived, and in the farming and fishing villages, and in the refugee camps, every home I entered had an altar central to it – on the altars, photos and remembrances of deceased loved ones and bowls for incense and candles for prayer to the ancestors. Across the province landscape were Buddhist temples and altars. In the center of the city, set on the mystical Perfume River was the great imperial palace, built to replicate China's great Forbidden City in Beijing. And across the river from the palace was the University of Hue, symbolically balancing the divine royal power of the palace with the populist order of the Confucian- trained mandarins who had administered public service for 1000 years.

One day, not long before I was to head back to the States, Mr. Nguyen, a gentle older man who guarded our military/civilian team's office compound with an M-16, invited me to his house. The house had a screened-in front porch filled with a variety of small trees, bushes and flowers and a variety of singing birds flitting hither and yon. Mr. Nguyen, his wife, and their son greeted me and, not many steps in the front door, also introduced me to the family altar and its photos and remembrances.

After a while and a cup of tea, Mr. Nguyen showed me his studio where he carved parts of trees and pieced them together with other objects to create imaginary landscapes. He handed one to me and said, "This is a gift for you, for your work for our people." It was a very skillful carving of a four foot long dragon, scales lacquered to a translucent reddish brown, hovering over a little community of three tiny houses and a tiny replica of Hue's famous seven tiered pagoda.

"The divine dragon brings life's power from heaven to earth," said Mr. Nguyen,

And there, my fellow Unitarians and Universalists, is the Taoist and the Confucian metaphor for the ultimate, originating, eternal Reality in relationship with all living things. They know they do not know the dragon's name, so they call it great.

Can you believe in the great dragon? As child, sibling, parent, worker, official,

monk, or elder, could meditation upon the dragon enhance your understanding of the Source and your relationship to it? Confucius was content with the dragon – mysterious, powerful, generous, generative. “Don’t worry about what you can’t know about,” Confucius says. “Just learn about the earthly order and the power that heaven sends. That is sufficient for deciding how best to live.”

The Confucians and Taoists agreed that *De*, as in the *Dao De Ching (Tao Te Ching)* is a word for this dragon power. When spelled with a capital “D” it stood for the ultimate, originating, eternal Power that is Being and that empowers all beings through all time and space.

De with a small “d” is also power – but power bound and limited in its use by time and space. The *de* that is of limited use is not the ultimate *De*, even though it is wonderful.

You will also hear the word *Chi* frequently used in Taoist and Confucian conversation. *Chi* carries the same meaning as *De*, as far as I can tell – and this understanding is endorsed by the famous scholar of comparative religion, Huston Smith in his book *The World’s Religions* (p. 203).

For Taoists and Confucians, *Te* or *Chi* has two aspects – *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* is the activating aspect of power – the power of the candle when the wick is lit, the power of the electrical system when the switch is flicked on, the power of the horse when the reins say “Run”, the power of the voice that asks “Ready?”

Yang is the waiting aspect of power – the power of the candle when the wick is not lit, the power of the electrical system when the switch is flicked off, the power of the horse when the reins are pulled back, the power of the voice that responds “Yes” or “No.”

The *yin* and *yang* of capital “D” *De* is always balanced. The *yin* and *yang* of lower case “d” *de* must be and can be wisely managed by humans to maintain the balance that is essential for harmony and effectiveness. If not done so, the *Tao* Itself takes over in a way that can be shattering to wayward civilizations. And if this is so, we can see why the dark and light of the *De* power are not always black and white. If you spin the *yin-yang* of power into unharmonious imbalance, then a greyness obscures the vision. If you spin the of power into harmonious balance that spreads and enhances power for all, then the light of the rainbow reflects from the dragon’s smile and her translucent scales illuminate the world.

Let me add a note in the hope that you will find yourself reading the Taoist and Confucian scriptures. Often the word *De* is translated as *Virtue* rather than *Power*. But it is *virtue* in the sense of *Moral Force* or *Moral Power*. In its cosmic version, it is the power to create and empower life and living, all to the

good. In its daily use, it could indeed be used for wasteful or life-harming unvirtuous purposes. So I like the neutral word *Power* better than *Virtue*.

And that leads us to talk about the *Dao (Tao)* – which is generally translated as the *Way*. To talk about *Dao* is risky, because as the *Dao De Ching* warns, “Those who know don’t tell. Those who tell don’t know.” And as you could tell from the exchange between the second great Taoism source, Chuang Tzu, and his querier, those who believe they can comprehend the full nature of *Dao* quickly get into deep *dew drops* or deep *daodao* as it is sometimes called.

Nevertheless, the *Dao* persists, and so will I. What capital “D” *Dao, the Way*, persists in doing is, to generously pour forth the *De* power. Exactly what is the *Tao’s* way of pouring forth *De* power? We aren’t yet sure – perhaps something to do with non-empty space and dark and light energies, and singularities and quarks and bosons. If anybody knows, they aren’t saying.

But even in trying to define it only this far, I have crossed the line from the *ultimate originating eternal unnamable Way* into the *individualized created momentary naming way* – *tao* with a small “t”. We need a much bigger box in which to observe and think. But, the Taoists and Confucianists agree, there is no box big enough. The best understanding we are going to get of the eternal *Tao* is from close observation of the temporal *tao*. Down on earth, the eternal *Way of Power* must work through every day and every one, and there be seen – or at least so we Confucian Taoists think.

A closing note of encouragement: The *Dao De Ching* has been translated by more individuals than any other book in history. As far as I can tell, every translation is different in wording and different in interpretation of meaning. Even its title is contested: *The Book of the Way and Its Power?* or, *The Book of the Power and Its Way?* I think a Western translator would be in bounds to decide that *De* could be interpreted *Grace* (the Divine Power) and that *Tao* could be interpreted *Truth* (the Divine Way) – *Dao De Ching, The Book of Truth and Grace* – that might bridge a divide between East and West. I’d bet Teilhard de Chardin would think so.

What each person finds in the provocative proclamations of the *Dao De Ching* and in the Taoist insight and humor of the *Chuang Tze* and in the clear-minded simplicity of *The Analects of Confucius* has made the Taoist and Confucian (and Zen) traditions a treasure trove for those who believe there is a better way for individuals and the world than the one we’re on.

More on that next Sunday. In the meantime, in *Yin-Yang* fashion, let’s keep testing and observing and pondering and testing some more, so we might maximize the dragon power for good on the good earth.

READINGS

Words For Meditation

Tao Te Ching (The Power & Its Way)

The *tao*, the way that you can go is not The Tao.
The word *tao* is not an adequate name for The Tao.
The identified is mother of the ten thousand things.
The Unidentifiable is the origin of heaven and earth. (1)
Unformed, complete before heaven & earth formed,
Solitary and silent, alone and unchanging,
pervading all things without limit,
its virtue grows all; its matter shapes all;
its energy empowers all. (51)
All beings owe their life to it and none depart from it.
It clothes and nourishes all beings,
but does not become their master.
By not making itself great, it does great things. (34)
I don't know its name – best call it Tao,
best call it great. (25)

Reading Before Hymn #175

from *Book of Burial*

The Book of Burial says,
The purpose of burial is to return to the generative *Chi*, the power or energy of life.
Chi moves within the earth and develops so as to generate the ten thousand things....
When *Chi* moves externally, it is generating forms; when *Chi* moves internally, it is generating life....
Life is the condensation of *Chi*....
The *Chi* of *yin* and *yang* –
the life energy in reciprocating, balancing duality –
flows out and becomes wind;
it ascends and becomes cloud;
it descends and becomes rain;
it moves through the ground and becomes the generative *Chi*....
Where *Chi* accumulates to form the ultimate ground,
it then transforms to become the ten thousand things.
(Taoist *Book of Burial*)

Reading Before Sermon

from *Classic of Rites, & Chuang-Tzu*

Confucius acknowledged the truth of the ancient scripture of Proper Order, that the Rites or Ceremonies harmonize the feelings and nature of humans with *Chi*, the energy that produces life, the *Chi* in its *yang* phase of vigor without dissipation of its power and its *yin* phase of remission without vanishing of its power. (Confucian *Classic of Rites*)

Tung Kwo-tze asked Chuang-tzu, 'Where is what you call the Tao to be found?'
Chuang-tzu replied, 'Everywhere.'

Tung-tzu said, 'Specify an instance of it. That will be more satisfactory.'

Chuang-tzu said, 'It is here in this ant,'

'Give me a lower instance.'

'It is in this earthenware tile.'

'Is that really the lowest instance?'

Chuang-tzu said, 'It is in that excrement.'

Tung-tzu gave no reply to this last statement.... (Chuang-tzu 29)