

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Lao-Tse:

'When I let go of what I am,
I become what I might be'

By: Reverend Charles Brock
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Lao-Tse: 604-531 BCE

It isn't easy to make a mystic out of Lao-Tse, the founder of Daoism. In order to answer this we need to have a quick look at the East and its very different forms of religion compared to the West. There are quite different meanings of "God."

The big point is this – the West has God separate from the universe and us, though we can in various ways participate or adhere to the divine being. That is theism, but the East is monist; they believe God is all and is in all and there is no essential separation between the world and God. You are God. God is that table, etc.

But there is a way to view theology that can bring the two together. Paul Tillich said "God is Being – Itself" or "That Which Is." This is a kind of pantheism – God is in everything – the Ground of Being, but God is beyond everything as well: panentheism.

How does Hinduism have 2.3 million gods at last count? Most of these gods are local deities, but there are a few main players on top of the heap. In the 9th century CE, Shankara, using insights from the much earlier Upanishads, claimed that being is One and the many variations we see in gods and people are there, but illusionary. We are all part of the One – i.e. That Which Is.

China never has systematically theologized. Confucius was mainly concerned with right living and just government; Lao-Tse used aphorisms teaching how to live, and Buddhists, who came to China later from India, followed their own guidelines that didn't have separate deities but looked to Nirvana as the great unknown that one could attain with meditation.

Daoists texts for mystical consideration

From ancient times until now the One has been the source of all attainments. By realizing the One[1], heaven becomes clear, Earth becomes still, spirits gain power and hearts fill up with joy.[2] (This is like later Hinduism and Buddhism).

Great indeed is the sublimity of the Creative, to which all beings owe their beginning, and which permeates all heaven.[3] (This sounds theistic, but it need not be. It gives a sense in which the subject can relate here to the great Object – Being Itself).

Life and death are one thread, the same line viewed from different sides.

Music in the soul can be heard by the universe.

The key to growth is the introduction of higher dimensions of consciousness into our awareness.

To the mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders.

When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.

Man's true self is eternal, yet he thinks, "I am this body. I will soon die." This false sense of self is the cause of all his sorrow. When a person does not identify himself with the body, tell me, what troubles could touch him? One who sees himself in everything is fit to be guardian of the world. One who loves himself as everyone is fit to be the teacher of the world.[4]

Become totally empty, quite the restlessness of the mind, only then will you witness everything unfolding from emptiness. See all things flourish and dance in endless variation. To know this process brings enlightenment; to miss this process brings disaster.

When there is silence one finds the anchor of the universe within oneself.

Some aphorisms dealing with life

Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes. Don't resist them – that only creates sorrow. Let reality be reality. Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like.

In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it. (Water is an often used metaphor for life in process in Daoism).

Surrender your self-interest. Love others as much as you love yourself. Then you can be entrusted with all things under heaven.

Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures.

If you want to know me look inside your heart.

A leader is best when people barely know he exists, when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves. (Though Lao-Tse is not primarily interested in government, he gives good advice for leaders in any field. This is the best of modern management theory).

Daoism in contrast to some other religions

The truth is not always beautiful, nor beautiful words the truth. (Plato might not agree).

By letting it go it all gets done. The world is won by those who let it go. But when you try and try, the world is beyond the winning. (Here is the necessity of letting go in contrast to Western religions that normally fosters activists as opposed to quietists).

A Crucial Idea

There is one very important Chinese idea that is life-changing for you and me and for nations as well. It is accepted throughout China in theory, though alas not often in practice. It is called the yin-yang. It was originated by Zou Yan in the 3rd century BCE and fits in nicely with Daoism. It can help all of us. If American politics can be criticized for its binary thinking (“you are either with me or against me”), so too can Western religion. It is hard to know what is the chicken and what is the egg and they may be

both infecting each other with spiritual e-coli over many centuries. One of the ways beyond this dichotomy is the notion of yin-yang which has been around in China for 3000 years. The idea is that there are no binary opposites that cannot interact creatively.



Yin-yang represents the ancient Chinese understanding of how things are. The black and white shapes within the circle represent the interaction of two energies, called “yin” (black) and “yang” (white), which describes the universe and how it works. Yin: negative, moon, female principle in nature, earth, water, below, cold, growth. Yang: positive, sun, male principle in nature, light, heaven, active, fire, above, heat, generation. Countless other applications arise. These balance each other just as things in life are not completely black or white but cannot exist without each other. One should note that yin-yang is not contrasting good and evil – but it is evil is to claim that this figurative representation does not exist.

“Hold your male side with your female side; hold your bright side with your dull side; hold your high side with your low side; then you will be able to hold the whole world.”[5]

This helps us understand how Communist China was able to take in some aspects of capitalism and become the financial powerhouse they are coming to be. They understand that communism and capitalism are interrelated – they are different and, in many respects, opposite but when they interact there is progress. As one of its leaders said, what they need is “socialism [i.e. communism] with Chinese characteristics [i.e. capitalism].” With any version of communalism, the trick is to integrate it with individualism without the extremes that we often find in the West. Basically, the point is not to be unwaveringly ideological on one side or the other. Be both and push both for your country. Doing yin-yang is not just to compromise, but to appreciate the role and benefit of the opposite. According to recent reports, China needs to learn this again for itself with its outrageous persecution of religious minorities of Islam, Buddhism, and Christianity.



Another aspect of Chinese religion is its ability (in theory at least) to get along. Just as in India (in theory at least) there is the belief that all religions are a part of the Great

Oneness. China has an ancient picture summing this up showing Buddha, Confucius, and Lao-Tse.

In this picture to the right, the holy three are actually smiling at each other. Where can you find a picture in the West showing Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad together – (knowing that one is not allowed to show Muhammad in any form, but he could be represented by a symbol)? Western religions have always been at virtual wars with each other.

This Eastern picture is good for mysticism and life in all its forms East and West.

Citations:

[1] “Yi” (in this context) = unity/the One/whole/wholeness/one with Tao. *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, trans Jonathan Star, Penguin, 2001, p 177

[2] *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, trans Jonathan Star, Penguin, 2001 Aphorism 39

[3] This and other quotes not otherwise attributed are from Lao *goodreads.com*

[4] Star op cit Aphorism 13

[5] *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, trans Jonathan Star, Penguin, 2001 Aphorism 28

Lao-Tse: <http://quotesforum.blogspot.com/2015/05/lao-tse-tao-te-king-step-6-to-10.html>

Yin-Yang: gettyimages.com

The Holy Three: <https://jesuslightworker.com/tag/tao-te-ching-lao-tzu-martin-aronson-sayings-of-jesus/>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.

