

In an increasingly complex Western culture where strict reason governs our views of nature and ourselves, we overlook and fail to recognize the simple truth within each and every one of us. This truth is the Tao and nature itself. The Tao in its truest sense can neither be described, explained, nor discussed, but it is something we all experience as being.

"Ah-ha, t'ai chi is the Tao, wu-wei, tzu-jan, like water, like wind, sailing, surfing, dancing with your hands, your head, your spine, your hips, your knees...with your brush, your voice...ha ha ha ha...la la lala ah ah ah...," Alan Watts said about the Tao. It is like a newborn child seeing, hearing, feeling and tasting for the first time without qualities or preconceived ideas as to what he is seeing, hearing, feeling and tasting. In other words, the Tao just is.

Alan Watts, in his book *Tao: The Watercourse Way* discusses the ancient Chinese philosophical system of Taoism. His discussion is in layman's terms, whereby one who is not necessarily endowed with great intellect can still come to grasp the essence of the great wisdom of the Taoists. He basically divides the book into four sections, with each section discussing an essential element of Taoism.

Before venturing into the first element of Taoist thought, which is the principle of polarity, Watts devotes a chapter to the Chinese written language as a sort of introduction to the Chinese mindset.

In this chapter, the written language of the Chinese is paralleled to the Tao, in its simplicity and practicality. Through the use of ideograms rather than an alphabet, things and ideas can be stated with no rigid distinctions between parts of speech. Also, these ideograms give one the ability to say many things at once and to mean all of them.

Ironically, the Chinese written language does not involve a knower as being separate from the known as in a subject and object, which is the essential and underlying truth of Taoism as Watts later points out. For instance, raining needs no rainer and clouding needs no clouder. Subject and object are essentially the same, contrasting with the Western view of objectivity, whereby subject and object are made separate and natural phenomenon become mechanisms that can be ruthlessly exploited.

Finally, in discussing the Chinese written language, Watts emphasizes the sheer beauty of the ideograms aside from their utilitarian advantages. This beauty, as Watts points out, is the same beauty seen in moving water, waves, clouds, flames, and smoke in sunlight, reflecting the Chinese movement towards beauty in nature, which essentially is the Tao.

The Yin-Yang principle of polarity is first element of Taoism that Watts ventures to discuss, for it lies at the very roots of Chinese thinking and feeling.

Watts is quick to point out that the Yin-Yang principle of polarity is not to be confused with ideas of opposition or conflict, in so far as light is "at war" with darkness or good is "at war" with evil. Rather, "...polarity is the principle that + and -, north and south, are different aspects of one and the same system, and that the disappearance of either one of them would be the disappearance of the system."

It is quite the opposite view in the eyes of Western technology, as the world is thought of only in terms to make it better, as in having pleasure without pain and wealth without poverty. Watts points out the dangers of this Western view by showing how technology such as penicillin, nuclear energy, computers and automotive transportation only create more problems than they solve. Watts sums this up by saying that as long as we try to comprehend and control the world it runs away from us. In other words, we cannot interfere with nature nor subjugate it, for it only eludes us by revealing even more of itself.

The Taoist view is simple. "Taoists view the universe as the same as, or inseparable from, themselves - so that Lao-Tzu could say, "Without leaving my house, I know the whole universe. "' Basically, the Taoists believe the art of life "...is more like navigation than warfare, for what is important is to understand the winds, the tides, the currents, the seasons, and the principles of growth and decay, so that one's actions may use them and not fight them." The basic rhythms of this process of nature can then be found in the polarity of yin and yang, or the two poles of cosmic energy by which all things arise and pass away.

Yang is associated with the positive, light-giving qualities of the universe and yin is associated with the negative, dark qualities. Often yang is referred to the masculine and yin to the feminine. Watts makes it clear that "...the art of life is not seen as holding to yang and banishing yin, but as keeping the two in balance, because there cannot be one without the other." I think this is best summarized by Lao-Tzu when he says, "Knowing the male but keeping the female, one becomes a universal stream. Becoming a universal stream, one is not separated from eternal virtue."

Basically, the Yin-Yang principle states that all opposites (life and death, subject and object, sleeping and walking, etc.) are mutually necessary and dependent on one another for their existence. Therefore, the Yin-Yang principle does not imply a duality, but rather an implicit unity. "One yin and one yang is called the Tao. The passionate union of yin and yang and the copulation of husband and wife is the eternal

pattern of the universe. If heaven and earth did not mingle, whence would everything receive life?"

After describing the Yin-Yang polarity in detail, Watts moves on to discuss the fundamental element of Taoism arising from the Yin-Yang polarity. This element is simply the Tao, which in truth is no element at all.

Before discussing Tao, Watts tells us how to achieve the proper state of mind necessary to comprehend its meaning. He tells us to "...lay aside all your philosophical, religious, and political opinions, and to become almost like an infant, knowing nothing. Nothing, that is, except what you actually hear, see, feel, and smell." Most importantly, Watts is trying to tell us to "Simply be aware of what actually is without giving it names and without judging it, for you are now feeling out reality itself, instead of ideas and opinions about it."

The Tao can be best told of as being ordinary consciousness in the way the world is felt naturally by a newborn child, or as Lao-Tzu says, "The Tao principle is what happens of itself." No one is outside or separate from the Tao, nor can one deviate from it. It simply, as Alan Watts would say, "The watercourse of nature" or the ground of all being. The true Tao, however, cannot be known or not known, therefore it can not be spoken of or named.

Since the true Tao cannot be spoken of or named, it cannot be associated with "god" in the sense of the ruler, monarch, commander, architect, and maker of the universe.

The great Tao flows everywhere,
To the left and to the right,
All things depend upon it to exist,
And it does not abandon them.
To its accomplishments it lays no claim.
It loves and nourishes all things,
But does not lord it over them.

One may ask, "If the Tao cannot be spoken of or named, isn't it just non-existence or nothing?" Alan Watts would answer this question by saying that "Verbal description and definition may be compared to latitudinal and longitudinal nets which we visualize upon the earth and the heavens to define and enclose the positions of mountains and lakes, planets and stars. But earth and heaven are not cut by these imaginary strings." In other words, the patterns of nature and the Tao transcend all dualities as in a knower and known or existence and non-existence. The Tao is just the natural movement of yin and yang or the two pairs of opposites in the universe ("The watercourse of nature").

According to Watts, the basic principle arising from Tao is that "The order of nature is not a forced order; it is not the result of laws and commandments which beings are compelled to obey by external violence, for in the Taoist view there really is no obdurately external world. My inside arises naturally with my outside, and though the two may differ they cannot be separated."

Because one's internal and external worlds are mutually dependent, one's "own way" is the "own way" of the universe according to Watts. "Because of the mutual interdependence of all beings, they will harmonize if left alone and not forced into conformity with some arbitrary, artificial, and abstract notion of order, and this harmony will emerge "Tzu-Jan", of itself, without external compulsion."

This natural order or harmony is called Li. It is an organic order and not a mechanical or legal order. "Li is the asymmetrical, non-repetitive, and unregimented order which we find in the patterns of moving water, the forms of trees and clouds, of frost crystals on the window, or the scattering of pebbles on beach sand." Basically all that is being said is that if we do not force nature or try to control it through arbitrary means, it will naturally harmonize with itself through the co-dependence of yin and yang, just as water naturally flows downstream. In other words, we must only not go against the grain of nature, for only there does conflict arise.

One may come to question this natural order of nature by saying that there is nothing concrete by which we can prove it exists. A reasonable reply would be to say that the Tao, and likewise Li, does not belong to the realm of abstract knowledge, logic, and proof, for it is through the Tao itself that these phenomena come into being. The very process of trying to prove that Li exists is what causes it to run away from us, as we fall back into the dualistic trap of knower and known. "Our only way of apprehending it is by watching the processes and patterns of nature, and by the meditative discipline of allowing our minds to become quiet, so as to have vivid awareness of "what is" without verbal comment."

From the principle of Li arises the principle of Wu-Wei, which Watts discusses in the fourth chapter. Wu-Wei can be best understood according to Watts as "not forcing" or not trying to go against the grain of Li or nature. In simple terms it means "...going with the grain, rolling with the punch, swimming with the current, trimming sails to the wind, taking the tide at its flood, and stooping to conquer."

Wu-Wei is considered to be the lifestyle of one who follows the Tao. "It must be understood primarily as a form of intelligence - that is, of knowing the principles, structures, and trends of human affairs so well that one uses the least amount of energy in dealing with them." One

who understands and follows the Tao therefore takes the line of least resistance in all his actions. However, this does not mean one should avoid using any effort. One must rather wait for the right moment, whereby his effort is not forced and goes along with the grain of Li. Apprehending this right moment comes with being aware of the Tao, for as Chuang-Tzu points out, "The mind of the sage being in repose becomes the mirror of the universe, the speculum of all creation." A mind in repose is the Tao itself, and therefore in perfect harmony with Li.

Watts moves to point out that the principle of Wu-Wei is important in understanding government and its shortcomings. Watts says that, "When it comes down to it, government is simply an abandonment of responsibility on the assumption that there are people, other than ourselves, who really know how to manage things." In other words, it becomes a self-serving corporation which proliferates laws of ever-increasing complexity to keep things under control.

What is being said is that government basically tries to force and control nature instead of trusting in it. "The Taoist moral is that people who mistrust themselves and one another are doomed." Only by learning to trust ourselves and others can we make any successful progress in getting back to the course of Li in government or as Watts would say, "The Watercourse Way." "Trust in human nature is acceptance of the good-and-bad of it, and it is hard to trust those who do not admit their own weaknesses."

To stun up the principle of Wu-Wei, it is best to quote Watts when he says "...those who understand the Tao delight, like cats, in just sitting and watching without any goal or result in mind...it does not punish itself or compete with other cats in an endurance test as to how long it can remain immovable - unless there is some real reason for being still, such as catching a bird." Chuang-Tzu best sums up the man of Tao when he says:

His mind is free from all thoughts. His demeanor is still and silent. His forehead beams with simplicity. He is cold as autumn, and warm as spring, for his joy and anger occur as naturally as the four seasons.

Finally, in the last chapter, Watts talks of Te, or the "realization or expression of the Tao in actual living." It involves a sense of virtue, but not the terms of say Christian virtue or following rules. Rather, Te is "...natural virtue, based on inner feeling, as distinct from artificial virtue, based on a following of rules."

This virtue arises from one's realization and awareness of the Tao. In terms of the sage, it is "his unself-conscious and uncontrived skill

in handling social and practical affairs." Once one has realized his or her oneness with the Tao, this Te comes naturally through intuition and must not even be thought of. For as Lancelot Whyte says, "Thought is born of failure. When action satisfies there is no residue to hold the attention; to think is to confess a lack of adjustment which we must stop to consider."

Those who force virtue are more likely to create opposition than good. They try to harmonize with the Tao by stating its principles in words and then following them as laws. Those who follow these arbitrary laws "...are like tourists who study guidebooks and maps instead of wandering freely and looking at the view." In other words, we neglect nature and allow ourselves to be controlled, when we actually already possess the free, uncontrolled and eternal virtue of Te. When 'the rule of law' becomes absolutized and everything is done by the book or the computer, people call out in desperation for the intervention of a reasonable human being."

For one to realize Te, one must go beyond the rules and come to question the validity of what most would call common sense. Therefore, the person of genius, and likewise the person of Te, realizes that "the fountain of creative work is an intelligent questioning of the rules." One who questions is certainly a reasonable man, for "...if you think there are only five colors, you must be blind, and deaf if you think that all music has to be in the pentatonic scale."

The man who has come to realize Te performs in the world with the unity of heart and mind as all his actions are unselfish and in accordance with the Tao.

The real and astonishing calm of people like Lao-Tzu comes from the fact that they are ready and willing, without shame, to do whatever comes naturally in all circumstances. The unbelievable result is that they are far more sociable and civilized than those who try to live rigorously by laws and watchwords.

In conclusion, Alan Watts' book is a successful and enlightening approach to Taoism. He manages to integrate the great truths of the Taoists into a complex and highly materialistic Western culture. Watts realizes that the time has come for us to begin questioning our frameworks of values and thinking in the West and to return to a simpler view of life that is more in harmony with nature. The point being that we must learn to be aware of life without thinking about it, whereby "The watercourse" of nature is allowed to take its own course into the hearts and minds of humanity.

Source

Watts, Alan. Tao: The Watercourse Way. Pantheon Books, New York, 1975.