

Wisdom From The Tao of Pooh
A Sermon by the Rev. Robert L. Morriss

March 13, 2005

For a long time I have been attracted to the concepts of Taoism, and yet I don't think I have ever tried to preach on Taoist thought. This is at least partially due to the fact that whenever I have delved into the texts I have had available, it has been easy to become overwhelmed in thinking about how to present these concepts in a sermon.

The *Tao Teh Ching*, attributed to Lao Tzu is a little like reading the Sermon on the Mount. There is wisdom in each of its 81 chapters - wisdom which, incidentally, often parallels insights into the nature of reality that were later perceived by Jesus - and yet it is difficult to communicate a good picture of Taoism from looking at just a few of them in isolation.

Harold Roth's book *Original Tao*, focuses on the foundations of Taoist Mysticism through a comprehensive pattern of inward training, but again this seems to require practice rather than explanation if one is to come to a significant appreciation of what it has to offer.

Perhaps the best place to begin is by placing Taoism in its context among the three great religions that have influenced people in China for thousands of years. Stephen Karcher does this elegantly in his introduction to *Ta Chuan*, (the great Treatise.) He writes:

“Let us imagine we are in traditional China, sitting in the study of a refined gentleman of taste and leisure. We glance around the room, noticing the antique ink stone and brush, samples of calligraphy from the master and beautiful old bronze ornaments. On the wall we might find a certain scroll painting. It is quite a famous painting and has been copied over and over again, for it has a certain depth and wit and it induces whoever looks at it to reflect on the world in which we live.

“The scroll painting is called the “Vinegar Tasters.” Three men are shown grouped around a large cask where vinegar is fermented. They have each dipped a finger into the cask, drawn it out and tasted the vinegar. Each of the men has a different expression on his face.

“However, these are not ordinary people. We know from their features and the way they are dressed that they are the three great figures of Chinese spiritual life, Kung-fu-tz'u or Confucius, the Buddha, and Lao-tz'u. They represent the three Teachings or Ways of Chinese spiritual life. So we know, too, that this is no ordinary vinegar. It is life itself, everyday life, the dust of the world, the Red Chamber Dream.

“Confucius stands on the right of the picture. He finds the vinegar sour and scowls in distaste. The Confucian Way is based on the ideal of an ancient Golden Age from which we have sadly fallen. Everything must be perfectly ordered through proper ritual, belief and social relations to try to re-create that lost past. The present moment is sour indeed. Can we ever hope to attain the moral

grandeur of the ancient rulers and sages?

“The Buddha stands in the middle. He tastes the vinegar and finds it bitter. His face [mirrors the bitterness he tastes]. For Buddha, this life is illusion and sadness. It most often brings suffering. He stands for a place that is completely beyond time and change – Nirvana, where the winds of desire are stilled.

“On the left stands Lao-tz’u. He is the legendary writer of a series of Teachings on the beauty and mystery of the Tao or Way. Lao-tz’u smiles. He finds the vinegar sweet. His smile is the smile of the valley spirit, mingling with the dust and becoming one with the continual change of things. He mocks Confucius’ concern for propriety and he waves away the Buddha’s expression of suffering. The moment now is all we need. The power of the Way is endless. Stop thinking about it! Find the uncarved block, the face you had before your mother was born. Life, as it is, is sweet.”

Benjamin Hoff, in explaining this same scroll of the Vinegar Tasters to Pooh in *The Tao of Pooh*, emphasizes that this does not mean that Lao-tz’u saw life as sweet like honey. Any life has its ups and downs, its share of scraped knees, and bumped elbows. And yet to the Taoist, the natural world is not a setter of traps to ensnare us, but a teacher of valuable lessons. We need only to learn life’s lessons if we are to live in harmony with the Way and any of us can learn the Way of the Tao if we pay attention. We do not need abstract and arbitrary rules creating additional struggle for us and turning life sour. Rather than turning away from the dust of the world, Lao-tz’u invites us to join the dust of the world. If we appreciate, learn from, and work with whatever happens in everyday life – without giving it layers of meaning it doesn’t inately have – we can naturally develop a harmonious way of living and the happiness that goes with it.

Over the years, Taoist teachings were developed and divided into philosophical, monastic, and folk religious forms. Many of the sayings in the *Tao The Ching* are obviously meant for those who would have been the counselors in a Chinese Imperial Court. They were not only the ones who would have been able to read them, but would also have been the people who were concerned with acquiring status, knowledge, power, jewelry, fine clothes, and all the other symbols of rank and authority which Taoism sees as a distraction from appreciating the essence of life. While I might wish that our current political leaders on a national level had an appreciation for the Taoist approach of leading by doing less, this morning I want to focus on what Taoism means on a personal level as at least partially revealed through some of the adventures of the “Western Taoist” Winnie-the-Pooh.

Before scoffing too much at the thought that Pooh might be able to illustrate the principles of Taoism, consider the following:

“When you wake up in the morning, Pooh,” said Piglet ... “what’s the first thing you say to yourself?”

“What’s for breakfast!” said Pooh. “What do you say, Piglet?”

“I say, I wonder what’s going to happen exciting today?” said Piglet.

Pooh nodded thoughtfully.

“It’s the same thing,” he said.

Now the unbeliever might well say “That’s not Taoism, that’s just a statement from a dumpy little bear that wanders around asking silly questions, making up songs, and going through all kinds of adventures, without ever accumulating any amount of intellectual knowledge or losing his simpleminded sort of happiness.” To which one might respond, “It’s the same thing.”

Now it’s important to point out that to the Taoist, simple-minded does not mean stupid. The Taoist ideal is that of the still, calm, reflecting “mirror-mind” of the Uncarved Block, which Pooh often demonstrates much better than do the thinkers – Rabbit , Owl, and Eeyore.

An example of how discarding our tendency to complicate things can lead one to a basic appreciation of life is contained in the following story.

Now one autumn morning when the wind had blown all the leaves off the trees in the night, and was trying to blow the branches off, Pooh and Piglet were sitting in the Thoughtful Spot and wondering.

“What I think,” said Pooh, “is I think we’ll go to Pooh Corner and see Eeyore, because perhaps his house has been blown down, and perhaps he’d like us to build it again.”

“What I think”, said Piglet, “is I think we’ll go and see Christopher Robin, only he won’t be there, so we can’t.”

“Let’s go and see everybody,” said Pooh. “Because when you’ve been walking in the wind for miles, and you suddenly go into somebody’s house, and he says, ‘Hello, Pooh, you’re just in time for a little smackerel of something,’ and you are, then it’s what I call a Friendly Day.”

Piglet thought that they ought to have a Reason for going to see everybody, like Looking for Small, or Organizing an Expotition, if Pooh could think of something.

Pooh could.

“We’ll go because its Thursday,” he said, “ and we’ll go to wish everybody a Very Happy Thursday. Come on Piglet.”

And so they set off on an adventure in which they encounter Eeyore and his pessimistic brand of thinking, which, while it has its own dark humor, pretty much speaks for itself in its ability to take the fun out of life. And they encounter Rabbit, whose cleverness is illustrated in any number of tales in most of which he is very concerned with Important Things. But let’s join Pooh and Piglet as they meet him this time:

“We’ve come to wish you a Very Happy Thursday,” said Pooh....

“Why, what’s going to happen on Thursday?” asked Rabbit, and when Pooh had explained, and Rabbit, whose life was made up of Important Things, said, “Oh, I thought you’d really come about something,” they sat for a little ... and by and by Pooh and Piglet went on again. The wind was behind them now, so they didn’t have to shout.

“Rabbit’s clever,” said Pooh thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said Piglet, “Rabbit’s clever.”

“And he has Brain,” [added Pooh.]

“Yes,” said Piglet, “Rabbit has Brain.”

There was a long silence.

“I suppose,” said Pooh, “that that’s why he never understands anything.”

Of course it’s not that there’s anything wrong with genuinely understanding things. It’s just that so often, instead of letting things be what they are, we try to understand them by adding a level of meaning to them that they don’t naturally have.

Consider for instance the old story of the Taoist farmer whose mare comes into season, breaks down the coral, and runs away. His neighbors come over to console him, saying how terrible it is that he has lost the horse that pulls his wagon to market. Rather than buying into the drama of the story his neighbors present, the farmer simply replies, maybe it’s bad, maybe it’s good, ... time will tell. In a few days, his mare returns and has a wild stallion with her. His neighbors come over to celebrate his good fortune saying isn’t it wonderful that, while before he only had one horse, and then none, now he has two. Again, the farmer replies, maybe it’s good, maybe not, time will tell. A short while later, while trying to ride the new stallion his son is thrown from the horse and breaks his leg in several places. His neighbors come again to console him, saying how awful it is that his son has been crippled by the horse but instead of buying into their dramatic story the farmer simply replies, maybe it’s bad, maybe not, time will tell. Then in a few weeks, a general comes through the village conscripting all the able bodied young men into the army, and the farmer’s son is left behind as he recovers from his broken leg. Again the farmer’s neighbors try to tell him how fortunate he is that his son has been left behind while their son’s have been taken off to war. His response is, maybe it’s good, maybe not for how can one tell what will happen in the future. The only thing we know for sure is that things will change and that we will fare best if we accept this reality and deal with it as it happens.

The truth is of course, a lot of the drama in our lives is stuff we experience in response to the stories we make up about the meaning of things that occur as part of the natural course of our lives. While our stories can certainly provide us with an emotional roller coaster, they often have little to do with the basic stuff at hand with which we might deal quite differently if we could just get beyond the stories we are creating about the significance of what we are facing.

This has certainly been the case for me as I have been dealing with the news that our grandson will need to have heart surgery shortly after he is born. I have gone from thinking it was too bad that Stephanie needed to go back to France and be away from Jeff during the last couple of months of her pregnancy, to thinking it’s good that she was there - where they do routine ultrasounds as a part of prenatal care, to feeling sad at the discovery of the TGA that will necessitate the surgery, to being glad that they are able to prepare and plan for it ... and that’s before I have even begun to add all the stories my mind is able to create about the surgery’s significance in this baby’s young life.

Who can know what effect heart surgery would have on one so young? It could be traumatizing, or, provided the surgery goes well, it could provide a sort of Lance Armstrong style stimulus to succeed athletically, and the child could grow up to be an Olympic skier as one

knowledgeable friend has suggested to Jeff. Such an early stimulation of the heart chakra could inspire great compassion, or given that his parents are both into computer science, could inspire him to develop new breakthroughs in medical technology. Or if he feels called to politics, maybe he can help bring about a more advanced health care delivery system in this country – though I certainly hope that one is straightened out long before he is of age to do anything about it.

But then I catch myself and recognize that in order to deal with what I know will be a physically painful situation, I am making up stories about how it might come to some good. While it is true that it might, this much I do know. Physical pain usually diminishes as part of the healing process if we allow nature to take its course. When my children were small and fell and hurt themselves it made a big difference how I responded. When I dramatized the injury with looks of horror and anguish, so did they - and their crying increased. And when I was able to keep my need for drama in control, and pick them up with an assurance that while it hurt a lot right now, it would be better in a few minutes – then they too adopted that attitude, and moved through their pain with minimal trauma. And so I find myself working on that Taoist skill of being in the moment, letting life be what it is, and hoping that I can be sufficiently grounded not to add drama and thus trauma and memory to what I hope does not have to be a defining moment in this new young life in any direction.

Pooh looks like a Taoist master to us because, unlike Eeyore who frets, or Piglet who hesitates, or Rabbit who calculates, or Owl who pontificates, Pooh just is. May we all develop his skill of being in the present without overly dramatizing what life hands us. And now lets sing our closing hymn as something tells me it is about time for a little smackerel of something.