

# SEARCHING FOR AN APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN EDUCATION FROM TAO TE CHING

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Certain words - such as formation, transformation, shape, change, fashion and conversion - have been prominent in Christian Education for the past twenty years. These phrases - education for formation, education for transformation, education for conversion, education for change, education as shaping - are very familiar to us, even in our post-modern era. These words indicate that Christian Education, or Religious Education, is excessively teacher-centered; teachers appear to have a lot more power than the learners. We try to set objectives which are as concrete as possible in order to measure clearly the changes effected in the learners. We would like to see the same concrete, analytical results in our abstract imaginative teaching as we do in areas such as the social sciences. The first question is: Is Christian Education for formation, or transformation, or to fashion or to mold? The second question is: How do these objectives, measurable verbs work in Christian Education?

Reflecting on these questions, I see a picture of the educational setting attempting to effect change, working hard to pour something into the person and endeavoring to shape or make the student take the form which the teacher desires. Observing our educational setting, I see very busy teachers trying to pour their knowledge, belief, and even faith into their students, making them express what they learn in concrete ways through activities. However, regarding the outcome of education in the long run, I wonder if I really see the students take the form or shape the teacher intends.

We might discuss this educational phenomenon from the standpoint of Western thought in our history, but I would like to reflect on it from the standpoint of Eastern Taoist thought, using especially Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching. I believe that theories of Christian Education have developed in conversation with Western philosophy, but not with the Oriental philosophies such as Taoist thought which is centered on that of Lao Tzu's thought and has influenced all realms of human life - politics, religion, science, medicine, psychology, art, music literature, drama, design, and warfare. Over the ages not only in China but also in other Oriental countries such as Korea and Japan its method has been practiced widely in people's lives, involving physical and mental exercises, breathing, sexual intercourse, human relations, thinking system and writing, etc. Many think that the Tao Te Ching has mostly influenced on Chinese culture and character. Deep in the hearts of Oriental people is flowing the thought of Lao Tzu. Taoism provides not only philosophical thinking but also a practical way of daily life for the old days and also for the post-modern era. Therefore, today many scholars in Western society have begun to be interested in Taoist thought and scholars in Oriental societies are recognizing again the worth of the Taoist philosophy.

In education circles, especially religious education circles, we have not paid much

attention to Taoist thought. If we turn to this old hidden resource, we might get some new wisdom from the East to help solve some of the problems Christian educators face these days. Taoist literature first appeared in the fourth century B.C. Since this is the initial stage in searching for an approach to Christian education, this paper will limit itself to considering the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu(□□□ □□□) and focus only on understanding education. Of course Lao Tzu never used the word “education,” in the Tao Te Ching or any of his other writings, but I can pull out his thought about education flowing in the Tao Te Ching, since he used other words such as “cultivating,” “learning,” “knowing,” “evocativeness,” and “awareness.”

### **Who Is Lao Tzu (□□, □□)?**

Lao Tzu probably lived in the 3rd year of King Ting of the Chau dynasty (B.C. 604). His name means “Old Master.” He was probably an archivist. We do not know much about who he was, not even where or when he was born. There has been a long debate about Lao Tzu’s biography in the West as well as in China. It is still mysterious. But we do have a collection of his sayings, proverbial wisdom, attributed to him from the 4th century B.C.. A Chinese historian Ssu-ma Ch’ien in his Records of the Historian gave us some personal data about Lao Tzu, his meeting with Confucius, and what he wrote, but the facts are uncertain (Chan 1963, p.35-37).

### **What Is the Tao Te Ching (□□□, □□□)?**

In Chinese characters “Tao(□, □)” means “the way,” “Te(□, □)” “virtue,” and “Ching(□, □)” “sacred book” or “scripture.” So, literally, it is a sacred book of the way and virtue. However, in the Tao Te Ching “Tao” means more than the way; it means also ultimate reality or the Principle. “Te” means much more than virtue; it is also the dynamic power of human beings and everything in the world which comes naturally when the “Tao” is embodied. Mair translates “Te” as “integrity.”

The Tao Te Ching is a short book written with 5,000 Chinese characters. It has 81 chapters; 1 -37 focus on the way of Tao, Tao’s existential aspect; 38-81 focus on the Way of Te, Tao’s functional aspects. In Ma Wang Hui’s Scripture discovered in 1973 the order is reversed. Te (38-81) is first and Tao (1-37) last. Victor H. Mair translated this, the most recent discovery of this ancient manuscript, into English in 1990. Ma Wang Hui’s manuscript is considered at least a half a millennium older than the other commonly translated version (Mair 1990, p xii). In this article I use mainly two translations - Mair’s and LaFargue’s - referring to the Korean and Chinese versions.

Generally it was believed that the Tao Te Ching was written by Lao Tzu in the sixth century B.C. However, there are other opinions about the its author. Mair views “the core of the Tao Te Ching, as having been derived from oral tradition rather than from a single author” (Mair, p. xii). He sees it as the collective sayings of old masters and only attributed to the Old Master, Lao Tzu. (Mair, p.120). James Legge was convinced that the Tao Te Ching is a genuine relic of Lao Tzu, one of the most original minds of the Chinese race (Legge 1962, p. xiv). The two teachings, Taoism and Confucianism, among The Three Teachings (including Buddhism) were indigenous to China. It is assumed that the Tao Te Ching may have originated earlier than during the lifetime of Lao Tzu or Confucius (B.C. 551-478) (Legge, p.1).

In this century the Tao Te Ching has become very popular in Western Society and has

begun to be valued again in Oriental countries. Among oriental classics it is the book most often translated into other languages. This book became familiar to European society when the earliest missionaries came to China. The first translation, a Latin version, was made at the end of the 16th century, and Matthew Raper brought it to England and presented it to the Royal Society on the 10th of January 1788 (Legge, p. xiii). It was completely translated into English in 1842. So far there are more than one hundred different renditions of this Taoist classic in English alone.

## Education as Self-Cultivation(□ □ )

- 54 -

.....

Cultivated (Tao) in one's person, its Te becomes genuine  
Cultivated in the clan, its Te is abundant  
Cultivated in the village, its Te lasts long  
Cultivated in the state, its Te becomes ample  
Cultivated in the empire, its Te becomes vast.

.....

From Tao Te Ching the most important word for education I bring is the word 'cultivate(□, □).' It means literally 'practice,' 'discipline,' or 'helping to grow.' That is, education is cultivation of Tao in oneself, practicing and practicing Tao in daily life. It is disciplining oneself in Tao every day. Education does not come from outside; rather it comes from inside of the person. The crucial factor for education is the self, one's person. If one cultivates Tao in one's self, the person's Te becomes genuine and the person is becoming genuine. What is the genuine Te?

- 55 -

One who embodies Te in fullness  
Is like a ruddy infant.....  
Wasps, scorpions, and snakes do not bite it,  
Fierce beasts do not attack it.

.....

Such is the perfection of its harmony.

.....

- 32 -

Tao will always be nameless, an Uncarved Block  
Although it is a thing of no account,  
No one in the world can make it his subject.

.....

Te does not come from outside, rather is “inherited” as the original endowment of nature. The genuine Te looks like an infant. The infant has the power of life - the life force - to the perfection of its harmony (Chen 1989, p. 184). It is not imposed from outside. Only has an infant possessed the full Te that is the perfection of its harmony. Through self-cultivation one returns to the state of an infant; genuine Te, then one arrives at the perfection of its harmony with all. Through education we help them cultivate infant-like-selves in one person. In other words we try to help them turn themselves back into nameless, Uncarved

Blocks, instead of carving them for some particular qualities, or particular ends we have in mind. We do not try to make them 'big,' rather try to help them discover 'small' in themselves. The Te is willing to go unrecognized. Education is not "carving up" into standardized socially desirable qualities. Rather it is recovering an "uncarved" personality. It is recovering the true nature of the mind. 'Carving' does not bring a better personality, nor does it result in a loss of wholeness, a lessening of being and true worth. Rather by 'carving,' we recover and cultivate the goodness in ourselves ( LaFargue, p. 37, Kang Nam Oh 1996, p. 129). The center of Education is the person, the self who cultivates Tao in herself or himself, and returns to the Uncarved Block. This is the one who knows oneself. Through self-cultivation one arrives at knowing oneself, which is called enlightenment (□,□).

- 33 -

.....

One who knows oneself is enlightenment (□, □)

.....

One who wins oneself is really Strong

.....

One who knows contentment in oneself is wealthy.

.....

### **Education as Valuing 'Nothing'(□, □ )**

- 11 -

Thirty spokes unite in one hollow hub -  
In this 'nothing' lies the wheel's usefulness.

Knead clay to make a jar -  
In its 'nothing' lies the jar's usefulness.

Cut out doors and windows in making a house -  
In their 'nothing' lies the house's usefulness.

Yes:

'Being(something)' makes for profit

'Nothing' makes for usefulness.

- 52 -

.....

Seeing the Small thing is illumination (□, □).  
Abiding in the Weak is strong.

Use your light to return to illumination,

.....

In the Tao Te Ching, from viewing education as self-cultivation, that is cultivating the infant-like self or the uncarved block, we move to education as valuing the “Nothing.” The world we live in is composed of both “being” and “non-being.” These are the two phases of everything: “something” becomes “nothing;” “nothing” brings into being “something.” What we value in our education is “something,” the bigger and larger it is the better it is. We are only

able to see “being” or “something,” which has name and form and is tangible. We see wheels, vessels, houses, and objects in the picture. We are not able to see the existence of “nothing” in the hub, in the pot and in the room which makes the “something” useful. In the Tao Te Ching “nothing” is nameless, formless, and intangible, but makes the thing of functional worth. What is of genuine worth and brings real satisfaction is “Nothing.” “Nothing” gives power and energy to “something.” However, “nothing” makes no impression on others and appears “disgraceful” like an “Uncarved Block.” It is very easy for “nothing” to be alienated or “left-out” in society.

In education we need to see the existence of “Nothing” and value its usefulness, even though it has no name or form. The teacher needs to cultivate insight that helps to see the value of “Nothing” and the potentiality of “Nothing” in all learners as well as in the universe where we live. Tao asks that we turn back to what feels weak, what looks small and what seems to be nothing.

### **Education as Emptying (□,□ )Oneself**

- 4 -

Tao is a whirling empty  
Yet never refills with use;

Bottomless it is,  
Like the forefather of the myriad creatures.

.....

It appears to precede God.

Very intangible -- the origin of the world,  
deep and fundamental.  
It makes the world more quiet  
and filled with harmony.

.....

- 5 -

.....

The space between heaven and earth  
Isn't it like a bellows?  
Empty, but not shrivelled up,  
Set it in motion and always more comes out.

.....

Tao in its original character is emptiness. This emptiness is always large and deep and big enough to hold all things in it. Never does it lack space to fill anything up. This emptiness accepts all things, resolves all problems and harmonizes all things. It is so deep and still. Like a bellows it is empty but never exhausted. The more it pumps, the more comes out. Our being seems evanescent and empty. One who is pursuing Tao cultivates emptiness like a Space between Heaven and Earth. This Emptiness is worth holding onto. Attended to and cultivated, it is a potential source of endless energy. LaFargue notes, just as the "empty" physical space around us is continuously and endlessly producing all the living things that fill it up, the empty state of

mind is a source of boundless energy (LaFargue, p. 35). Then, how does one cultivate emptiness?

- 48 -

To pursue learning, one increases daily  
To pursue Tao one decreases daily -  
Decrease and again decrease,  
Until one arrives at not doing.

Not nothing and yet nothing is not done.

.....

- 81 -

Understanding is not wide learning  
Wide learning is not understanding

The Wise Person does not store up for himself.

By working for others  
He increases what he himself possesses.  
By giving to others  
He gets increases for himself more and more.

"Heaven's way: to benefit and not to harm."  
The Way of the Wise Person: to work and not contend.(LaFargue, p.18)

Here, the Tao Te Ching uses some of the important words in education. Especially it distinguishes between learning in general and cultivating or pursuing Tao. The most important point is that pursuing learning is getting more knowledge or increasing one's knowledge daily, while pursuing Tao is decreasing and decreasing until one reaches at the point of Not doing. It is emptying oneself day by day, following the natural way, until everything can be done by itself. It is emptying the mind and decreasing our doing daily. There is neither intended play nor insistent action. It is education that helps us to follow what comes up naturally, emptying one's desire, action and knowledge. It is not teaching learners to store up knowledge for themselves. It is not wide learning, getting wide information, surfing the web. It seems to follow what the heart says, spontaneously and willingly. In other words, it is becoming a Non-doer according to the Tao Te Ching.

What comes naturally as the result of emptying oneself?

- 7 -

Heaven is lasting, Earth endures.  
What enables Heaven and Earth to last and endure?  
Because they do not live for themselves --  
So it is that they can live so long.

And so, the Wise Person:  
Puts himself last, and so finds himself in front.  
Puts himself in the out group, and so maintains his place.

The personal does not exist for him --  
Isn't this how he can perfect

What for him is most personal?

- 8 -

The highest Excellence is like water.  
Water, Excellent at being of benefit  
To all things,  
does not contend --  
it settles in places everyone else avoids.  
Yes, it is just about Tao. (LaFargue, 16)

For the Tao Te Ching, as the result of emptying oneself, one's life turns to live for others. The real worth of a person is not storing up things for oneself. It lies in selflessly trying to give away things to people, service to others. Empty oneself, then fill it up with others. 'Live for others' is the life for emptiness. Through emptiness we see the place for others. LaFargue interprets the true self or the large self as emptying oneself and the small self as the self-conscious self. Emptying oneself is the true life and the perfecting of oneself.

- 16 -

Attain utmost emptiness,  
Maintain utter stillness.

The myriad creatures arise side by side,  
Thus I observe their renewal.

.....

Then, the Tao Te Ching moves to attain the utmost emptiness. As one reaches to the utmost emptiness, all things flourish together, and we observe their renewal. Through emptiness we see the harmony of all living things in the universe.

### **Education with 'No Goal' (□□□,□□□ )**

- 73 -

.....

The way of heaven  
Not contending but excels at overcoming  
Not speaking but excels in getting answers  
Not summoning, but people come of themselves  
Relaxing, but excels at making plans.

Heaven's net is very wide -  
Loosely woven,  
But it lets nothings slip by.

This chapter shows what is heaven's way. Heaven's way is 'not contending,' 'not speaking,' 'not summoning,' or 'not hurrying,' yet this way wins, responds, arrives, and plans all in a perfect manner (Chen, p. 219). While human ways are contending, speaking, summoning, or hurrying, they do not work well. The net of heaven is vast and loosely woven, yet missing nothing.

- 1 -

The Tao that can be told is not the invariant Tao  
The names that can be named are not the invariant Names.

Nameless, it is the source of heaven and earth  
Named, it is "Mother" of all things.

Always: being desireless,  
One sees the hidden essentials.  
Always: having desires,  
One sees only what is sought.

.....  
(LaFargue, p. 94)

- 2 -

.....  
The wise person:  
Settles into his job of Not Doing  
Carries on his teaching done without talking.

.....  
(LaFargue, p. 92)

- 38 -

The finest Te is not Te-like, so it is Te.  
The poorest Te never leaves off being Te-like,  
So it is not Te.

The finest Te: no working at it, no goal in mind  
The poorest Te: people work at it, with a goal in mind

The finest Goodness: People work at it,  
But with no goal in mind

.....  
- 57 -

.....  
Yes, the Wise Person says:  
I Do Nothing,  
And the people change themselves,  
I live Stillness,  
And the people bring themselves to correctness.  
I do No Work,  
And the people enrich themselves.  
I have no desires,  
And the people by themselves become the Uncarved.

A person without desire observes its wondrous subtleties, while a person with desire observes its manifestations (Mair, p. 59). A person of high Te does not work for it, and a person of high jen (□, □, humanity) works at it, but with no goal in mind. Chapter 57 speaks also of the worth of Not doing. In heaven's way there is neither purposeful action nor intended behaviour. There is neither forced nor formed action.

What wisdom for education can be found in these words? Is education possible without goals in mind? Can we wait for children to be educated in heaven's way? According to the Tao Te Ching, education seems to be possible with "no goal." When teachers set and provide specific and clear goals and objectives, this may actually prevent learners from real learning. It

may prevent them from seeing hidden essentials and ultimate reality. It may remain only superficial teaching and learning. I like to call it prescribed teaching and learning.

When the teacher works hard to change learners, it is difficult to change or enrich them, while if the teacher does not work for change this allows the learners to change themselves. Only when the teacher provides the loosely woven vast net can learning occur in it. If there is forced or purposeful action, there can be pretended learning with pretended action. The teacher is not a supervisor suggesting all details as she or he desires, rather the teacher is an observer of how heaven works for both of them, trusting heaven's way, since he or she is also a continual self-cultivator. This educational adventure is possible when the teacher trusts in the heavenly way and trusts the learner's inherited, natural ability.

Also, it is only possible, when the teacher has an open mind and puts up with the learner's speed of cultivation. Whatever else is needed to improve our educational structure, an equal relationship between teacher and learner is one necessity in order to come to close to the teachings of the Tao Te Ching. The teacher needs to believe that the less the teacher works, the more learners cultivate themselves. The teacher only provides the vast net and together teacher and learners cultivate themselves in it. The vast net for education might be the harmony of all creatures including "nothing," or the oneness of all creatures in the world, including NonBeing.

### **Searching for an Approach to Christian Education**

I have just entered the Taoist thought, so it is too soon to form an approach to Christian Education from Taoist teachings. I will leave this task for tomorrow. However, there is no doubt that the Tao Te Ching offers helpful wisdom for Christian Education in both theory and practice. As I read through the Tao Te Ching, I felt that I was reading the Christian Bible. Most readers will recall the Bible passages parallel to the sayings of the Tao Te Ching quoted in this article. These sayings are not new to Christians, but we have neglected them or not paid enough attention to them. We need to look at Christian Education theory and practice from a different angle than that of our educational history. In the history of Christian Education there has been a different trend which emphasized learners, understanding of education as "nurturing," "unfolding," or "helping," without giving up the role of "teaching." Even understanding education in this way, using these words, there still seems to be unbalanced relations between the teacher and the learner. Aren't there softer words than these- form, transform, change, or shape- which would view education as less purposeful, more spontaneous and natural, demonstrating more balanced relations between the teacher and the learner?

- 43 -

The Softest thing in the world  
Rides right over the Hardest things in the world.  
What-has-No-Being enters what-leaves-no-opening.  
This makes me realize the advantage of Not Doing.

Teaching done by not talking  
The advantage gained by Not Doing --  
Few things in the world can match this.

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