

# **Self-Cultivation as a Way of Christian Education: Exploring Self-Cultivation in the Life and Teaching of Jesus**

Nam Soon Song  
(Knox College, University of Toronto)

## I. Opening Thought

The most important word for education that I find in the Tao Te Ching, the most important work of Lao Tzu who is one of the most influential philosophers to Eastern people, is the word ‘cultivate(□, □).’ According to Tao Te Ching, education is cultivation of Tao in oneself. Not only in education in the Taoist thought or in religious education, but also in education in general, is self-cultivation situated in a very important place. Even in child education we hear the idea of self-cultivation in educational settings. At home also from childhood we used to hear very often the word self-cultivation from parents. However, it seems that self-cultivation does not have a place in Christian education circles. In this paper I would not try to bring theological debates regarding self-cultivation as a way of Christian education, but show the same notion of self-cultivation in the life and teaching of Jesus, especially as it appeared in the synoptic Gospels. This study eventually might show Jesus as a learner. First, I will begin it with the thought of education as self-cultivation in the Tao Te Ching. Let me begin with the definition of self-cultivation.

## II. Definition of Self-Cultivation

The Canadian Dictionary (Gage educational publishing Company, 2000) unfortunately does not have the word of self-cultivation, even though there are 139 words with the prefix “self-.” Only a few of similar words can I find, such as self-control, self-educated, or self-taught. Self-cultivation in the eastern educational sense seems to be a foreign word to the westerners. I look for the word “cultivate,” which says “prepare and use to raise crops by ploughing it, promote the growth, development, or improvement of by time, thought, and effort, etc” There was no meaning in the eastern sense. Dictionary.com has the word self-cultivation defined as the process of educating yourself.

Kwok Pui-lan, a woman Asian North American theologian, explains the importance of self-cultivation in learning in the Confucian tradition.

Learning is not seen as grasping intellectually a body of metaphysical or abstract eternal truth. In the Confucian tradition, learning is for the cultivation of the individual person and the ordering of human society. According to Du Weiming, the Confucian tradition understands the self to be a center of relationships, not an isolated entity. Self-cultivation, in the Confucian sense, is the process of “the broadening of the self to embody an ever-expanding circle of human relatedness.( Kwok 1995, p.36)

In the Confucian sense, learning is for the cultivation of the self, education is helping people to cultivate oneself to understand the self in human relatedness, and discipline the

individual person in the circle of human relatedness, pursuing Tao (the Way) and practicing Te (virtue).

Not only in the Confucian tradition, but also in other eastern thoughts or religious cultures, is self-cultivation the core of education. Self-Cultivation means to discipline oneself to respond to Tao, the oneness of the universe, making balance and harmony in all. Self-cultivation is not limited only to spirit, but extends to whole person, whole being, including the physical body and mind. It results in moral behavior in a well-cultivated body, mind, heart and spirit. Self-cultivation brings in a well-integrated person. Self-cultivation does not carry any concept of locating the self at the center of everything, as most Westerners think. Rather it results in understanding the self as a part of everything in the universe, and the self as a totally connected being. Now let us turn to self-cultivation in education in the Tao Te Ching.

### III. Education as Self-Cultivation in the Tao Te Ching

- 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.

.....

The word 'cultivate' 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 oneself, the person's Te (virtue, power) 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 it 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 does an infant possess 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 learners cultivate infant-like-selves in themselves. In other words we try to help learners 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 learners '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.

.....

We can say that as the person cultivates Tao in the individual person, the person embodies genuine Te, Te in fullness, returns to infant, the uncarved block, arriving at enlightenment. It is the primary education in the Tao Te Ching in which the self becomes the agent in the process of education.

The idea of self-cultivation returning to infant-like-selves reminds me of “becoming like little children” from the teaching of Jesus to his disciples: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”(Matt. 18:3, I use NIV throughout this paper.) And that the vision comes as the result of returning to the state of an infant; genuine Te, “one arrives at the perfection of its harmony with all” reminds me the vision of Isaiah 11:8-9. Then, it seems that there is a room for self-cultivation in Christian Education. I would move to study the notion of self-cultivation in the life and teaching of Jesus only in the synoptic Gospels.

## VI. Self-Cultivation in the Life and Teaching of Jesus

If we understand self-cultivation in the sense of the Tao Te Ching, it seems that there are so many places we can see self-cultivation in the life and teaching of Jesus. In this paper on purpose I would begin with self-cultivation in his teaching.

## 1. Self-cultivation in the teaching of Jesus

At this stage I can see four angles or four processes of self-cultivation in the teaching of Jesus in the synoptic Gospels: self-cultivation as practicing the Way; self-cultivation as cultivating the inner-self; self-cultivation as denying oneself; and self-cultivation as becoming like a little child.

### 1) Self-cultivation as Practicing the Way

Jesus concluded the sermon on the mountain by bringing attention to practice of the way he taught. “Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.”(Matt. 7:24, Lk 6: 46-48) And he warned crowds and his disciples to practice what they teach or preach using examples of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees:

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.”  
(Matt. 23:2-4)

Jesus continued to teach them how woeful it is not to practice the truth they preach and the way they teach throughout Matthew chapter 23 (Luke 11). Also, when he debated with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law with the matter of “clean and unclean,” he said that what is unclean are things come out from the heart of the person. Again Jesus urges to practice what is the way in the story “the Sheep and the Goats”(Matt. 25:31-46) and in “the parable of the Good Samaritan.” (Lk 10:25-37)

Jesus taught us to cultivate ourselves to bear good fruits as follows: “Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but bad tree bears bad fruit.” (Matt. 7:17, Lk 6:43-44); “The Kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit.” (Matt. 21:43) With this teaching, if we remember, Jesus’ saying “The Kingdom of God is within you,” (Lk. 17:21) it seems that the Kingdom of God comes through self-cultivation, practicing what we learn, the Way, Tao. Learning is practicing to bear good fruit. In self-cultivation there is no end, for one has to practice to be perfect, as God is perfect. “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt. 5:48)

### 2) Self-cultivation as Cultivating the Soil

The other teaching of Jesus in which I see clearly the sense of self-cultivation is the parable of the sower. (Matt. 13:1-23, Mk. 4:1-20, Lk 8: 4-15) Jesus illustrates four kinds of persons’ mind: the mind of the person like the path, the mind of the person like the rocky place, the mind of the person like the thorns and the mind of the person like the good soil. An interesting part in this parable is that the farmer, the sower, is not responsible for cultivating the bad place to good soil. Then who is responsible for it? It seems that the soil itself is responsible for the soil. It means that the person who hears is

responsible for it. The person who hears is responsible for cultivating a good mind in one's own person. The person needs to dig around and fertilize one's mind to produce a good crop. Just as the parable of the sower, the parable of the talents says to cultivate what is given to the person and become a good and faithful servant.

### 3) Self-cultivation as Denying oneself

According to the Tao Te Ching through education we help learners to turn back into a nameless, uncarved block, Jesus also taught us to be the least, or servants. It is self-cultivation that requires denying oneself until one dies taking one's cross. Jesus teaches:

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt. 20:26-28, Mk 9:35, Mk. 10:43-45) Again he repeats the same instruction, saying “ The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt.23:11-12, Lk. 14:11) After Jesus predicted his death and said to the crowd and his disciples: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. (Mk.8:34-35, Lk 9:23-24) To follow Jesus is practicing “dying to self.”

### 4) Self-cultivation as Becoming like little children

Just as Lao Tzu taught us to be like a ruddy infant, Jesus taught us to change and become like little children, “unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”(Matt. 18:3, Mk.10:15, Lk 18:17) The subject of changing and becoming like little children is you, the person, self. The person cultivates oneself to become like a little child through the learning and teaching process. The state of a child is the state of full openness to the Way, the Truth.

Therefore, God reveals the Way hidden from the wise and learned: “Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.”(Matt. 11:25) Self-cultivation might not be easy for adults to become like little children, there is a great invitation to us: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”(Matt. 11:29) Self-cultivation is not always hard training; Jesus set us an example and called us to follow him. Then, how did Jesus cultivate himself through his life?

## 2. Self-Cultivation in the Life of Jesus Himself

As John Hull pointed out that “it was certainly Jesus as the Teacher rather than Jesus as the Learner who made the greatest impression upon the Christian mind” (Hull, p. 207), understanding Jesus only as a teacher seemed to create a problem for adult Christian education, unlearning spirituality. ( Hull, p.207) Exploring self-cultivation in the life of Jesus himself might open a new possibility to grasp Jesus as a learner and eventually a new window to see Christian education differently. According to Harpur, there is

evidence of the enlightenment of Jesus, realizing the oneness with God. Harpur claims that the story of Jesus' baptism marked the moment of Jesus own enlightenment.(Harpur, p. 198) Then, it is very clear that Jesus went through self-cultivation as well.

### 1) Before His Public Ministry

“After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished....Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.....And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.” (Lk. 2:46-52)

As all of us are aware, there is not much known about the life of Jesus before his ministry. In the Bible we can see only a few places in which readers can guess his early life. The above passage is the most useful one in which we get hint of his life intellectually and spiritually. Also, in terms of eastern thought I can apply the sense of self-cultivation to Jesus. As he grew up, it seems that he cultivated his mind, body and spirit.(Lk. 2:52) He seemed to grow up in awareness of relatedness to God and others, even though we do not know how he was educated. He seemed to cultivate himself learning through ordinary life.

### 2) At the Beginning of His Ministry

Jesus began his ministry with the baptism and temptation.(Matt. 4: 1-11, Mark 1:9-13, Lk. 4:1- 3) After the baptism he was led by the Spirit into the desert, where he was tempted by Satan for forty days. While he was in the desert, he prayed without eating anything during forty days and nights. At the end he was hungry. Satan tempted him to “turn this stone to become bread,” “ worship me, all will be yours,” and “throw yourself, angels will lift you up in their hands.” He could drive Satan away saying words from the Scripture. As we know, many see that the temptation Jesus experienced here must come from the self, and not from an external devil. Borg says that at the heart of Jesus' prayer was the experience of communion with God. (Borg, P45) Agreeing with him, also for me it seemed to be his final preparation for his ministry going through an intense self-cultivation, examining himself to accomplish his mission. It was learning through self-cultivation, arriving at the perfection of its harmony with all, “filled with the Spirit.”

### 3) During His Ministry

During his ministry from time to time Jesus had quiet time to pray. Borg points out that Jesus often left his disciples to go and pray for such lengthy hours accompanied by solitude, the stilling of the mind and directing of the heart towards God. (Borg, p.44) It can be considered time to cultivate himself, refreshing and recreating himself and affirming the relationship with God: “After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray.” ( Matt. 14:23, Mk 6:46) Jesus prayed in a solitary place. (Mk. 1:35) At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. (Lk. 4:42) Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed. (Lk. 5:16)

Especially, before he took important ministry he always went to mountains to pray. It was time for self-cultivation, bringing himself back fully, engaging in deep relationship with God and renewing his spirituality. I counted this his habitual rituals as his way of learning by listening from God and from inner-self. As examples, he went to pray before calling his disciples: “One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.” (Lk. 6:12) He went up onto a mountain to pray with Peter, John and James. During that time the transfiguration took place and predicted his death to disciples. (Lk. 9:28-29) The praying of Jesus set an example to his disciples; for example, one day Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples asked him to teach them to pray.(Lk. 11:1-4)

During his ministry we see self-cultivation not only in his prayer life in solitary places, but also in his daily ministry. As an example, we see Jesus’ self-cultivation in the story of the calling Levi, eating with “sinners,” becoming a friend of isolated people in his society.(Matt. 9:9-11, Mk. 2:13-17, Lk. 4:27-31) It might have been a very important way of self-cultivation for Jesus, seeing himself connected to those people.

#### 4) At the last Moment of His life

At the last moment of the life Jesus reached the culmination of self-cultivation. It was a beautiful fruit of self-cultivation. Jesus prayed to God at Gethsemane confronting his death (Matt. 26:36-46. Mk.14:32-42, Lk. 22:39-46), “ My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” (Matt. 26:39, Mk. 14:36, Lk. 22:42) It is the culmination of denying himself and accepting the will of God. It is true self-cultivation, arriving at oneness with God, responding to the way(Tao) to death, and embodying Te (the power of life) in fullness.

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

*Who, being in very nature God  
did not consider equality with God  
something to be grasped  
but **made himself nothing**,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.  
(Philippians 2:5-7)*

#### V. Closing Thought

This work is in a very preliminary initial stage exploring self-cultivation in the life and teaching of Jesus through eyes of Lao Tzu, the Tao Te Ching. It is very new, and even feels very strange to most of us. Although self-cultivation in Christian education seems to be too far away, I see much similarity in the traditions of apprenticeship and holistic education, since an apprentice learns more than skills and requires more practice, and learning self-discipline is very important.(Melchert, p. 294) Also, Miller describes that holistic education “attempts to bring education into alignment with the fundamental realities of nature. The focus of holistic education is the whole person, not just those aspects that will prepare the students for the workforce.” (Miller, p.1) Therefore, if we

study further these three traditions, we may discover an approach to Christian education as a life long education in which learning and teaching go together, breaking the hierarchy between the teacher and the learner. We also discover Jesus as a true learner, but a learner who is very different from the sense of learner in our day. We discover Jesus as a teacher who broke the hierarchy between the teacher and learner through continual self-cultivation throughout his life.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aronson, Martin (ed), *Jesus and Lao Tze: The Parallel Sayings*, Berkeley: Seatone, 2003
- Borg, M.J. *Jesus: a New Vision, Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship*. San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987
- Chen, Ellen M. *The Tao Te Ching- A New Translation with Commentary*. New York: Paragon House, 1989.
- Coy, Michael W., (ed.) *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Method and Back Again*, Albany:State University of New York Press, 1989
- Grassi, Joseph A., *Teaching the Way: Jesus, the Early Church and Today*, Washington: University Press of America, Inc, 1978
- Harpur, Tom, *Prayer: The Hidden Fire*, British Columbia: Northstone Publishing, 1998.
- Hull, John M., *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991
- Kwok Pui-Lan, *Discovering The Bible in the Non-Biblical World*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995
- LaFargue, Michael. *The Tao of the Tao Te Ching*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992
- Leong, Kenneth S., *The Zen Teachings of Jesus*, New York: Crossroad, 1995.
- Manson, T. W., *The Teachings of Jesus: Studies of Its Form and Content*, rev.ed. Cambridge University Press, 1935
- Melchert, Charles F., *Wise Teaching*, Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998
- Miller, John P., *The Holistic Curriculum*, Toronto: OISE Press, 1996
- Miller, Ron, "Philosophical Foundations" In C. L. Flake (ed), *Holistic Educaation: Principles, Perspectives and Practices*.(pp.78-9). Brandon: VT: Holistic Education Press, 1993
- Oh, Kang Nam. *DoDuck Kyung*. Seoul: HyunAm Sa, 1996.