

THE TAO OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

by

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The origins of Taoism are lost in the mists of time. It is highly probable that it was developed as a philosophy in China during the 4th and 5th centuries B.C. The Chinese word TAO literally means way or path, but it can also be a method or principle.

Taoism is strongly associated with Lao Tsu through the book *The Tao Teh Ching* which has become well known and popular in the West. There is some doubt as to whether Lao Tsu actually existed as an individual, but if he did, he would have lived some time during the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. - the time of Confucius. (Alan Watts believed that Lao Tsu did exist and wrote the *Tao Teh Ching* single handed. See *Tao - The Watercourse Way*, Pelican 1979).

The Tao is something which can only be felt intuitively. It cannot be classified, described in other than metaphorical terms, or broken down into its constituent parts, dissected weighed or measured. The concept of Tao is close to a similar idea of the Universe which is now gaining ground in the West. By this I mean the movement which has begun to question how useful it is to attempt to understand 'the nature of things'

by breaking them into smaller and smaller component parts, rather than taking a more 'holistic' view and gaining an appreciation of the interdependency of things.

This 'interdependency' is, in terms of Taoism, best illustrated by the ideas of Yin and Yang. These terms are now well known to us in the West, but rarely used in the original Chinese sense. Most Western usage reflects cultural preconceptions that severely distort the original meanings. Briefly, Yin corresponds to all that is contractive, responsive and conservative, whereas Yang implies all that is expansive, aggressive and demanding. Further associations of Yin include, earth, moon, night, winter, moisture, coolness and interior, and of Yang include heaven, sun, day, summer, dryness, warmth and surface. It is important to remember that in Chinese culture Yin and Yang are nothing to do with moral values. "What is good is not Yin or Yang but the dynamic balance between the two; what is bad or harmful is imbalance". So remarks Fritjof Capra in his excellent book *'The Turning Point'* (Flamingo 1983). In the same book Capra goes on to warn us against the danger of portraying women as passive and receptive,

(Yin) and men as active and creative, (Yang). "This imagery", he says, "goes back to Aristotle's theory of sexuality and has been used throughout the centuries as a 'scientific' rationale for keeping women in a subordinate role, subservient to men".

In Taoism, all manifestations of the Tao are created by the dynamic interplay between these two forces. This gives us the idea of the Universe and everything in it as being in constant motion or 'process'. As Yin increases it gives way to Yang and vice versa. It is important that these two opposites are not seen as separate things, but different expressions of the same thing. Man is not Yang, nor woman Yin. Each of us has Yin and Yang, and the way we are reflects the constant interplay of these two forces. This constant flow and exchange is an integral part of the behaviour of the Universe. Chuan Tsu (probably a contemporary of Lao Tsu) called it the 'constant flow of transformation and change'. This idea has its parallels in the ideas of Carl Rogers and other Humanistic psychologists, though they have different names for it.

Capra believes that in the West we have shown a consistent strong preference for Yang values. "According to Chinese wisdom", he says, "none of the values pursued by our culture is intrinsically bad, but by isolating them from their polar opposites, by focusing on the Yang and investing it with moral virtue and spiritual power, we have brought about the current sad state of affairs. Our culture takes pride in being Scientific, our time is referred to as 'The Scientific Age'. It is

dominated by rational thought, and scientific knowledge is often considered the only acceptable kind of knowledge. That there can be intuitive knowledge, or awareness, which is just as valid, is not generally recognised". (From The Turning Point).

Taoists believe that imbalance in Yin and Yang is the cause of disease, disorders and physical and psychological malfunction. In the body Yin and Yang can be thought of as kinds of energy which flow along certain defined pathways or meridians. Other examples of the Yin and Yang polarity in modern psychology come easily to mind: introvert-extrovert, cognitive-affective, subjective-objective, intuitive-rational etc. It is worth stressing that neither end of the spectrum is considered good or bad, again it is the balance between the two which is important:

*Tao gave birth to One;
One gave birth to two;
Two gave birth to three;
Three gave birth to the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry Yin and embrace Yang.
The two primordial breaths blend and produce harmony.
(The Tao Teh Ching. Chapter 42. Taken from 'the Guiding Light of Lao Tsu Quest Books 1982 by Henry Wei).*

This means that Tao gave birth to Yang (spirit or heaven), Yang gave birth to Yin (matter or earth). 'three' symbolically means Yin and Yang united. 'The ten thousand things' is a lyrical Chinese way of saying 'everything'.

Another principle central to Taoism is the principle of Wu-wei, and this again finds parallels in the work of many Humanistic psychologists, particularly Rogers, but these will be discussed a little later.

In the words of Lao Tsu:

*Tao is eternal and devoid of action,
Yet there is nothing it does not do.
If kings and nobles can preserve it intact,
The ten thousand things will reform of themselves.
(Tao Teh Ching, Chapter 37.
Henry Wei translation op.cit.)*

Wu-wei can be translated as 'non action', but this is often misunderstood. It does not mean indolence, apathy or laziness. Neither does it imply a passive acceptance of everything, no matter how dangerous, bad or uncomfortable. Wu-wei can also be translated as 'not forcing', and as Alan Watts says: "This is what we mean by going with the grain, rolling with the punch, swimming with the tide . . ." (Tao -The Watercourse Way. Alan Watts op.cit.)

One way to think of Wu-wei is to think of it as avoidance of those actions which are contrary to the harmony of the Tao, which serve only to disturb the natural processes of change and growth, and the adoption of actions which are intended to facilitate and restore nature's way.

An interesting perspective on Wu-wei developed by Alan Watts is that Wu-wei encourages us to be fully human, and to trust in human nature,

rather than attempt to control it by force: ". . . a true human is not a model of righteousness, a prig or a prude, but recognises that some failings are as necessary to genuine human nature as salt to stew. Merely righteous people are impossible to live with because they have no humour, do not allow the true human nature to be, and are dangerously unconscious of their own shadows . . . 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". (Alan Watts op.cit.)

Wu-wei, as a principle of life is returned to again and again in the Tao Teh Ching, and to me there is an obvious similarity between this concept and a central concept underlying much Humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychotherapy stresses a trust in the individual to be able to adopt a positive, creative attitude towards change and growth. The formative tendency in Roger's terms, the actualising tendency in Maslow's, even Jung's process of 'individuation' can be trusted to promote a positive direction, the role of the therapist is to try to create the conditions whereby this can happen, not to try to force or meddle with the individual's process of gaining understanding and meaning. To quote from Rogers:

The individual in this nurturing climate is free to choose any direction, but actually selects positive and constructive ways. The actualising tendency is operative in the human being. It is still further confirming to find that this is not simply a tendency in living systems

but is part of a strong formative tendency in our universe, which is evident at all levels . . . We are tapping into a tendency which permeates all of organic life - a tendency to become all the complexity of which the organism is capable . . . And perhaps we are touching the cutting edge of our ability to transcend ourselves, to create new and more spiritual directions in human evolution". (C. Rogers 'A way of Being' Houghton Mifflin 1980)

Wu-wei is not a passive process of simple, unquestioning acceptance, but an active process in which the greatest arbiter and authority is the process of **experiencing**. Wu-wei implies the ability to make choices based on an appreciation and trust in the naturally creative and positive direction of the Universe (the Tao). In order to have such an appreciation we must be open to our own experiences of the Universe. In psychotherapy many clients present themselves as defensive and untrusting of their own experience. The process of change, of growth, brings with it a loosening of rigid structures and personal constructs. "Clients seem to move toward more openly being a process, a fluidity, a changing. They are not disturbed to find that they are not the same from day to day, that they do not always hold the same feelings toward a given experience or person, that they are not always consistent. They are in flux, and seem more content to continue in this flowing current. The striving for conclusions and end states seems to diminish". (C. Rogers. *On Becoming a Person*. Constable 1961)

There is too a Yin/Yang dimension to the idea of a formative or actualising tendency, as its opposite expression is entropy. This is the well known mathematical principle of the tendency of systems to move towards disorder and deterioration. The universal tendency for systems to disintegrate has been well studied, but Rogers points towards the opposite tendency, that of the move from simplicity to complexity, from chaos to order, and this is just as important a phenomenon as entropy. Rogers sees this tendency at work at all levels of organic life, and sees its expression also in an individual's psychological functioning, moving through psychotherapy from a state of relative internal chaos to one of relative internal order.

Although the formative tendency and the Tao are not the same thing, as concepts they appear to be closely allied. Both Lao Tsu and Rogers show a faith in the natural processes of the Universe, and a desire to find ways for persons to give these processes expression in the world. Neither wishes to interfere with these processes, as to do so leads only to destruction, in the case of psychotherapy of the individual's freedom to be, and in the case of science of the natural environment. This not to say that either Lao Tsu or Rogers are anti-science, but they are both aware of how science can be used creatively or destructively.

There are a number of general similarities and parallels between Taoism and Humanistic psychology and psychotherapy, and it is at this

general level that comparison is most meaningful. Both take a 'holistic' view of nature and view mankind as intellectual, affective and spiritual and do not exalt one of these dimensions over the others. They both see a positivity and creativity at work in the Universe which can be trusted and valued in each of us.

Both Lao Tsu and the Humanists like Rogers and others are, in their distinctly separate ways, part of the same tradition. The culture of objective knowledge, of reason and intellect has much to recommend it, and Rogers himself has shown how good, objective science has achieved a great deal in the search for closer and closer approximations to the truth. Yet one has the sense that in our competitive, rational world there is something missing. The promotion of Yang at the expense of Yin leaves a sense of incompleteness. Today, there is a strong movement towards a science which can combine reason with intuition, objectivity with subjectivity and so on. This 'new paradigm' science has much in common with Taoist ideas of harmony and balance.

In the world of psychotherapy the Humanistically oriented therapists

of whom Rogers is one of the originals and still most influential have shown that psychotherapy can be based on trust in the individual. Behaviour modifiers and psychoanalytically oriented therapies take a distinctly pessimistic stance on questions of 'human nature'. To Rogers and to Lao Tsu there is nothing to be afraid of in the dark recesses of the mind. Experience has shown again and again that where a therapist can provide a safe psychological climate in which the client can feel accepted and understood, the tendency of the client is to take positive steps towards self actualisation. Therapists who try to overpower and manipulate their clients (and I fear that some so called Humanistic therapies do this) succeed only in frustrating the search for existential meaning and corrupting the growth and development of their clients.

The Tao of psychotherapy is the way of naturalness. It is the way of gentleness and respect for individual persons. Taoists seek only to provide the conditions in which there can be harmony and balance. If as psychotherapists we can do this for our clients, it may be all that is needed for growth and change to happen naturally.