Notes and Sources on Taoism and Taoist Training

These extracts from web sites and books are intended to help instructors develop their understanding of how the Taoist Tai Chi Society and the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism are grounded in the Taoist tradition. It is hoped that these materials may stimulate interest in consulting other materials listed on the Taoism reading list, and of course it also motivate us to re-double our own practice!

Some core ideas of Taoism

The Meaning of the Concept of Dao

Firstly, Dao is the eternally existing Origin of the world: it knows no limits in space or time. According to Laozi, it is an undifferentiated whole which precedes the existence of Heaven and Earth. It is empty, silent and formless; it grows independently and is inexhaustible; and eternally revolves without ever stopping. It is the Source of all beings. In the Laozi ( 老子 Laozi ) it is said:

"There was something undifferentiated and all-embracing,  
Which existed before Heaven and Earth.  
Soundless and formless, it depends on nothing external  
And stays inexhaustible.  
It operates with a circular motion  
And remains inextinguishable.  
It may be considered the mother of all things under heaven"

It is so ancient, and so fundamentally different from all other beings, that it does not have a name, and cannot be described in ordinary language. However, in order to describe it, we cannot but give it a name, so it is called 'Dao' ( 道 Dao ), or also 'Great' ( 大 Da ).

Another Daoist theorist, Zhuang Zhou, also said in the chapter "The Great Patriarch" of the Book of Master Zhuang ( 莊子 Zhuangzi ), that "Dao is a reality that can be trusted even though it has neither behaviour nor form; it can be transmitted from heart to heart, but not by words; it can be obtained but not seen. It is its own root, and existed prior to Heaven and Earth. It created the Spirits and Divinities, and gave birth to Heaven and Earth. It is higher than the Supreme Ultimate yet is not high; it is under than the Six Directions ( 六極 Liuji ) yet is not deep; it precedes all creation yet is not old; it is farther than the remotest antiquity yet is not distant".

The above makes clear that Dao is the origin of all existence; it is both the first and last of all beings, and knows no limits in time.
The law of motion of Dao is movement toward the opposite

Laozi's conception of Dao is rich in dialectical thinking. He considered that Dao is in a process of constant cyclical motion, always following the law of return to the opposite. Concepts such as Being and Non-Being, high and low, long and short, before and after are all relative and mutually generating. Fortune and misfortune depend on each other, each always turning into its opposite. Who can master the turning point of these transformations? Why is Dao never in a normal state? Normality will become abnormality, the good shall turn to evil. These deep thoughts were not only inherited by successive generations of later Daoists, but also had a deep influence on the entire body of Chinese philosophy. On the foundation of Laozi’s thought, later Daoist scholars developed concepts such as 'the Dao of Heaven is Return from the Ultimate' (極而反，天之道 also Ji Er fan, Tian Zhi Dao ye ), which has become a famous maxim regarding the Chinese approach to reality. Related to this, Daoism considers that softness can defeat hardness. Laozi said that softness is an expression of Dao. For example, water is the softest thing under Heaven, but when it attacks hard objects, none can resist it in the end. Therefore the softest thing in the world can circulate freely amidst the hardest things. Self-effacement and softness are the basic principles of Daoist methodology and approach to people and things; they also count among Daoism's unique characteristics.

Spontaneity is an attribute of Dao

The Laozi (老子 Laozi ) says that 'Man follows Earth, Earth follows Heaven, Heaven follows Dao, Dao follows Spontaneity". Dao is the ultimate existence; no other existence is above it or precedes it. Therefore, it does not follow anything but itself. Though Dao is its own ruler, this does not mean that it intentionally rules other things, but that it respects the natural development of all beings and of the world. According to Heshang Gong's Han dynasty interpretation of 'Dao follows Spontaneity', "the nature of Dao is Spontaneity (自然 Ziran ); it is ruled by nothing."

Opposition between Man and Spontaneity

All beings have their own nature, which is spontaneous. Here, the term 'Spontaneous' is equivalent to the commonly used term 'Natural' (天然 Tianran ). The Perfect Man of Nanhua (南華真人 Nanhua Zhenren ) considered that cows and horses originally lived in a state of natural spontaneity, but that when men forced them to wear harnesses, they infringed on the spontaneity of the cows and horses. Man also originally had his own nature, but has been reined in by fame and locked up by fortune, to the point where he has lost his natural spontaneity.

Source: The source of all the above material is the Daoist Culture Centre Database maintained by the Fung Ying Seen Koon temple in Hong Kong. There is quite a bit of other interesting material there – visit the web site at http://en.daoinfo.org/wiki/Main_Page
Summary of key Taoist concepts

All Daoist religion is based on the notion that there is a way, a logic or a rationale that governs the relationship between humans, the earth and the heavens. This is the Way, the evolving cosmic process in which these three dimensions of life are interrelated, and mutually constituted. Daoism, like science, generally rejects the notion that things are the result of some capricious trickster-like spirit or chaotic force, but rather asserts that there is a basic principle of organic communication within the evolving universe. For Daoists the world is explainable and there exists a principle of communication between the various types of life in the universe because all forms of life and power depend upon the Dao as their mother or matrix. Importantly this is true for gods and spiritual beings, just as much as it is for human beings and fish. This is why the Daoist pantheon, unlike the West Asian religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, contains no supreme creator god: in Daoism all deities, like every other life form, are manifestations of the primordial Way.

A universal theme of Daoism is cyclical motion, the rhythm of life that arises from the ground, flourishes, decays and eventually returns to its point of origin. Daoism takes this pattern to be a foundational pattern for the way all life operates. The universe is dynamic and alive, but it dances to a clearly discernable pulse, a binary pulse or a cosmic heartbeat according to which everything around us is undergoing a process of expansion and contraction. Nothing in the world stays the same. Transformation is constant, but this transformation is regular and in principle understandable.

The name for this pattern in Daoism – and in all of Chinese culture – is yin and yang. The words themselves refer originally to the shady side of a hill and the sunny side of a hill respectively. Of course the important feature of this idea is that the shady and sunny sides of the hill are constantly changing: the side that is in the sun in the morning will be in the shade in the afternoon and vice versa, and this goes to show how nothing in the world ever stays the same. The basic yin-yang dynamic is thus summed up in the famous yin-yang symbol.

From this basic pattern two important points emerge about the nature of the Dao. The first is that everything is constantly transforming itself. The second is that opposites in the world are complementary. Thus there can be no black without white and vice versa, no good without evil, no strength without weakness, no male without female, no boom without bust, and no joy without sadness. When one fully internalizes this realization, it becomes clear that the goal towards which human beings should strive is balance and harmony rather than the ultimate victory of one perspective over another – since there are no ultimates.

Source: James Miller, Daoism: A Beginner’s Guide, p. 51-54
Taoist training

Master Moy established the Taoist Tai Chi Society and Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism in order to make available a set of methods for Taoist training. The objective of these methods is ‘dual cultivation of body and mind’: to develop a body of perfect health and a calm mind free of selfish desires. And ultimately the purpose of this transformation is to merge into greater harmony with the Dao. This is also termed ‘Return to the Source.’

Return to the Source (or Return to the Origin)

In Taoist internal alchemy the goal is to ‘Return to the Source’ (huanyuan 還元). Return to the Source has a number of levels of meaning. First it means returning to our Original Nature (benxing 本性). Second, it means returning to our original state of being. The original state of being has two aspects: consciousness and body. First we shall consider what is meant by ‘returning to our Original Nature.’ There is a spark of goodness in all of us. This is the Original Nature with which we are born. As we interact with the world around us, our Original Nature becomes clouded as we become self-centred, greedy, and accumulate bad habits and vices. We need to purge our bad habits so that our Original Nature of goodness can guide our thoughts and actions. Understanding and practising the Eight Virtues (bade 八德), as discussed in Chapter Two of this volume, are steps toward returning to our Original Nature. Self sacrifice, giving, and losing self-centredness are manifestations of our Original Nature of goodness.

Perhaps Master Moy's own behaviour is the best example of how these principles are put into action. Master Moy spent considerable effort in raising funds for the International Taoist Tai Chi Centre, the Golden Age Centre, the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism’s branches, and numerous other causes. He travelled widely to spread Taoist Tai Chi internal arts and to train instructors at local branches. When asked how we should thank him for his instruction, Master Moy’s answer invariably encouraged us to use our skills to help others, whether by volunteering to teach or to attend to the myriad of things needed for running the organization. He was asking us to help spread Taoist Tai Chi internal arts so that others may receive the benefits of practising these arts just as we received them from him. Practising these arts is not just performing the physical movements in the way Master Moy demonstrated to us. We must be able to share our skills in the internal arts with others without the intention of satisfying self-interest. Only then are we practising these arts well.

Return to the Source also means returning to the original state we were in before we were born. In Taoist terminology this is referred to as ‘earlier heaven’ or ‘before birth.’ Before we were born, while we were in our mother’s womb, our body and our consciousness were in a state untouched by the outside world. Consciousness in this state is described as wuji 無極 (limitless); the body is described as the ‘golden’ or pure body. We shall first look at what is meant by ‘returning to the original state of consciousness.’ Then we shall look at what is meant by ‘returning to the pure body.’ In the state of wuji, the mind is able to see through the myriad forms of appearances and realize that appearances are but transient phenomena. What is real and permanent is Original Nature. When we are born and come into contact with the world our consciousness becomes differentiated. The Taoist texts say ‘from wuji 無極
comes *taiji* 太極 (great ultimate), from *taiji* comes *yin* 隱 and *yang* 陽, from *yin* and *yang* comes the four directions (*sixiang* 四象), cardinal points of the *bagua* 八卦 (eight trigrams), and from the *bagua* spawn all phenomena in heaven and earth.' As we continue to live in the world, our consciousness turns farther and farther away from the original state of *wuji*. This means that we have lost our ability to see our Original Nature. One of the goals of Taoist internal alchemy is to return to the state of *wuji* so that we can recognize that the only thing that is real and permanent is our Original Nature. Recall the first meaning of Return to the Source. It meant returning to the Original Nature of goodness which is inherently in us.

In Taoist training, mind and body are equally important. Transformation of both is necessary for the completion of the transformation (internal alchemical) process. Thus, it is said that in Taoism, both life (returning to the Original Body) and human nature (returning to our Original Nature) are cultivated (xingming shuangxiu 性命雙修).

**The Three Taoist Treasures**

In Taoist internal alchemy, *jing*, *qi*, and *shen*, are the Three Treasures, sometimes called the three energies. The internal alchemical process starts with the cultivation of *jing* or generative energy. Many things can damage or deplete the *jing*, including illness, substance abuse, excessive stress or worry, casual and frequent sex, bad eating habits and lack of rest. Training in *Taoist Tai Chi* internal arts helps to recover our health and vitality so that *jing* can be prevented from dissipating.

The second stage of the internal alchemical process involves the gathering of the *qi* (internal energy) with *jing* as a catalysing agent. Once the *qi* is gathered it can be channelled through the body, breaking the blockages that have accumulated since we were born. At this stage the practice of the *Taoist Tai Chi* internal arts prepares the body and the internal organs for the *qi* to flow freely through the meridians. The meridians are channels in our body connecting the various parts of the body to each other. When circulation along the meridians is opened, all parts of the body are connected and *qi* can flow through the body without hindrance. Thus, Zhang Sanfeng said that in motion, the body must be ‘strung together throughout.’ Master Moy often spoke about how every part of the body should be connected. On one level, he meant that the arms, legs, and spine are connected such that movement of the spine propels movement of the arms and legs. On another level, connectedness means internal connectedness, in that all the meridians are open and *qi* can travel from one part of the body to another.

The third stage of the alchemical process is the transformation of *qi* into *shen* (spirit). When *qi* flows unhindered through the meridians and consciousness is turned inward, *shen* emerges. The emergence of *shen* is likened to the birth of a baby. This is the consciousness which sees through all transient phenomena and recognizes that only Original Nature is real. At this point the body has also returned to a state like that of a newborn. Master Moy has often described how taijiquan can make our skin and bones and body resemble those of a baby, flexible, supple, and spontaneous. The final stages of Taoist internal alchemy involve gathering the *shen* to embrace the non-differentiated state of being in which mind and body, thoughts and actions are united. This is referred to as ‘returning to the Tao’ or ‘at one with the Tao.

Source: *A Path of Dual Cultivation*, Chapter 1
This equal emphasis on techniques for the cultivation of body and mind, and on the oneness of body and mind, has recently led scholars of Taoism to use the term ‘biospiritual practice’ to describe Taoist training methods. In doing so, they recognize the unique characteristics of Taoist practice with its detailed focus on techniques for bodily health as well as spiritual development, compared to most other religious and spiritual traditions.

In Taoism, both one’s body (or, more properly, one’s body/heart/mind/energy/spirit) and the social, political and physical matrices within which one’s personal life takes place – i.e., realities that Taoists often called one’s ming, ‘facts that cannot be changed’ – are deemed not only to be real and important, but, in certain key ways, fundamental to one’s practice of personal transformation. (Russell Kirkland, Taoism: The Enduring Tradition, p. 194)

The Three Vehicles of Taoist Training

Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism observes the unified teachings of the three religions of China: Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Its mission is to deliver both the living and the dead from suffering. It does so in three different but interrelated ways: by promoting acts of compassion to others, by observing religious rituals and ceremonies, and by providing training to facilitate the dual cultivation of the body and the mind. These are the Three Vehicles of Taoist training.

Carrying out the Mission

All of the three religions mentioned above encourage us to transcend our earthly selves and become enlightened. Buddhism calls this reaching Nirvana; Taoism calls this achieving the Tao; Confucianism calls this becoming a Sage. In all three religions, the path toward enlightenment is the same. It starts and ends with compassion toward all sentient beings.

Performing good deeds and rendering service to the community cultivates compassion. From the karma and retribution point of view, such acts reduce our karmic burden, our transgressions against nature and others in our past lives. Selflessly helping others trains us to put less emphasis on counting personal gains and losses. This is an important step toward transcending ourselves and is a key part of what the three religions understand as cultivation of the mind or spirit.

Observation of rituals and ceremonies is an integral part of any religious practice. In Taoism and Buddhism, the rituals pay respect to the Deities, ask for blessings for the living, and comfort the dead. In Confucianism, there are sacred rites for many things including favourable weather and good harvest. It is also said that ‘a sutra is a path.’ The act of chanting the words of a sutra or scripture reminds us of the teachings of the Buddhas, Immortals and Sages. The chanting in the ceremonies is also an excellent form of exercise that works on the respiratory system and promotes circulation in the body.
The practice of the rituals associated with the temple and with chanting further assist in cultivating our Original Nature. For example, to offer incense, we place a stick in the middle of the incense burner, making sure that it is straight. This reminds us that we need to be balanced and centred in our daily lives and avoid going from one extreme to the other. Placing the incense stick upright calls to mind the alignment of our body and our spine, as we try to maintain an upright posture. It also reminds us to be honest and straightforward when dealing with others. Bowing in the temple is another example of how ritual helps our dual cultivation. Physically, bowing exercises our whole body, including the head, spine, legs, knees and ankles. Mentally and spiritually, bowing reminds us to be humble. A humble attitude promotes good relationships among people and helps us cultivate our hearts. The whole experience of ritual in the temple – the images of the immortals who provide positive examples for our conduct, the colours and arrangements of flowers and fruit on the altar, and the incense spiralling upward – helps create a meditative state in which we can forget ourselves and develop a more peaceful mind and a stronger body.

The altar of a Taoist Shrine contains a wealth of information about the Taoist view of the world and about the *Taoist Tai Chi™* internal arts of health and longevity. Everything on the shrine symbolizes a component of Taoism’s teachings about health, well-being and spiritual development.

*The dual cultivation of both body and mind* is unique to Taoism. This is the reason why, in addition to techniques to calm and empty the mind, the Taoist tradition also has a well-developed system of exercises to improve health and nurture life. As training in Taoism progresses, these two aspects are impossible to separate; nurturing the body must also involve cultivating the mind or spirit, and vice versa.

To put it simply, ‘internal alchemy’ in Taoism is a process of changing and transforming the body to the original healthy state. This starts with the transformation of the physical body. When the physical body is healthy and strong and the mind is quiet, then the transformation of internal energies can occur. Taoist exercises such as taijiquan and Lok Hup are the results of centuries of Taoist experience and knowledge of changing and transforming the body. At the same time, the practice of these movements helps to focus and calm the mind of the practitioners. Such focus helps to drive out stray thoughts in the mind and is a crucial part of the transformation of the body and the mind. Thus the practice of these arts should also be considered spiritual work, achieving the aim of cultivating both the body and the mind.

*Source: A Path of Dual Cultivation, Chapter 9*

**History of Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism**

Fung Loy Kok traces its lineage to a school of Taoism known as the ‘Confucian Tradition’ or the ‘Three Teachings School of Taoism.’ A unique characteristic of our school is in following the unified teachings of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. The Three Teachings School of Taoism has its origins in the Taoist Immortal Lü (呂洞賓, one of the Eight Immortals), the Buddhist Bodhidharma (達摩) and of course Confucius and his followers.

In our Confucian Tradition of Taoism, Bodhidharma is respected as the first patriarch of this transmission. From Bodhidharma the lineage was transmitted to Hui Neng 慧能. Hui Neng
is also known as the Sixth Patriarch and is the founder of Chan 禪 Buddhism (which in Japan is practiced as Zen Buddhism). From Hui Neng onwards, the teachings were preserved by various Taoist and Buddhist sages, the most outstanding of them being Wang Chongyang (王重陽) and his seven disciples (Quanzhen qizi 全真七子). (See Seven Taoist Masters for more.)

The transmission remained within the monastic tradition until the 20th century. In China there was war and much suffering on a scale that had not been known before. In the year 1916, an extraordinary leader emerged in the Confucian Tradition, whom we respectfully call the Great Teacher who Unified the Tao (統道師尊, Tongdao Shizun, or Si Juen in Cantonese). He is considered as the fifteenth holder of the Confucian Tradition transmission. The Great Teacher prescribed that the transmission of his teachings should be made available to everyone. This is an era in which the monastic tradition of transmission should be changed into a tradition in which lay people are responsible for preserving and spreading the teachings. This gives everybody a chance to return to the Original Nature of goodness and recover the health of the Original Body.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, one of the Confucian Tradition’s prominent leaders in Southern China was Mr Yip, who moved to Hong Kong after 1949 and helped found the Yuen Yuen Institute. Mr Mui Ming-to and Master Moy Lin-shin were part of the Confucian Tradition community under Mr Yip’s leadership and received instructions from him on cultivating Original Nature and the Original Body. Master Moy followed in the lead of the Great Teacher and founded the Taoist Tai Chi Society of Canada (which led to the formation of the International Taoist Tai Chi Society). The intention was to promote an open and ‘modern’ environment conducive to helping members of the public learn about the teachings and put them into practise in their everyday life. At the same time, Master Moy applied his skills to incorporating the health enhancing techniques of internal alchemy into various forms of internal arts, including in particular a modified form of taijiquan, which he hoped to make available to all through the Society. Finally, he sought to change the public perception of the purpose of practising these internal arts. Rather than just martial arts, he emphasized instead their health improving qualities and their spiritual dimension as tools for helping practitioners Return to the Source. In 1980, ten years after establishing the Taoist Tai Chi Society, Master Moy founded a Fung Loy Kok temple in Toronto, Canada. Since then, over 30 Fung Loy Kok shrines have been founded in Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

The Taoist teachings which pervade through the practice of Taoist Tai Chi† internal arts have been transmitted through the lineage of many teachers of the Three United Religions (sanjiao 三教). Within the International Taoist Tai Chi Society, Master Moy intended for the Fung Loy Kok Institute of Taoism to be a custodian of and a direct link with this tradition, as the source of our taijiquan and other internal arts. Without these teachings, our taijiquan would be like that of any other school of taijiquan. It is the relationship of our taijiquan to Taoism that makes it unique, and, it is the existence of Fung Loy Kok which provides the rich philosophical background that makes the Taoist Tai Chi† internal arts possible. Knowing and understanding the historical lineage and the teachings of Fung Loy Kok allows us to return to the roots of our taijiquan.

Source: A Path of Dual Cultivation, Preface.
Russell Kirkland, a scholar of Taoism, offers an interesting perspective on the essence of Taoist practice:

It might be fair to say that the core of Taoist practice – from classical times down to the present – has involved a practice of self-cultivation within a cosmos comprised of subtly linked forces.

... Taoist ‘self-cultivation’ has never been grounded in a belief that each human being has any separate, enclosed, individualized ‘self’ that is more worthy of value and attention than what is outside such enclosures. Rather, Taoists generally assume that one’s ‘self’ cannot be understood or fulfilled without reference to other persons, and to the broader set of realities in which all persons are naturally and properly embedded. It is this fundamentally holistic perspective that sets Taoist ideas and practices apart from most of what is taught in other traditions of China or those of other lands, in Asia or elsewhere. (Kirkland, p. 192)