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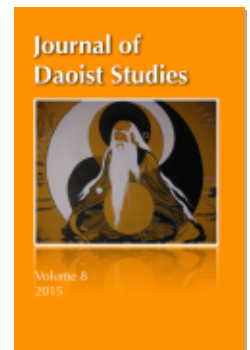
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Journal of Daoist Studies, Volume 8, 2015, pp. 152-164 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/dao.2015.0007>



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Daoist Wisdom for Teachers

A Diary Study

DAVID MCLACHLAN JEFFREY

Daoist wisdom as presented in the *Daode jing* is the philosophy of living in harmony with Dao, considered as the way everything exists. It is one of the three main Chinese worldviews, alongside Confucianism and Buddhism. Its mystical and individualistic essence emphasizes a realization of virtue (*de*) through an appreciation of paradox and nonaction (*wuwei*) as well as choosing simplicity and spontaneity or naturalness (*ziran*) in place of complexity and impulsiveness through adherence to the three core values of compassion, moderation, and humility.

Through the Daoist prism, everything coexists mutually and is interdependent because of the interaction of two interdependent elements known as yin and yang. These are not polar opposites but two sides of the same coin. Daoism regards all elements as being complementary in that each defines itself in relation to the other. With this come paradoxical notions of the seemingly weak overcoming the strong in the sense that flimsy bamboo yields to storms and survive while mighty oaks fall, and wind and water patiently flow around rocks while turning them into sand over time.

Teacher Diaries

One of the first philosophers to introduce Daoism to the West was Zen practitioner and thinker Alan Watts who lived from 1915 to 1973. Much of his prolific writing and speeches appeared posthumously, such as *Dao: The Watercourse Way* with Chung-Liang Huang (1975) and *Daoism: Way*

Beyond Seeking (1997). The subsequent growth of interest in Daoism among Westerners has led to many annotated English translations of the *Daode jing* such as those of Roberts (2001), Ivanhoe (2002), Ames and Hall (2003), Wagner (2003), Lin (2006), and Moeller (2007), to name a few. They have provided Westerners with insights into Daoism, supplemented by works on its application to daily life, found in works such as *The Dao of Pooh* by Benjamin Hoff (1982) and *The Daoist Cookbook* by Michael Saso (1994).

Among educators, Flowers (1998), Nagel (1994) and Doerger (2004) among others, have introduced Daoist wisdom to the classroom. They have shown how it can be an inspiration to both teachers and students, emphasizing Daoist values of compassion, moderation, and humility to allow for gentleness (rather than strictness), patience (rather than impulsiveness), and flexibility (rather than rigidity). All these serve to nurture harmonious instruction and learning.

The *Daode jing* says, "Those who understand others are intelligent; those who understand themselves are enlightened" (ch. 33; Lin 2006). A teacher diary study fulfills this need of understanding not only the world around us but also our relation to the world in an introspective manner. It fulfills both needs of intelligence and enlightenment simultaneously.

Teacher diaries are written accounts of experiences that teachers encounter not only in the classroom but also in the broader context of their work, such as the administration, colleagues, and the wider professional, even personal, environment.

Bailey (1990), Nunan (1992), Jarvis (1992), and Bell (1993) are notable linguists who acknowledge the practical benefits of teacher diary studies as well as their wide-ranging applications for the professional development of teachers.

The entries are examined for recurring patterns leading to insights that advance personal-professional development. In addition, these studies are an effective and thorough means of attaining balanced self-perspectives, and give teachers the courage to challenge previously held rigid opinions that merely lead to burnout and limit intuitive opportunities to cope with adversity.

I have undertaken several diary studies over the past decade, and found them considerably helpful in paving the way to new insights. In one study, I applied *The Art of War* to education (Jeffrey 2010); in another,

the *36 Stratagems* (Jeffrey 2013). I then decided to undertake one applying the *Daode jing* to teaching, given that this classic lays the foundation to the philosophies of both the other works. I worked with this over a period of three years (2011-2014) while teaching at the Academic Bridge Program of Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

One of the greatest challenges of undertaking this study was the need to embrace an appreciation of the inherent formlessness of Daoism, as well as the subtle interplay of paradoxical features. While conventional academic approaches might have been a valid tool to examine the text, I decided that it needed to be balanced with the individualistic and mystical characteristics that play an important role. Therefore, I considered a teacher diary study that was both individually introspective and uniquely reflective of my own classroom as an appropriate option, where my entries could be read and re-read, leading to both deeper and unconventional viewpoints that, in turn, lead further contemplations and applications.

My approach was to read the *Daode jing* in the evenings and highlight parts that struck a chord. I would then contemplate how best to embrace the wisdom I had highlighted the next day while teaching in the classroom. I put these intentions in writing, given that writing is a meditative means of clarifying thoughts (and a good way to recall thoughts that may otherwise be forgotten). The next day after each experience, I typed a page or two on my computer, reflecting on how it went and to what extent the experience had been helpful.

Later, the entries were read again and contemplated more deeply, and summarized further. The WordSmith Tools program (Scott 1997), normally utilized in creating concordances as an aid to studying corpora, was used to find key words within concordances. This was especially effective in directing my attention to underlying, related thought patterns throughout long texts. Looking at these concordances of sentences and paragraphs and regrouping them paved the way for several insights and highlighted the subtle underlying interrelationships of perspectives beyond my initial awareness. This part of the diary study, the sifting, shifting, and rewriting, was the most demanding and time-consuming component of the work, but it was also the most revealing.

With the refinement of the entries based on the above, the diary entries were eventually grouped into eight categories of philosophic

thought that had evolved over the course of doing the diary study, and short summaries were written on each. They were then given titles as follows: (1) Mysterious Unity, (2) Virtuous Non-Virtue, (3) Selflessness, (4) Less is More, (5) Unconditional Love, (6) Detachment, (7) Leadership by Example, and (8) Simplicity. These are elaborated on below, and all the *Daode jing* quotations are from the Lin (2006) annotation.

Insights Gained

1. Mysterious Unity

The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth. The named is the mother of myriad things. Thus, constantly without desire, one observes its essence. Constantly with desire, one observes its manifestations. These two emerge together but differ in name. The unity is said to be the mystery. Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders. (ch. 1)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: The Dao is ineffable: without form and in constant flux. It transcends all conventional definitions, contemplations, introspections, feelings, anxieties, interpretations, analyses, self-consciousness and judgments. Daoism encourages us to follow and tap into our individual natures and to be open to all approaches depending on prevailing situations.

Diary Extract: "I have until now seen myself as a distinct entity, and my students as another. But are we really so? Surely if our objectives are the same, then we should focus more on our similarities and less on our differences."

Diary Summary: Through applying this way of thinking, I began to see a working blend in my teaching between yang-oriented, direct instruction (such as teaching grammar structures) and yin-oriented, indirect instruction (such as inspiring creativity and personal insights). The classroom no longer remained a metaphor for the world but had rather become a world in itself where my students and I came to see the reality of learning as it was, and that instruction and acquisition are one and the same thing. Illusory distinctions between gain and loss, advantage and

disadvantage, fortune and misfortune, good and bad were lessened, and the classroom atmosphere became less stressful.

2. Virtuous Non-Virtue

When the world knows beauty as beauty, ugliness arises. When it knows good as good, evil arises. (ch. 2)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: Making judgments based on self-opinions of situations create divisions that become hardened and inflexible. If something beautiful could be seen within what may appear ugly on the surface, it would be seen in terms of what it really is (its substance), and not as what it appears to be (its image). In this non-judgmental state of not seeking self-opinionated virtue (to the point where substance and image become merged and inseparable) lies the true virtue.

Diary Extract: “Am I really ‘better’ than my students because I hold the title of ‘teacher’? Surely it is their impression that would also qualify me as their teacher and not merely the impression I have of myself.”

Diary Summary: The benefit was to see more of the duality within seemingly opposed situations, rather than as polarities of each other. It helped me transcend seeing gain and loss as separate entities, and to rather consider their paradoxical mutuality. Divisions such as us versus them became less distinct, making goals less competitive and more mutual. Punishments became less severe, rewards became less excessive, and my perspective shifted away from categorizing students as good or bad to just accepting them the way they were.

3. Selflessness

Heaven and Earth are everlasting. The reason Heaven and Earth can last forever is that they do not exist for themselves. Thus they can last forever. (ch. 7)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: Nature does not have a distinct life span. Humans know of their mortality, thus focus on being distinct from nature and become self-fixated through seeking lofty reasons for exist-

ence. But, nature has no such introspective considerations, and because of this, exists indefinitely. Nature never hurries, yet leaves nothing undone. Humans are often in a muddled rush, and because of this much is left undone.

Diary Extract: "The semester has a set time-span, and so does a single class-time of instruction. If they arrive late, it is recorded as an absence. But, beyond all this, and of my expected role in it, if I can just step back once, and let things take their course, everything settles down of its own accord."

Diary Summary: This chapter made me realize that I had become too conscious of my formal role as a teacher (especially in terms of rules and regulations, and their enforcement). Likewise, my students were becoming too conscious of their perceived distinction between my role and theirs. This made barriers between us, and to the wider learning process. This false virtue was destroying the classroom ambience given that we were clinging to self-perceived impressions that were making us play mind-games and become confrontational towards one another. I then forgot about the image I was trying to portray of myself, and in so doing found more joy in being my truer self. The inner-peace this gave me released more energy to cope with the real needs of my students, and they seemed happier because of it.

4. Less is More

Holding a cup and overfilling it cannot be as good as stopping short.
Pounding a blade and sharpening it cannot be kept for long. (ch. 9)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: We are conditioned to believe that the more we accumulate things the safer and more satisfied we become. However, this quickly becomes addictive and leads to excessive clutter, a false sense of security and an endless struggle to protect whatever has been accumulated through a fear of loss. All forms of excess lead to distress and anxiety, and compound a false sense of deficiency.

Diary Extract: "When I try to cram more into our class-time, and into homework, students cannot recall much. But when I let things take more of their own course, and allow for engagement more in relating

real-life experiences and insightful stories related to them, students can not only better understand and relate to them, but also recall them..."

Diary Summary: I felt that my instruction was lacking something and crammed more into each lesson. The result was draining our energy, and the preoccupation in fulfilling tasks within limited time made us lose sight of the benefits of learning. The students needed to engage more in the intrinsic enjoyment of learning without the artificial struggle. So I gave them less tasks and less homework, and encouraged more autonomous study. This helped us to get beyond the mere teaching and acquisition of practical skills by rote for later regurgitation to where my students become curious, self-reliant and inquisitive, and where life itself also became their teacher.

5. Unconditional Love

Can one be without intellectuality? Bearing it, rearing it. Bearing without possession. Achieving without arrogance. Raising without domination. (ch. 10)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: Integration and sharing of all that which is basic to our existence, and the avoidance of intellectual emotions such as distrust and irritation is love. It does not contend. It accepts the way things are and lets them be.

Diary Extract: "Whenever I teach something robotically, in an exclusively intellectual way, the students get turned off, and soon forget it. But when I teach it with the same passion that I tell stories to my own child before bedtime, the students become much more engaged and remember."

Diary Summary: Too much clutter of excess concerns based on an intellectual analysis of what goes wrong in the classroom scatters emotional energy and destroys love. I was being too scientific and robotic, and overly concerned with so-called flaws in others and myself. My thoughts became blocked and I was starting to get in my own mental way and this was dampening the enjoyment of being together with my students. To remedy this, I aimed to free my students and myself of these inhibiting perspectives by regarding everything as being perfect in its own way and in its own right and with an attitude of unconditional love.

This helped me see all the little things that gave me satisfaction, and to which I had been blind before. I gained joy in merely accepting things the way they were, rather than continuously trying to shape them into how I thought they should be. This had the effect on the students of accepting me in an unconditional sense as well. In making the conditional more unconditional the classroom became a happier place, and a more meaningfully engaged learning environment.

6. Detachment

The five colors make one blind in the eyes. The five sounds make one deaf in the ears. The five flavors make one tasteless in the mouth. Racing and hunting make one wild in the heart. Goods that are difficult to acquire make one cause damage. (ch. 12)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: The muddled clutter of over planning dulls our innate attachment to our senses and results in a senseless waste of energy. By only fulfilling the most basic of our desires for happiness can we sustain our energy. The more we become attached to things, the more confused we become, and the less we achieve.

Diary Extract: "Just when I was in the middle of planning my lesson, I was interrupted. I came to the classroom unprepared. But the students identified positively with the "spontaneity" of events as they unfolded, and it turned into a fruitful lesson. And they told me they enjoyed it."

Diary Summary: Before contemplating this chapter I had seen detachment as indifference and apathy, but through the diary came to realize that it meant not to get too emotionally caught up with things and to be less interfering and controlling. In playing more of a supportive role, I was better able to guide my students towards their own creative discoveries rather than to unwittingly stifle their initiatives through my constant directives. In becoming more focused on detaching from short-term objectives on grades to becoming more focused on longer-term goals such as life skills, instilled a sense of trust that had not existed before and it was a motivational experience for us all. I came to notice that nothing is constant and change is ceaseless, and is a result of a multitude of interactions ranging from my instruction to the interactions between us. My

acceptance of this, and my flexibility to this, made the students contented.

7. Leadership by Example

If the rulers' trust is insufficient have no trust in them. Proceeding calmly, valuing their words. Task accomplished, matter settled. The people all say, "We did it naturally". (ch. 17)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: Leadership that is haughty and demanding merely leads to resentment and rebelliousness. Leadership should embrace appropriate actions that convey sincerity and humility, and follow through on promises. It should not insist upon blind obedience.

Diary Extract: "When my attempts to instill discipline at times of unruliness backfire, and I just sit back and smile at my students, discipline returns more quickly, and is sustained longer, that if I were to continue actively engaging."

Diary Summary: If it is true that more messages are conveyed through actions and body language than words, then leadership by example is an important consideration for teachers. I began to explain less and instead focused on my behavior and through that connection aimed to create awareness. I rid myself of the illusions that I felt were needed to convey a superior attitude merely because I was teacher. Instead, I facilitated an atmosphere of trust and encouraged my students to believe in their own abilities. I stood by to help at all times. I never became angry, and even when I did become, I never showed it. Smiling kept things cheerful. I refrained from negative comments and gave more complements instead. If I had to discipline a student, I made sure not to do so in front of others and focused on the problem and not the person. I noticed that before students would say, "Thanks for the A grade, sir," but later they began to say, "Thanks for showing us how to do it ourselves."

8. Simplicity

Cease learning, no more worries. Respectful response and scornful response. How much is the difference? (ch. 20)

Contemplation of Daoist Meaning: Becoming too fixated on trying to rationalize and explain everything is a futile and alienating exercise. It is often better just accepting the way things are, and in being content even with their apparent imperfections.

Diary Extract: "I tried to explain something in great detail, over and over again. The students merely became more perplexed. Then I took away the detail, and just related the essence of it in simple terms. Surprisingly, the students grasped onto that, and, not only so, but also added their own detail."

Diary Summary: I had been of the habit of taking on more than required rather than staying with simplicity. I had believed that the more complex one made things the better they would somehow work. On the contrary my complex approaches were merely entangling my students and myself unnecessarily and was detracting from instructional and learning effectiveness. I then adjusted my perspective to the way things in the classroom actually were, and adapted to them. Everything then appeared appropriate – as a form of perfection that merely appeared chaotic. Instruction and learning became more quality orientated, and more meaningful to both the students and myself.

Major Insights

Here are the main insights gained from the study.

The philosophy of the *Daode jing* should not be used merely as a technique to become an effective teacher, or a quick fix, because the Dao is much more than that. It is a way of life to be lived. It takes time, but in just becoming aware of the yin and yang unison of everything, together with the acceptance of consistent change and being spontaneous rather impulsive, immediate benefits can be reaped.

The chapters of the *Daode jing* are suggestive signposts along a path to finding solutions, and are not definitive instructions. It would be mistaken to follow the chapters as though they were precise instructions, as

they serve to inspire insights that underlie the ultimate actions to be taken, which in turn depend on changing circumstances.

The *Daode jing* can, and should, be interpreted differently from one teacher to the next. In the same way that no two rivers follow the same path to the sea but instead choose their courses in accordance with the uniquely changing terrains in which they find themselves, so too should no two teachers necessarily apply the *Daode jing* in exactly the same way given that their circumstances are often quite different. It is best not to regard it with a one size fits all mentality and to mechanically apply it as such, but rather to be flexible and tolerant, given that adaption to unanticipated changes is an inherent part of the process that is often indistinguishable from its outcome.

Accept the yin and yang elements of seemingly opposing circumstances, and focus on their underlying mutualism and dependency, to discover their endless tactical and strategic potential. The chapters of the *Daode jing* are merely bits of information, like the lines of a network. Excessive conscious attention on the lines of the network would merely lead to an inflexible mindset, and to judgmental perspectives, to polarized labeling and complication as well as over-classification. To be an effective teacher requires looking at the spaces between the lines of the network as well because, to effectively apply the *Daode jing*, it is essential to think in a holistic and multidimensional manner, to be uncluttered, uncomplicated and attentive to the infinite subtleties of change. It requires a certain amount of detachment from the network itself so as not to get too entangled with its lines, but without discarding the network as well.

Trust yourself, listen to your gut feelings, and do not excessively analyze the *Daode jing* to the point of confusion. Teachers tend to feel comfortable when their professional expectations are clearly defined, and when they are fully conscious of them. This is evident in clearly defined instruction manuals, course outlines, academic calendars and curriculums. Yet, as soon as it all seems to be figured out, there comes a myriad of unexpected surprises on a daily basis. These unexpected surprises happen so quickly and unexpectedly, and do not wait for us to make up our minds. Often teachers become thwarted by their own excessive cognizance of situations. Teaching is so demandingly multifaceted that much of it is beyond mental rationalization and mechanical im-

plementation. Flows and rhythms also have an important place in teaching. Thus, in not over analyzing the *Daode jing*, but in contemplating its philosophy nevertheless, teachers can tap into their own instincts, and solve many problems intuitively without even thinking too much about them. The starting point for this is to go with the flow of situations and to rely more on self-trust and less on extremely rigorous analysis that merely perplexes the situation.

Choose the simple path. The essence in applying the *Daode jing* to teaching is to walk a simple path, to be humble, to love and enjoy life, to be grateful, to follow nature, to accept the way things and people are, to be caring, and to follow the three jewels of Daoism: compassion, moderation and humility.

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