

Nothing for Something

April 2, 2017

Lori Chapman writes:

I like nothing more in the world than sitting on my ass doing nothing. And it's not my fault I have this attitude, because I happen to have an amazingly comfortable ass. It may not look like much, but if you could sit on this baby for two minutes, you'd realize that getting off this ass would be a crime against nature. (Lori Chapman, "The Sun", April 2012, p48)

Ok. I'm going to hear about this after service.Yes – you're probably right....

...but again...blame your search committee....

...but bear with me and let's think about this in light of the following conversation between the Buddha and one of his followers...or one of his critics...I don't know:

The Buddha was asked, "What have you gained from [sitting] meditation."

He replied, "Nothing...however," the Buddha continued, "let me tell you what I lost: Anger, Anxiety, Depression, Insecurity, Fear of Old Age & Death."

So the Buddha gets nothing from his sitting meditation....Nothing for something.

That doesn't seem to make much sense to our Western sensibilities. So Buddha's ROI is 0! Buddha's return on investment is 0! He's not going to have many investors! We put in all this effort and we expect to get something in return!!!

This month's theme is transformation....and this sermon is about transformation....but on a deeper level it's about the opposite of transformation. If you've read any Eastern philosophy, especially Taoist philosophy like Lao Tzu's "Tao Te Ching" or Chuang Tzu's "The Book of Chuang Tzu," you'll come away scratching your head thinking that none of this makes any sense....it seems like it's all crazy, flip-flopped, bass-ackwards nonsense.

From the "Tao Te Ching"....

“When the Tao is lost, there is goodness; when goodness is lost, there is morality, when morality is lost, there is ritual [piety] (Lao Tzu, “Tao Te Ching,” Chapter 38, translated by Stephen Mitchell).”

“Get rid of kindness and justice, and people once more will love and obey (Lao Tzu, “Tao Te Ching,” Chapter 19, translated by Red Pine).”

“If you want to become straight, let yourself be crooked (Lao Tzu, “Tao Te Ching,” Chapter 22, translated by Stephen Mitchell).”

What? Is this just clever wordplay?

Eastern philosophy often seems counterintuitive...at least to our way of thinking here in the West...and keep in mind that our culture has taught us to think in these ways....It's part of who we are. Yet, no doubt, other people and other cultures see things in other ways.

For instance, I heard a funny story that when the missionaries were trying to first teach Native Americans on the plains about the everlasting fires of hell, the Native Americans laughed off such a thing. How could anyone believe in that? When the missionaries asked why not, the Native Americans replied that there simply wasn't enough firewood to keep such a fire going.

Good point! That's how the Native Americans on the plains saw the world. Seems reasonable to me.

Contemporary Western thought has been highly influenced by the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries. I'm going to talk about this in a few weeks so consider this “previews of coming attractions”....yet the Enlightenment brought us the use of reason; and that the only beliefs that could be called rational would be beliefs concerning scientifically proven truths.

Eastern philosophy attempts to answer the same questions as Western philosophy but it is

developed in different ways. I'm generalizing, but there were essentially two strands of Eastern philosophy that we know about— one strand developed in India through the texts of the Vedas and the Upanishads, which led to the many varieties of Hinduism, while the other strand developed in China through Confucianism and Taoism.

Chinese culture has a few characteristics that are not as prevalent to us in the West, yet are held very strongly by those of that culture. For instance, “li” is the idea of cultural or social piety; propriety; “xiao” is filial piety - respect and honor reserved for one’s elders; and “wu-wei” is effortless action – sometimes translated as actionless action, spontaneity...but I like to think of it as natural action, natural effort; or actions and efforts inherent to one’s nature.

Although both Confucianism and Taoism promote wu-wei, natural action, their approaches are fundamentally different.

In Confucianism, the goal is to bring about a harmonious and virtuous society. All action and behavior are done in such a way to respect ritual, cultural and filial norms – respect for the society and one’s elders (li and xiao). Wu-wei, natural action, is achieved through training and practice. In a utopian Confucianist society, leaders need not be heavy handed or dictatorial in their leadership because the entire society’s wu-wei, natural action, is harmonious with, and obedient to, the cultural norms of an ordered society.

A few years ago, my oldest son Austin taught English at an orphanage in Seoul, South Korea. I called him one time and he was at a huge Starbucks in Seoul--very crowded, lots of people there. He said that it was sometimes difficult to find a place to sit down. You could tell which empty seats were actually taken because people would leave either their computer or their cellphone on the counter or table at that seat. It didn’t matter whether that table was inside or outside. Imagine that! I asked him, “People don’t worry that their phone or computer would be stolen? It’s right there for the taking!” He said, “They just don’t do that here. It’s not what they do.”

I was in South Korea for work in the mid-90s and was asking my South Korean co-worker

whether or not it was safe to go to a particular area of the city at night. I had to repeat my question several times because he couldn't comprehend what I was talking about. "What do you mean?....Why would anyone hurt you?" he'd say.

These are remnants of Confucianism. It would be against the cultural and societal norms, the "li" of the society, to steal or to mug somebody.

The idea of the "Tiger Mom" is also a remnant of Confucianism. "Listen to your mother and practice, practice, practice to achieve excellence.

"How do you get to Carnegie Hall? Practice!" ... I think Confucius actually coined that phrase.

There are some parallels here with the Western Protestant work ethic.

Taoism is different. Wu-wei, natural action, natural effort, isn't something you work toward through practice and hard work. It's something you rediscover in yourself. It's something you recover; something inherent in your nature that you've lost while trying to maintain all those cultural and societal norms. Wu-wei is something you've lost by doing things contrary to your inherent nature.

Everyone knows the feeling "I'm carrying so much baggage!" To the Taoists, all the social and societal norms and expectations are baggage...often baggage we don't realize we carry....yet baggage that must be discarded to rediscover who we are.

If "All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten," what is everything else? What is that at the top of the graduate school mountain?

There is no question that Confucianism can lead to excellence. One might say, "My mother made me practice violin for an hour every day for ten years and now I am an excellent violinist!" But amongst those who might say this, some might also say, "...problem is...I don't really like playing the violin. I always wanted to play the bass line...on a tuba!"

"If you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life." We've all heard that one. I think

that might be attributed to Lao Tzu. Actually he said simply, “In work, do what you enjoy” (Lao Tzu, “Tao Te Ching,” Chapter 8, translated by Stephen Mitchell).

Think about that which you love to do.....a hobby of yours...maybe it’s painting, sailing, reading, playing an instrument, working in the garden or, if you’re lucky, your life’s work. Hopefully you’ve had the feeling of being completely lost in that activity...disappearing into that activity; then you look up at the clock and three hours have gone by....three glorious hours...three glorious hours doing what you were meant to do!

That’s Taoist wu-wei.

One of the great jazz bassists, Jimmy Blanton, died at age 23 of tuberculosis but not before making his mark with Duke Ellington’s band. It was said he only played the bass from midnight to midnight. Band members noted that he never even stopped to eat.

After Einstein had passed away, there were stories about those who were cleaning out his home and office desks that they’d routinely find uncashed, undeposited checks and paystubs he apparently used as bookmarks. He was too engrossed and in love with work to bother to cash those checks.

That’s Taoist wu-wei.

When the ideas of Mahayana Buddhism of India met those to Taoist China, the result was Chan in China – Zen in Japan. Now there is definitely a “practice” component to Zen which might seem strange to the Taoists. Zen practitioners talk about their “practice,” yet I believe this practice is in alignment with Buddhist principle of Right Effort and the Taoist idea of wu-wei (natural action, natural effort).

Zen teacher Barry Majid says:

“Practice isn't intended to get rid of anything. Practice should be a way to let everything stay just as it is....Practicing zazen (sitting meditation) for the purpose of affecting change is like exercising because you think you're overweight. If your motivation is to squelch an aspect of yourself that repels you and to actualize an image of yourself that you desire, then you will have to exert continual effort....” (i.e. unnatural effort, non wu-wei effort). “Yet if you practice or exercise because you feel that doing so is a natural part of the day and because somehow it makes you feel "more like yourself," then no gaining idea will be necessary to motivate you (Magid, Barry, “Shambhala Sun”, March 2013, p59).”

Notice Mr. Majid said, “Practice isn’t intended to get rid of anything”. Yet the Buddha, in the earlier quotation, said that he definitely got rid of something: “...Anger, Anxiety, Depression, Insecurity, Fear of Old Age & Death." To me, these are completely reconcilable. The Buddha didn’t sit down to meditate to lose those things. It’s simply something that happened. His mindfulness sitting and doing nothing allowed him to see the baggage he’d been carrying and he decided that rather than keep carrying it; he’d rather put it down. For the Buddha, meditation made him feel more like himself. He rediscovered his inherent nature.

So, where does all this leave us? You...if you’re still awake...might be out there thinking, “Does this mean we have to meditate?!” You might be thinking, “I hate meditation! It requires a lot of effort...for me, it requires an inordinate amount of unnatural effort. Meditation is not wu-wei for me.”

I get that. I have incorporated meditation into my spiritual practice on numerous occasions over the last fifteen years. Although I’ve gotten better at it, it is still one of the most difficult things for me to do. It seems to involve an inordinate amount of unnatural effort for me at times.

But maybe there are other things you can do, consistent with your natural self, that are wu-wei for you.

You might want to start with what you love. Be intentional making time for doing the things that you love. Paint, write, garden, sail, do woodworking, play around with non-Euclidian geometry...whatever! Once you've started, if you like, you can then incorporate other Zen components into your wu-wei practice – paying attention to your breath to practice mindfulness; to clear your mind from cluttered baggage.

The goal of your practice is to see that there is no goal to your practice...there is no destination....Only the path of happiness in front of you – nothing for something. By putting down your baggage through actions and efforts inherent to your nature, wu-wei, you rediscover your natural self – feel more like yourself.

Getting nothing for something is what we find when, to borrow the language of T. S. Eliot, "...[at] the end of all our exploring [we] will...arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." (T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding")