

# A modern way of the eternal Tao

*The insights of this ancient tradition can enrich our personal spiritual practice.*

**Rowena Pattee**



The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

The named is the mother of ten thousand things.

Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.

Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.

These two spring from the same source but differ in name;

this appears as darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gate to all mystery.

(*Tao Te Ching*, Random House, 1972)

The Tao means 'Way'. The Tao is the 'Way' to live in order to achieve by non-doing. This is a dynamic peace and mystery, neither passivity nor struggle. It is only when the separate "I" attaches to activity or result that the 'Way' of the Tao seems to be lost. But Tao can never be lost for it is the ever-present eternal quality of source, law of creation and end.

In modern times, as more people of different cultures meet one another because of our electronic and air travel networks, the 'Way' can appear in many traditions and guises. The Taoist 'Way' is not dependent on race, creed, or any cultural form. It is very fluid and mainly demands an openness to truth, the nameless mystery.

The nameless mystery of the Tao is the same spiritual creative source as "Our heavenly father" beginning the Christian Lord's Prayer. How might we experience it as the same? By entering deeply into our own tradition, our own spiritual roots, whatever form that may take. It is not always true that the culture we are born into is our primary spiritual root, our 'Way'. In modern times we live in a global spiritual and material mixing process. We live in a time of the breakdown of traditions, distillations of the essence of spiritual teachings, and synthesis for reculturation.

A person's spiritual tradition may be complex or simple, a weaving and synthesis, or a single root. I came by the Taoist tradition through recognizing spirit in nature as a child. Creation (nature itself) is the book of life that reveals the Tao to me. Nature (creation) is the mystery of the nameless One's art. Through our creativity we return nature within us to the Tao (Creator).

Creativity draws upon *Ch'i* or vital subtle energy. As a teen-ager, growing up in Oregon, I saw the eddies and currents of *Ch'i* in Chinese landscape paintings and remembered the truth of these "dragon veins." Taoism is not confined to any one culture.

However, Taoism is associated with China, for Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu brought forth the ancient 'Way' through China five hundred years before Christ. Their works, along with those of the teachings of the Yellow Emperor, are the cultural foundations of traditional Taoism. The basic tenets are four: 1) that the 'Way' or Tao underlies all things, 2) that human action that is harmonious with the Tao is spontaneous, effortless, and inexhaustible, 3) that the perfected individual is a sage, free from desire and strife, and 4) that the sage conducts government by guiding his people back to a state of harmony with the Tao.

The essence of this teaching is universal: The first mystery of the Tao or the nameless is experienced as a 'Way' to continuously return to the source of all life. It is inherent in the heart of all religious traditions. For example, in the 'Way' of the ancient Druidical rites of Britain there is thus the same inexhaustible mysterious source as the Tao: "There is nothing truly hidden but what is not conceivable; There is nothing not conceivable but what is immeasurable; There is nothing immeasurable but God; There is no God but that which is not conceivable; There is nothing not conceivable but that which is truly hidden; There is nothing truly hidden but God." (*The Mysteries of Britain*, Samuel Weiser, 1970).

The mystery of the 'Way' can never be explained or named, but we can *live* it. No matter what we think, say, or do we are embraced by the 'Way'. Taoism uses the metaphor of water for the 'Way' for it has innumerable forms and yet is always the same. It takes the form of mist and rain, underground wells and springs, rivulets and eddies, waterfalls and rivers, lakes and the great sea. Thus the 'Way' is infinitely compassionate, supporting and nurturing even in our ignorance but we cannot truly be wholly nourished until we forgive ourselves our mistakes along the way and thus cease blaming others for our wounds. The Chinese *I Ching* says "no blame." The Lord's Prayer says similarly, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." You may find other cultural manifestations of the 'Way' that inspire you, that bring forth your

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essence, that enable you to take harmonious action with nature and spirit.

For the Taoist, nature and spirit interpenetrate. In spirit there is nature and in nature there is spirit. Hildegard of Bingen uses the terms *creation* for nature and *God* for the ultimate spirit, but her meaning is essentially Taoist when she says, "God has directed for humanity's benefit all of creation which God has formed both on the heights and in the depths." (*Book of Divine Works*, Bear & Co., 1987)

The Islamic, Judaic, and Christian traditions tend to emphasize a greater separation of spirit and nature than cultures that are closer to the aboriginal root of religions: shamanism. Cultures that have a closer connection with shamanism include Taoism, Japanese Shinto and Zen, Amerindian "religions," and some forms of Tibetan Buddhism. With shamanic cultures, as with Taoism, spirit and nature or God and creation are inherently bound up with one another. The Cabalistic, Sufi, and mystical traditions of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity also have as-

natural laws. Then supreme effort is required to return to the 'Way'. In the Sufi treatise, *The Conference of the Birds* (Samuel Weiser, 1969), the hoopoe bird replies to another bird who is afraid of the toil and suffering necessary to make the journey back to the 'Way': "One hour of serving God in accordance with the true law is worth a lifetime of serving the world."

Being aware of our "embodiment" is the best opportunity to cultivate and refine oneself to fulfill the purpose of reunion with the Tao. This reunion is not simply "spacing out" to some immortal realm but grounding the 'Way' right here and now on earth and in our bodies. It necessitates the awareness of the earth as a living being not inert matter to be exploited. As traditions break down we are forced to meet the 'Way', which is both a mystery and source for regenerative global culture. The essence of spiritual traditions can never be lost for the 'Way' is perennial wisdom, eternal truth.

There are innumerable teachings, doctrines, theologies, and practices of world religions to



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pects of the awareness of the interpenetration of spirit and nature.

When a tension results from the separation of spirit and nature, it is based on the subject-object split, the great divide in consciousness that says sense perception and logical thought are objective whereas feelings and intuitive thought are subjective. In our scientifically-oriented Western culture objectivity is seen as the main criterion of truth and subjectivity is considered personal and relative. But an insight, vision, or intuition may be more true than logic and descriptions of objects. The test of following the intuitive and inspired 'Way' is the effectiveness in *living* the vision. How healthy, happy, productive, compassionate, and altruistic are we?

Once we lose the 'Way' in this subject-object abyss innumerable are the ills that grow out of it. The abuse of nature for technological exploitation, the resultant pollution, illnesses, and lack of wholesome food, water, and air for life are extreme signs of losing the 'Way'. God and the world seem to be antithetical because humans create culture in ignorance of spiritual and

bring us to the 'Way' if we have lost it. In the modern world we have the opportunity of distilling wisdom from these many traditions. We can meet the essentials and learn to resonate to spiritual dimensions that will inspire us to create templates, models, and methods for holistic forms of education, ecological economics, visionary art, organic agriculture, and planetary governance. The Tao, the 'Way', is the eternal harmony of heaven, the human, and earth in all times and places. It is ever renewed and yet inexhaustible. May you find your 'Way' which is one with the eternal Tao. O

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