

# “Test-Driving the Tao”

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## **Sermon Text**

**August 18, 2024 at 11:00 a.m.**

**Channing Memorial Church**

"How can ancient concepts of Taoism help us with our spiritual life in today's world?" This was the question posed by Julia, the top bidder for the coveted Auction Sermon--okay, well, the mildly-desirable, worship-associate version of the Auction Sermon--and here it is!

*Tao te Ching* was written by the philosopher Lao-tzu in the sixth century BCE. To answer Julia's question about its applicability in modern times, I decided to take the Tao for a test drive. Yes, it's an older model, but let's give it a go!

I read the *Tao te Ching*<sup>1</sup> and analyzed its basic core -- the specs of the vehicle, you might say. In studying the Tao, I learned that this intellectual approach is actually not at all the way to go about it. The real test drive was to look at my life and how the principles seemed to apply -- looking at what spiritual lessons the 6th century BCE Tao might have for me in the 21st century CE.

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<sup>1</sup> Lao-tzu. *Tao te Ching*. (Translation by Stephen Mitchell.) Harper & Row, 1988.

NOTE: All chapters cited in this manuscript are from this work, unless otherwise noted.

## ***Basic Specs -- Definitions of Tao***

So, what is this car we're about to start driving? What is the Tao?

From the User's Manual, *Tao te Ching*, Chapter 25:

There was something formless and perfect  
before the universe was born.  
It is serene. Empty.  
Solitary. Unchanging.  
Infinite. Eternally present.  
It is the mother of the universe.  
For lack of a better name,  
I call it the Tao.

It flows through all things,  
inside and outside, and returns  
to the origin of all things.

Lao-tzu actually discourages talking about the Tao.

Yet, in sharing this sermon with you that is precisely what I have to do.

I don't feel so bad, though. Translator Stephen Mitchell pointed out the work of poet and stand-up comedian Po Chü-i, who wrote<sup>2</sup>:

"He who talks doesn't know,  
he who knows doesn't talk":  
That's what Lao-tzu taught us,  
in a book of five thousand words.  
If he was the one who knew,  
how could he have been such a blabbermouth?"

I'll forgive Lao-tzu for being a blabbermouth as he tries to explain the Tao,  
as I hope you'll forgive me!

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<sup>2</sup> Mitchell, Stephen. Notes for Chapter 1. *Tao te Ching*. Translated by Stephen Mitchell. Harper & Row, 1988.

As far as identifying the parts of the vehicle, the big themes in defining the Tao seem to be as follows:

- The Tao is an eternal, infinite, unnamable mystery [21, 25, 34, 35, 41, 52]<sup>3</sup>
- Everything comes from nothing - from the Tao [4, 11, 28, 51 52]  
[The Tao] is like the eternal void: filled with infinite possibilities [4]
- The Tao doesn't take sides [5]

Given those bare-bones specs of what the Tao is, the bulk of the owner's manual--the *Tao te Ching*--is about basic operations.

### ***Basic Operations -- Prescriptions for Living***

As far as basic operations of Taoism, many of its prescriptions for living are about what NOT to do. Here are the big themes as I saw them:

- **#1 Non-doing** [26, 27, 37, 38, 43, 45, 48]

This includes

- Letting things happen [36, 51]
- Living in harmony with nature [39]
- Allowing what is [28, 36, 74]
- Allowing people to be who they are
- Flexibility [... 76]

One of the central ideas here is that trying to do stuff and fix things actually messes things up. [29, 39]

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to specific chapter numbers in the *Tao te Ching* by Lao-tzu (Translation by Stephen Mitchell.) Harper & Row, 1988.

- **#2 Non-attachment** [27]

This includes not being attached to:

- to outcomes [...55, 74]
- to thoughts [16] and ideas [21]
- to people
- to possessions

It also includes non-judgment [52]

and not over-valuing certain things or people [3, 45]

- **#3 Not-knowing** [10 ... 65, 71]

In addition to being unattached to thoughts [Notes 16],

this also includes

- stepping back from your own mind [10]
- Trusting inner vision [12]

and the appeal to

- Use the Tao, don't talk about it. [5, 56, 81]

- **#4 Non-violence** [30, 31, 46, 57, 69]

This includes the values of

- Peace [...31]
- Harmony, and balance [... 77]

as well as the concept that

- Fear is an illusion. [46]

- **#5 Contentment** [8...30, 44 - familiar]

One positively-stated theme in *Tao te Ching* is that of contentment.

Be content with what you have;  
rejoice in the way things are.  
When you realize there is nothing lacking,  
the whole world belongs to you.

Nonetheless, Contentment, too, includes a couple of “don’ts”:

- Don't try to compete [8...68]
- and the idea that we don't need to travel [80]--  
one of the few points where I took exception -- especially after  
learning that Lao-tzu himself moved away from his country when it  
was in decline!

### ***The Test Drive -- Personal Applications***

So, now for the true test drive: “How have the ancient concepts of Taoism helped me with my spiritual life in today's world?”

At the end of Chapter 21 of *Tao te Ching*, Lao-tzu writes:

“Only in being lived by the Tao can you be truly yourself.”

Being lived by the Tao. Translator Stephen Mitchell offers an anecdote of the little boy who--when his mother got annoyed and said, “Stop sneezing!” --answered, “I'm *not* sneezing, *It's* sneezing *me!*”

Likewise, I feel that I'm not writing this sermon, *it's* writing *me*.

I'm not driving the Tao, *it's* driving *me*.

How and where has the Tao been driving me this summer?

Here are some of the principles that have most resonated with me:

I'll start with three key Taoist principles, described nicely in the "Three Things" chapter from our Story for All Ages<sup>4</sup>:

One, try to understand what is natural:  
the birds, the trees, growing up, learning,  
fun with your family and friends.

Two, try to be patient with everyone,  
even when they are angry or yell.

Three, practice compassion with everyone,  
be understanding and kind,  
even if you are the only one who is.

*Tao te Ching*<sup>5</sup> Chapter 67, one of today's readings, sums this up as follows:

I have just three things to teach:  
simplicity, patience, compassion.  
These 3 are your greatest treasures.

Something else that resonated--from Chapter 10:

Can you cleanse your inner vision until you see nothing but the light?  
Can you love people and lead them without imposing your will?  
Can you deal with the most vital matters by letting events take their  
course?

Chapter 2, the other of today's readings, further speaks to non-doing and non-attachment:

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<sup>4</sup> Oskolkoff, R.A. (author) and Iovino, J.H. (illustrator). *Voyage to the Sun: The Tao te Ching for Children*. Ruth Ann Oskolkoff, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Lao-tzu. *Tao te Ching*. (Translation by Stephen Mitchell.) Harper & Row, 1988.

Therefore the Master  
acts without doing anything  
and teaches without saying anything.

Things arise and she lets them come;  
things disappear and she lets them go.

She has but doesn't possess;  
acts but doesn't expect.

When her work is done, she forgets it.  
That is why it lasts forever.

Now for a few examples of how the Tao has been *living* me. These often show up in noticing the ways that I am not living the Tao--and then laughing at myself.

One very specific example is my relationship with the weather.

I like to know the weather forecast, sometimes as much as 10 days ahead, but more typically the hourly forecast as a way to plan my day.

Even when I want to know the current conditions, my tendency is to check the weather app--versus opening a door and stepping outside.

Lao-tzu would have scoffed at my reliance on this so-called "labor-saving machine"<sup>6</sup>. Even *during* my morning walk, as I'm having a *direct* experience of the weather, I feel compelled to confer with the weather app to quantify it:

The air feels heavy, oppressive. 92% humidity--that seems about right.

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<sup>6</sup> Lao-tzu. Chapter 80. *Tao te Ching*. (Translation by Stephen Mitchell.) Harper & Row, 1988.

It feels breezy. How many MPH is that? Only 3? Are you sure?  
Sometimes, I want to argue with the weather app:

Current conditions, sunny, you say? Obviously, it's raining right now!  
This is just one specific example of how I generally seek to compare, clarify, or confirm my experience with some outer "reality."

Although I'm always a work in progress, I have been somewhat more successful in living the Tao in my relationships. Learning to let people be who they are. Here are a few examples:

Letting my husband have a bad day at work--and treating him with compassion and support, without letting his sour mood bring me down.

Letting my daughter cry over something that has been weighing on her --not trying to fix it or solve it or even trying to make her feel better--just sitting with her in empathy and letting her feel the sadness or frustration.

Letting my son do the prep for his lab work in the way that he chooses.

Noticing my urge to step in and micromanage.

Catching myself and allowing him to find his own way.

Stepping in only when it seemed absolutely necessary.

Forgiving myself for stepping in--and, once again, stepping out of the way.

Like I said, a work in progress.

Simplicity, patience, compassion.

These three are your greatest treasures.

A way that I'm really a work in progress with the spiritual teachings of the Tao is in the way of non-doing. **Wu Wei** -- w-e-i. I'm certainly not the most



productive being on the planet, but still, I like to get things done. I have that desire of wanting to make things happen. Just the other night, my husband and I were talking about how we like our checklists and getting things done. We reflected on how easy it is to slip into the trap of becoming more of a “human doing” than a human being. Checking off tasks on a list instills such a sense of accomplishment! Heck, I use a checklist--in a spreadsheet--to prepare for Sunday service!

Nonetheless, I am inspired by the *Tao te Ching*, Chapter 27:

A good traveler has no fixed plans  
and is not intent upon arriving.  
A good artist lets his intuition  
lead him wherever it wants.  
A good scientist has freed himself of concepts  
and keeps his mind open to what is.

Thus the Master is available to all people  
and doesn't reject anyone.  
He is ready to use all situations  
and doesn't waste anything.  
This is called embodying the light.

Zero waste! That's a modern movement that moves me! My fellow members of the “Clearing as a Spiritual Practice” circle can attest to that as one of my aspirations. Although I've applied that mostly to stuff, the Tao has me looking broader, and deeper.

She is ready to use all *situations* and doesn't waste anything.

Wow! Could *that* apply to me?

She is available to all *people* and doesn't reject anyone.

Could I ever be that Master?

Ideas like this--and others that I've read this summer in the ancient *Tao te Ching*--drive me forward in my spiritual life, as I apply it to my daily living, right-here right-now in the summer of 2024 CE.

### ***My Review***

In summing up my test drive of the Tao, here is my review:

Designed by Taoist philosopher Lao-tzu in the sixth century BCE, The *Tao te Ching* is an older model, yes, but one certainly worth consideration. Designed to be a practical vehicle, the Tao is nonetheless an attractive model. Its beauty is in its simplicity. Neither gas nor electric, the Tao is kinetically self-powered. That's right, *you* pedal it! Its range is, therefore, as far as you want to take it. However, the Tao is designed with the understanding that you won't need to travel far--because you already have all that you need within reach.

This compact model doesn't hold other passengers or cargo--because you really don't need those attachments. But don't worry about companionship--you can ride alongside your fellow travelers and lead by example, rather than by driving the bus.

Let's face it, as a vehicle body design, the Tao is basically a bicycle!

As with learning to ride a bicycle, once you get the hang of it, it's best not to overthink its operations. Using your instincts, being considerate of your fellow travelers, and following the open road, the Tao can serve you well. In short, as my fellow worship associate David Fu would say, "Runz gud!"

May it be so, and Amen