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## **East Meets West: Integration of Taoism Into Western Therapy**

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When Eastern and Western philosophies meet, there are considerable differences which can affect the process of counseling or psychotherapy. Western psychology emphasizes improving one's skills, changing one's environment, and fulfillment of individual needs. There is often a preoccupation with goal-seeking behaviors. Western scientific methodology focuses on organization, classification, and observance using a systematic plan.

In contrast, Taoism, one of the most basic of Eastern philosophies, looks for more fundamental changes in attitudes. Taoism espouses the concepts of the dao (way) and wu wei (non-intervention). Mankind is an inseparable part of the universe where everything in the world relates. There is a dao or cosmic course of evolution, and any human intervention will only bring about disharmony and conflicts. Life will take its own course in harmony with the rest of the cosmos, and one will eventually experience peace and fulfillment (Leung & Lee, 1996).

Can these two opposing philosophies be joined so that they create a balance between intellect and intuition? A study of Eastern texts shows that there is much importance placed on having a balance between opposites in one's experience. Because the West has overstressed the intellect in the past, inclusion of the Eastern methods of dealing with intuition will provide a balance or tension so that all aspects of human consciousness are developed (Coward, 1985). The focus of this article will be to understand the philosophy of Taoism and how the Tao principles have been used in Western therapies to effectively expand and balance traditional Western methods of psychotherapy.

## **Understanding the Philosophy of Taoism**

“The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.” Lao Tzu begins the *Tao Te Ching* with these words (Lao Tzu & Mitchell, 1988, p. 1). Explanatory words are inadequate to describe the Tao, for it is something known rather than thought. The Tao refers to the intuitive knowledge that there is a unifying principle, or an underlying meaning, in the universe to which everything relates and is connected. The Tao, popularly translated as path or way, includes in its philosophy the concepts of spontaneity, receptive knowing, and flowing with life rather than against nature. Taoism is based upon an acceptance of ambivalence and contradictory forces at play in nature. Man is regarded not as center of the universe but as a part of nature, a seeker of balance, a work in progress (Landy, 1997).

The natural and supernatural worlds, which are all part of the same Tao, are comprised of two contradictory energies – yin, embodying soft, yielding, receptive qualities, and yang, embodying hard, rigid, unbending qualities. Human life, as in other forms of nature, is predicated upon a changing relationship between the yin and yang. They are mutually stimulating and giving way to each other constantly. The polarities flow and return in a cyclic system of interacting and interdependent parts, each the cause and effect of the other. To be healthy, the two opposite drives must be in balance so that there is a natural motion between them (O’Byrne, 1990).

In the *Tao te Ching* there is frequent reference to wu wei, the power of non-action, or an attention to process. In Lao Tzu’s words, “to learn, one accumulates day by day. To study Tao, one reduces day by day. Through reduction and further reduction one reaches non-action, and everything is acted upon. Therefore, one often wins over the world through non-action. Through action, one may not win over the world” (Lao Tzu & Mitchell, 1988, p. 48). In practicing Taoism, the student does not seek productive goals, as in Western therapies. Instead, unnatural problems ranging from muscular tension, immature attitudes, and troubled interpersonal interactions may be lost.

## **Taoist Principles Applicable to the Therapeutic Process**

Certain principles of Taoism are used as the basis of specific counseling techniques. In Bolen’s (1979) book, *The Tao of Psychology*, the concept of synchronicity is emphasized. Synchronicity refers to the manifestation of coincidences in an individual’s life, whereby the person places meaning to those happenings. In therapy, when clients realize that synchronicity is at work in their lives, they may feel connected, rather than isolated from others; they feel a part of a dynamic, interrelated world where their lives have meaning.

Carl Jung espoused that the archetypal layer of the unconscious was involved in synchronistic events. Archetypes were described by Jung as patterns of instinctual behavior whereby the endless repetition of these experiences engraved them into our psychic being (Bolen, 1979). Examples of archetypal situations can include birth, death, marriage, mother and child bonds, or heroic struggles. Jung recognized that both the unconscious and conscious parts of the individual’s mind work together to create balance and self-healing. In the way of the Tao, Jung concluded that neurosis contained the source for its own cure and had the drive to bring about healing and growth. The therapist

served as a vehicle to promote balance, growth, and integration (Corsini & Wedding, 2007).

Abraham H. Maslow frequently wrote about the Taoistic *let be* attitude. In therapy Maslow recommended a nonactive, noninterfering contemplation of a client's problem, rather than analytical, premature intervention. "We don't have to do anything about multiplicity; we can just experience it receptively, taoistically, contemplatively. It doesn't at once have to be explained, classified, theorized about, or even understood" (Maslow, 1966, p. 63).

There have been parallels made regarding Carl Rogers' person-centered theory and the way of *doing nothing* in Taoism (Hermsen, 1996). Rogers suggested that the most therapeutic counseling occurred when the therapist was authentic and real in the relationship and placed trust in the client to discern what was best for himself without interference from the therapist (Hayashi, et al., 1998). The central concept of Taoism is doing nothing and being natural. Both Rogers' theoretical beliefs and Tao philosophy maintain that when these conditions are achieved successfully in therapy, the human organism will develop almost spontaneously (Hayashi et al., 1994).

### **Specific Techniques Applied in Therapy**

Western theories use numerous counseling techniques that have Taoist principles as their foundation. These counseling techniques may be found in varied theoretical fields, such as family systems therapy, analytical psychotherapy, person-centered therapy, transpersonal psychology, and even cognitive therapy. The Taoist axioms used also vary; some therapies incorporate the yin-yang principle, others integrate the *do nothing* belief, while still others utilize methods of reaching the intuitive level of consciousness.

One family therapy technique is referred to as Strategic Therapy (Saposnek, 1980). This form of therapy is likened to the martial art of aikido, which approaches a challenge by joining with the position of an opponent. Aikido seeks to use the momentum created by the opponent to transform his aggression into cooperation. By using the teachings of the Tao, Strategic Therapy operates under the assumption that change will occur when the actions of the therapist can lead the clients to simply *do*. The results of therapy improve to whatever extent the clients can take action and be *mindless* of the underlying intent (Price, 1994).

Price (1994) gave a case example involving a 20-year-old man, who continued to live in his parents' home, sat around the house all day, had no job, and showed no progress toward accepting responsible adult goals. The therapist first helped the parents to understand that they expected their child to operate as a responsible 20-year-old, but he was actually acting much more like a 13-year-old. The therapist then advised the parents on how they would act in relationship to their child if he was 13 years old. The parents were told to operate their house as if their son was now aged 13 - restricting his privileges, instructing him on dress and money management, and scheduling his time. Then as the son's behaviors more closely resembled those of a 20-year-old, the interactions were modified to move the young man's life and expectations also toward his biological age.

The Tao Te Ching (Lao Tzo, 1989) provides a practical and simple set of guidelines for bringing about the realignment between the worlds of biological age and

actual age, as shown in this case example. Both worlds are real and must be addressed. The therapist understands and joins with the reality of the family he or she is facing and brings their incongruous realities back into line (Price, 1994).

Another example of Taoism principles applied to family therapy involves the balance between the yin and yang. There is thought to be a natural motion between the two opposite drives, one to change and one to stay the same. But if they *stick* they need a combination of yin and yang interventions to *release* them. This method involves paradoxical work, where the therapist positively connotes a symptom or difficulty and prescribes that it be retained, if not increased. Then the client is expected to recoil from the suggestion and to decide to change (O'Byrne, 1990).

Papp (1980) wrote of one such family counseling technique, which uses the paradoxical method, and referred to it as the Greek chorus. The Chinese duet is a similar approach (O'Byrne, 1990). The family in therapy is seen by co-therapists who have planned a therapeutic debate. One therapist takes up the no-change position and the other takes up the pro-change. The debate swings to and fro, playing out the family's ambivalence for change, and ends in disagreement. The therapists are placed in a one-down position to the family, and the family is drawn in to helping them resolve their disagreement. By attacking in the debate the wisdom of change, the process helps the family to come to grips with their struggle. The logic behind the dilemma is made clear, and this makes it easier for the family to consider new and less problematic choices. The debate allows the family to have a more circular view, rather than a limited, linear perception. These paradoxical strategies are examples of how the striving for a healthy balance of yin and yang, change and resistance, can be used effectively in family therapy.

The practice of Chinese Taoist yoga and active imagination are two methods that Jung prescribed to develop action through inaction. In his Commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, Jung reflected on the Taoist practice of wu-wei with the following words: "The art of letting things happen, action through non-action, ... became for me the key that opens the door to the way" (Wilhelm & Jung, 1931, p. 93). In Jung's view, the most important thing for the West to learn today is the art of just letting things happen in the psyche. He realized the difficulty Westerners might have because from birth their conscious level has been overemphasized and trained to interfere and has never allowed psychic processes to grow in peace (Coward, 1985).

Jung believed that the psychic process of intuition could be obtained by practicing various meditation techniques and Taoist yoga. He also thought that the use of active imagination could be used for the same purpose. Active imagination involved a switching off of conscious awareness so as to make room in one's conscious mind for new impressions and ideas. By instructing the client in these methods, he thought that the client could create a healthy balance between the conscious and the unconscious mind.

Maslow adopted therapeutic techniques based on the taoistic *let be* attitude. He saw the therapist as a guide who simply helps the client actualize his or her own resources (Maslow, 1966). For Maslow, taoistic healing is a natural process. The more capable therapist is one who waits comfortably for change to happen (Maslow, 1979). He believed that the therapist should promote the clients' acceptance of their psychological pain by allowing them to feel it as part of their inner state, not as something alien, but rather as a means to further development. With acceptance, a client could experience events with less ego involvement and less psychological intensity.

The taoistic *let be* attitude is also interwoven into person-centered therapy. Rogers (1973) described how he came into contact with Zen Buddhism and Taoism. He related how a valued scholar had pointed out to him that his thinking and actions seemed to be something of a bridge between Eastern and Western thought. He went on to state that he “enjoyed some of the techniques” of Eastern therapies (p. 12). The three necessary conditions that the therapist must fulfill, according to Rogers, are authenticity, complete acceptance as well as unconditional positive regard, and empathy for the client’s feelings. In *On Becoming a Person*, Rogers (1961) referred to Lao Tzu when he quoted the sentence, “The way to do is to be” (p. 164). He entitled that chapter “To Be That Self Which One Truly Is.” In these statements, Rogers is establishing a basic principle of his theory, that of being authentic and establishing the relationship so that the client feels acceptance. The *do nothing* principle in Taoism is also practiced in person-centered therapy. When Rogers referred to group leaders, he quoted Lao Tzu, “A leader is best when people barely know that he exists” (Rogers, 1973, p. 110). The facilitator should withhold his or her personal influence and competence to the extent that the group feels that they have accomplished everything themselves.

One would not normally think to find a Taoist paradigm used in cognitive therapy in the Western world of business. However, counseling in an Employee Assistance Program uses the yin and yang in the process of promoting balance, which is essential. This paradigm is used to aid the client in understanding the change process. There are human factors and economic factors with both external and internal forces acting upon them. The model depicts how each subsystem in the organization is affected by change and how the human and economic cost-benefit relationships lead to systemwide enhanced functioning through balance (Gerstein & Sturmer, 1993).

Furthermore, management studies have explored how trust impacts on conflict management by using Taoist Yin-Yang thinking (Du, Ai, & Brugha, 2011). Researchers began with basic Western rules of reasoning regarding trust and trust building. They then proposed a moderated model of trust in conflict management based on Taoist views, which included adjusting activities when dealing with conflict and negotiation. Some of the findings, which can be applied in both Eastern and Western organizations dealing with conflict resolution, include: taking indirect actions through relationships rather than direct actions through power increases harmony; creating and retaining harmony is essential in the negotiation process; and keeping a balance between adjusting others and adjusting self is a key to resolving conflict and negotiating a win-win outcome.

### **Shared Virtues**

Although Western and Eastern techniques seem to be oppositional, there are commonalities in basic core virtues. When attempting to study positive psychology, researchers found that they needed a way to classify universal positive traits, therefore enabling them to have a basis for applying these ideas to research, diagnoses, and interventions (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). They examined religious and philosophical traditions of several different cultures around the world, including China (Confucianism and Taoism), South Asia (Buddhism and Hinduism), and the West (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) to determine respectively their human values and core

beliefs about life. The six core virtues that the authors observed repeatedly in these writings included: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom, and transcendence.

### **Implications for Counselors**

As shown by previous research, there are many therapies in the Western world which utilize Taoistic principles. Major theorists, including, Rogers, Jung, and Maslow, have incorporated teachings of the Tao into their philosophy.

When counselors are willing to be open to different avenues of thought, they may find a new awareness both within themselves and within their client's world. Because Eastern thought often seems strange and unfamiliar to Westerners, counselors must work to develop an awareness of intuitive thought and synchronism. Even though, as Taoism proclaims, one may not understand, there can be an acceptance that these processes actually exist. The counselor can then help the client to become more aware of unconscious thought and synchronistic events. Techniques such as meditation, Taoist yoga, and "just being" with the client can be used to heighten awareness of unconscious thoughts.

Counselors may also use a variety of effective methods in their practice, which draw upon a specific principle of Taoism. The balance of the yin and yang is a good example (O'Byrne, 1990). The need for balance in the universe as a whole, as well as in one's personal life, lends itself to the utilization of the yin-yang principle.

Skepticism of both the counselor and the client has to be considered. If both parties cannot be open to learning about or accepting Eastern thought, these methods of therapy will not be effective. Westerners must become aware that there are alternative methods of retrieving and processing thought other than the cognitive-based, scientific method. When one accepts the reality of the intuitive world, then a balance between intuitive and cognitive thought can exist.

### **Summary**

The principles of Taoism are an integral element of many Western counseling theories. Principles such as authenticity, or being true to oneself, and the need for balance in the universe, the yin and yang, are two examples that can be found in many theoretical practices. Methods based upon the teachings of Tao have been effectively interwoven into Western therapy. Eastern philosophy is difficult for many to understand, but the awareness and acceptance of intuitive thought and synchronicity can provide clients much insight into their lives. Also, knowing that Eastern and Western philosophies possess the same core human virtues can be a way of converging these otherwise opposing thoughts.

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