

## Zen, Tao, and Love

Some years ago the Saturday lecture at Berkeley Zen Center focussed on details of Zen forms: how to bow during service, how to walk in the zendo, how to eat during formal meals. Afterwards one student asked: "Why do Zen teachers talk about these things so much? Why don't I hear them speak more about love?"

The speaker, Sojun Mel Weitsman, responded: "Love? That's all we ever talk about."

Readers of the Tao Te Ching might raise the same question as that student, and I'd make a reply similar to Sojun's. It's undeniable, though, that neither Zen nor Taoism use the "L" word very much. In fact, sometimes they seem actively hostile to it. The Hsin Shin Ming ("Faith in Mind"), begins: "The Great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences; when love and hate are both absent, everything becomes clear and undisguised." The Taoist Chuang Tzu writes chillingly: "Because right and wrong appeared, the Way was injured, and because the Way was injured, love became complete."

This is quite a contrast with our society's emphasis on the importance of love. The Beatles song "All you need is love" has been an unofficial anthem for many for over 50 years now. Raised in such a love nest, we may think Zen and Taoism are missing a vital element, or perhaps reflect some emotional constriction in the Asian cultures from which they came to us.

We have our own cultural biases, though. We approach love as a *feeling*, a fusion of unselfish devotion, sexual craving and psychological need. We think of love as having some core, distinguishing (if mysterious) substance. Countless volumes have been written trying to answer the question "what is love?"

The problem is, when you ask *what* love is you make it into a thing. The Tao deals not in things but in flowing springs, and Buddhism stresses the ephemeral transience of all phenomena, void of any essential nature. Asking "what is love?" is like asking "what is Buddha?" It is a koan, so don't be surprised if you get an answer like "dried shit-stick" or "three pounds of flax."

The love unspoken but inherent in Buddhism and Taoism is ungraspable. It is neither a feeling nor some other sort of thing. Love in Buddhism and Taoism is a *practice*.

Love as a swirl of feelings/emotions/urges is inherently impermanent. Feelings of love can lead to ecstasies of selflessness and moments of blissful coupling, but these are short-lived and bring with them the seeds of dissatisfaction, of yearning for a more perfect union, of disagreements and disappointments, of bereavement and grief when the object of love dies or is remote or unattainable.

Both Buddhism and Taoism reject elevating any particular feeling - even love - to a privileged place. There is nothing "wrong" with feelings: we cannot cling to them, but neither should we reject them. As Chuang Tzu says,

When I talk about having no feelings, I mean that a man [or woman] doesn't allow likes or dislikes to get in and do him harm....To serve your own mind so that sadness or joy *do not sway or move it* [my italics]

Zen teacher Eihei Dogen echoes this in his essay *Genjo Koan*. He concludes the opening section with a simple statement of fact: "In aversion weeds spring up, and in attachment flowers fall." Avoidance, rejection and hate engender invasive intrusions and attacks; grasping and clinging choke the precious objects they try to preserve. The *emotions* of love and hate can be notoriously close to each other, morph into each other, and can easily cloud our vision,

The central concern of Buddhism and Taoism is liberation from suffering, and this requires clear vision and equanimity. Equanimity, though, is easily misunderstood. Equanimity is not itself a feeling, a kind of constant calm, nor does it mean being devoid of human feeling. Equanimity involves finding the empty center of being, relying on that as your basis, and from that standpoint greeting each moment with equal love.

Equanimity simply means we meet all that we encounter with acceptance and treat all - *everything and everyone, regardless of our personal preferences or feelings* - with kindness and compassion. Joy then emerges naturally. The Tao Te Ching describes it this way:

"the sage has a gentle smile for all...  
[and] assists the self-becoming of all being."

We assist the self-becoming of all being in myriad ways. When we walk by a stream and see the minnows darting here and there, our joy ratifies the joy of fishes. When after a meditation session we fluff up our sitting cushion and bow to it, we restore it to itself and express our gratitude for how it supported us. When we see a car in front of us on the highway trying to merge into our lane, we check our mirrors for other cars around us and, if conditions permit, give the questing car a little extra space so it has room to find its place.

Love is a continuous process of giving-and-receiving. To think of giving and receiving as complementary but separate from each other would be like breaking water down into its components of hydrogen and oxygen. It's not exactly wrong, but it misses the point. Like water, like all living relationships, love *flows*.

Giving-and-receiving is a form of non-greed, of releasing and letting go, participating with full body and mind in the coursing stream of generosity. This transforms love from a back-and-forth to a practice of circulation, of offering one's self up and receiving all that comes. Giving-and-receiving makes love *round*.

I began thinking about this blog in mid-December, when many people feel stressed out by the tensions that accompany gift exchanges as if the amount spent on a gift - whether it be in money, thought, or effort - is a measure of the importance and value of the relationship. This is an error which can lead to tremendous suffering.

Giving and receiving is not a matter of bestowing something on another while scrutinizing the balance scales. Asking "Does what I give equal what I receive?" only leads to

dissatisfaction. In truth, no gift can ever be repaid; it can only be passed along to another, becoming more wondrous with each person it touches. As Dogen says, “in giving, mind transforms the gift and the gift transforms mind.”

Of course sometimes there is a stutter in the flow, a gap in the circle. This happens whenever the process of giving-and-receiving constricts to a particular aim, whether the aim be altruistic or self-centered. This is natural: there are no streams without eddies and snags, whirlpools and waterfalls. Love expresses the willingness to immerse yourself in the current, swirling around while closing the gaps and restoring the touch of unbroken flow.

Turning the wheel of reciprocal connectedness, love expresses itself in what Dogen calls identity-action: “you cause yourself to be in identity with others [i.e., harmonizing] while causing others to be in identity with you.” The Tao Te Ching states it more simply when it asks: “in loving people, can you lead without imposing your will?”

When we love this way we forget ourselves, but not as self-abnegation nor even self-sacrifice. Chuang Tzu says, “If you act worthily but rid yourself of the awareness that you are acting worthily, then where can you go that you will not be loved?”

Love is a very practical matter; acting “worthily” requires a willingness to make constant adjustments so we are in tune with the needs of the moment. As Dogen notes, “the relationship of self and others varies limitlessly with circumstances.” How do we reconcile our feelings, needs, and actions with the people, plants, animals, and objects which constitute our being-with-the-world?

Love is the practice of listening to each moment to discover how we can harmonize with all we face:

- My sweetheart is searching for a word to express herself; do I offer her my best empathic guess at what she might be feeling,, or give her more space to find herself?
- This tree’s branches are shading the rose bush; do I prune one, move the other, or let nature take her course?
- I am thirsty, and the tea leaves have been rinsed but have not yet unfurled and relaxed: do I quench my thirst, or assist the self-becoming of the tea leaves by giving them more time to open up?

Love is homely and ordinary, expressed not in grand proclamations but in our everyday activities. Love is the way we can choose to move in the world.

There is a wonderful set of movements in Dayan (Wild Goose) Qigong which embodies the practice of giving-and-receiving and in so doing primes us for love:

Standing relaxed and balanced, we extend an open hand palm down, reaching out in front of us at the level of our heart. We look at our hand and gather, wrapping our fingers around the energy which is always there.

As we do this we take care not to grasp so tight we choke what we clasp, not to hold so loose we do not adequately nurture and protect what is at hand.

We let our hand sink down, come in to us, draw it up and receive what we have carried; then we reach out and repeat with the other hand.

We make a series of circles, then reverse the flow: we reach out with our palm up, offering ourselves and opening up while simultaneously receiving; we draw in to our hearts and lungs, sink down into our center and from there again extend our arm with an open hand.

There are endless ways to nurture this circulation. As we offer and open, give and receive, are we leaning slightly forward, tilting slightly back, or standing relaxed in the middle? Are we drawing on the earth and sky equally, and does the flow of the movement “catch” on any of our personal sticking points? Do we give and receive from our head, our heart, our mind, from the soles of our feet or from the very center of our being?

The practice of love is this. It’s how we hold one another *just so*, in mutual call-and-response, in full awareness there’s no *thing* to hold on to. Love is unstoppable because it is ungraspable:

When looked at, no thing to see.

When listened to, no thing to hear.

When used, no thing to use up.

Hence, inexhaustible.

(Tao Te Ching, verse 35)