

Stress Management

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Abstract

Clearly and simply written, and with reference to Lao Tzu's *Tao Teh Ching* (the "Book of Meaning and Life"), the practitioner-academician explores and examines the key principles or practical ways of *Taoism* in relation to managing and reducing stress; the paper is devoid of jargon. Ten essentials or pearls of wisdom, when applied, can help readers to diminish or minimize their stress. Among other things, these ten essentials include: Be detached, emulate nature and be in harmony with others, simplify and practice humility, patience and self-cultivation as well as living in the NOW.

Key words: Tao, Yin, Yang, stress; harmony, patient, detachment; living today or the NOW factor.

1 Introduction

1.1 What is Tao?

Tao is indefinable. The idea of the Absolute Reality or God as the active creator is foreign in the Chinese mind, and thus Tao, in fact, surpasses the ideas of God as understood by all other world religions. Tao can be said to encompass not only all that exists but also all that does not exist. For Lao Tzu, "The Tao (Way) that can be told of is not the eternal Tao." Tao cannot be expressed or described. To describe, in fact, Tao itself is un-Tao, words are outside Tao and therefore things outside Tao cannot describe or be attributed to what's inside Tao.

To reduce stress the Taoism way, there is an overall need to ensure the balance of Yin and Yang. And along with eating correctly, getting the right amount of sleep and

relaxation, and not wasting one's *chi* (energy) through an unhealthy lifestyle, and the best way to build a strong foundation with one's *chi* through the practice of *chi kung*.

1.2 The Paper's Purpose & Objectives

This paper's aim and objectives are to demonstrate the vital importance of understanding and practicing the principles of Taoism and its ways in managing and reducing the stress while living rather contentedly.

2 Taoism Principles to Manage and Reduce Stress

Each of us feels pressure at some time in life, and when seen as a challenge and managed well, it can prove highly energizing and inspiring. Only when pressure becomes overpowering does it result in tiredness, ill health, or unhappiness. The overwhelming pressure or more aptly, stress that saps us. Conversely, we can apply the various Taoism (Note the author wishes to distinguish the terms, that *Taoist* is more of a religion while *Taoism* is more of the thought systems or philosophy of Lao Tzu) ways that can help us to manage and reduce the pressure, and we will reduce our stress. And these Taoism ways are as follows.

2.1 Be Detached and Practice Detachment

One needs to avoid attachments, instead detach oneself. Empty oneself and be free.

In Taoism, each of us needs to be all that heaven has given us, but one acts as though one has received nothing; be empty; it's as simple as that.

One should empty oneself to be full. "We make a vessel from a lump of clay; it is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful. We make doors and windows for a room; but it is these empty spaces that make the room livable." (Lao Tzu, verse 11, *Tao Teh Ching*, cited in Wu, 1990: 15).

We can emulate nature; and like nature, be plainly objective or simply detached. Why should we be attached to money, wealth, material things or to people? Why should we be

attached to a fixed way of doing things? Or even in business, to a certain method, procedure or sales pitch? Why should we cling on to past mistakes? Let go. Low's (2005: 60, Low, 2010) study has, in fact, highlighted that inflexible negotiators are likely to be more tense or stressed. "The rigid negotiator, lacking weaponry of tactics, due to ill-preparations, tends to be more tensed. He's like a mouse with one hole (and is) easily caught"... Besides, the inflexible negotiator, a one-dimensional person, has his mind like a bee in the bonnet; he just "talks shop" with his clients. He easily bores his client with his sales pitch."

In friendships, begin on what we see as a positive reflection of ourselves. Over time, that view may change as another's true nature put us in conflict with our own beliefs. And as such, in relationships, do not blame, judge or shame others. Know when to say goodbye and walk away, grateful for the experience. We have learnt something.

We learn from nature – a flower falls even though we love it, and weed grows even though we do not love it. There is a season and reason for everything; just let it be. A rose plant grows, and bears roses. It then dies, and the dead rose plant provides compost or fertilizer for a new rose plant to grow; and a new cycle develops.

In being detached, we are lighter, and in fact, without encumbrances and baggage, and in most ways, free from problems or worries. When we are attached to things, we think more and more of ourselves. And we also build our desires and wants, and we can even get greedy. However, when we are detached, we think less and less of ourselves; and we now reach out and extend to others.

If one loses one's life, then one gains one's life. It is in giving than one's receives or gets (Low and Ang, forthcoming; Low and Ang, forthcoming-a).

2.2 Emulate Nature and Be In Harmony with Others

One Chinese proverb says, “Don’t clap with one hand.” Note that humankind surfaces from nature, and gets along most effectively by collaborating with nature, rather than trying to conquer or master it.

We need to follow the natural order (Low, 2010a). When we follow nature, we are in harmony with nature. There is no or little stress. We sit quietly... do nothing. Spring comes and grass grows by itself. Besides, a known yet interesting point to note is that nature does not hurry yet everything is accomplished.

Next, it is good to note that most of our life’s problems have to do with our relationships with people (Low, 2001). Conversely, once we relate well and be in harmony or get along well with others, all of our problems appear to disappear. Friendships make prosperity more intense, and lighten adversity. Besides, as Low (2001:13, *italics mine*) has highlighted, “the more high-tech the world gets, the more ‘cold’ it is and the more we need the soft human touch (*or harmonious relationships*).” When doing business, it is also good to be a marketing company and not a selling company, it basically means handling business in a relationship way, and making friends and developing partnerships. And indeed “it pays to apply the ‘Power of Nice’”. (Low, 2001: 39).

There is an anonymous saying that goes, “*Love speaks even when lips are closed.*” One advice given is to surround oneself with affirmation cards of love, and see frequently so that one can meditate at times stop what one is doing and meditate on that sentiment (Sell and Roberts, 2005). Yes, extend one’s love to all, near and far, those who have touched our lives, supplied comfort or loved you conditionally – write a short note or email to them telling them how they have touched your life.

Taoism, as embodied in the traditional Chinese way of thinking, stresses on living in harmony; balance and harmony is critical in leading one’s life. Humankind is to live in harmony with nature, loving fellow human beings as well as creatures – big and small, and all things. For the customary Chinese, something that is disharmonious is considered

more or worse than ugly. And even in a Chinese landscape painting, for example, all the elements are balanced with one another (Low and Ang, forthcoming-a).

2.3 Simplify, simplify, simplify!

The best things and treasures in life is simplicity. Lao Tzu (cited in Low, 2009b) highlighted:

“I have just three things to teach:
simplicity, patience, compassion.
These three are your greatest treasures.
Simple in actions and in thoughts,
you return to the source of being.
Patient with both friends and enemies,
you accord with the way things are.
Compassionate toward yourself,
you reconcile all beings in the world.” (Lao Tzu, Verse 67, *Tao Teh Ching*)

A *koan* (a Zen inspirational saying) goes as such “When cold, say cold; when hot, say hot”. Not to simplify is to increase, wanting more and more. To add is to clutter or litter, and to clutter or crowd is to complicate matters, hindering oneself with unnecessary things and even all kinds of ideas and mumbo-jumbo. Physically, mentally and emotionally, it is cumbersome and burdensome for us to carry a lot of things in our lives as if we were Atlas, bearing the world. We should not clutter ourselves. One, for example, should not have too much of a thing, even good things. In fact, one should not have too much of a good thing. Too much of good or rich food and affluence can lead one to having a more comfortable, sedentary lifestyle without much daily exercise, and that can lead one to having all kinds of health problems such as gout, hypertension, heart diseases and diabetes.

Keeping life simple can be done by going the nature approach. And here, Tu Fu’s poem which also becomes one of Chinese proverbs or Zen’s *su hua* (common sayings) aptly expresses this:

The country is ruined: yet
mountains and rivers remain.
It's spring in the walled town,
the grass growing wild.

The context here is the destruction of the capital during the An Lu-shan rebellion. Tu Fu was not a Taoist, yet his way of being and working came close to the essence; one cherishes life with much appreciation of nature and the various forms of life. One lives simply or 'naturally', without attachments or baggage. [It should be noted that the poets and the Taoist/Zen masters were in a sense just the tip of the wave of a deep Chinese sensibility, an attitude toward life and nature that rose and flowed from the seventh to the fourteenth century and then slowly waned.] (Low, 2010b).

Life is simple, life should be simple; keep it simple. And one lives contentedly. If we have no or little desires, there are little wants and demands. We just need to satisfy the basic needs and we are contented. Moreover, do not expect, and there is no or little disappointment.

To elaborate, a Chinese saying has it that "a man whose heart is not contented is like a snake which tries to swallow an elephant." Indeed life is simple when we have little or no desires. There is nothing much to worry about. If one does not seek prosperity, then one would not be troubled by the ringing bait of profits or rewards. If one is free of desires and upkeeps the purity of heart, then one needs not worry about temptations or lure from others.

2.4 Be Humble and Have No Self-Importance

One should never assume or own importance, and one will never lose it. And this principle echoes in the following verse by Chuang Tzu:

The cinnamon tree is edible, so it is cut down.
The lacquer tree is useful, so it is slashed.
Everyone knows the usefulness of the useful,

But no one knows the usefulness of the useless.

(Chuang Tzu)

This is also reinforced by the practice of emptying oneself, be modest while having no ego or self-importance actions.

2.5 Practice Patience and Be Gentle

Patience enables you to focus on the moment at hand (Sell and Roberts, 2005). Impatient, Type A people normally like to rush and they like to get things done fast; they easily stress themselves (Low, 2005).

The Tao's equivalent of "Rome was not built in a single day" is Lao Tzu's oft-heard saying: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step". Patience, highly valued, is one of the three treasures in life as preached by Lao Tzu (Low, 2009b). When we are impatient, we rush, and we can become easily unbalanced or upset. It is in going slowly that we can keep our balance and not lose sight of our way. "When we are patient, we do not rush. We are not easily provoked or get angry. We, in fact, become more being than becoming." (Low, 2009b).

Low (2008) relevantly asks: "(In life,) must all things be manufactured and be made it fast? Instant noodle style? To borrow Chu Chin-Ning's (1998: 9) words, 'let the water boil'". He cited Chu (1998: 9) in the context of *Doing Less, Achieve More*:

in order to boil water, you pour it into a kettle and place the kettle over a fire. These actions all involve expending energy. When you close the lid of the kettle, you let the water boil. If you become too anxious about the result and keep opening the lid, you hinder the process of heating up the water, and you delay its boiling.

So, all of us need to be unhurried. There is a simple way, and let me share this. Note that when we are in shock, frightened (stressed), or in pain, we usually tend to breathe in short, quick gasps from our chest. However, when we focus on breathing in slow, deep

breaths from the belly, we are able to change our bodies' internal chemistry. These make simply us feel better, in fact, less stressed. So whenever you find yourself in a stressful or demanding situation, stop, and return to this simple belly-breathing practice.

This author reckons that a very good yet simple practice to reduce stress as well as gaining control of our *chi* (energy) is to simply stop whatever we are doing, saying, thinking, or feeling, and simply breathe. Breathe well. Remember to breathe from the belly, deeply and slowly. [Note that the air we breathe is a precious thing; it is the Universe's gift of love to us.]

2.6 Self-cultivate, Improving Oneself

Forget about all those programs that teach how to be powerful, sexy, wealthy and greedy.

No teacher can make you happy, prosperous or healthy. It said that no rules or teachings can enforce such qualities. If you want or wish to improve yourself, try silent. Just be silent, "cleansing discipline that will gradually show you your true selfless self." (Heider, 1994: 37). Silent can be a tremendous source of strength. Embrace the Great Quiet.

Grigg (1994: 45) speaks of:

Come to self then empty of self. Once there is emptiness – no wishes, no expectations, no desires, no attachments –filling will come of itself. Trust the filling. It is infallible. It is very ordinary. From the very beginning everything has relied upon it. Move with the Tao and become one with the Tap. Be virtuous by becoming one with the primal virtue.

2.7 Meditate and Reflect

"Meditation is a pause", a break (Low, 2010b).

These days, many people find it difficult to find time to relax. We are often on the move. Yes, we need to find time to relax, and to relax, try these. Sit on a beach and allow the sounds of the incoming waves wash over you, take a nature walk after a heavy rain,

breathe the fresh air, cleaned by the rain. Or walk along the beach or a trail deep in the forest, breathing in the fresh smells of the trees, plants, and earth; and this can indeed be even more therapeutic than a visit to a psychotherapist or to a costly health spa.

Mind is one way to rest the mind. Note that people do not see things the same way when under stress. What they see is influenced by their beliefs, values, background, and goals and psychological frames or references. Meditation and reflection can thus help to gain clarity of mind and see things in proper perspective. It opens up new vistas, opportunities to look at new landscapes creatively.

“The Tao’s Way is to empty when there is too much and to fill when there is not enough. Such is its way. When the mind is too full, it must be emptied. When it is empty, it will be filled by the Tao.” (Grigg, 1994a: 31).

If one can empty one’s mind of all thoughts one’s heart will embrace the tranquility of peace (*Tao Teh Ching*, verse 16). Socrates once said that “an unexamined life is not worth living”. Examine one’s life. Examine what has happened. And reflect. Review.

Have pauses or breaks in between. Be empty. “Learn to return to yourself.” (Heider, 1994: 79). Go into the depth of our inner silence and peace. And have true enjoyment. The peace that comes from peaceful surroundings is not true peace. The pleasure that comes from pleasurable surroundings is not true pleasure. Only in the peace acquired in the midst of activity is found the true domain or sphere of one’s original nature.

There should always be Yin-Yang, and there must be a balance of Yin and Yang. One cannot always be in a hurry (The dominance of Yin and the weakness of Yang). If so, learn to meditate (To increase the Yang to ensure the Yin-Yang balance or equilibrium). More critically, the key issue here is that meditation adds a rhythm since complete lack of regularity creates anxiety and tension. Yet, on the other hand, if we have too much regularity, routine sets in and we can get bored. So it is good to have change and constancy present (Yin-Yang Balance) in our lives at once. And to put it simply,

meditation helps; it builds up the energy. It supplies the constancy in the world of change which is paradoxically remained unchanged (Change is the most regular – unchanged – thing in the universe) (Low, 2010a).

In managing stress, the Tao way, meditation is basic. Meditation sessions are very much like roots of a tree and without roots, the tree cannot survive, it dies. Meditation is as essential as breathing; it gives the *chi* (energy) to the Tai Chi practitioners.

2.8 Have Yin and Have Yang – One Needs to Work Hard and Play Hard Too!

All of us need to balance ourselves. Many people, more often than not, are very well-versed in working hard, but only a few are familiar with playing hard. Frequently, people work very hard, causing much stress to themselves.

Many are skilled at their labor, too few accustomed at play. One should thus be diligent when working and playful when playing. Have fun, and laugh. And laugh heartily. Laughing is good; it is de-stressing.

2.9 Go with the Flow

A *koan* is a meaningful saying for one to reflect and ponder upon, and one such example to reflect this going with the flow goes like this: “when hungry, eat, and when tired, sleep.”

Just go with the flow, and be like water, the highest good. “Nothing in the world is softer... than water.” (Verse 78, *Tao Teh Ching*, Lao Tzu cited in Wu, 1990: 111).

Life is, in fact, never constant. It never, in other words, stands still. And it is never without a challenge. Find gold in any change. Death might seem to be the issue of life; however, those who follow the eternal Way, do not see it this way. They also do not count the time. They “do not seek fame. Do not make plans. Do not be absorbed by activities. (They) do not think that (they) know. Be aware of all that is and dwell in the infinite” (Chuang Tzu, cited in Towler, 2007: 32).

Indeed most of us are planners, but we need to be flexible just like water, as things and circumstances may change as life is so dynamic and fluid. Like a young bamboo, when there are strong winds, we bend, and not snap. And whatever event(s) may come, we just need to make good out of it. If we are too rigid and inflexible, then we would be totally and utterly disappointed when we cannot get what we want or do what we intend to do. As babies, all of us are often flexible, our skins are tender and supple and we can bend easily; but as we get older, we get rigid, our joints ache, and in our old age, we even have difficulties in bending or stretching. And of course, the moment we die, we become rigid and dead stiff, affected by *rigis mortis*. In life, we indeed need to be agile and not rigid; if one is rigid, one is dead (Low, 2010b). [Examples of rigidity include that of blindly following bureaucratic procedures – the means becomes the ends, eating a fixed or preferred menu day in day out or worse, as if one is following a religion without understanding its spiritual core, then one is indeed embracing an empty religion.]

Interestingly, the above resonates what Lao Tzu once expressed:

All living growth is supple
Until death grips or takes hold of it.
Thus people who have hardened are ‘kin of death’,
And people who stay soft are ‘kin of life’.

If one expects much, then try to be without expectations. No expectations, no disappointments or unhappiness. Simply accept what may come or what Nature throws at you. Accept even a bad event as it carries the seed of goodness or good opportunity; when one learns to cope with an ill event, one builds one’s resilience.

Going with the flow also means one does not await or expect. When one anticipates, one becomes concerned, worried or even anxious about what happens, whether it comes (it does not come) or what happens when this (that) occurs. Indeed when we anticipate, we generate our own fears or grow our monsters.

Better still, come what may, when we go with the flow, we take it as the Tao or Universe time – that is, the best and well-fit time. Reduce anxieties. Lao-Tzu (Verse 3, *Tao Teh Ching*, Lao Tzu cited in Wu, 1990: 5) expresses, “Practice Non-Ado, and everything will be in order.”

2.10 Living in the Now

Live in the Here and Now. Celebrate life now! Enjoy life in the present moment, cherish life now; it's beautiful that way.

One has no need to be totally elated or utterly regret about the past; and one also has no need to dream (worse, worry) about the future. There is no need to run to the future; there's no need to be concerned of the past or worry of tomorrow, it is yet to be. Today is a present, a gift! Live, and enjoy the moment.

3 Conclusion

If you move fast, learn to go slow.

Learn to have breaks too – and while work hard, play hard too. Learn to be patient. Follow the nature way, avoid counting time while going with the flow. Overall, to this author, one best way is to enjoy life at the present moment; live fully for the moment, not in the past or in the future.

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