

instructive discussions on social justice activism and service, and to Cathy Cornell for sharing her developing reflections on compassion fatigue, secondary trauma, and contemplative practice.

5. For detailed explanation of progress and integration of practice in life and work, consult *Awakening through Love*, chapters 5–7.
6. On principles of adaptation, see *Awakening through Love*, introduction and chapters 1 and 2.
7. For one such example, see *Awakening through Love*, 240.

*From Meditation and the Classroom:
Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious
Studies / Edited by Judith Simmer-
Brown and Fran Grace. Albany:
State University of New York
Press, 2011.*

9

FIELD NOTES FROM A DAOIST PROFESSOR

LOUIS KOMJATHY

FROM THE HUT TO THE ACADEMY

I walk over the needle-strewn path beneath a canopy of Douglas-fir, hemlock, and cedar. I find my way along the narrow, rain-soaked trail, eventually reaching the door to my thatched meditation hut. It is sparsely furnished, free of unnecessary objects—a small cot, writing table, books, and meditation mat. I take my seat on mat and cushion and begin practicing Daoist quiet sitting (*jingzuo*). Internal stillness merges with external silence. The silence takes in everything. Wind and the rustling of leaves. A kingfisher calling in the distance. After completing the meditation session, I stand up, stretch, and open the rough-hewn door. As I cross the threshold, I encounter thirty pairs of eyes looking at me. Some seem curious, others hungry, and still others frightened. These thirty students are in my Daoism class, having found their way through the forest along many different life paths. When I stand in front of them as their teacher, does it make a difference that I am a Daoist and a contemplative? What is the relationship between the meditation hut and the academy?

Much of academic life may be compared to solitary meditation, though an appreciation of and opportunities for contemplation itself seem increasingly rare within university life. There is no doubt that a “capitalist model of education” has become dominant in the academy: production, consumption, and service (in the sense of the “service industry”) too frequently define academic success. Where is the time for contemplation? Indeed, few people seem capable of engaging in deep reflection and conversation, or of recognizing the contributions of philosophical insights derived from contemplative practice. Some of us may opt out of academic life, seeing it as incompatible with our inner commitments. In Daoist

literature, for example, we encounter Lü Dongbin, a Tang dynasty literati-official who abandoned an official career in order to practice internal alchemy. In other words, the "hut" may be compelling in its own right. To pursue contemplative life may mean that one finds oneself as a recluse in early retirement, rather than a court official who has attained promotion in the imperial bureaucracy. But, even though academic life may be analogous to Lü Dongbin's Yellow Millet Dream,¹ for those of us who are dreaming the dream, we should dream big. Can we envision a fully integrated life as contemplative scholar-professors who seamlessly cross the threshold of hut to academy and back again?²

By "contemplative" and "contemplation," I do not simply mean meditative praxis; contemplation cannot be reduced to mere technique. Contemplation involves heightening awareness and attentiveness. This awareness may then inform one's daily life. Daoists frequently speak of this interplay in terms of developing clarity and stillness (*qingjing*), and emphasis on these psychosomatic conditions is one connective strand throughout the Daoist tradition. For example, chapter 45 of the fourth-century BCE *Daode jing* (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) explains, "Clarity and stillness are the rectification of the world." These technical meditation terms receive one of their clearest expressions in the eighth-century CE *Qingjing jing* (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness; DZ 620):

Perfect stillness resonates with things.
 Perfect constancy realizes innate nature.
 Constantly resonating, constantly still,
 There is constant clarity, constant stillness. (1b)³

Other contemporaneous, Tang dynasty Daoist texts describe this as a five-stage process: 1) great agitation; 2) decreasing agitation; 3) equal agitation and stillness; 4) increasing stillness; 5) great stillness. Through quiet sitting, stillness deepens. Daoist contemplatives locate themselves in the internal silence at the ground of being, which from a Daoist perspective is the Dao. As stillness deepens, clarity increases. This is the capacity for discernment and spiritual insight. Consciousness becomes purified of defilements and distortion, returning us to our basic humanity and goodness. It then becomes possible to see things from a more all-encompassing perspective, and to develop ways of relating based on mutual respect and mutual flourishing. Thus, for Daoists, meditative practice is both solitary and communal; on a more integrated level, it informs and is expressed in the Daoist's daily life.

My personal practice is Daoist quiet sitting, a form of apophatic meditation that centers on internal silence and nonconceptual, contentless awareness. It finds clear historical precedents in the earliest Daoist scriptures and remains one of the primary forms of contemporary Daoist meditation. Briefly stated, Daoist quiet sitting involves stilling and emptying intellectual and emotional activity. This is

not a forced or contrived activity; rather, one simply allows thoughts and emotions to dissipate naturally. The practitioner enters stillness. In terms of its basic commitments and guidelines, it resembles other practices such as Quaker silent worship and Soto Zen meditation. For this form of meditation to be "Daoist," there is of course an informing worldview and communal context. In my case, the study of Daoism is not restricted to reading and translating classical Chinese texts or examining fragmented artifacts in an attempt to reconstruct lost worlds. My understanding of Daoism is deeply informed by participant-observation in Daoist communities, both in mainland China and the United States. This includes formal commitment to and affiliation with the Daoist religious tradition.

Many challenges result from being a "scholar-practitioner." I do not always find it easy to cross that threshold from the hut to the academy, so to say. The most difficult challenge is how to address the negative view of religious practice that seems to prevail in the academy. I have come across this negative view at every turn, from a variety of sources: Protestant Christians, secularized Protestants, spiritualists, and adherents of secular materialism or social scientific reductionism. These various segments of the academy assert what I see as a highly questionable view that religious adherence necessarily leads to prejudice, manipulation, and distortion. But my experience reveals that the opposite may, in fact, be true: critical religious adherence may not only lead to a greater degree of reflectivity and self-awareness, but it may also provide important insights into *lived religiosity*. Such insights, I have found, enrich rather than compromise my research and teaching as a scholar in religious studies.

BEING A DAOIST PROFESSOR

How has Daoism enriched and guided me as a professor? What does the tradition I study and practice teach me about pedagogy? Reflection on and application of the study of Daoism has transformed my pedagogical practice in specific "Daoist ways." By taking Daoism seriously on its own terms, I have discovered principles and practices that may be applied to classroom teaching and learning. One dimension of my contemplative pedagogy involves actually engaging in critical inquiry on teaching (reading relevant books and speaking with colleagues, for example) and developing an applied and experimental approach to student learning. According to chapter 41 of the *Daode jing*,

When the highest adepts hear about the Dao,
 They are diligent in their practice of it.
 When the middle adepts hear about the Dao,
 They wonder whether or not it exists.
 When the lowest adepts hear about the Dao,

They laugh loudly and mock it.
If they did not laugh, it would not be the Dao.

This passage is, of course, referring to the Dao as the sacred or ultimate concern of Daoists, but there are many *daos* ("ways") in human existence. One is the "way of teaching." Reframing the passage under this light,

When the most committed teachers consider teaching,
They are diligent in their reflection and practice.
When less committed teachers consider teaching,
They wonder whether or not it is important.
When the least committed teachers consider teaching,
They dismiss and ignore its relevance.

As we deepen our level of pedagogical reflexivity and practice, we become more committed to facilitating student learning.⁴ We become more aware of the motivations behind our teaching, the means by which we teach, as well as the importance and relevance of our subjects. We also realize that our being and presence in the classroom, our physical embodiment and nonverbal communications, are as influential as conventional podium postures.

Being a Daoist professor means that I attend closely to listening. By this, I do not simply mean listening to the students' insights, questions, and concerns; I also mean listening to aspects of interpersonal relating with which they may not even be aware. The aforementioned insights about committed teachers may, in turn, be combined with the following passage on classical Daoist meditative praxis:

Make your aspirations one. Don't listen with your ears; listen with your heart-mind. No, don't listen with your heart-mind, listen with your *qi*. Listening stops with the ears, the heart-mind stops with recognition, but *qi* is empty and waits on all things. The Dao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the heart-mind. (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 4)

This passage urges me to become attentive to what I am listening to. Some teachers are listening to institutional limitations. Others are listening to student dissatisfaction or apathy. Still others are listening to their own insecurities and reactions. From a contemplative perspective, it is possible to overcome this conditioning, habituation, and reactivity; we can train ourselves to listen to something else, to discern what lies beneath appearances. For example, many students who denigrate the relevance of a course are actually limited by their own preconceived ideas or habitual tendencies of perception. A sensitive teacher finds ways to reveal and transform such cognitive and behavior patterns. Internal silence and stillness are essential for this task. Every classroom, every teacher, every stu-

dent, and every group of students has its own energetic quality. Such influences and patterns of interaction may be a source of joy or a source of distress. By abiding in a state of open receptivity, we become more aware of our own strengths and weaknesses as teachers and of the possible opportunities and challenges of specific learning contexts.

This is where "nonaction" (*wuwei*) as a Daoist practice may be applied (see *Daode jing*, chaps. 2, 3, 38, 43, 48, 57, 63, and 64). *Wuwei* is a Daoist technical term related to effortless activity, or doing nothing extra. Parallel principles include "embracing simplicity" and "decreasing desires" (*Daode jing*, chaps. 19 and 37), and "loosening the tangles" and "untying the knots" (*Daode jing*, chaps. 4 and 56). We can find ways to teach, to facilitate student learning, in which our own egos are submerged in a larger communal vision. Our own educational values, concerns, and objectives (to be discovered by each teacher) become more prominent in our courses. Such commitments may be expressed in a more subject-centered and person-centered classroom.

Also relevant in this respect is the classical Daoist emphasis on "nonknowing" (*wuzhi*). In chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi* we find the following:

Suppose you and I have had an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don't know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who disagrees with both of us? But if he already disagrees with both of us, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who agrees with both of us? But if he already agrees with both of us, how can he decide? Obviously, then, neither you nor I nor anyone else can decide for each other. Shall we wait for still another person?

But waiting for one shifting voice [to pass judgment on] another is the same as waiting for none of them. Harmonize them all with the Heavenly Equality, leave them to their endless changes, and so live out your years. What do I mean by harmonizing them with the Heavenly Equality? Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument. Forget the years; forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home!⁵

And according to chapter 71 of the *Daode jing*, "To know that you do not know is best; / To not know that you are knowing is sickness. / Only by being sick of sickness are you not sick."

These passages teach me that strong attachment to my own opinions inhibits conversation, and every perspective has inherent limitations. The classical Daoist recognition of the limitations of rationality and knowledge tempers the academic tendency toward hyper-intellectualism and authoritarian discourse. It helps to reframe teaching and learning in terms of inquiry, a communal discourse informed by every engaged and committed participant. We recognize the partial nature of any perspective, and this creates openness toward the perspectives of others. Why? Because we ourselves may not fully understand what we teach and why we teach. This aspect of a Daoist worldview also inspires us to investigate alternative views of consciousness and human flourishing. Dominant approaches to education as well as our very social and institutional locatedness may be as much of an impediment as an aid to student learning. For example, is there a type of learning that can only be attained with physical movement? Should walking have a place in teaching and learning?

I would thus suggest that the religious traditions that we study and teach may inform our own teaching and learning. In addition to clarifying pedagogical practice, our subject matter may become our conversation partner and create contexts for inquiry with our students. In contemplating Daoism, I find alternative views of human flourishing: from self as landscape and alchemical crucible; to place-specific community as a manifestation of the Dao; through clarity and stillness as the source of social transformation. These views challenge dominant American value systems, especially the emphasis on desire-based existential modes and material acquisition. They challenge the prevalence of uninformed opinions, conspicuous consumption, the cult of celebrity and fame, and "entertainment" based on humiliation and denigration. We may thus turn the subject matter of our classrooms back on ourselves: how do specific religious views and practices challenge our own pedagogical approaches? How can they be used to challenge students to reflect critically on their own learning and motivations? For example, why is a memorial at the former site of the World Trade Center ("Ground Zero") so important from a Daoist perspective?

DAOIST INTERNAL ALCHEMY: TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS IN THE CLASSROOM

The Daoist tradition invites me to see education as transformative process. Whether teachers acknowledge it or not, they influence the lives and perspectives of students. Education imprints students. On some level, it even acculturates and domesticates them. The most committed teachers understand this and

teach with awareness, intentionality, and care. They also make space for creativity, spontaneity, and wildness.

Internal alchemy, a model of Daoist practice and attainment that became dominant from the late Tang dynasty (618–907) onward, provides a possible map for the process of transformation. One way of understanding Daoist internal alchemy involves the refinement of *yin* qualities into their *yang* counterparts.⁶ Here *yin* and *yang* diverge from the standard associations of female/receptive/stillness/earth and of male/assertive/activity/heaven, respectively. In internal alchemy, *yin* often refers to negative or harmful qualities and existential modes, while *yang* refers to positive or beneficial qualities and existential modes. Like Daoist alchemical practice, teaching and learning involve transmutation, or alchemical transformation. That transformative process entails cognitive and behavioral shifts: from ignorance to understanding, from rigid conviction to open inquiry, from inherited limitations to unimagined possibilities.

I witness these shifts in the classroom, especially as a result of contemplative-based assignments that give students direct personal experience with the subject matter. This type of learning catalyzes "critical first-person" perspectives in class discussion. In my Contemplative Traditions course, for example, students are required to choose a particular contemplative method and to practice it regularly throughout the semester. They study the religious and historical context for that practice and also have the opportunity to hear directly from a practitioner of that religious tradition about the practice. Thus the first-person contemplative learning goes hand-in-hand with conventional third-person historical-critical methods.

This combination of learning methods catalyzes an alchemical process for some of the students. One student, who chose Dominican prayer as her personal contemplative practice, came to a profound respect for the religious tradition she studied. She realized that the power of a practice may come from its connection to a community of practitioners: "It's a Catholic practice. I'm Christian, but not Catholic. You have to be part of the Catholic tradition to really practice Dominican prayer. Maybe even be a Dominican." The class members subsequently had conversations on the tradition-based nature of certain forms of contemplative practice, on the ways in which contemplative practice is always informed by the specific worldviews, concerns, commitments, contributions, and limitations of community and tradition.

In addition to the transformative effect of individual, first-person investigation of subject matter, something beneficial seems to happen when the class sits together in silence. Recently, in the Contemplative Traditions course, I applied my Daoist meditation practice to the classroom. We sat silently for five minutes at the beginning of a given class. Why do this? There are various rationales for introducing such "learning exercises" into education, including creating an environment more conducive to learning, helping students deal with stress,

providing an experiential basis for conversation about religious praxis and embodied being, meeting students in a place of open inquiry and existential search, and so forth. These and other benefits of making space for "meditation in the classroom" were noted by students in my Contemplative Traditions course. For example, one student remarked during a class discussion, "I never knew how confused and chaotic my mind was. I'm completely distracted. I have no attention span. How can anyone learn like this?" In a journal entry, another student wrote, "Meditation is helping me calm down and relax. . . . In class, I can concentrate more and be fully present."

OPENING THE THATCHED DOOR AND REMEMBERING THE FOREST COMMUNITY

With respect to contemplative pedagogy, to "meditation in the classroom," I have benefited from the tradition that I study and in which I participate. Daoist quiet sitting as well as similar apophatic and quietistic meditation practices develop awareness, attentiveness, and interior silence. Such qualities have the potential to frame classroom learning. While some teacher-scholars may have reservations about introducing actual contemplative practice into university education, there can be little doubt that fully embodied presence and deep listening exert a beneficial influence on students' academic and personal development. We become more capable of meeting our students, including their aspirations, fears, and disappointments. We may abide in a state of unagitated encounter and open receptivity that makes space for their own process of becoming fully human. We may become a model for a contemplative mode of being, a way of life rooted in clarity and stillness. Such a commitment offers an alternative to conventional academic tendencies toward egoism, domination, pettiness, and rigidity. Daoism thus gives me specific insights into the contributions and limitations of knowing and learning, including those of university education and academic intellectualism. It reminds me that there are many dreams, from Zhuang Zhou's dream of a butterfly's life to Lü Dongbin's dream of millet. I am dreaming too. But in the process, I find Daoist existential and ontological models that inform my pedagogy, a pedagogy that remembers a meditation hermitage and the forest community.

NOTES

1. According to standard Daoist hagiographies, Lü Dongbin (b. 798?) was a Tang dynasty literati-official who abandoned an official career in order to practice internal alchemy. The Yellow Millet Dream is one story related to

- this decision, wherein Lü realizes the absurdity of pursuing fame and reputation. For one account see Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 126–32.
2. If one has affinities with the Daoist emphasis on "embracing simplicity" (*baopu*) and "decreasing desires" (*guayu*) (*Daode jing*, chaps. 19 and 37) and the principle of "non-contention" (*wuzheng*) (*Daode jing*, chaps. 66 and 81), one may know the "joy of fish" (*Zhuangzi*, chap. 17) and be able to "drag one's tail in the mud" (*ibid.*).
 3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
 4. More recently, I have found Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007) and David Finkel's *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2000) to be books on pedagogy worthy of critical reflection. I have also benefited from many conversations with colleagues about teaching.
 5. Burton Watson, *Chuang-tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 43–44.
 6. Conventionally speaking, *yin* and *yang* relate to what may be referred to as "traditional Chinese cosmology." They are complementary and interrelated cosmological principles. This cosmology became utilized in Chinese medicine and particular Daoist worldviews.