

This is a read-only draft of a chapter in a forthcoming book: *Lao Tzu's Court: Exploring Taoist Practices in a Western Culture*. Please do not save or make copies. The finalized version will be available at [SimplyTao.com](http://SimplyTao.com). Thank you!

### **Bibliographic Notes (or Rants and Raves)**

The best part of many books is the bibliography. The text may get our attention and inspire, the citations in the bibliography allow for further exploration. Therefore, this bibliography is longer than many of the chapters. It is not exhaustive, by any means, but the major authors and subjects are included. Reading one text can lead you to other titles by the same author. Hopefully it will support your own interests, in some small way.

It's worth noting, again, that the essence of the Tao will not be found in any book, no matter how enticing the title or how prestigious the author. If we approach books expecting to find or understand the Tao, we will always be disappointed. If we approach these books as a way to support our own exploration and experience of the Tao...ah, well that's a different story.

The following notes are only my personal opinions. I encourage you to explore whatever draws your interest and form your own conclusions.

### **Technique**

English books on Taoist meditation and chi kung techniques have only been widely available in the last 30 years. Thanks largely to the personal efforts of authors like Chang, Chia, Cohen and Frantzis, (????others) we have practical and detailed references for a wide range of techniques and practices. This has allowed previously unimaginable access and growth of Taoism in the West. However, it is tempting and oh, so easy to pick up one of these books and begin to practice. This is not a good idea. These books can be used to explore and find an area of interest, but please make the effort to find a qualified teacher with whom to learn.

Mantak Chia was one of the first Asian teachers to publish English books on Taoist techniques. He has several dozen titles each of which explain specific practices in detail, from the very simple to the quite esoteric. One of his earliest titles, *Taoist Ways to Transform Stress into Vitality*, illuminates what is possible. Imagine, all the stress in our lives changing into vitality!

In a field dense with eccentric and interesting authors, Ken Cohen stands out. He is equally skilled and trained in Taoist and Native American traditions, combining two approaches to the natural way from very different times and cultures. The current ethnocentric approach to spirituality, meditation, healing, politics, the earth, nature and life in general, may begin to subtly change thanks to efforts of people like Cohen. His book, *The Way of Qi Gong* is clear and easy to understand.

In his series of books,

B.K. Frantzis makes a convincing argument for the importance of yin practices (referring to them as the water method) in Western culture. He may overstate this position when advocating that everyone should only do yin practices, especially since he spent several decades doing very intense

yang practices (the fire method) before embracing the water method. This clearly illustrates a, perhaps universal, tendency for teachers of all meditation and spiritual traditions to promote a method that worked well for them personally as the right way for every body. We only have to look to Frantzis' own Chinese teacher, Liu Hung Chieh, for insight. Liu had two disciples. He taught Frantzis the water method; a Chinese student he taught the fire method. This was because that was what each student needed at the time and according to their nature. This example clearly demonstrates almost everything we need to know about being a teacher and being a student.

## **Academic & Scholarly**

I have a strong attraction/aversion relationship with academic and scholarly works. As may be clear by now, I lean heavily toward a personal and experiential understanding of Tao essence. It's useful to listen to a very experienced Taoist, Lu Xixing, from over four centuries ago.

*I urge you, reader, to listen patiently to what I have to say next. When I was a Confucian student, I tried to study the words and phrases of the alchemical texts as a scholar before I had any spiritual foundation and experience. All my efforts at study came to nothing. Then, I had the fortune of meeting a teacher of a true lineage. After receiving the teachings, I realized that I needed practice and experience before I could understand the meaning of the alchemical terms mentioned above. Now that I have learned their meanings, I realize that the Tao is not difficult to understand.... Trying to understand the alchemical terms intellectually, they (students) end up missing the true meaning. If you want to penetrate the meanings of the alchemical terms easily and naturally, you must build a strong foundation and practice diligently, because the root of all meanings can be attained only through practice. (emphasis added)*

It's important to understand that a Confucian scholar of 16<sup>th</sup> century China would probably be the equivalent of a modern day philosophy professor at a major university. Years of scholarly study at the highest academic level brought him little true insight or understanding.

Even so, I still find value in scholarly works. Without them we would have very few historical materials would be available to the general public. We just need to remember that academic efforts need to be grounded by personal practice and experience.

Here is a lovely example of this type of writing from Lau and Ames' *Yuan Dao: Tracing Tao to It's Source*.

*If, as in the Chinese alternative, order is emergent rather than existing as an independent scientific principle, knowledge of it must be qualified by the where and the when of it. As such, knowledge must be*

*provisional, and more modest in its claims. The Daoist cosmogonic narrative takes us back to an earlier set of conditions which, as they recede from us historically, offer increasing resistance to explanation by the application of our present philosophical vocabulary.... Given the inseparability of agents and context assumed in this tradition, dao has as much to do with the subjects of knowing and their quality of understanding as it does with any object of knowledge. Without an originative principal, and the linear teleology that comes with it, the world has no persisting governing purpose, and no preassigned design. The alternative to some given and governing purpose, then, is localized and temporalized self sufficiency - a collaboration between the human knower and the world as it is realized, to get the most out of each situation. Thus, "knowing" dao is always proximate - you have to be there.*

If you can follow that, you'll enjoy this book.

J.J. Clarke's *The Tao of the West* offers one of the most comprehensive academic and scholarly bibliographies I have found.

Solala Towler's *The Empty Vessel* is a journal about Taoism in modern Western culture. It provides a diverse range of articles by modern authors and teachers. It is also a great resource for books, videos, classes, workshops and retreats. Towler's, *A Gathering Of Cranes*, is a collection of interviews with contemporary authors and teachers of Taoism in the West.

## **Classical Translations**

Classical translations present a formidable challenge to Western students. When I first started exploring Taoism in the 1970s, I found only the Feng/English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* and Wilhelm's 1940's translation of the *I Ching*. At the time it seemed quite simple - these were the definitive English translations; they were the only ones available.

The last 30 years have led me to question that assumption. What is one to make of dozens of quite different *Tao Te Ching* translations? I encourage you to explore for yourself. Try this experiment: Find three translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, possibly Feng/English, Le Guin and Hinton. Or, find three translations of the *I Ching*, possibly: Wilhelm, Jou and Ni. Set them side-by-side and read the same chapter in each book consecutively.

I've often done this and find the process very useful. Over time, I have concluded, that I need to create my own translation. That insight takes us to the essence of the matter of classical translations. There is no definitive version. All versions can inspire and be guides to finding our own understanding of classic Taoist texts. We don't have to know how to technically translate

classical Chinese to relate to classical texts in our own way. This naturally happens through the accumulated experiences and insights developed through practice.

The *Tao Te Ching* is a recognized classic and has, reportedly, been surpassed only by the Bible in terms of publication and translations. I personally resonate with Le Guin's version, although I find others to also be enlightening. Even modern translations that, seemingly, stray far from the original can still express the spirit of the words. Consider Trevino's modern translation of Chapter 77, (see page ??), in Chapter ??: The Power of Attention).

Le Guin's rendition is worth consulting, not only for her poet's approach to language, but for her insightful commentary at the end of the book. Her description of the translation process, how and why she consulted earlier versions, explains so much about the diversity among multiple versions of the *Tao Te Ching*, and about all translations of classical Taoist texts into English. I also find Le Guin's fiction to be very inspiring. Many of her works explore Taoist themes without ever using the word Tao.

Another great resource for those interested in the translation process is Coleman Barks and John Moyne's introduction in *The Drowned Book*. They provide an insightful example of how they first produced a literal, then a spiritual translation of 13th century Persian to modern English.

The *I Ching* offers a more challenging translation process. The depth and complexity of the book can be daunting. I highly recommend Thomas Cleary's the *I Ching Mandelas* to get an overview of the many ways to approach this book. The common use of the *I Ching* as an oracle, or divination, is a very superficial and minor aspect of this great book. At deeper levels it is a sophisticated and complete guide to a detailed understanding of the transformation of chi. Every eight years or so I get inspired to study the *I Ching* more thoroughly. After a year I need to put it down, let it settle in, before approaching again. It's a slow process... and a rewarding one.

Less well known is *The Book of Chuang Tzu*. Written at approximately the same time as the *Tao Te Ching* (400 B.C.E.), it provides another approach to the basic philosophical aspects of the Tao. If interested, consider Merton, Chang and Hamill.

The *Tao Te Ching* is attributed to Lao Tzu, who is thought to have lived around 500 B.C.E. *The Book of Chuang Tzu* is attributed to Chuang Tzu, a Taoist philosopher, who is thought to have lived around 290 B.C.E. Scholars routinely debate specific details associated with the written material and authors. It seems that both books were collections of primarily oral teachings passed down through many generations before being written in a single volume and attributed to each author.

The two books have very different qualities. The *Tao Te Ching* is quite short, offering an often mysterious and enigmatic presentation of proverbs and traditional sayings. The *Chuang Tzu* is composed of longer prose, including stories and fables. The two classics balance each other nicely,

providing prospective on the same core Taoist principles from differing vantage points.

Most of my complaints about classical translations involve the inherent constraints of the academic writing process and the relative lack of practical experience of the authors. For example, I have great respect for Thomas Cleary and his prodigious number of translations. However, while reading, it seems to me that he is not an experienced practitioner of all the materials he translates.

Eva Wong is a different type of scholar. Her translations of lesser-known works from the Taoist canon, like *Cultivating Stillness* and *Harmonizing Yin and Yang: The Dragon and Tiger Classic*, vibrate from accurate translation combined with deep personal practice and experience. The introductions, commentary and footnotes of her books are enlightening, inspiring and provide modern access to esoteric and arcane historical writings. Her *Shambhala Guide to Taoism* is one of the most complete and reader-friendly overviews of Taoism available.

## Chinese Energetic Theory

A practical understanding of Chinese energetic theory is incredibly valuable, possibly mandatory, for a well-rounded Taoist education. However, most of the energetic information in meditation and chi kung technique books is presented piecemeal, a little bit here and there without a coherent, full perspective. Books specific to Chinese medicine offer a more complete picture. Unfortunately these books are mainly written for a professional or academic reader, focusing primarily on pathology and disease. Ted Kaptchuk's *Web That Has No Weaver* is a classic and presents all the information, but in an incredibly dry manner. Harriet Beinfield's *Between Heaven and Earth* is a much easier read with more practical examples, but primarily focuses on just one approach: the five elements. Nigel Wiseman's *Fundamentals* and Giovanni Maciocia's *Foundations* are textbooks for students and professionals of Chinese medicine. The information is available, but it may take reading several of these books to get what you need. Remember, all of this energetic theory will come alive and make much more sense in the context of personal meditation and chi kung practice and experience.

Within the professional Chinese medicine literature, Paul Unschuld's *Medicine in China* provides a very useful perspective. Reading this book was a pivotal experience in my understanding of the larger picture of Chinese medicine and Taoism. His central theme is that social, political, economic and cultural context influence the development of Chinese medical theories, terminology and therapeutic techniques. While Unschuld explores this theme through the subject of how medicine evolved in China over 3500 years, the central ideas apply to Taoism and everything else as well. *Medicine in China* may be more academic and detailed than most meditation students need, but it is extremely valuable for understanding how natural it is for Taoist practices to evolve and transform in a Western culture as they have historically throughout Chinese culture.

## Emotions

The Western approach to emotions seems mainly limited to a few two options: ignore them, medicate them or psychoanalysis. These approaches have not worked well for me. Thankfully, there are other options. Iona Teegaurden's *Joy of Feeling* is a detailed, if somewhat dense, exploration of the subtle act of balancing emotions. This is the best material I am aware of that provides an in-depth description of emotions in energetic terms. Tara Brach's *Radical Acceptance* offers a simple and easy to understand approach to relating to our emotions wisely. Mantak Chia's *Transform Stress into Vitality* presents two simple, powerful practices to connect with the internal organs and explore their emotions: six healing sounds and inner smile. Equal portions of all three books have provided me immense personal and professional benefit.

## Mystics

It is one of my, many, opinions that the mystics of all traditions have more in common with each other than with their standard tradition. That is, Sufis have more in common with Kabbalists than standard Islam. Christian mystics have more in common with Taoist mystics than with standard Christianity. In some way it seems that mystics all share a similar language and experience no matter what their tradition: Taoism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, etc.

I offer as proof the poetry of Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, known in the West simply as Rumi. Coleman Barks' translations of this 13th century Sufi mystic seem to transcend all cultural definitions and barriers. We don't have to label ourselves as Sufi to understand, absorb and draw inspiration from these poems. I had no interest or understanding of poetry until I read *The Essentials of Rumi*. While not drawn to follow Sufi rituals and practices, I find in Rumi's poetry a clear and accurate description of the natural way of things. As inspiring as Rumi's words are, I resonate even more with the writings of his father, Bahauddin, in *The Drowned Book*, also translated by Barks. I more easily find the natural way in the applications of the energetic and spiritual to the practical and mundane activities of daily life, as are well-represented in Bahauddin's writings.

While there are several English translations of Rumi's works, Barks' resonates most with me. Find out for yourself. Put several translations of the same poem side by side and feel for which one is more resonant for you.

Barks sums it up nicely, not only for translations of Rumi, but of all translations and interpretations in *The Soul of Rumi*:

*The spiritual information being transmitted can only filter through my own experience. No doubt I miss a lot. It's good to have many translators.*

## Buddhism

Buddhism and Taoism have borrowed, adopted and plagiarized from each other for so many centuries it may be impossible to absolutely point to where one begins and the other ends. I draw great inspiration and insight from many Buddhist traditions and authors. While I enjoy the many writings of the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hahn, Chogyam Trungpa and others, it seems easier to relate to Western authors.

Stephen Levine's books, *Who Dies?* and *Healing into Life and Death*, first sparked my interest in what was possible from a meditative practice. Jack Kornfield's *A Path with Heart* is just as true for finding a Taoist path as it is for finding a Buddhist path that resonates. These are both considered classics in their field.

Tara Brach's *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*, provides a clear and simple explanation of many basic Buddhist concepts and practices. At the same time she offers a very practical approach to learning how to relate to ourselves and others in a much more natural way.

Toni Packer's books are included here because she began her spiritual journey in a very traditional Zen setting. Packer's is an inspiring story. As she was preparing to take over the teaching and leadership position from Roshi Philip Kapleau, Packer had an awakening that led her to leave the Zen tradition. Her books are inspiring, simple and clear. She resolutely maintains that the wonder of full presence and the power of complete attention naturally occur without the need for any technique, practice or tradition. While I still find value in these, I also find clear inspiration in her descriptions of that natural, original state of existence that is available to each and every one of us. Consider this quote from *The Work of this Moment*:

*The emergence and blossoming of understanding, love, and intelligence has nothing to do with any tradition, no matter how ancient or impressive - it has nothing to do with time. It happens on its own when a human being questions, wonders, inquires, listens, and looks silently without getting stuck in fear, pleasure, and pain. When self-concern is quiet, in abeyance, heaven and earth are open. The mystery, the essence of all life, is not separate from the silent openness of simple listening.*

While we might find the simplicity of her method, or lack of method, challenging, it seems worth the effort as Packer is accurately describing our natural being and encouraging us to embrace it fully. She states it quite simply in *The Silent Question*:

*Awareness can actually take the place of thinking.*

Her books and their chapters are refreshingly short, which inspired me to write briefly, enough to convey the intended meaning, but no need for extra words.

Packer's simple and clear message is a reminder that it is the grasping onto techniques, practices and traditions that gets in the way of why I practice in the first place: presence, awareness, fully reclaiming original nature. Her books encourage us to pay careful attention to how we are relating to our meditation and chi kung practice, to not confuse technique, tradition and practice for the results they support.

For anyone actively cultivating creative art, which is everyone, I highly recommend John Loori's *Zen of Creativity*. It was while reading his book that my last resistance to start writing this book melted. The following quote was instrumental:

*In writing, do not let a hair's breadth separate you  
from the subject. Speak your mind directly; go to  
it without wandering thoughts. - Basho*

Loori is a talented photographer, but his book describes a creative process that may be applied to any art or activity. He also nicely summarizes the whole Zen aesthetic, which has its own exquisite interpretation of the natural way of things. His approach allowed me to find a writing process that was more fun and enjoyable - that is, writing within a state of joy!

Reading about the experiences and stories of others provides great inspiration for my own practice. Jim Bedard's *Lotus in the Fire* is an intense and dramatic example of the author's practical application of his Zen training to a lengthy life-threatening medical condition. His descriptions are very graphic and not for the fainthearted. George Crane's *Bones of the Master* is an inspiring story of an American who befriends a Chinese Ch'an Buddhist monk and accompanies him on a memorable return visit to China.

## **Kids**

I believe the validity of any philosophy or spiritual tradition may be found in its relevancy and application to the practical and mundane activities of daily life, children... and cartoons. Benjamin Hoff's *Tao of Pooh* and *Te of Piglet* explore aspects of Taoism in the context of conversations with the beloved childhood characters Pooh, Piglet and their friends. Jon Muth's *Zen Shorts* is a remarkable and beautiful children's book that explores several Zen parables.

