

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. Thank you!

1: Tao Essence

The essence of Tao cannot be fully expressed by written or spoken words.

It's quite simple, really. Although within that simplicity lie many challenges to a complete understanding and experience of Tao essence.

The first, simple sentence of this chapter is a classic way of defining Tao. It is derived from the first lines of the Tao Te Ching, considered the primary surviving classic on Taoism from the fourth century BCE by Lao Tzu. The reader who fully grasps this one sentence will have no need to read any further. If that is the case, congratulations.

Most people will continue to read. As we read, it is very, very important to remember, and remind ourselves, and remember again that these words, any words about Taoism, are not themselves the true essence of the Tao. If Tao essence cannot be expressed in words, why bother to write? Why so many books?

Each writer as their own answers to these questions. My experience is that the process of writing has been another way to practice, allows another approach to a direct experience of Tao essence. Writing, words that truly resonate appear when we are completely immersed in the subject, there is no separation between writer and subject. Then, even though we recognize that the letters, words, paragraphs, pages and chapters can't fully expressed Tao essence, the spirit of Tao essence is somehow embedded within the writing.

Taoist writing tries to convey something that cannot be put into words, a knack, an approach, an experience of fully living. There is not an absolute definition of Tao that contains some ultimate truth or reality, which is why it can be so difficult to find words or even explain. It shifts and changes according to context and circumstances. It flows like water in a river - adapting to each rock, tree, boat and pull of the moon. A Taoist tale has a carpenter explaining how he cannot put into words how much pressure to exert when chiseling wood. Each person must feel the chisel in hand, the weight of it, the point of contact with wood, the amount of

firmness, resistance and the gradual increase in pressure until the wood splinters in response to the appropriate amount of pressure. Or, consider the word sunset. No amount of descriptive adjectives before or after the word can fully express the experience of sunset. At their best words may point to, illustrate or illuminate an experience. Done well, words may become resonators of the natural essence of an experience, like chiseling wood or sunset. At their worst words, may distract and confuse, obscuring the very understanding we seek.

In the time of Lao Tzu, fourth century B.C. E., this may have been less an issue than now. At that time there were few literate people. Poetry, parables and short stories were written on small bamboo scrolls, not in bound books as we know them. Teaching, whether Taoism, poetry or medicine, was done primarily through an oral tradition. That oral tradition continues in China today, where there is less emphasis on learning from books and more emphasis on memorizing fundamentals and classics.

The Western approach to words and books is very different. We have an underlying assumption, sometimes unconscious, that information in print is true. We tend to revere books. Ultimately, if information is not in a book, it is immediately suspect; not true until published. Even with much personal evidence to the contrary, we have a strong belief in the truth of published words. This is a strong Western cultural root, as strong as the oral tradition in China. It is not that either approach to words and books is right or wrong; each has advantages and disadvantages. When applied to reading about Taoism, the Western cultural approach to words and books can be an obstacle if left unconscious.

With a balanced understanding of the natural limits of expressing Tao, we may still gain benefit from the process of what words point to and what writing illuminates. These can be useful guides as we explore and directly experience Tao essence.

