

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!

35: Teaching Others

As our personal Taoist practice deepens it is very common to be presented with opportunities to teach others. Sometimes this may appear as formal permission by a teacher, as part of a school or lineage, which may involve scheduled classes, workshops and retreats. Other times, these opportunities to teach are far more informal; they don't necessarily involve classrooms or conventional teacher-student relationships. Opportunities to teach arise naturally as we internalize and integrate different levels of practice.

Teaching in a traditional way is very valuable and useful; however, it is not the only way teaching happens. A natural process of teaching others doesn't always require making it a profession, scheduling and advertising classes or renting classroom space. With the skills cultivated through our deepening practice, the process and value of natural teaching moments becomes clearer.

Teaching others offers a way to deepen our own experience by explaining it to someone else. We don't have to be an expert to share what we know with others. If teaching is approached as expertise, as if we are helping someone by telling them something they don't know, a very important point may be missed. A natural way exists within each and every person. Rather than a one-way dissemination of knowledge, teaching can be a context where we are all learning together; we are all walking along a similar path. Teaching others doesn't have to be about expertise, authority or standing at a podium. It can be an easy and natural extension of the learning process for everyone.

Sharing Taoist practices and their benefits may be more like reminding than a conditioned image of teaching. The process of reminding recognizes something is known, just momentarily forgotten. There may be many obscuring layers, but with the support of teachers and friends, we all have the capacity to reconnect with that most natural way that is within each of us. When helping to remind someone else of their natural way, it reinforces the natural way in us at the same time. Teaching as reminding is a two-way process; we all learn from each other.

For example, if we approach teaching tan tien breathing as reminding, some people may protest, "But, I never knew this technique of tan tien breathing! I don't even know what a tan tien is! They may not know the term, but at some point everyone has done tan tien breathing. It is a natural way that infants breathe. The next time you are around a baby, find out for yourself. Any infant can be a teacher, reminding us of the natural way to breathe. In the same way, any of us can be a teacher to others, reminding them, and ourselves, about a natural way to breathe."

When we accept an opportunity to teach or remind someone, the process of explaining a practice allows us to put into words a typically quiet, internal and often personal process. There might be proficiency and comfort with a specific technique, but when describing it, we have to find words

that somehow convey the essence of the practice or our experience. Someone with less experience frequently brings up questions or wonders about aspects we haven't considered. We might feel comfortable describing a practice in a certain way that makes little sense to someone else.

All of these teaching dynamics give us a chance to stretch, grow and deepen our own understanding by explaining practices in ways that other people can understand. It's not always easy... and the effort is well worthwhile.

Often, without realizing it, we end up teaching what we most need to learn. For example, teaching a moving form like five animal frolics involves showing people the physical movements and sequence of steps. Demonstrating and explaining the same movement class after class, week after week, month after month can be quite repetitive and tedious. After answering the same question multiple times, we might notice a little frustration growing. Noticing and bringing clear attention to frustration may provide insight. While the class is learning animal movements, we have the opportunity to learn patience. Patience isn't typically a named movement in the standard five animal frolics form. But, teaching others can be a way to bring patience to our own form, deepening practice in ways we'd never find by ourselves.

The above example demonstrates how teaching can be a very important aspect of our personal learning process. Often it seems like a deeper integration of a practice or experience occurs only after turning around and sharing what we've received. It is also through this teaching process that it becomes very obvious what we don't know or need to clarify.

Many times we're teaching others without even knowing it. How we interact with other people, handle stress and deal with difficulties at work may teach much more effectively and directly than standing in front of a class.

Living what we learn from Taoist practice - balance, flow, clear attention, harmony - in our daily life is visible to anyone paying attention. Without our saying anything, someone may notice and inquire: How is it you didn't lash out at that rude person? Or, How is it you only have the sniffles when everybody else is sick in bed? Or, How can you be relaxed when everybody else is so stressed about that deadline? Or, Where did you learn such patience? These are all natural opportunities to share what we've learned.

A friend frequently mentions that she could never teach meditation as there is so much she still has to learn. She then goes on to recount numerous conversations she's had at the gym, in a grocery store, with neighbors on the street - obviously most people in her daily life - about the benefits of meditation. She doesn't consider that teaching, yet sometimes the best and most effective teaching

takes place outside formal classrooms.

Given the opportunity, the natural way of teaching often shows up unexpectedly. An older student had been studying tai chi for several years. She struggled with some of the basic principles, but persisted in practice and learning the form. Whenever I tried to explain inner aspects of tai chi movement, she would dramatically roll her eyes, expressing without words the utter incomprehensibility of the ideas. She also steadfastly resisted any suggestion that she could teach others what she already knew about tai chi.

After warm-ups during one memorable class, she seemed so excited she could hardly contain herself. She began describing how, while practicing at home, she could feel the movement of her hips driving the rest of the body through each movement. In the telling, she was so enthusiastic, so full of chi, that all the other students gathered around her and paid very close attention.

As she continued talking, she very naturally began to encourage each student, Here - try it this way. See? That's what it feels like! Within a few moments, each student was following her suggestions, following her natural enthusiasm to share what she recently understood. I could stand back and observe the spontaneous and natural way of teaching happen without needing to do anything, except stay out of the way.

This is a good example of how teaching others can be a part of natural action, wu wei. Natural moments to share our experiences arise when the time and context are right. If we are paying attention, these moments occur effortlessly.

We don't have to be a formal teacher, organizing classes, charging money, standing in front of a group to share what we've learned with others. One very effective way of deepening our own practice is to turn around and share what we know with someone else. Frequently, teaching allows us to learn as much or more than the student.

With increasing depth to our practice, it is easier to notice when spontaneous opportunities arise to teach, share and remind others about the natural way of things. In this way, we all learn from each other.

