Cultivation of Qi and Virtue

Daoist education insights

The West has some of the best education standards in the world but for Dr Tom Culham, a lecturer at Simon Fraser University, Canada, it is missing an essential component of what it means to be human. While Western education might be efficient at teaching external facts about the world, it is lacking any serious focus on the internal experiential world of students. As a result, students in the West find it more difficult to find inner tranquility and to live virtuously. Meanwhile, those who adopt the Daoist theory of education have a more holistic learning experience. Culham argues in favour of adopting Daoist technology, teaching students qi and virtue cultivation through contemplative learning techniques.

THE PRIMACY OF DAOIST VIRTUE

Culham distinguishes between Western and some Asian styles of education. While the West prioritises education of the mind, some Asian traditions take a more holistic approach. Through techniques such as meditation, taiji, aikido, qigong, lung fu, karate, and yoga, these types of Asian education are not just training the mind but simultaneously the body, breath, emotions, and spirit.

Western education systems, Culham argues, are primarily concerned with training the intellect. Daoism places cultivating virtue to be of first and foremost importance. This distinction has its roots in the differences between the Western Enlightenment and the Daoist Enlightenment. Both versions of the Enlightenment value individual effort to discover the truth through objective impartial observation. However, they diverge when it comes to discovering life’s deepest truth. The West, drawing on the thinking of Socrates, believes in the epistemological priority of ideas, and holds that truth can be found through language, reasoned debate, and empirical science. Daoists, conversely, are sceptical of language and reason, instead believing in the power of personal experience. In essence, science is oriented to observation of matter while Daoism emphasises objective observation of life. This results in the development of very different worldviews and technologies. For example, for Daoists, virtue is not a social construction – rather it is a universal phenomenon like sunlight or gravity.

Daoists believe that humans are born with five attributes: qi, emotions, an innate nature, a heart-mind that feels and thinks, and in-built tranquility. Through contemplative practices that enhance tranquility, these attributes can be cultivated and nurtured to align oneself with universal virtue, a cornerstone of the practice. According to Culham, Western education lacks the understanding of the significance and primacy of Daoist virtue. This creates a narrow system that neglects fundamental aspects of the human experience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-DISCOVERY

Because Western education is founded on the Western Enlightenment, it seeks external sources of knowledge. Students educated in this way of thinking are very good at learning about the world through the familiar pedagogical disciplines of mathematics, science, history, geography, and other core subjects. However, they have inadequate education regarding their inner worlds.

They are not taught about emotional regulation or achieving an inner sense of tranquility. In the Daoist world, self-discovery is the primary goal of education. Students are taught to align themselves with virtue and to practice achieving the tranquil state in which your emotions and life’s ups and downs are experienced with an attitude of equanimity. This is a fundamental part of being human that Culham believes is missing from Western education.

Daists adopt a practice called Neiyang, or Inner Training. This helps students to get to know their unconscious mind so that they can use it to cultivate personal growth, leadership skills, and moral judgement. To achieve this, students observe their current inner experience non-judgmentally, reflect on the experience once it has passed, and imagine future experiences. By leaving out this exploration of consciousness from Western education systems, students are ill-equipped to achieve the self-discovery that would enable them to observe, relate and act in the world objectively and appropriately.

THE ROLE OF DAOIST TECHNOLOGY

Although the Daoist view of education is an ancient one, its value is recognised in the 21st century in the emerging field of holistic education. Holistic education should be aligned with modern science and technology, and the two need not be framed as adversarial or mutually exclusive. For Daoists, qi represents life energy. It is everywhere and in everything. Without it, nothing would exist. Qi is the energy and matter in the universe but it is also the core of being human. It is intimately related with our virtue and tranquility. Although it is not thought of this way, most of us have experienced an unrefined form of qi during an emotional event such as the birth of your child, listening to moving music, or when a favourite team wins a hard-fought championship, as a sense of tingling up the spine, lightness, expansiveness or other uplifting embodied experience.

We are physical beings animated by a subtle life energy, qi, which we can become aware of, refine, enhance and transform for our wellbeing through contemplative practices. Modern science is not immune to a relationship between matter and energy. For instance, Einstein’s famous E = MC2 reveals a connection between matter and energy resulting in the conversion of uranium into energy to produce electricity. In this sense the...
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Ancient ideas of Daoism and modern technology are not in conflict but rather complementary. Just as there is a technology for working with matter based on the Western perspective, according to Daoists there is also a technology for working with the body, life, and qi.

Culham views the harnessing of qi to benefit human life as a kind of technology. Chinese body technology involves concentrating physical, mental, emotional, and moral power into the centre of the body. For instance, during qigong, gentle movement, meditation, and breathing are used simultaneously to help qi flow through the body.

This contrasts with Western sport which views the development of physical skills as being separate from mental and emotional wellbeing. Athletes tend to do physical workouts, building fitness and muscle mass but with little focus on their mental state or, importantly, their virtue. While psychologists are increasingly used in sport to monitor wellbeing, this practice isn’t merged with physical movement as it is in Daoist technological practices like qigong.

Culham argues that Western education needs to do more to incorporate Daoist technology into learning. Practising the virtues of kindness, selflessness, and humility can help a student increase their qi energy and their own virtue. This helps them to live long, authentic lives and achieve a state of wisdom and tranquillity. While Western technology has enabled humans to meet their physical needs, Daoist technology can be used, in Culham’s words, for ‘transforming us into wiser, healthier, and more ethical people’.

DAOIST LEARNING: EVIDENCE FROM MODERN SCIENCE

Culham is keen to highlight the compatibility of Daoist philosophy with modern Western science.

The importance of virtue is supported by modern research. The importance of tranquillity as a means to cultivate virtue can be demonstrated in homeostasis that exists in all cells and organisms. The body is unconsciously regulated to maintain a careful balance which neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has said is the expression of virtue because it is a process that supports life. Whether you call this inner tranquillity or use more scientific language, the concept is the same. Cultivating tranquillity and virtue puts one into alignment with the basic processes of life. People who practice kindness, selflessness, and humility tend to be healthier and happier. This suggests that we can improve our physical health by becoming more in tune with our inner qi and cultivating virtue. Western thought uses similar imagery, such as Aristotle’s golden mean, in which a person is advised to find virtue in the balance between two extremes.

Modern science is also revealing evidence of the heart-mind. Daoists believe that humans must find the right balance between the heart and mind, which relates to the scientific concepts of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Culham sums up the views of McGilchrist, who claims that the right brain controls impulses, favours unity, and values empathy. The left brain, meanwhile, prioritises ‘getting things done’.

This theory is bolstered by the experience of Jill Bolte Taylor, a neuroscientist whose left brain shut down due to a stroke, leaving her only with right-brain consciousness. This left her with an entirely different awareness, in which her soul felt unified with the universe. A sense of unity and care for others is not external but available to anyone who can access right-brain consciousness. This led her to follow in the footsteps of some other scientists in accepting a more expansive view of reality that has parallels with Daoist thinking. Unfortunately, many other Western scientists are missing this right-brain understanding regarding the educational value of inner experience.

Culham’s research shows that there should be no conflict between modern Western science and ancient Daoist technology; each supports the other. By only focusing on the intellect, Western students are missing out on the opportunity to live with purpose and virtue, and to navigate the world with a sense of tranquillity and deep self-awareness and understanding.

References