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Citation:

Cohen, E (2024) The Dao of Dialogue: Daoism, Psychology, and Psychotherapy. *Journal of Daoist Studies*, 17. pp. 99-117. ISSN 1941-5524

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This is a pre-publication version of the following article:

A Keynote Paper for the 16th International Conference on Daoist Studies 2023

‘The Dao of Dialogue: Daoism, Psychology, and Psychotherapy’

Dr Elliot Cohen - Leeds Beckett University

Correspondence - e.cohen@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Abstract

From analytical psychologist Carl Jung’s exploration of internal alchemy through humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow’s plea for a more Taoistic Science to pioneering person-centred therapist Carl Rogers’s embrace of nonaction, Daoist teachings have played a consistent, subtle but significant part in shaping popular approaches in psychology and psychotherapy. Contemporary cognitive therapies are increasingly informed by Daoist principles and cultivation practices—including the emergence of Chinese Taoist Cognitive Psychotherapy.

In this paper, I outline the past, present and future of this cross-cultural dialogue, in addition to reflecting on my own Daoist encounters and inspirations that have led to my pursuit of more transpersonal and ecological approaches and insights. Our current global predicament is largely the result of a prevalent, insidious, largely unquestioned anthropocentric mindset, which reduces the natural world to natural resources. It is my firm conviction that a more Daoist-based worldview may prove to be a potent antidote to this detrimental, default way of thinking and more vital than ever when faced with impending climate crises and catastrophe—bridging the psychological, ecological and soteriological.

Approaches in Psychology

The most promising psychological approach to enter authentically and fruitfully into a dialogue with Daoism remains Transpersonal Psychology. It is currently located somewhere on the periphery of mainstream psychology, concerning itself with the transformative potency of spiritual experience and non-ordinary states of consciousness—particularly their capacity to open us up to wiser, more compassionate ways of being.

Transpersonal psychology is arguably one of the long-forgotten, seldom acknowledged ancestors of psychology. Esteemed pioneers such as William James wrote the landmark publication *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, gifting us with the popular, naturalistic term ‘stream of consciousness.’ James was also one of the very first to note and promote the psychological value of studying religious experience, as documented in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, published in 1902, and may have been the first person to coin or utilize the term ‘trans-personal’ in 1905 (Ryan 2008, 20).

When psychology was still in its relative infancy, the Buddhist scholar and translator Caroline Rhys-Davids harbored high hopes for the fledgling ‘new science,’ advising it to attend to and

emulate the ‘introspective genius of the East’ (1914, v-vi). Introspection however was to fall ever further out of fashion and eventually be eclipsed by empiricism and more materialist, positivistic paradigms.

In the official scientific histories of psychology, the rise of experimental psychology with the work of Wilhelm Wundt in the early laboratories of Leipzig university (founded in 1879) is awarded pride of place. This elevation of empiricism was taken to an extreme in proceeding behaviorist approaches, popular in the first half of the 20th century, where human behavior was sometimes boiled down to the reductionist algebraic formula S-R (Stimulus leading to Response).

In popular, contemporary approaches in psychology, the algebraic has extended into the algorithmic, as cognitive psychology observes mind and behavior through the technological lens of information processing. The cognitive psychological paradigm runs parallel to the increasingly dominant neuropsychological approaches which seek to understand and locate the neural correlates of consciousness (NCCs) with the assistance of increasingly advanced brain-imaging technology.

I recall at my very first presentation at the 5th International Conference on Daoist Studies at Wudang Shan in 2009, when I was still somewhat under the pervasive influence of these cognitive and neuropsychological approaches. During one particular panel discussion related to longevity techniques and the goal of immortality, I began to outline and discuss the Default Mode Network (DMN), the brain regions involved in self-referential thinking and their role in rumination and stress.

I noted that stress is associated with elevated levels of the steroid hormone cortisol, which can contribute to both psychological and physical illness and premature aging. I confidently contended, that the Daoist emphasis on serenity and stillness could be supported with recent scientific findings, as traditional cultivation practices would likely result in the reduction of activity in the DMN and lower levels of cortisol being produced.

I was disappointed when one Daoist priest in attendance responded, kindly yet firmly, that although “interesting” my presentation “did not really have anything at all to do with his daily practice or in any way further his understanding of Dao.” I was equally disappointed and further disillusioned some years later when a neuroscientist colleague pointed out how even more recent findings suggested that excessively low levels of cortisol can also result in premature aging (Perez et al. 2020).

At that time, I was still seeking to validate my passion for spirituality and to demonstrate its value via more empirical means. Science, or more precisely ‘the scientific method,’ remains a potent benchmark of validity, consequently providing more highly valued cultural capital and currency in the knowledge economy—certainly more so than religion or spirituality. My approach was not too dissimilar from the ‘save qigong with science’ mission statement of the Yan Xin Qigong Association in the 1990s (Cohen 2010, 157).

High profile, celebrated collaborations between contemplatives and neuroscientists can still be seen in the ongoing dialogues at the Mind and Life Institute, where the Dalai Lama regularly meets with leading psychiatrists and psychologists. I have previously argued that this form of dialogue

is mutually beneficial, as it lends a mantle of scientific legitimacy to spiritual practices, whilst allowing the new Western disciplines to anchor themselves in Eastern antiquity, enhancing and extending their cross-cultural reach.

This has also led to some memorable and surreal scenes of Buddhist monks meditating whilst being wired-up to EEG monitors to observe and measure the cortical oscillations (brain waves) of an advanced meditator's brain or esteemed Tibetan lamas lying inside fMRI scanners to see which brain regions activate or light up during different meditation practices (Cohen 2021).

Such research has also led to some rather misleading, sensationalistic headlines including the declaring of the French-born Tibetan Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard as being 'the happiest man alive' by neuroscientists at Wisconsin University in 2012, after they observed unique patterns of Gamma waves in his EEG readings.

The abiding Western fascination with, and adoration of, the Dalai Lama arguably owes as much to his being a passionate advocate for science as the Tibetan Buddhist belief that he is the living incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of infinite compassion. Documentaries such as *The Dalai Lama Scientist* (Engle 2019) celebrate and promote His Holiness's conversations with the leading scientists of the day. However, despite these scientific sympathies and leanings it is worth remembering that the Dalai Lama still firmly believes in rebirth (in fact his very title and role rests upon such an acceptance), the existence of whole hosts of spiritual beings and metaphysical forces, the prophetic power of oracles, Tibetan astrology and divination systems.

When it comes to comparing contemporary psychology with ancient Indian and Buddhist approaches to and understanding of the mind, the Dalai Lama has previously stated that the West was still at a 'kindergarten' (Goleman 2015, 67) level of understanding. At first this assessment may seem a little extreme or unfair—after all, Buddhism and psychology are arguably seeking quite different goals (psychological versus soteriological) and arose in very different cultural and historical contexts, making any direct comparisons problematic. It's also worth remembering that the Dalai Lama deeply values his ongoing dialogues with psychologists and has frequently presented Buddhism as a Mind Science (Dalai Lama et al. 2012). While taking issue with the 'kindergarten' label, some transpersonal psychologists may agree with the underlying sentiment of the Dalai Lama's statement.

Mainstream psychology's traditional, default exclusion of introspection and spirituality has arguably stunted the growth of the discipline, resulting in a psychology of surfaces. This surface psychology not only lacks, but often cautiously, consciously avoids depth—questioning only what can be quantified and limiting itself to the measurable aspects of cognition and affect, losing whole inner worlds of lived experience in the process. There are, however, encouraging signs that this materialist trend is changing.

A Spiritual Renaissance?

Recently mindfulness-based approaches have become widespread, and third-wave cognitive therapies are rising rapidly that incorporate contemplative and compassion-focused approaches. This may well be what psychoanalysts might term a 'return of the repressed' or what transpersonal psychologists may call a 'spiritual renaissance,' that is, a reawakening of the psyche in psychology,

whose etymological roots refer to soul and spirit. More medicalized and psychologized forms of spirituality, specifically secular forms of mindfulness meditation, have increasingly found their way into both clinical and commercial settings.

Additionally, recent advocates for a fourth wave in psychotherapy (Peteet 2018) argue for more spiritually literate and informed approaches. These approaches may be further underpinned by contemplative studies, which have been popularized by Daoist scholars including Harold Roth (2022) and Louis Komjathy (2017a). Roth's innovative use of a 'meditation lab' to support and inform his teaching of religious studies at Brown University represents a more experiential and transformative approach to learning.

At this point, it is important to recall that some decades prior to popularity of the mindfulness movement or contemplative studies, meditation was already being seriously studied and sincerely practiced by many Transpersonal psychologists in the 1960s. Just as behaviorists likely viewed themselves as the rightful inheritors of the laboratorial legacy of experimental psychology, Transpersonal psychologists continued in the spirit and intellectual lineage of William James—promoting a more experiential, phenomenological psychology.

Transpersonal psychology was to be known as the 'fourth force' in psychology, following psychoanalysis (first force), behaviorism (second force), and humanistic psychology (third force). The most prominent, founding figure of both humanistic and transpersonal psychology was Abraham Maslow.

Maslow's (1993) spiritual leanings became ever more evident toward the latter part of his career, as his focus moved beyond self-actualization into self-transcendence. In his posthumously published *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, he sets out his new transpersonal vision. Of all the spiritual traditions he mentions, the one that receives the most repeated attention and admiration is Daoism. Both humanistic and transpersonal psychology for him served as an antidote to the dehumanizing, reductionist tendencies of experimental psychology which emphasized and valorized measurement and prediction.

The more naturalistic path Maslow proposed appeared to offer a softer, more intuitive approach to science and psychology. Indeed, he called it Taoistic, a term that could have quite easily become an alternative appellation for humanistic or transpersonal psychology. As he says:

Clearly we as scientists, not to mention physicians, teachers or even parents, must shift our image over to a more Taoistic one. This is the one word that I can think of that summarizes succinctly the many elements of the image of a more humanistic scientist. Taoistic means asking rather than telling. It means non-intruding, non-controlling. It stresses non-interfering observation rather than a controlling manipulation. It is receptive and passive rather than active and forceful. (Maslow 1993, 14)

It is entirely evident that Maslow's vision is primarily informed and shaped by the principle of nonaction (*wuwei* 無為), which means to do things the natural way, by not interfering with the patterns, rhythms, and structures of nature, without imposing one's own intentions upon the organization of the world. (Kohn 2008, 1067)

Daoist Therapies

Maslow's sentiments found further tangible expression and compassionate embodiment in the Humanistic psychotherapy of Carl Rogers. Rogers was also someone who had been deeply impressed with Daoist thought, particularly Laozi.

In Person-Centered Therapy (PCT) the therapist takes a decidedly non-directive approach towards the client, trusting in their inherent capacity to self-heal, sitting with and working alongside them as an empathetic ally, cultivating a therapeutic attitude and atmosphere of unconditional positive regard.

Key terms that are frequently encountered in PCT training are genuineness and congruence—these qualities are integral to the process of 'becoming a person' (Rogers 1961). Psychotherapy training becomes somewhat akin to spiritual training, as one cultivates a capacity for deep listening, seeking to become more authentic, more self-actualized and self-aware whilst simultaneously being less self-centered—allowing for one to be fully present for and responsive to the client.

I have previously noted the striking similarities between PCT and nonaction (Cohen 2011, 2021) and it's significant to note that Rogers himself quotes directly from the *Daode Jing* to illustrate his person-centered approach:

If I keep from meddling with people, they take care of themselves,
If I keep from commanding people, they behave themselves,
If I keep from preaching at people, they improve themselves,
If I keep from imposing on people, they become themselves.
(ch, 57; Rogers 1995, 42)

Fortunately, one can clearly observe these parallels for oneself in the video footage of Rogers in session with Gloria, as one of the featured therapists in E. Shostrom's (1964) documentary *Three Approaches to Psychotherapy*.

Gloria, a recently divorced mother, appears struggling to balance and reconcile her idealized self-image as a loving, trustworthy mother, alongside her real needs for physical intimacy outside of a traditional marital framework—in her words, the “sweet and motherly” versus her “shady side.” She is seen to be struggling with the resultant guilt from concealing these relationships from her nine-year old daughter.

Throughout the session (her confession), she is clearly expecting and encouraging Rogers to be forthcoming with guidance and license (and possibly forgiveness). At one point, she expresses the fear that her daughter might think she is a “devil” if she ever discovers the truth about her mother's relationships with other men. Rogers non-judgmentally reflects and articulates her struggle by asking her how she can expect acceptance from her daughter until she can learn to accept herself. From a PCT perspective one might determine that Gloria's guilt stems from her feeling the need to be incongruent and inauthentic in the presence of her daughter.

It is a pity that we never get to see Gloria in session with the Analytical psychologist Carl Jung, since he passed away three years before the documentary was filmed. His approach and advice would have been markedly different.

Most likely, Jung would have seized upon and sought to explore the psychic tension building up between Gloria's idealized (and somewhat authoritarian) Mother archetype and the Shadow of her sexuality that she was seeking to disguise or repress. The analytical approach is far less focused on nonaction and relates much more to internal alchemy—working with all the powerful sexual, emotional, and spiritual energies found within the furnace of the psyche. In analytical psychology, one seeks to authentically encounter and integrate all the different and disparate elements of our being into an authentic, whole Self.

Jung's passion for alchemy had been forged through his close friendship with the German sinologist Richard Wilhelm, and the latter's translation of the Daoist alchemical text *Secret of the Golden Flower* (Wilhelm 1962), to which Jung contributed several forewords. The practice of reversing the light (*fanzhao* 返照), consciously turning and tuning one's attention inwards in order to gestate and cultivate the immortal embryo (*shengtai* 聖胎), resonated deeply with Jung. It appeared to him to recapitulate the path of individuation, through symbolically giving birth to one's Self (Cohen 2011).

One can view the results of Jung's self-analysis, his own personal journey of individuation, in his famed *Red Book* (Jung 2009). It also shows the inner charts of his psyche, as explored through the meditative means of "active imagination." Just as with the inner landscapes depicted in the famous diagram *Neijing tu* 內經圖 (Chart of Internal Passageways; see Komjathy 2008; 2009), complete with body gods and palaces, Jung's psychonautic voyage led to his entering and encountering varied realms and personages, both demonic and divine. The accompanying vivid artwork includes some early mandala-like illustrations which were to become an increasingly important symbol for the process of individuation and pursuit of wholeness through integration in Analytical psychology.

Daoist Psychotherapy

In more popular, contemporary cognitive approaches to psychotherapy one very rarely encounters spiritual themes of wholeness, self-actualization—even less so self-transcendence. Instead, one often encounters a markedly denatured, more mechanized model which re-envisioned humans as psychological processors. In order to illustrate this, I had included an indicative diagram from the internationally acclaimed journal *Nature Reviews* (Disner et al. 2011, 469) that depicted 'information processing in the cognitive model of depression' (see Fig. 1).

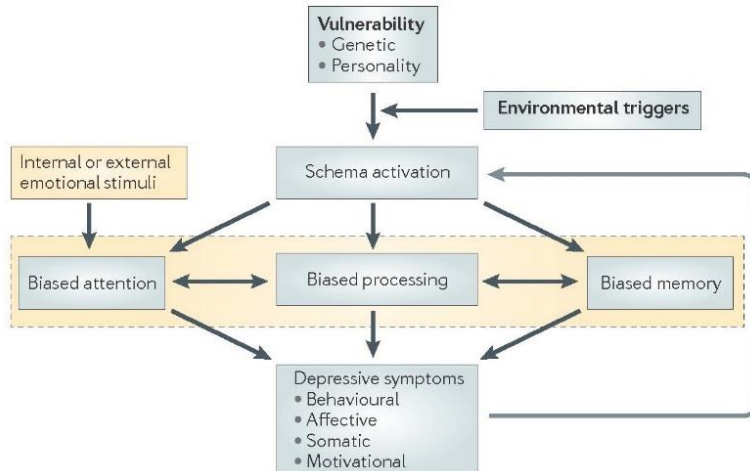


Fig. 1. Source: Disner et al. 2011, 469

This shows how the lived experience of depression can be filtered down and reduced to an algorithmic flowchart. At first glance, such an overt form of reductionism may intend to reduce the suffering of depression through deliberately seeking to simplify, represent, and make sense of an experience otherwise overwhelming to the patient. However, it is also worth considering what the consequences of such a potentially dehumanizing, robotic re-rendering of the psyche might be in the long term.

When an ‘environmental trigger’ leads to ‘schema activation,’ I may consequently experience self-destructive cycles of rumination in the form of Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs). Through engaging in more ‘metacognition’ (thinking about my thoughts), I may increasingly seek to challenge these NATs. This may all be exacerbated by a depersonalizing, artificializing, highly technical language that may inadvertently risk further alienating me from my experience and accompanying emotional states. The therapist also risks becoming increasingly comparable to a technician, seeking to identify and correct my psychological source code and ‘debug’ my mind.

The recent and rapid rise of online, virtual e-therapies and increasing experimentation with non-human, automated therapists (evidenced in the proliferation of ‘therapy apps’) is another worrying part of this overall trend towards artificiality and algocracy. This trend may become ever more entrenched if we continue to internalize this more mechanized view of the mind - for if we are ultimately understood to be algorithmic at our very core, then what better than an algorithm to treat us or even eventually lead us?

The relationship with Artificial Intelligence (AI) is significant and increasingly troubling—indeed, one of the celebrated pioneers or Godfathers of AI is the cognitive psychologist Geoffrey Hinton. He was primarily interested in uncovering the parallels between machine and human learning (neural networking) rather than advancing AI technologies, but recently and very publicly left his job at Google, due to his fears of the increasingly rapid and unchecked deployment of AI and the existential threat it presents. Such an increasing embrace of artificiality would seem to be very the antithesis of Daoism which consistently emphasizes and strives for naturalness and authenticity. It

may therefore come as a surprise to learn that there is a Chinese Taoist Cognitive Psychotherapy (CTCP).

This endeavors to take a more indigenous Chinese approach to mental health and recognizes the abiding and deeply rooted influences of Confucian and Daoist thought in shaping the Chinese psyche. The indigenous approach is strictly adhered to, excluding all Buddhist influences, since it only arrived in China from India in the early centuries of the Common Era and also because Buddhist approaches are already amply represented in mindfulness-based approaches to psychology today.

The system sees Confucianism and Daoism as complementary opposites of indigenous psychology, matching the standard understanding that, while the Chinese may appear Confucian in public, they employ Daoist defenses as a means of thought control and coping (Zhang et al. 2002, 117).

What constitutes such Daoist defenses is not clearly articulated. The way the method is presented, moreover, uses terms such as ‘thought control,’ which may seem jarringly at odds with the earlier humanistic, Taoistic embrace of nonaction. There is no evidence that the originators of CTCP were informed by any person-centered approaches; instead, their language opts for a more traditionally cognitive and controlling tone. For example:

The goal of CTCP is to regulate patients’ negative affect, correct maladaptive behavior, and prevent mental illness by changing personal modes of thinking and styles of coping (Ibid. 117).

One may even observe that the system sometimes appears more Maoist than Daoist. The authors openly note that there is a didactic quality to their approach, admitting that there may be some unfortunate parallels with “indoctrination” and even refer back to the historical success and efficacy of Maoist ‘thought reform’ as a form of ‘cognitive intervention’ (2002, 124).

The eight principles of CTCP appear to offer a more familiar Daoist framework, containing similarities with the traditional Nine Practices (*jiuxing* 九行) which they appear to emulate:

1. Benefit without harm to yourself as well as to others
 2. Do your best without competition with others
 3. Moderate desire and limit selfishness
 4. Know when to stop and learn how to be satisfied
 5. Knowing harmony and put one’s self on a humble position
 6. Hold softness to defeat hardness
 7. Return to the initial purity and back to the original innocence
 8. Following the rule of nature
- (Young, Zhou, and Zhu 2008, 34-35)

Slogan eight, ‘Following the rule of nature,’ at first glance seems to refer to the Daoist quality of naturalness (*ziran* 自然), intimately related to the principle of nonaction and promoting a more spontaneous way of being. However, it adopts and advocates a more nomothetic mode of “doing

things according to objective rules” (2008, 35). The question here arises whether cognitive psychology and cognitive therapy are a somewhat forced and unnatural fit for Daoism.

Transcognitive Therapy and Ecopsychology

Perhaps the problem lies primarily with and in our thinking. When one examines Daoist systems of cultivation one cannot help but notice pronounced ‘transcognitive’ (Cohen 2021, 54) trends.

Whereas traditional psychology focuses on the personal surface, the rising and falling waves of thoughts and feelings, Daoist contemplative practices rest their attention on the still and silent transpersonal depths of our psyche. From a Daoist perspective mainstream psychology may be seen as currently constituting the study of imbalanced, inauthentic beings who are detrimentally disconnected from both their internal and external environments (Cohen 2022, 25).

The center stage of mainstream psychology remains the activity of mind and behavior, by contrast the center of Daoism is stillness and serenity.

Daoism has always emphasized mental serenity and maintained that good effects will come about from it. To be serene means that the mind is clear (*qing* 清), or free of any thoughts that confuse it; it also means that the mind is calm (*jing* 靜), without any emotions that agitate it. Daoism maintains that you should foster serenity at all times and in all activities. Activity itself is best limited to only what is most natural (*ziran*) and necessary—nonaction (*wuwei*) is thus frequently enjoined. (Eskildsen 2015, 1)

Daoist texts themselves often go beyond merely seeking to free oneself of confusing thoughts, but actually go as far to advocate apophatic practices intended to lead one into states beyond all thought. One such example is the ideal state of *zuowang* 坐忘, translated as “sitting and forgetting” or “sitting in oblivion” (Kohn 2010). This emptying, decluttering, or cleansing of one’s consciousness is also traditionally termed *xinzhai* 心齋, mind fasting. The latter is a particularly pertinent term when one considers today’s wasteful and destructive “cultures of excess” (Slosar 2009) with its accompanying habits of mindless consumption and bingeing behavior, typically centering around food and entertainment.

Daoist practitioners seek and identify with an alternative center, a serene and perennial stillness at the center of one’s being. Within and through this inner core one rediscovers, recovers, and cultivates authenticity. The *Zhuangzi* calls this transcognitive center is the pivot or axis of Dao (*daoshu* 道樞). Gia-Fu Feng translates it as the “still-point,” inspired by T. S. Eliot’s phrase “the still point of the turning world” from his *Four Quartets* (Eliot 1974 191), which also subsequently became the title of Feng’s biography (Wilson 2009): “At the still-point in the center of the circle one can see the infinite in all things. (Feng and English 2008, 29).

Sitting and being in the still-point, one does not merely see what was previously unseen, but one also begins to hear what could not previously be heard—one begins to discern what

ecopsychologist Theodore Roszak called the “Voice of the Earth” (1992) and what Zhuangzi termed the “piping of heaven.”

Ziqi of South Wall reclined with his elbow on an armrest, looked up at the sky, and exhaled, in a trance as though he had lost his counterpart.

Yancheng Ziyou stood waiting before him. “What is this?” he asked. “Can the body really be made to be like withered wood, the heartmind like dead ashes? Is the man reclining here now the same as the one who reclined yesterday?”

Ziqi said, “Good question, Yan! Just now I lost my self, did you know that? You hear the piping of humanity, but not yet the piping of earth. Perhaps you hear the piping of earth, but not yet the piping of heaven? (ch. 2; Chinn 2013, 25)

In this passage, the transcognitive quality of the mind is likened to “dead ashes,” evoking the image of an extinguished fire. This stillness stands in stark contrast to the popular Daoist description of the untrained mind’s constant, restless activity, comparable to galloping horses in dire need of taming and training (Komjathy 2017b). One might observe in our daily lives how the vast arrays of competing, distracting stimuli accompanied by the habitual clamor of consciousness drowns out all other sounds, saturating our senses, as outlined in the *Daode jing*:

The five colors blind the eye.

The five tones deafen the ear.

The five flavors dull the taste.

Racing and hunting madden the mind. (ch. 10; Feng and English 1996)

Only when stillness has been restored can the music and messages of Earth and Nature be clearly discerned and our living connection to the Dao be recovered. One may even discover what the *Neiye* 內業 (Inward Training) describes as the “mind within a mind,” which consists of “an awareness that precedes words” (Roth 1999, 117). This indicates a mind and awareness still beyond the scope of mainstream psychology.

An excellent Daoist example of listening to and learning from the piping of earth can be seen in the late imperial master Liu Yiming’s classic *Awakening to Dao*, where he demonstrates how the secrets of inner cultivation may be readily revealed through closely observing the natural world:

Murky water is turbid; let it settle and it clears.

A dusty mirror is dim; clean it and it is bright.

What I realize as I observe this is the Dao ‘

Of clarifying the mind and perceiving its essence.

The reason why people’s minds are not clear

And their natures are not stable

Is that they are full of craving and emotion. (Cleary 1988, 19)

With the comparison of the mind to water, we may return to William James’s ‘stream of consciousness,’ which has now become polluted with desire and disturbed by dysphoric states. When viewed through a contemporary lens of the impending climate crisis, we may also begin to reflect on related and pressing environmental themes. To what extent do our polluted and disturbed

minds reflect or run parallel to our increasingly polluted climate and disturbed, disrupted ecosystems? Our constant cravings for comfort and convenience have largely led to our current ecological predicament. Our egocentric and anthropocentric worldview has alienated us from the Earth, transforming what was once understood (and still is by many indigenous peoples) as a nurturing mother and shared home to an insentient object consisting of exploitable resources.

My key observation is that the transpersonal, transcognitive elements of Daoist cultivation most of all allow the more organic emergence of an ecological consciousness (or, maybe, the mind within the mind). When Theodore Roszak outlines his eight principles of ecopsychology, he begins by stating:

The core of the mind is the ecological unconscious. For ecopsychology, repression of the ecological unconscious is the deepest root of collusive madness in industrial society. Open access to the ecological unconscious is the path to sanity. (1992, 320)

Understood in this way, the transpersonal allows for authentic access to and a restorative communion with the ecological.

Seminal Source and Fertile Edge

As the current chairperson of the Transpersonal Psychology Section in the British Psychological Society, I am under no illusions in regards to the outlier status and orientation of our more spiritual inquiries.

In the US, lingering concerns over perceived lack of scientific status, legitimacy, academic impact, and mainstream acceptance have led to some transpersonal psychologists seeking to downplay or even ditch the spiritual and metaphysical in pursuit of, and alignment with, a more traditional scientific approach (Walach 2013). In the UK, we are consciously taking a distinctly different path, recognizing that it is precisely our openness to the spiritual and metaphysical that imbues Transpersonal psychology with its unique character.

Rather than attempt to simply adapt and assimilate into more mainstream, conventional forms of psychology, transpersonal psychology has a unique opportunity to actively embrace its otherness and outsider status; to pursue authentic interdisciplinary encounters and pioneer more inclusive and radical approaches to research methods. (Cohen 2022, 24).

I was greatly encouraged by one of the delegates at the 16th International Conference on Daoist Studies, who following my keynote, astutely observed that being small, ignored, or not taken entirely seriously might make transpersonal psychology even more akin to Dao, matching the words of the *Daode jing*:

The highest good is like water.
Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.
It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.
(ch. 8; Feng and English 1996)

As for not being taken so seriously, the text also reminds us that “if there were no laughter, the Tao would not be what it is” (ch. 44). So let our critics and detractors laugh and deride us for the present. In time, they may well be laughing with us rather than at us—cultivating that transformative, transcendent “inner smile” that the world and all its inhabitants so desperately need.

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