

Tao at Work

By James Tu
Editor: Kenneth Howell

Buddha Dharma (Truth) resides in everyday life.
It never leaves the senses and feelings of everyday life.
Seeking the Dharma outside of everyday life
Is like seeking a horn of a rabbit.

----- The Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism

Are you bored with life? Then throw yourself into some work you believe in with all your heart, live for it, die for it, and you will find happiness that you had thought could never be yours.

----- Dale Carnegie

Our ancestors tens of thousands of years ago spent on average two hours a day seeking food and the rest of the day doing things without much time pressure-cooking, dancing, making clothes, or simple sight seeing. Ironically, since the dawn of Industrial Revolution, which created many more forms of entertainment-from air travel to islands that ancient navigators might spent a lifetime to find, to Internet games readily available at home, we never have enough time outside of work. At least we all think so.

In the meantime, while our ancestors' main survival skill was the ability to subdue various vicious animals, our "enemies" today come from the same species, i.e., the people we face. Oftentimes, as demonstrated in the atrocities of WWI and WWII, human beings are much more destructive and lethal than the strongest animals that have ever lived on Earth. However, while our lifestyle has metamorphosed, for the better or the worse, Tao remains eternal. Tao manifested in people is always a constant state of mind in the flux of nature. So how do we practice Tao in today's hectic and competitive work environment? Here are some principles derived from the wisdoms of Tao:

1) Know your talent

He who knows others is wise; he who knows himself is enlightened. ----- Lao Tzu

There is a purpose in everybody's life. Each person in the world is a unique creature of nature and nobody is exactly the same. If we believe that nature is the most intelligent being in the universe, would it design something of no use? Almost all major problems we confront in our work life arise from our inability to find our special gift as bestowed by nature. Therefore before we even contemplate strategies and learn techniques of various professions, we need to

ask ourselves: what is my unique, unequaled talent that nature bestows upon me? Does the work I am doing fit the real me?

Of course, to answer this we need to know our real self. This is not difficult to identify at all: What you enjoy the most, not what earns you the most money or obtains for you the highest position you can hold, is what you are designed for. Do you most enjoy talking to people? Do you most enjoy the consummation of a sale? Do you most enjoy sitting in front of a computer and finding the best solution behind a problem? Find your unique talent. As the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism, Huei-Neng, said: "Without knowing your heart, it is futile to practice any dharma (ways to enlightenment)". If you do not feel that you would tap-dance into your office early everyday, there is no need to stay a minute longer in your current work. Trying to cultivate talent not innate to yourself through laborious training usually does not work either, because nature performs only effortlessly (wu-wei). It simply flows and unfolds with melodies. And that is supposed to be the way when you work according to your talent.

Babies never need to worry what parents give them because there is no doubt parents always give their children the best. Likewise, if you choose what Tao designs for you, you don't need to worry if you will be happy or successful.

2) Compete with yourself, not others

"Not to compete so nobody can compete with you" ~ Lao-Tzu

Nature is full of competition because that is the way it evolves. However, competition cannot be more vivid and sometimes vicious than the human workplace today. We compete with our colleagues in the same company. We compete with peers in the same industry for the same deal. We compete with our employer's expectations. Competition generates pressure. Pressure generates tension. And tension follows us to every corner of our life. No wonder the National Sleep Foundation recently reported that 63% of Americans are sleep deprived, and as much as 35% suffer from insomnia.



The psychological problems originate from our attached attention to the external world, which is ever changing. How can we expect peace when we try to compete with things that we cannot predict? Furthermore, as the old Chinese saying goes: "There is heaven beyond heaven and there is man beyond man". There are always people that are younger, more capable and harder working than us because the universe is in constant evolution. We can never expect to rule over the world over anything. Even if we do, it will not be long. That is why it is better to compete with ourselves. By competing with ourselves, we become better everyday and we never stop improving because once you stop becoming better, you lose--to your old self.

3) Focus on the process with patience

"Worry not that people do not know you; worry that you are not capable" ~ Confucius

In today's result-driven culture, we are accustomed to seek instant successes. Insanely rewarded executives cut thousands of jobs for immediate cost saving. Lottery revenues are now often the second highest revenue source after taxes for the states that allow gambling (and many that do not are loosening the laws). However, have you ever watched the growth of a Chinese bamboo tree? For the first four years, a bamboo tree grows no more than a few inches. But then, in the fifth year alone, it grows forty feet! As Lao-Tzu said: "The journey of a thousand miles starts from a single step; the terrace of a thousand floors arises from a pile of earth". The daffodils take a few months to blossom but they die in a matter of weeks. When the wind blows hard, the petals fall and the stalks snap. The bamboo trees take years before their growth become visible but they last decades, through the scorching sun in summers and snow blizzards in winters. Be it a gale or a squall, they bend rhythmically as if the wind only manifests their strength and beauty.

Nothing of great qualities and enduring value comes from a single huge effort but consistent work toward perfection. We should never expect the results of our diligence and dedication in a short period of time because it would not be an act of nature (if it does come quick, we should thank God).

4) Never lose the ordinary mind

"This too shall pass" ~ Abraham Lincoln

No matter how hard we try, sometimes we hit the bumps of failure and frustration. Life is interesting precisely because it is full of curve balls! However, as the Buddhist saying goes: "Worries are wisdoms." Think about it, without pressure, nothing in the universe would ever come into existence. In the philosophy of I-Ching, the universe thrives through constant pushes and pulls of yin and yang. And the greatest achievements in history usually come from

extreme pressures. Thomas Edison found the ideal filament (carbon fiber from cotton) for light bulbs after trying 6,000 different materials in 1,200 experiments. In his childhood, Edison, the greatest inventor in modern times, suffered from serious hearing problems and was constantly teased by other kids for his poor performance. He wound up leaving school and teaching himself at home. If he could say "Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration", what right do we have to give up as a result of our occasional mishaps?

We should also never forget that our five senses usually misinterpret the reality of the physical world. For example, we see things as they appear because our brain cannot detect the minute texture and movements of things. The trees, the people and the buildings appear as solid objects to us. The political strife in the office, the acid criticism from the boss and the loss of a deal to rivals is as real as death. However, should we observe the atomic particles on a quantum level, we would see electrons circling the neutron with a speed of 60,000 miles per second and that the space inside the electron's orbit is truly vast in comparison. If you do not have the scientists' instrument, try walk into the woods during a spring morning, you will hear pockets of bursting noises from the seemingly still trees as the buds and branches grow rapidly every second. Things, visible or invisible, living or inert, in fact never stay as they are even for a nanosecond. The apparent solidity of the physical world is an optical illusion. The same rules can be applied to things happening in our daily lives. Most reactions from people around us are emotional but we tend to take seriously others' comments on us. And all the frustrations we feel are nothing but our mental work and all of them are destined to vanish before long. The solution? Laugh at the embarrassment, dance over the failure and sing for the scalding. They are all bugaboos concocted by our unenlightened minds. What is an enlightened mind then? It is a mind of ordinariness.



The greatest Taoist master and satirist, Chuang-Tzu, said it best: "When it comes to the working of mind, the ultimate man is like a mirror. He does not greet anything, nor does he escort it. He simply responds to it and never keeps it as a burden. Therefore he can always ride over things without being wounded".

The change for better starts from you

As we practice the wisdoms of Tao in our workplaces, it is not hard to find that people around us also start to change for the better. After all, who would not emulate the acts of the people with a peaceful and happy mind? And never underestimate your influence upon the world. In 1967, in a project called "Small World", Harvard social psychologist Stanley Milgram sent 300 letters to randomly selected people in Omaha, Nebraska with the instruction to get the letter to a single "target" person in Boston using only personal contacts. For the 60 letters that found their targets, Milgram found that the average number of steps a letter took was around six. The term "Six Degrees of Separation" has since been used to demonstrate our intimate connection with the world. The principle is not surprising to I-Ching aficionados. The sixty-four hexagrams used to represent all phenomena in I-Ching are created through six layers of multiplication from Tai-Chi down ($2^6=64$). We are never far from all other people and things in the world! Your unity with nature will bring great changes rippling through the lands that you never think of. The workplace of the 21st century may become a lot better because of you!

