

# Appreciate!

By Aaron Schlosser

“Appreciate, appreciate, appreciate!” my teacher would say to us during Qi-gong and meditation. We were to focus and be thankful for the air we breathe, the sun, the earth, the lessons we have learned, the opportunities we have been given, and so on. I had seen my life change a great deal since I began practicing Tao, so I had a lot to appreciate.

## My Catholic Upbringing

I was blessed to be raised in a house with a spiritual background. My parents tried hard to teach me to be a good Catholic. They dragged me, sleepy and unappreciative, to church practically every Sunday until I was sixteen. For years, we read the Bible after dinner every weeknight, a practice which, though at the time I was just anxious to get back to watching TV, planted the seeds of knowledge and a familiarity with a spiritually-inspired discipline.

As a teenager, I decided not to follow in my parents footsteps as a Christian. Though I was in part simply rebelling against my parents, I could not escape the feeling that there was too much to be learned outside my hometown, outside the Catholic tradition. I went off in my own direction, and though I might not have attributed it to them, their efforts to teach me a moral tradition helped keep me from falling too far off course.

My father retired in 1998, and since then he and my mother have devoted the majority of their time and energy to their Catholic practice. They have attended classes, expanding their knowledge beyond the basic Catholic doctrine. They helped sponsor other people in need, emotionally, financially, and spiritually. Their minds and their hearts expanded, and they have been granted more energy from Heaven. This energy was shared with me when I needed it without my knowing; I now realize that their efforts in these recent years have greatly contributed to my opportunity to receive and cultivate Tao.

Before I began practicing Tao, I looked at the Christian tradition with some mild disdain, similar to the way rebellious kids dislike the music their parents listen to. Now when I read the Bible after all these years, I derive inspiration and insight from it that as a child I was unable to see. Practicing Tao has made the soil of my consciousness more fertile, so that the seeds of wisdom can grow deeper and faster than before. It has also enabled me to appreciate my parents' contributions.

## Becoming Vegetarian

When I was 22, I became a vegetarian. This was six years before I received Tao, but it was a decision that I felt led me in the right direction. Vegetarianism had cropped up in my experience repeatedly, beginning from my high school years. I once tried being a vegetarian for a month as part of an unusual school project. Then again in college I assumed a vegetarian diet because my girlfriend at the time was vegetarian. Years later, in 1996, my long-time friend and roommate, Gabriel, became a vegetarian seemingly out of the blue. Around the same time a restaurant called the Sunflower opened nearby our house.

I was excited about the Sunflower even before it opened. I was delivering pizzas for the Pizza Hut across the street when I noticed the signs going up. “Sunflower Vegetarian Restaurant coming soon.....” When Sunflower opened, Gabriel and I quickly became regulars. Sunflower convinced me...again...that it was possible to be vegetarian and not suffer for lack of good food. Shortly after Sunflower opened, I decided to become vegetarian.

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At the time I was not clear about my motives for being vegetarian, I knew it was better for my health, better for the animals, better for the environment; but when people would ask me why I was vegetarian I would typically respond "Because I can afford to choose what I eat and do not eat." I had meant that I had enough money to make that decision, but looking back I see that it could have meant something altogether different. Vegetarianism, like all important lifestyle changes and commitments, requires the discipline to overcome the weighty momentum of habit. I could "afford to choose" a better way in this case because of the positive influences that were available to me and the level of self-discipline I had attained in this particular facet of my life. I was to learn later how a negative environment and a lack of self-discipline could put me in a position where it became extremely difficult to choose a better way of life.



### **Down and Out in D.C. and London**

Years later, in 2001 I was living and working in London. My career had taken off and enabled me to work abroad. Though these circumstances were exciting, I was not doing so well. I had gotten married for all the wrong reasons, I was getting drunk practically every other night, and I had added seafood to my diet. I was miserable and sick all the time, but my perspective was so bad, I generally felt that I was living a good life.

Luckily for me, the bottom was about to drop out of this situation. I lost my job, tension in my marriage got worse, and I turned to alcohol more and more to anesthetize myself from the sad truth that neither the life I had nor the life I was consciously striving for was in harmony with my spirit. During this time I had a dream. I am not very good at remembering my dreams, but I remembered this one. In my dream I was back in the Sunflower Vegetarian Restaurant. It looked totally different, and there was a school attached to it. I wandered through this school and saw people studying cooking, meditation, and Qi-gong (I did not know what Qi-gong was at the time. Qi-gong, pronounced "chee-gong," is a meditative practice of slow movements and exercises designed to help the Qi, or life-energy, flow through the body.). I woke up thinking, "Wow, wouldn't that be wonderful?" However, instead of working towards that goal, I struggled to find another job in London, to keep my marriage together, and to preserve my self-destructive and unfulfilling lifestyle. I can now see that dream as evidence that my soul already knew where I needed to go, and if I lacked the courage to consciously go in that direction my life would be litany of failures and miseries.

And so it was. I was unable to find a job in the UK, so my wife and I had to move back to the United States. By the time I found a job I had been unemployed for six months. During those six months I went from having the most money than I had ever had to the deepest debt. However bleak my financial situation was, I continued to drink heavily. I felt that the worst thing I could do would be to deprive myself of alcohol. To me, alcohol represented the enjoyment of life. Not only were all my social gatherings focused on alcohol, but alcohol also provided a numbness that allowed me to forget the problems that loomed over me. Even the screaming hangovers did the job of distracting me from long-term problems. One such problem was the growing contempt between my wife and me. Lacking the courage or the tools with which to face that situation, it continued to grow until it was unbearable. When we could no longer ignore how bad things had gotten between us, we separated.

## Receiving Tao

I had been separated from my wife for about two months when my friend Gabriel invited me to go to dinner at Young and Cathy's house. I knew Young and Cathy by sight because they had both worked at the Sunflower. Gabriel had already received Tao and was continuing to cultivate Tao under Young's guidance, and I had noticed how much more healthy and positive he had become. He had enrolled in massage school and was doing very well. I had known Gabriel since middle school, and I knew that in the past he had trouble with being successful in school. Something had changed in his life, suddenly he could "afford to choose" a new and better path to take. The benefits of his Tao practice were already clear, and without my knowing it, the positive energy behind it was already spreading to me.

He had talked to me about his experiences a little bit, but I only partially paid attention. I trusted him, and the seeds of knowledge were definitely planted in my subconscious, but I still felt that I could take care of myself without the guidance of others. Though that was how I felt, I was beginning to realize something. I realized that even though the failure of my marriage was painful and unforgettable, I really had not learned my lesson. It had not really changed me much. Something made me realize that REAL change was necessary, or I was bound to repeat the same scenario with a different cast of characters again and again. I had been living through this cycle in the dark, and thanks to the influence of Gabriel's practice, the light of understanding was slowly pouring into my life.

So I finally went with Gabriel to meet Young. Young and Cathy had a temple in their house and welcomed anyone in need of help. Young sat down to speak with me, and he was very direct. There were two very important questions he asked:

The first one was: "Do you believe in reincarnation and karma?" "I guess so," might have been my answer since I was not very clear about what my beliefs were. Young went on to talk about karma, about how it is a cycle, the momentum we create that can keep us stagnant, sick, and miserable; unable to help ourselves or anyone else unless we face it and break out of its patterns. Karma includes all the habits and excuses we make for ourselves that ultimately sabotage our self development. If I wanted a better life for myself, one where I could contribute great things to my family, friends, and the world, I needed to try to break these mental and behavioral patterns and choose better ways to live my life. If I begin to break the patterns and make better choices, I will be gradually able to tackle harder challenges. I had heard of the term karma before, but having the concept put in that perspective at that point in time really struck me. I recognized that karma was at work in my own life and started to realize that the real change I needed could very well be with this Tao practice.

The other question he asked was "Do you want to change, or are you happy with the way your life is now?" I was not even clear enough to answer that question easily. It had been a long time since I had actually been happy, so I was no expert on the subject. Maybe what I was feeling was as happy as I could be? Thankfully, I was clear enough to say, "Yes I want to change, and yes, my life could use some improvement." Little did I know how important making that distinction was.

I received Tao that night. I was pretty confused about the whole thing and promptly forgot most of the significance of the ceremony. However, on that same night I gave up alcohol and dropped the seafood from my diet. I had known that giving those habits up would be beneficial to me, but before I had believed it would be too difficult. After receiving Tao, quitting these habits was easy.

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### Taking the Initiative

Two weeks later, I was invited to start taking Qi-gong lessons at Young's temple. I had agreed to it, but now that the day had arrived, I could not shake this feeling that I would really rather just go home, watch a dumb movie and go to bed. It had been a long week at work, and I felt I did not need to push myself to do anything more. My thoughts were a constant stream of excuses and complaints pointing me home. I recognized this sort of internal conflict – it happened to me all the time, keeping me from doing anything interesting or challenging. But this time it was even worse. I felt nauseous, I had headaches, I felt sleepy . . . I felt that I really ought to go home. But something had changed; now I knew that these thoughts and feelings were manifestations of my karma. I realized that I had to make a decision. If I succumbed to the same old pattern, went home and missed this opportunity, I would have probably sabotaged the momentum I had hoped to build towards self-development and a better life. Or I could just suck it up and go to Qi-Gong and who knows? Maybe it would change my life! So, despite my physical and mental anguish, I went to Young's house (which took me at least a miserable hour), and practically at the moment I walked in the door, I felt fine.

This was an important shift in my life. I learned to recognize that I could not just follow my gut instincts as long as my self-destructive and stagnant patterns were the dominant momentum in



my life. I learned through this experience that my "gut instincts" were disconnected from the deeper desires of my true heart and with the needs of my spirit. My thoughts were full of a mixture of fears, unclear perceptions, and flawed reasoning that, if I followed their lead, would either keep me in the same spot forever or drag me down further. And now through this experience I learned that my old behavioral patterns were not only supported by my mind but could also manifest physically. In other words, karma could make me physically ill.

This experience made it quite clear to me that I was not always the best judge of what is best for me. I knew this meant that I needed some guidance from others. I needed help from caring people with the strength and clarity to assist me. I needed guidelines, perspective, and practical focusing and calming tools to fall back on when supportive people are not available. I have found all this and more within the Tao practice.

That first day of Qi-gong class marked another important change as well. It was the first time I had taken the initiative to say "Yes!" to a path of self-development despite the difficulties it presented. I have a lot to appreciate and be thankful for, but all my good fortune would be for nothing if I did not take the initiative to practice Tao. All the assistance and teachings I have received in the practice would be worthless if I do not put them into action. "Do the work!" I have told myself repeatedly. In my case, this has meant recognizing and breaking out of my karmic patterns, bringing people to receive Tao, helping people adopt a vegetarian diet, assisting others, writing down what I have learned and sharing it. Appreciation for my blessings helps keep me motivated to do the work and keeps my attitude more positive when I face challenges. So, as my teacher told me, "Appreciate, appreciate, appreciate!"