

More Will Be Revealed

By Kelli Thomaides

As a young child, I was very happy-go-lucky and outgoing. I have so many memories of my brother and I rolling on the ground, hysterically laughing. I was full of energy and would dance and do cartwheels around the house, much to the exasperation of my mother. However, as I grew older, psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, and guilt emerged. I kept expecting them to go away, but unfortunately these patterns just got stronger over time until they controlled a large part of who I was. They drove me to believe that I was an awful person and did not deserve to be happy. Whenever I made a mistake I saw it as proof that I really was an inferior person. The breaking point was when my family moved to a different state; my depression grew, and I suddenly became incredibly shy. I was afraid no one would like me, and I was frightened to open up to new people.

Eventually, the fear I experienced regarding social interactions became debilitating, and it seemed to me that the only way to work through it was to get drunk to the point where I no longer felt the fear. I thought that when I was drunk I could finally feel free to say and do what I wanted and really enjoy other people's company. The truth was, my drinking had the opposite of the intended effect. My alcoholism was insidious and pushed me further and further away from family and friends, leaving me lonely and confused. At the age of sixteen, I had picked up my first beer and by the age of twenty I had "bottomed out" and ended up in the hospital. Waking up in the hospital bed was shocking enough to make me realize that I was on a path to a very early death. I was totally consumed by my partying lifestyle, and in order to break free of that I needed to consciously make some large, deliberate changes in my life. One of the crucial changes I needed to make was to spend time with different people; ideally, a new community of supportive people who did not drink. My therapist- whom I was seeing in order to treat my depression and anxiety- recommended that I check out an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I chose to go to a meeting only because I knew I would drink otherwise.

Through Alcoholics Anonymous I became connected to a community of (generally) supportive people who had the same fundamental problem as I: they could not keep their hands off of alcohol. I recognized the benefits of a sober lifestyle right away, the main one being that I was actually conscious as I lived my life. I also had more energy and felt happier in general. However, I still experienced the obsessions and compulsions that plagued me during my drinking days; most notably, the desire to drink. Now that I was sober I was not acting on these obsessions and compulsions, but I still continued to suffer a great deal. I learned AA's tools for handling the desire to drink; the two central tools of AA are working with a sponsor (on the twelve steps) and sponsoring others (to lead them through the twelve steps). A couple months into the program, I began sponsoring a young woman. She would call me when she was hysterical, angry, or depressed and I would do my best to help her calm down and get some clarity. I drew on personal experience and also repeated things that my sponsor had told me during difficult times. I often felt unqualified to advise another on issues I continued to struggle with, but AA emphasized that helping other people to stay sober would keep us sober as well. This concept was called "passing it on". It was ironic that when I offered my sponsee advice, it was often the same advice that I needed to hear.

A year and a half into the program, I finished the twelve steps and subsequently hit a plateau. I stopped growing and it seemed that I had somehow "used up" all the tools that AA had to offer me. Through my experiences in AA, I realized the benefits of trying to make spirituality the focal point of my existence. However, I wanted to explore my spirituality in more depth and the program was limited in the information it could provide me. I had completed all the twelve steps with my sponsor and I attended the most intense meetings I could find, which were held at homeless shelters in downtown Washington, DC. Even though I continued pushing myself, I was

not benefiting from it. I felt stagnant and directionless, without a clue as to what I should do. It was during this period of time that I came to receive Tao.

After I received Tao and brought a few people in my life to receive Tao, I attended two AA meetings. While I was there, I realized that I did not need to rely on meetings to stay sober because I had found a new practice that provided me with such strong spiritual support that my alcoholism became manageable. I did not have constant thoughts about alcohol, nor did I crave it. I had nothing to “share” because I was no longer plagued by obsessions and compulsions. So, I left the meeting and I never went back. I did not need to. Bill Wilson, the founder of AA, always encouraged recovering alcoholics to be open and continue to challenge themselves spiritually beyond the parameters of AA. As the Buddhist analogy goes, you use a raft in order to get to the other shore. However, once you arrive you must abandon the raft or else it will become an unnecessary burden to carry in the new land.

Since I have been cultivating Tao, I have continually drawn on my experience in AA; the parallels are uncanny. AA members talk a lot about how you cannot give something that you do not have, and so it is important to find a sponsor who has the kind of life, or at least the clarity, that you desire. I was drawn to the Tao practice because everyone had a glow about them that I did not see in others; I saw a happiness and serenity in them that I was seeking for myself. In AA, they emphasize the importance of sharing what you have with others. They also maintain that once someone helps you, you can return the favor by helping others when you have the opportunity. I find that it is the same in the Tao practice. We were able to receive Tao only because others extended themselves to us. Inviting people to receive Tao requires us to open up to others and take the risk of asking them to do something outside of their comfort zone.

Three months after receiving Tao, I really left my comfort zone. After months of debate, I finally garnered the confidence and courage to pursue a dream of mine. I moved to New York and attempted to become an actress. In order to do so, I had to quit my current teaching job and break the lease on my apartment- both of which were scary ideas to me. One of my Tao teachers was instrumental in providing me with the support I needed to take the right action in order to realize my dream. When I felt paralyzed with fear, he reminded me that I was doing this for myself, and if I did not do it, I would have to live with my own regret. So I sold my furniture, quit my job, broke my lease, and drove to New York City. Once I arrived, I was overwhelmed by the abundance of different energies there. The combination of Wall Street, Fifth Avenue, the fashion industry, and the sheer amount of people who lived and worked there made it a jarring transition from my low-key, rather peaceful life in DC. I stayed with a family member, who is a professional model and actress, and she was graceful enough to allow me to go with her on casting calls and get a taste of the entertainment industry. I soon found the lifestyle to be very tiring and erratic. Since I had gotten sober, I had not experienced any real exposure to drugs and alcohol, but once I was in New York, it was in my face. I was around marijuana frequently, and when I went to clubs many people offered me free drinks, but somehow I managed to decline each time. Now, this was a miracle. Not only did I refrain from drinking, but it was also easy for me to say “no” when people pressured me to drink. Many of my relative’s friends offered me drinks as a token of their friendship, but I declined even though I risked offending them. What mattered most to me at that point was being true to myself and doing the right thing. I had already spent years of my life trying to please others and being a follower, but now it was time for me to be my own boss.

The only reason I was able to go to New York and not become submerged in the partying lifestyle again, was because I had received Tao and gained enough spiritual merit to face my patterns without becoming sucked into them. When you accumulate spiritual merit, it allows you to see clearer, make better decisions, and thus spiritually “promote” to new levels. Even though I had the strength and clarity to refrain from using alcohol and drugs, I found myself getting angry and frustrated by constantly being surrounded by temptation and indulgence. I realized that it was important for me to monitor my inner world, now that the physical pattern was no longer an issue. Everything would have been easy if I could have just calmed myself down by taking a deep

breath or telling myself to relax. But when I was feeling the weight of my depression, I needed some heavy-duty tools in order to keep my head above water. Whether I was drinking or not, my ingrained patterns of depression, anxiety, and self-destruction were strong. Therefore, I said the Heart Sutra whenever I could, wrote down my frustrations and revelations in my journal, and did Qi gong & meditation.

I realized that when I was away from a temple and the Tao community, I only had myself to rely on, but I was weak. Therefore, I needed to build my strength by putting the tools and knowledge of the Tao practice to use: this is a way to gain wisdom. I knew there was a spiritual level that could not be detected by the five senses, but did I really have faith in it? When I maintained faith in the spiritual level, I felt inspired- like I was a superhero in my own life and truly capable of changing it. When I felt this way it was incredibly easy for me to do what I needed to do. Looking beyond the material level allowed me to stay focused on my purpose and not feel dejected when I hit obstacles on my path.

When I only focused on the material level, I felt depressed because I had no job and was quickly running out of money. In New York City, I was a tiny fish in a big, big ocean. I was a poor nobody in a land of glamorous millionaires. Part of the karma I faced was my attachment to material entities; I desired the nice clothes, the money, and the fame that so many people attain in New York City. I found myself becoming jealous of everyone around me because they had money and I did not. However, after I spent a couple of weeks in New York I was able to see how empty my material desires were. I finally realized that I was there to reevaluate my investment in the material world and make a commitment to a spiritual life. On days when I was frustrated because it took me two hours to find a parking space or three hours to go grocery shopping amidst the New York traffic, I tried to look at the big picture and appreciate the fact that I had this opportunity to test my faith in myself and my spirituality.

The changes I experienced through cultivating Tao were internal transformations that occurred in the way I think, the way I learn, and my ability to love. Albert Einstein once said, "The most important decision we make is whether we believe we live in a friendly or hostile universe." For the majority of my life, I had the "victim" mentality where I believed that the earth was an incredibly cruel and loveless place. Thus, all of my thoughts were negative and fearful and kept me stuck in an undesirable frame of mind. Now that I recognize the role that my negative thoughts, intentions and behavior played in creating my circumstances, I can change my perspective and approach problems with optimism and a sense of personal responsibility. I know that change is possible so long as I work for it. Furthermore, love had always been evasive for me, and it seemed to disappear when I needed the support of my friends and family the most. Now I see that my concept of love was warped and selfish in nature. What I felt for others was merely attachment, not love. I learned- and continue to remind myself- that I need to give unconditional love freely in order to experience its buoyancy and nurturance in my own life.

In addition to changing the way I think and love, cultivating Tao has changed the way I learn. For example, through reading the Tao Te Ching and attending classes that elucidate its concepts, I have strengthened my connection with nature and I seek to learn from nature's metaphors on a daily basis. This is a source of great comfort for me. Whenever I step outside, I see divine truth in the animals and plants, because they are microcosms of the universe just as I am. I can read topics such as physics and biology and clearly see how the underlying processes are metaphors for situations that occur on larger scales. On an interpersonal level, my problems are reflected in the people around me. If I pay attention, I am able to learn from their struggles and avoid suffering in similar ways. I also use my own experience to help others avoid making mistakes, and to awaken them to the possibility of change. I now have faith in the interconnectedness of the universe, so it does not surprise me when I am able to learn or receive guidance from an unexpected source. Learning has become a holistic process as well as the focal point of my life.

Cultivating Tao brought me the point where I could see that my dream to become an actress was unauthentic, because it was merely a manifestation of lower desires. I wanted to become an

actress in order to receive attention and connect with people in power. In order to get out of this “ego trap”, I needed to gain wisdom. Wisdom is not material level knowledge; it is not the acquisition of facts or the even the ability to problem solve. It is a transcendental quality that develops when we have faith in ourselves and in the Source from which we came. Once I had built up some faith and wisdom, I could intuit that my dreams and wishes were artificial. I was clearer, and I began to walk down an authentic path towards my True Heart. The True Heart is the part of ourselves that is in harmony with the universe, so it can only be revealed when we are acting authentically and with good intention. Although I cannot see my True Heart in its entirety, I know that if I continue to cultivate myself and my Tao practice, then as they say in AA, “more will be revealed”.
