

What is the importance of introspection in Taoism?

IB World Religions B4

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A Rationale and Preliminary Research

In my freshman year World Cultures class, I was exposed to several eastern religions, including Buddhism, Taoism, and the teachings of Confucius. While I found all three incredibly intriguing, it was the mystery of the Tao that caught my attention, but I did not allow it much room in my mind. Last year, while going through a period of personal uncertainty, the teachings of the Tao were a constant presence in the back of my mind. Unable to ignore these thoughts, I quickly picked up a few books on the topic, including the Tao Teh Ching by Lao Tzu and The Tao by Mark Forstater. This year, when presented with the opportunity to research a critical aspect of a philosophy or system of beliefs in my International Baccalaureate World Religions class, I immediately thought to further my examination of the religion of Taoism. Having a little bit of a background in the topic already, I was very drawn to the idea of discovering **what is the importance of introspection in Taoism?** The concept of introspection struck me as relevant due to the evident and necessary balance in Taoism between the mind and body and how this harmony is achieved. As a hopeful future psychologist, the importance of introspection in a general lifestyle appealed to my senses of reason as well, and I thought of it to be all the more applied in a religion in which one's Self is so fundamental.

Upon choosing the subject of study, I referenced the aforementioned books, knowing fully the weight of my inquiry and looking to discover of what points in each book I would be able to draw from. I found myself highlighting many seemingly complex concepts, and marking pages of interest. Next, I used these books' ideas to formulate specific questions to be answered in a later interview that would help me to be more detailed in my investigation.

Next, I cross-referenced my understanding of the book sources with a helpful and reliable internet source: <http://www.religioustolerance.org/taoism.htm>. This allowed me to discover that my reason for interest in the connection between introspection and the Taoist philosophies were tied in more than just my mind. My assumptions were confirmed when I ascertained that Taoism began as not a faith but as a combination of psychology and philosophy.

B Plan for Study

As I prepare to enlighten myself as to **what the importance of introspection in Taoism is**, my intent is to exhibit the ways in which concepts involved in introspection as well as Taoism are connected and to identify the importance of this correlation. Within the Summary of Significant Findings, I will explain the fundamentals of Taoism as I have come to understand them through my research. Here I will also discuss information brought to light in my interview with a person rooted in eastern religions, a local Tai Chi instructor. In the Critical Reflection and Evaluation, I will interpret various theories brought to my attention through the reading of various sources and recognition of ideations that are relevant to what is found in my research. I will also analyze the relevance of my experience with one or more practices of an eastern exercise in balancing the mind and body, specifically Tai Chi and/or yoga classes and meditation based upon

common ideals shared among Taoists. By connecting my research to my experiences, I will be able to articulately express the link between introspection and Taoism.

C Summary of Significant Findings

Taoism consists of the maintenance of a great balance, of the equilibrium found between self and universe, responsiveness and activity, and the difference between the realization and actualization of potential. The creed of the *Reform Taoist Congregation* as found on the website for the Ontario Consultants of Religious Tolerance states the following:

“We believe in the formless and eternal Tao, and we recognize all personified deities as being mere human constructs. We reject hatred, intolerance, and unnecessary violence, and embrace harmony, love and learning, as we are taught by Nature. We place our trust and our lives in the Tao, that we may live in peace and balance with the Universe, both in this mortal life and beyond” (Robinson, religioustolerance.org).

Tao is a mysterious concept. Lao Tzu, who authored the *Tao Teh Ching*, was very keen on the idea that the “inner essence” of the Tao should be studied, as contrasted with the concern for any materialistic values of it. In this most treasured writing, Lao Tzu wrote that “Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao” (*Tao Teh Ching*, translated by John C.H. Wu). It would then be suggested that Tao cannot truly be defined except for in one’s own personal manner. It is therefore the ultimate goal of each Taoist to harmonize himself with the Tao through personal action (Robinson).

Originally, Chinese philosophers were attempting to name the collective substance and reality that is behind everything we know as humans – ideas, animate objects, people, etc (Forstater). They came to call this energy *Chi*, and its source was the Tao (Forstater). The Chinese of course came to this realization by taking in what was around them, but especially from studying the energies and thought processes from within themselves (Forstater). Consequently, the Yin Yang symbol that is most often related to Taoism is called the *Tai Chi* (Forstater). The martial arts form by the same name has come to be identified as a part of modern Taoism, and I was fortunate enough to try a class and interview the instructor.

_____ of Erie, Pennsylvania stated that “Taoists are very introspective people.” _____ went on to describe how crucial balance is in Taoist philosophies, and in particular, the focus on negative space. He described the importance of negative space to be relative to accepting what is not. _____ also told of how, in opposition to those of other Eastern belief systems, Taoists are looking to prolong life and find spiritual immortality. Throughout the Tai Chi class, it became apparent to me that the balance _____ was talking about was not only spiritual, but physical as well. In modern times, the mind-body connection of Western thought has been applied to the originally only intellectual concept of Taoism, and now Taoists excel in martial arts forms such as Tai Chi, as well as in many forms of herbal and alternative medicine (_____). The important thing to realize about the art form that is Tai Chi is that it is a responsive form of martial arts which is used to avoid combative fighting and movements involved in

such forms (). Instead, one who is using Tai Chi as a form of defense uses their opponent's strength against them ().

My rationale for beginning this investigation had me inquiring as to the vitality of Self as it is described in Taoism and the comparison or contrast with the self we know as our own person. My reading and interview have helped me to discover that it is a statement of complete veracity to say that Tao is a realization of self and an ever hopeful reach for Self. While much of my core exploration was done by written word, I believe that the Tai Chi class and interview allowed me to experience Taoism in a real form, as much of it is so abstract.

D Critical Reflection and Evaluation

My topic question that I came to research stemmed from my curiosity towards the Taoist philosophy in general, but more importantly, from my inquisitiveness about the connections between religious philosophy and psychology. I made the assumption that because Taoism is a religion based much upon how to better oneself to live in harmony with the way that is Tao, it must be important for one to be self aware. Through my research, I have realized that one must be very conscientious of their own person in order to reach full accord with Tao, and obviously, this is the ultimate goal of the religion.

Though the connection between introspection and Taoism became obvious with very little research, I wished to discover why this connection existed. Upon further inquiry and reading, I deduced that the reasons for which a Taoist may be considered an introspective person fundamentally stem from the most ancient questions that Taoism is based upon. Tao is a complex theory. As aforementioned, there is no human way to define Tao, but it can be felt and known. Tao is the way of the world, the reason for everything, and an ever-existing presence. Tao is manifested in the way people treat themselves, others, and the universe. The sacred inquiries that Taoists are asked require them to answer with calm and ever-respectful, all-embracing actions, words, thoughts, and energies. As the questions are quite demanding (How is one's Self actualized? Are you able to keep the spirit and vital soul balanced? What is the dissimilarity to be found between good and evil?), I believe it would be necessary to know as much about oneself as possible. This is because in knowing who you are and how you have become who you are; you realize just why you are that person.

Taoism is a religion different from most others in that there is no prayer and no venerated deity. Instead, Taoists "seek answers to life's problems through inner meditation and outer observation" (Robinson). Knowing this is one thing, but it is something entirely different to apply it to contemporary lifestyles. I was up to the challenge. Nearly everyday, I found myself channeling what I came to call the "power of the universe" (it is not uncommon for believers to vary their name for the Tao, as no definition is absolute). I did this through meditation and breathing exercises that I had learned elsewhere and also by calling to mind the Tao as I saw it reflected in everyday life. This proved interesting,

as while I am still on a search for religious consolation, I became quite comfortable with the concept of Tao.

As I quickly found out, it is commonly misconstrued that Tai Chi as a martial art is an integral part of Taoism. Tai Chi later became associated with the religion as they mirror similar principals, namely, the idea of negative space. Though my resources were extremely helpful, a few questions were presented that I would hope to defer to a practicing Taoist in the future. This included my wondering if there is ever a personal moment where one realizes that Tao has been achieved, or if, like many things, it is a never ending process. In the spirit of the psychological nature of my research question, I have been brought to also wonder if there is a manner by which Taoists project their wholesome balance upon the more chaotically prone population.

E References and Compliance with the Format

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M , E Personal interview. 20 Oct. 2008.

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