

The Original Philosophy of Flow

We have stopped. A pandemic encircles the world. Many of us are either partially or entirely isolated, keeping our distances. The planes are mostly grounded, the non-essential stores are closed. The hospitals are filled with people who are sick and dying. And the world has become much quieter. Except for our minds.

Some of us are swirling in restlessness and resistance to what is. Many are raring to get back to work, penned like wild stallions; others are in fear and dread about an uncertain future—or of death itself; some are in grief and sorrow, seeing the toll in lost lives and hardships; and still others are in denial, mentally gyrating as fast as possible to avoid confronting our new reality.

My own moments of resistance have inspired a return to the Tao, the power of yielding, the knowledge that nature will take its own course, as water flows over rocks. Long before modern sports teams became fascinated with the idea of *flow*, the philosophical elite of China, beginning around 400 BC, constructed a sophisticated system of thought around that very notion. These teachings are known as Taoism, the understanding of the Tao, *the way*.

A thousand years later, in bringing Buddhism to China, Indian-born Bodhidharma initiated the blend of these two extraordinary traditions: the ancient Chinese philosophy of Taoism and the Indian meditative practices of Buddhism. This new tradition within China became known as Chan and later made its way to Japan, where it would be called Zen and where it incorporated the ancient Japanese tradition of Shintoism, just as Buddhism would later subsume Tibet's pre-existing shamanic system of Bon and become known as Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in that mountain kingdom.

Of all these hybrids, however, I personally find the merger of classical Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism the most valuable combination of any great spiritual traditions in history. Buddhist meditation offers understanding of the psychology of mind as well as freedom from its conditioning, while Taoism encourages living in non-resistance within nature's prescribed laws.

I have had a long relationship with both of these traditions. I practiced Buddhist meditation for many years long ago, all the while with a special fondness for Taoist perspectives, which seemed to involve far less effort. I was particularly influenced by a seminal text attributed to Sengstan, the Third Chan Patriarch, who lived in China in the sixth century AD, close to the time of Bodhidharma, considered China's first patriarch.

The Third Chan Patriarch's famous text is called the *Hsin Hsin Ming*. I first heard it read aloud by Ram Dass one summer night in Boulder, Colorado during his course at Naropa Institute in 1974. My friend Alan Clements and I were so taken with the text that we published the 28 stanzas as a little yellow booklet, which we then gave away for free to the 2000 participants in attendance at Naropa's founding season. So many people asked for additional copies that we agreed to print and sell them for ten cents apiece. As we were often travelling in those days, we convinced Alan's mother Linda to handle the mailing of the booklets, thinking there would be only a few orders now and then. But over the next few decades, at our expense from afar, Linda printed and mailed a couple hundred thousand copies. (We eventually raised our price to a quarter per booklet.) We don't know exactly how much this project cost us over the years, but Linda had a grand time in receiving letters of gratitude from people in far-flung countries around the world.

It is for this reason, a long and intimate history with the *Hsin Hsin Ming*, that I have taken the liberty to produce a new version of it for 21st Century readers. I have used combinations of famous English and Chinese translations as well as my own interpretations, and I have chosen only my favourite 12 stanzas.

I offer these verses to remind us to yield to unyielding reality. To soften our sense of knowing what should happen. To rest more in the mystery of life. To flow.

I offer this also as a bow to the great Taoist tradition of China, lest we forget the ancient richness of a culture during a troubled moment in its history.

The Confident Heart/Mind (*Hsin-Hsin Ming*)

by Sengstan, Third Chan Patriarch

The Great Way is not difficult
If you are easy in your preferences.
When grasping and repelling are both absent
Everything becomes clear and undisguised.
In the slightest resistance, however
Heaven and earth are set infinitely apart.

The Way is perfect, like vast space,
Where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess.
Indeed, it is due to our choosing
To accept or deny the true nature of things.

Live neither in the entanglements of outer pursuits
Nor in inner feelings of avoidance.
Be serene in the suchness of things
And confusion will disappear on its own.

When you strive for inner quietude
Your very effort fills you with disquiet.
As long as you strain in dualistic ambitions
You will not know peace.

The more you conceptualize it,
The further astray you wander from the truth.
Stop talking and thinking about it
And truth reveals itself.

When your thoughts are in bondage,
Reality is obscured
And the burdensome practice of judging
Brings annoyance and weariness.

Do not seek the truth; simply release your opinions.
What benefit comes from separations?
If there is fixation on right and wrong,
The mind will be lost in agitation.

The wise strive to no goals,
But the foolish fetter themselves.
The faster they hurry
The slower they go.

The Great Way is calm and expansive
But those with selfish views are fearful and hesitant.
When the mind is in accord with the Way
Self-centred striving vanishes
And the Way becomes effortless.

Just let things be their own expression
And there will be neither coming nor going.
Live simply in accordance with natural laws
And within your own nature.

One in all
All in one.
Realize this
And the heart/mind will be at peace.

And now, words fail us,
For the Great Way cannot be contained in words
Or in time—past, present, or future.

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