

Principles of taoism in the tao te ching and the tao of pooh



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Lao-tse's Tao te Ching is the defining text in the Chinese religious philosophy of Taoism. Written at an unknown time predating the 4th century BC, the Tao te Ching has been adapted and translated countless times, yet remains a guiding source of knowledge for Taoism today. Because of the many fundamental differences in Eastern and Western philosophy and the obvious language barrier, these ancient Taoist teachings can seem out of the reach of Western audiences. To remedy this, in 1982, American author Benjamin Hoff published the Tao of Pooh, in which he uses the characters from A. A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh allegorically to introduce traditional Taoist principles to Westerners. Though both texts are attempting to teach many of the same principles, they do so in very different ways and to different effects.

The Tao te Ching, in its 81 short chapters, is a veritable puzzle for many Western readers. It introduces many foreign concepts and routinely contradicts itself. Its purposeful ambiguity leaves the text wide open to different interpretation, and the huge array of translations only obscures meanings further- in fact, there are over 200 published translations of chapter one alone, a more traditionally accurate translation being "The Tao that is Tao'ed is not Tao" (adapt. John Chalmers Ch. 1). The use of contradiction is key to the effect of the Tao te Ching, as it causes readers to question what the text is saying and to evaluate which parts are true to themselves. To be with the way of the Tao is to "act without (thinking of) acting; ...to taste without discerning any flavour; to consider what is small as great, and a few as many" (Lao-tse Ch. 63). Contradiction like this is an important element to the text, but its use is also a factor that makes Taoist teachings more inaccessible to people reading the book in a translated

language. Lao-tse's "virtues" demonstrated in each of the chapters are neither commands nor suggestions, but seem almost passive. The most prominent of these virtues, such as the Tao, Wei Wu Wei, and P'u, are also addressed in Hoff's book. Lao-tse tries to state the truths of Taoism without offending, allowing readers to examine each idea with an open mind. In chapter 44, Lao-tse explains Taoist ideas on wealth and fame, stating his views as questions to the reader, causing you to think about how his statements pertain to you rather than immediately accept or reject the statement.

" Or fame or life, do you hold more dear? Or life or wealth, To which would you adhere? Keep life and lose those other things; Keep them and lose your life:-which brings Sorrow and pain more near?"

Instead of commanding you to live life by certain rules, the Tao te Ching encourages interpreting the text for yourself. Very different from many Western philosophical or religious texts, such as the Bible or works of ancient Greek philosophers, the Tao te Ching does not delineate wrong from right- it does not tell how you must go about something, only what the truths are and what you may strive to achieve. Do you want wealth and fame, or do you want a meaningful life? Taoism does not tell you which you should try to attain, it only lays out the facts for you to examine and make the choice the best pertains to you. Because of this, the Tao te Ching is a text teaches effectively and without judgment.

The Tao of Pooh reflects a much more palatable, concrete depiction of Taoist philosophy to the Western audience. Written by a westerner for westerners,

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even the cultural reference on which the book is built has definitively western roots. Benjamin Hoff depicts many Taoist principles as concrete and definite in their existence, application, and interpretation, even when chapter one in the Tao te Ching directly states that “ The Tao that can be trodden is not the enduring and unchanging Tao” (Lao-tse Ch. 1). Many of his points seem to contradict those in the Tao te Ching just as this example.

Despite this, the book at a broader level does an excellent job of bringing out the Taoist principles within each of A. A. Milne’s characters, namely Pooh. Both books deal with many of the same Taoist virtues, though in different ways. In the Tao of Pooh, Hoff illuminates the principles of P’u, and Wei Wu Wei within Pooh’s character.

P’u, or the Uncarved Block, is the Taoist principle of things in their natural state of simplicity, much as we find Pooh in Milne’s books. Pooh is “ the very Epitome of the Uncarved Block,” says Hoff, the essence of the principle being that “ thing in their original simplicity contain their own natural power, power that is easily spoiled or lost when simplicity is changed” (Hoff 11). Lao-tse addresses this same idea in the Tao te Ching, stating that a man of excellence in the way of the Tao derives this excellence from his “ endless return to man’s first state,” and is hailed for bringing out “ the simple infant man” within himself, which completes his excellence (Lao-tse Ch. 28). This same passage is often translated as “ return to the state of the uncarved block” and illustrates why the undisturbed, simple state of man or anything else is its greatest form. Lao-tse stresses that less is more: the simpler the being, the wiser and greater it becomes. Pooh’s simplicity is what allows him to overcome obstacles that could not be tackled by the wits

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or cleverness of Rabbit, Owl, or Eeyore. Much in the same way, the wisest insights are achieved by man returning to his simplest state.

Wu Wei is another virtue embodied by Pooh. To Hoff, Wu Wei means “without doing, causing, or making,” as is its traditionally defined. “But,” he says, “practically speaking, it means without meddlesome, combative, or egotistical effort.” Wu Wei means action without action and is a key principle in Taoist philosophy. Hoff best explains this by comparing it to water: “The efficiency of Wu Wei is like that of water flowing over and around the rocks in its path— not the mechanical, straight-line approach that usually ends up short-circuiting natural laws, but one that evolves from an inner sensitivity to the natural rhythm of things.” Water finds the path of least resistance to navigate the obstacles it encounters. When it comes to a falls, it falls. When it comes to a pool, it rests. Water does not attempt to combat its natural surroundings, instead, it succeeds precisely because it behaves without intentions, it acts without acting. As Lao-tse explains, “the softest thing in the world... overcomes the hardest,” allowing him to know “what advantage belongs to doing nothing” (Lao-tse Ch. 43). As translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, “teaching without words and work without doing are understood by very few” (Lao-tse Ch. 43 tr. Gia-fu Feng and Jane English). Acting in a way that causes no resistance is the most efficient and natural way to act, but Lao-tse observes that very few people are able to achieve true action without action. Following the Way allows people to learn to act in harmony with nature rather than against it, with the ultimate goal being the ability to act without any doing, which is the way of nature itself. Rigidity will be overcome by natural flow and flexibility, much like Pooh’s “

simple-mindedness” allows him to overcome challenges that rigid knowledge cannot.

In the Tao of Pooh, Milne’s other characters, such as Eeyore, Owl, and Rabbit become punching bags that Hoff uses to exemplify what the Tao is not. These characters all have “ brain” which makes them look wiser on the surface, but, asserts Hoff, “ Brain can be fooled,” while nature cannot (Hoff 57). Hoff criticizes these characters as appearing foolish, caught up in their own greatness, looking down on Pooh for his lack of brain when it is Knowledge, the source of their “ greatness,” that causes them to become unwise. “ While Rabbit’s little routine is that of Knowledge for the sake of Being Clever, Owl’s is that of Knowledge for the sake of Appearing Wise, [and] Eeyore’s is Knowledge for the sake of Complaining About Something,” (Hoff 15) “ Pooh, the Uncarved Block, is able to accomplish what he does because he is simpleminded” (Hoff 12). Hoff shows that these busybody characters do nothing but complicate life for others, sitting on their pedestals of knowledge and shouting down meaningless orders from above, while it is Pooh who truly knows the Way and therefore is wise.

Despite its apparent shortcomings, the Tao of Pooh makes Taoist thinking much more accessible to Western readers than the cryptic translations of the Tao te Ching while still maintaining a fair degree of truthfulness to core Taoist teachings. It covers many of the same ideas as the ancient text, but addresses them in a different manner, sometimes to similar effect while to opposite effect at other times. The use of Milne’s characters helped Hoff illustrate his points and make the book relatable, but even when the two

authors make similar points, they can come across very differently because of the way in which the books are written.

One of the largest differences between these two texts is the style with which they are presented and delivered. As previously stated, the Tao te Ching does not offend, and explains why enlightenment through the Tao is accessible to anyone. On the other hand, Hoff dedicates much of his book to explaining the fault in the lives of others, and how their lives are not complete because they lack the Way. He describes Western culture as being full of “Bisy Backsons,” setting these people against what he portrays as the perfect, peaceful Eastern and Indigenous populations of the world. The Bisy Backson comes in many varieties, be it the “Miserable Puritan, Restless Pioneer, ...the Lonely Cowboy,” Hoff’s list goes on regarding the people who are living life wrong (Hoff 103). The Backson is “always going somewhere, somewhere he hasn’t been. Anywhere but where he is” (Hoff 97). Hoff also lashes out against other Chinese religions, claiming that to Chinese Buddhists, life was “bitter” and “full of traps,” (Hoff 19) while Confucianists were merely “busy ants spoiling the picnic of life” (Hoff 40). Rather than tell the reader what is wrong, why they should not do this or can’t do that, the Tao te Ching attempts to educate the reader on how they, too, can live in harmony with the Tao, to “comprehend its mysteries, ... so as to elude man’s knowledge” (Lao-tse Ch. 15) Both the Tao te Ching and the Tao of Pooh describe these virtues as things to strive towards- acquaintance with the Way and the evasion of traditional knowledge- but they do so in seemingly opposite manners.

Though the works of both Hoff and Lao-tse may seem to contradict each other at times while trying to convey the same teachings, both are effective in their own ways. The Tao of Pooh acts as a gateway to Taoism for many readers who would not otherwise be exposed to it, while the Tao te Ching truly lays the groundwork on which all other Taoist teachings are built.

Because of the difference in the style of writing, both texts convey the same ideas to the reader, yet you come away with very different impressions and messages from perhaps the two most widely read works on Taoism in the West.