

Daoist Mysticism: Embodiment, *Eudaimonia* and Flow

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Note on Methodology

Given the contentiousness of the hermeneutics debate among sinologists, I will begin my analysis of Daoist embodied mysticism with a brief discussion of methodology. As J.J. Clarke has pointed out, the traditional interpretation of Daoism for the west was established by scholars who stressed a false dichotomy between philosophical and religious Daoism. Clarke accuses James Legge, for example, of

...[D]ismiss[ing] popular and religious Daoism as ‘superstitious,’ ‘unreasonable,’ ‘fantastic’ and ‘grotesque,’ by comparison with the philosophical depth of the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi.¹

Russell Kirkland² and Livia Kohn³ have also pointed out the degree to which western scholars have misunderstood Daoism by focusing on too few texts of the *Tao-tsang*, by using western interpretive lenses that considered Laozi and Zhungzi as individual philosophers who authored individual texts rather than as possibly mythological spokespersons for anthologies that embodied the wisdom of long standing traditions, and by ignoring the practices of common people to focus on a Confucian disrespectful analysis of those traditions. So, I hardly need to argue, at this point, for the inaccuracy of an interpretation of Daoism that contrasts the wisdom of Laozi and Zhuangzi with the superstitiousness of the Daoist religious tradition. Instead, I will argue in the paper for an understanding of the nature of the embodied mysticism that was advocated by the Daoist tradition in China. I will still make comparisons to western philosophers, but I hope that the western comparisons that I will make will more accurately reflect the thinking and practices of the Daoist sages, and will avoid some of the pitfalls for which Clarke, Kohn, Kirkland and others have faulted most 20th century sinologists.

In my comparisons I will adopt a hermeneutic of interpretation of the type used by Jon Herman to elucidate the roots of Martin Buber’s “...proto-dialogical unity,”⁴ through analyzing Buber’s encounter with Zhuangzi. Although there is probably no historical connection among the authors that I am comparing, Daoist forms of self-cultivation and embodied practice bear a close enough psychological parallel to procedures advocated and studied by Aristotle, Maslow and Csikszentmihalyi, for the comparisons to be fruitful and informative on two levels. One, in terms of what Herman calls an aesthetic or romantic hermeneutic,⁵ the Chinese and Western advocates of embodied self-cultivation are following similar procedures to achieve similar goals. Just as one would expect that another human culture, no matter how different from ours, would have some procedures of food production or waste disposal, one can expect that some manner of analysis of self-cultivation is present in most, if not all human cultures, and in cultures in which we find such practices we can fruitfully compare the manner in which this is done for similarities and differences that emerge in the local contexts. Of course, care must be taken to respect the

local contexts, but humanity consists of only one biological species, so one need not throw one's hands up in despair of any cross-cultural comparison, as Steven Katz ⁶ and other social constructivists do, because the ethnic, linguistic and cultural contexts in which people live differ. Two, my analysis describes **embodied** practices. In discussing what people do with their physical bodies, and the psychological consequences of the embodied practices, one is approaching a scientific analysis of the situation and moving away from a cultural or hermeneutic analysis, in any case. As one would not expect incommensurably different reactions to SARs or the Bird Flu when the virus crosses cultural, linguistic or ethnic boundaries, and one would expect regular exercise to improve the health of most humans, whatever their cultural contexts, one would expect that these religious embodied practices of self-cultivation will exhibit at least some similar effects cross-culturally. In this sense, postulated cross-cultural similarities in practice might even be construed as scientific hypotheses for sociological or anthropological research.

Self-Cultivation: Daoist Teachings and Practices

First, I will outline some of the salient teachings and practices of Daoism, as identified by recent Daoist scholarship. Second, I will show how Daoism reflects a conception of embodied ethical mysticism, reminiscent of Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*, in the *Nicomachian Ethics*. Third, I will show how Daoist practices that I identified in the first section of the paper reflect a conception of self-actualization, as expressed by Maslow, and of flow, as described by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly. From this comparison I will conclude that Daoist practice has traditionally embraced an embodied form of mysticism, that is, at once, philosophical and religious, although its religious expression differs from traditional western forms of religious expression.

Self-Cultivation, or *cheng* was an important traditional Chinese goal, whatever school of thought one belonged to, but for Daoists there was a stronger stress on maximizing the natural expression of *de*, perfecting embodied energy as *qi*, incorporating or relating oneself to *Dao*, and co-relating health in body to proper function in society, nature, and *Tian*, than there was in other Chinese traditions. Some of the teachings and practices concerning the self, and its cultivation were the following.

Daoist teachings regarding *de*, or self, variously interpret the ambiguous Chinese conception of a human self as at once physiological, cosmological, psychological, and transcendent. Livia Kohn argues that there are at least two senses in the *Xisheng jing* ⁷ (*Scripture of Western Ascension*) in which the physiological body is understood to be the self. One's *de* is born with one's body (*xing*) and is part of the functioning of one's body in everyday life. Kohn explains:

Throughout Chinese intellectual history *xing* is a complex and much interpreted term. The ancient dictionary *Shuowen jiezi zhu* defines it as *xiang*, "simulacra," "symbol," "replica." ...This original notion corresponds to our translation of *xing* as "form" or "shape." It means the body of the material appearance of things as an abstract conception, as an entity quite distinct and yet wholly integrated.⁸

Xing is thus, not ‘matter’ in the Greek sense of *hyle* but it does contrast as matter against *qi*, spirit, in some contexts, and against *shēn*, the personal body or self, in other contexts.⁹ *Shēn* is also understood as the conglomeration of the senses,¹⁰ and the psychological ego-identity.¹¹ The physical form of a person (*xing*) is responsible for emotions and desires and can distract from the Dao, but it must be intact for the self to come to the body and reside within it.¹² Kohn summarizes the role of the body in the cosmology of the *Xisheng jing* as being at once individual and cosmic.

Within the cosmological system, the body takes on a particularly remarkable position. Divided into the *xing*, the cosmic body that is part of creation, and the *shēn*, the personal body that is part of the man-made world and thus opposed to the Tao, the body is on the borderline between true realization and complete loss of naturalness; a bulwark of primordality and a fortress of egoism at the very same time.¹³

Since both physical form and personality are ultimately aspects of Dao in Daoist cosmology, disciplining the *shēn* aspects of body to prevent the blocking of *qi* while enhancing the health and primordial qualities of *xing*, to make it a smooth vehicle for presenting Dao, which is ultimately, its own nature as well as the nature of the universe, is the goal of religious practice in the *Xisheng jing*.

Russell Kirkland traces the specific steps used to achieve the Daoist ideal of self-cultivation “within a cosmos comprised of subtly linked forces,”¹⁴ across many centuries of Daoist practice in China. Kirkland summarizes Ssu-mo Sun’s *Chen-chung Chi (Pillow Book Records)* as listing five instructions for achieving integration of the whole person with Dao. They are:

1. “prudence,” i.e. self control and moderation in consumption and sensual pleasures;
2. “prohibitions’ regarding improper activities in those regards;
3. self-massage
4. guiding the *ch’i* by visualizational meditation
5. “guarding the One” to achieve apotropatic powers.¹⁵

Kirkland explains that these practices were expanded and elaborated over many centuries of Daoist practice, during which complex analyses of balanced diet and moderation in physical activity at the early stages of Daoist practice, and instructions for achieving calmness or equilibrium in both body and mind at the intermediate stages of development, were added to advanced stage meditative analyses of “sitting in forgetfulness” and forgetting ordinary distinctions between self and other, which would lead to “entering into suchness”¹⁶ and achieving *wu-wei* (doing without doing.)¹⁷ Kirkland also points out that ritual aspects of Daoism, such as focusing on sounds of words (*chen-yen*)¹⁸ interacted productively with a variety of East Asian tantric practices, such as reciting of mantras.

Kirkland points out how eclectic Daoist practice became during the second to sixth centuries, intertwining the philosophical, upper-class, *Huainanzi* texts and practices with practices advocated in less well known texts emerging from the Heavenly Masters’ traditions, such as the

Tai p'ing ching, the *Hsiang-erh*, and the *Nei-yeh*. Kirkland summarizes the moral precepts in some of these texts as follows.

Related texts in the *Tao-tsang* preserve thirty-six moral precepts said to have been part of the original *Hsiang-erh*. Nine consist of “prescriptive precepts” pegged squarely to the *Tao te Ching*, (e.g., “practice clarity and stillness” and “practice desirelessness”). The others consist of “proscriptive precepts.” Some of those go back to the *Tao te Ching* (e.g. “Do not delight in arms.”) or the *Nei-yeh*, (e.g. “Do not waste your vital essence and life energy”) and others preserve the wider social framework of the *Tai p'ing ching*, (e.g. “Do not pray or sacrifice to spirits and gods”).¹⁹

These lists of practices specify a method of self discipline that is two-fold. The first goal, which might, on the one hand, be characterized as largely negative, is aimed at attuning one’s body (*xing*) to a healthy state of equilibrium, while curtailing equilibrium disturbing psychological or mental propensities (*shēn*). *Qi*, energy or vitality is optimized, and attunement of the body to smooth interaction with the environment (both physiologically and psychologically) is practiced. Discipline is directed at suppressing any propensity, whether physical, mental or otherwise that would cause friction either intra-personally or interpersonally. A general recognition that friction causes disease, decay, stress, and ultimately, death seems to inform these practices. I have called this method of self-discipline negative because it is aimed at eliminating sources of disturbance, although, of course, it is also promoting health and equilibrium.

The more positive goal of these Daoist practices, on the other hand, aims at achieving a very high level of functioning and self-expression, and opening the door for what contemporary psychologists call peak experiences. Optimal physiological, psychological and mental functioning will enable a person to achieve states of transcendent harmony with his or her environment, and ecstatic expression of the qualities or talents most central to one’s nature and personality. It is this mystical goal of Daoism that unites all of the varied Daoist texts into what can be called a single tradition, despite the differences in outlook of the various texts. Kirkland points out,

What all three texts, the *Tao te Ching*, the *Nei-yeh*, and the *Chuang-tze* share is the idea that one can live one’s life wisely only if one learns to live in accord with life’s unseen forces and subtle processes, not on the basis of society’s more prosaic concerns.²⁰

Examples of this type of mystical achievement abound in Daoist sources. I’ll illustrate this sense of transcendence as attunement to the unseen forces of nature with just a few examples.

In Jon Herman’s account of the *Zhuangzi*, as translated by Martin Buber, Section 34, entitled “The String Music of the Yellow Emperor” tells the story of Pei-men Ch’eng, who claims that when the emperor played the Hsien-ch’ih, “I was at the first part shocked, at the second, stunned, at the third, enraptured, speechless, flabbergasted.”²¹ The emperor explains that it is the skillfulness of his play that has had this profound effect on Pei-men Ch’eng, for he began with mere human skill, but ended “animated by the primordial purity.”²² The music establishes a basic attunement or harmony among the disciplined music playing of the emperor, the

disciplined senses of Pei-men Ch'eng, the instrument, and the sound so profound that, as the emperor explains,

“My play first aroused fear, and you were afflicted as if by an apparition. Then I joined stupor to that and you were separated. But finally came enrapture; for enrapture means turned out from sense, turned out from sense means Dao, and Dao means the great absorption.”²³

This profound sense of absorption in music is perhaps one of the most common types of experience of mystical absorption on record. It isn't specifically religious, and is clearly cross-cultural. One must be at least open to it, in the ways that one would be opened by following the Daoist practices of self-cultivation. Hunger, illness, mental or psychological disturbance or poor levels of concentration would impede one's ability to become absorbed in the music. Lack of disciplined playing skill on the part of the Emperor would destroy the experience. But when all is in harmony, the music stuns and enraptures both the Emperor, for whom it is also a maximal expression of his *de* as personality, talent, energy and creativity, and the hearer, who can't help being overcome by the primordial purity of the music achieving perfection and revealing Dao in his presence.

In a sense the playing of the music is very physical and ordinary. Physical fingers, strings, and instrument, ears and air are all the elements that are contained in the musical event. But when they are perfectly harmonized to one another, Dao reveals the ultimate oneness of all of them. “Guarding the One” accomplishes perfect self-expression leading to self-transcendence of a clearly mystical nature.

Livia Kohn explains how the path of the sage, leading to the Tao, is tied to virtue and self-development in the *Xishing jing*. She quotes the text, as follows.

The Tao does not desire emptiness, yet emptiness naturally returns there.
Virtue does not desire spirit, yet spirit naturally returns there....

If human beings are empty, latent and free from action, they may not desire the Tao, yet the Tao naturally returns to them. Seen from this angle, how could the individual nature of beings not be natural?²⁴

Kohn explains that the return to the Dao may be either an ecstatic absorption in the darkness of the Tao, or an ecstatic state of liberation into a sense of spiritual freedom.²⁵ In either case, it is the self-development of the virtues already cited that leads to the natural and embodied, yet mystically transcendent state of the accomplished Sage.

There is yet another sense in which ethics is embodied for Daoists, as well. Dan Lusthaus points out how closely the epistemological perspective of seeing reality from the location of one's body is connected to the ethical evaluating system in which we judge some things better than others. It is from the perspective of being embodied within a body and a community that we judge some

things as ‘good’ and others as ‘bad;’ but we universalize the judgments falsely, forgetting their sources. In his analysis of the ethics of the *Zhuangzi*, Lusthaus claims,

...[O]ur claim to objective standards is a self-deception in which we indulge in order to disguise the fact that we are merely clinging to our prejudices...whether those are central or communal. In either case, objective standards mask self-justification and self confirmation.²⁶

In other words, a dis-embodied ethics, or one lacking in awareness of the perspective of the speaker or lacking in the self-development outlined above, represents not an ethics, properly understood, but rather, an ego or personality that is not properly developed and has run amok.

Someone might object that my treatment of Daoist ethics secularizes the Celestial Masters traditions to an exaggerated degree. I’ve discounted the rich ritual iconography of the inner landscape as featuring the Ocean of Energies, K’un-lun Mountain, the Cinnabar field, the Queen Mother of the West, and the virtual pantheon of gods and sacred spaces that populated the meditation practices of the Daoist priesthood. Kristofer Schipper points out several roles that the rituals played in traditional Daoism. On one level, the sages and adepts were skeptical of the worship of gods by common people but participated in them to engage the people in practices that would ultimately prove beneficial for the participants. But Daoist sages also symbolically invoked the inner deities, especially the ones included in their registers, while breathing rhythmically, as described in the *Book of the Yellow Court*.²⁷ The breathing, in turn, is closely linked to the anatomical organs as identified in Chinese medicine and the exercises of T’ai-chi ch’uan.²⁸ In the symbolic sense, the body was conceived of as an inner chaos of competing interests that had to be unified through many difficult processes of self-cultivation, for “Keeping the One.”²⁹ So achieving inner order was at once a physiological and a religious task. While one can’t ignore or discount the iconography and rituals of religious Daoism, the connections of these practices to the body are also more immediate than those of most western religions. Schipper points out that the word ‘religion’ has no direct Chinese counterpart.³⁰ It may also be the case that the notion of a secular practice had no pre-communist counterpart, either, and so, the western distinction between religious and philosophical Daoism is simply misplaced. In this sense, I have been focusing on the ethical rather than the ritual aspects of Daoism, without implying primacy or exclusivity for the aspects of practice that I am discussing.

So far I have been describing the interconnections among self-development, virtue, and embodied mysticism in Daoism. I have shown how a psychological attitude of detachment from the ego, attention to care for the health and vitality of the body, and preservation of vital energy produces the state of character in which the primordial Dao will enlighten and enliven a sage. Everyday practices involving self-discipline and self-cultivation lead to transcendence, which ultimately consists of a profound form of harmony with the primordial source of all of nature, the Dao. For the rest of the paper I will show some interesting parallels between this Daoist conception of sagely achievement and some western conceptions of ‘the good for man,’ as Aristotle characterizes the ethical quest.

Aristotle and *Eudaimonia*

In the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle is out to describe happiness, which is as he says, the best and highest good, for it is the ultimate goal for which all other goals are pursued.³¹ In turns of phrase that freshman philosophy students regularly find quite odd, Aristotle defines happiness as "...an activity of soul implying a rational principle..."³² and "...an activity of soul in accordance with perfect virtue."³³

Virtue, for Aristotle, is proper function, in the mundane sense that a virtuous knife cuts well, and a virtuous lyre-player plays the lyre well.³⁴ So, his goal is to seek the proper function of a human being, again, in the mundane sense of seeking a certain type of life, lived in activities that reflect the excellence of human nature. So far, so Daoist.

Of course, Aristotle also stresses some rather un-Daoist points in 1098a of the *Nichomachean Ethics*. For, he dismisses nutrition and growth as having anything to do with ethics and he isolates the rational principle as the identifying human characteristic which will select the virtuous activities. For Daoists, of course, the intellect does not bear any special insight into the nature of the Dao, and is more likely to reflect the inclinations of the delusive ego. These differences will seem less pernicious, in context, however.

Self-development is obviously very high on Aristotle's list of ethical priorities. Since virtue is a state of character,³⁵ and character is largely a matter of habit,³⁶ virtue and a potentially happy character are direct results of doing virtuous acts, developing one's habits for a properly functioning character to the highest degree possible, and living a lifestyle that exhibits activities in accordance with these habits. His faculty-psychology distinguishes between intellectual and moral virtues, in a way that can be seen as reflecting similar sensibilities to those of Daoist authors.

Aristotle's intellectual virtues are actually not rational principles, but rather, practices that parallel what I called the positive ethical practices of Daoism. They are the fulfillments of talents, which might be regarded as the self-expression of one's *de*, in Chinese terms. Intellectual virtues consist of learned arts and skills, and are products of education,³⁷ and for these skills there is no question of "seeking a mean between excess and defect," as there is for moral virtues. Indeed, for the intellectual virtues, one should 'go for the gold,' aiming for the highest level of achievement possible. The aim of the carpenter is to be an excellently skilled carpenter, of the lyre-player to be the best in skill, and of the philosopher to be the best thinker. The highest of the intellectually virtuous activities is, according to Aristotle, contemplation, of which he says;

If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue, it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue; and this will be that of the best thing in us. Whether it be reason or something else that is this element which is thought to be our natural ruler and guide and to take thought of things noble and divine, whether it be itself also divine or only the most divine element

in us, the activity of this in accordance with its proper virtue will be perfect happiness. That this activity is contemplative, we have already said.³⁸

I won't debate here whether Aristotle's notion of contemplation is intended to refer to a more "rational" or a more "divine" activity. I think it is sufficient for my argument to point out that his conception of contemplation is probably not Kant's "pure reason," or Descartes' thinking thing in a disembodied soul doing mathematics. Rather, Aristotle's *eudaimonia* state involves the enjoyment of maximal self expression in harmony with one's well developed talents. Indeed, Cohen, Curd and Reeve point out that the term *eudaimonia* is derived from *eu*, which means 'well', and *daimon*, which means 'divine being,'³⁹ So, even in the choice of his wording, Aristotle may have seen perfect order in a human life and perfect order in the universe as harmoniously resonant qualities; in which the well being of the gods and the well being of a human are united in happiness.

So, Aristotle's analysis of the intellectual virtues exhibits some very Daoist themes. Skill and talent development in harmony with one's nature and inherent talents will bring one to perform activities that bring about the highest level of happiness. Practicing these activities to the point at which they become a form of contemplation is the best of which a human is capable. Achieving that level of accomplishment is reflective of the divine element in a human, and the closest one can come to attunement to divinity. It is also the achievement of human happiness.

Aristotle's moral virtues parallel what I called the negative directives of Daoist practice. These involve a rational principle from the intellectual part of the soul, in his faculty psychology, dominating over the desirous portion of the nutritive part of the soul,⁴⁰ to seek a mean between excess and defect.⁴¹ Virtues such as temperance, moderation in eating, courage, the reasonable use of money in a way that is neither miserly nor ostentatious, and the like, reflect forms of self discipline reminiscent of the Daoist injunctions to suppress or ignore the *shēn* desires while satisfying the *xing* desires. For, Aristotelian defects of moral virtue would arise from too little attention being paid to the basic needs of the body, while the Aristotelian excesses would be results of too much emphasis on the *shēn* or psychological and egotistical propensity to greed and grasping.

Indeed, there are some verbal parallels between the Aristotelian concepts of soul or substance and the Chinese concepts of *shēn* and *xing*. The soul, or *psyche*, for Aristotle, is the form of the body, it is "the actuality of some form of body"⁴² it is the symbolic rendering of the organism, connected to Plato's *ideos*.⁴³ The substance, in contrast, is the principle that unites with the matter as a composite, making the matter into a specific differentiated individual.⁴⁴ So, one might say that in Greek as well as in Chinese, the particular, psychological and egocentric is the substance or *shēn*, while the symbolic, organic and highest sense of self is the *psyche*, the soul or *xing*. Both are the *phusis* or nature of the person, just as both *xing* and *shēn* are the nature or *de* of a person in Daoist texts. Both can be said to be ways that the body is organized, in both languages. And both Aristotle and Daoists show a preference for the organic, the natural, that connects to the divine over the egotistical and grasping aspects of self, which represent individual and isolated manners of self-organization.

I think I have identified enough parallels between the Daoist and Aristotelian conceptions of the good life to claim that the processes of self development and goals for ethical success bare some striking similarities. Aristotle's developed conception of *eudaimonia* as a state of virtuous character featuring high levels of skills and accomplished states of contemplation features a form of transcendence that like Daoism's conception of transcendence, may be ecstatic or enstatic. And similar paths are used to achieve these goals in both cases; suppression of egotistical desires coupled with rigorous self-discipline directed at skill development. In what follows, I will tie two more authors into the embodied conception of mysticism that I have so far identified in Daoism and Aristotle.

Maslow's Peak Experiences and Csikszentmihalyi's Notion of Flow

A half-century ago, Abraham Maslow argued that there was a deep connection between knowledge of human health and well-being and knowledge of human values. Self-development, according to Maslow, is the pressure of innate tendencies toward self-actualization. Maslow agrees with my methodological observation that psychological science can study human self-development cross-culturally, arguing that "...[A]ll organisms are more self-governing, self-regulating and autonomous..."⁴⁵ than the social constructivists would allow. Concurring with Aristotle, Maslow argued that self-actualization is a process of developing a state of character, or a state of mental health and well-being, in which an integrated personality delights in virtuous activities. The *eudaimonia* resulting from successes in growth and self-development is described by Maslow, as follows.

We are again and again rewarded for good Becoming by transient states of absolute Being, which I have summarized as peak experiences. Achieving basic needs gratifications gives us many peak experiences, each of which are absolute delights, perfect in themselves, and needing no more than themselves to validate life. ... Heaven, so to speak, lies waiting for us throughout life, ready to step into for a time and to enjoy before we have to come back to our ordinary life of striving.⁴⁶

Maslow points out, however, that despite innate yearnings for self-development, very few humans in fact achieve this level of human excellence. The reasons for the high level of failure to thrive are of two types, which, once again, correspond to failures of the negative and positive virtues that I identified in both Daoist ethics and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. On the negative side, as Maslow points out, people are fearful, craving safety, self-indulgent, have poor habits, embrace counter-productive cultural attitudes, are injured by traumatic episodes, or are poorly educated.⁴⁷ Failures of the negative or moral virtues result in people who lack the self-discipline for self-actualization. Failures of the positive, or Aristotelian intellectual virtues result in poor health, both physically and mentally, absence of self-identity and responsibility, boredom, lack of direction, spontaneity, creativity, or zest. The process of self-development advocated for Daoist sages clearly bears important parallels with Maslow's instructions for the achievement of peak experiences.

Like the Daoist sages, and unlike Aristotle, Maslow stresses the safety and health of the physical body. He points out that failure to meet basic needs, such as needs for nutrition, exercise, and safety, or falling victim to physiological trauma will disrupt one's capacity to advance in a course of self-actualization. Aristotle acknowledges the role of the nutritive part of the soul in self-development only in the negative sense that moral virtue requires moderation.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has continued Maslow's project by studying happiness and the activities that produce it, directly. He has found that the most happy people are the ones that he describes as having an 'autotelic' personality. Autotelic activities, according to Csikszentmihalyi, are activities that people engage in for their own sakes, in opposition to activities that someone might engage in because they have to or can't avoid doing them, or to earn a living, or to please someone else. Applied to personalities, the word 'autotelic' designates "an individual who generally does things for their own sake, rather than in order to achieve some later, external goal."⁴⁸

Csikszentmihalyi has found, in reverse of common opinion on the matter, that the happiest people are the ones who embrace the most challenging tasks, who work very hard at jobs that they find productive and on which they focus high levels of energy and interest. He observes,

As one focuses on any segment of reality, a potentially infinite range of opportunities for action—physical, mental or emotional—is revealed for our skills to engage with. ...

The important thing is to enjoy the activity for its own sake, and to know that what matters is not the result, but the control one is acquiring over one's attention.⁴⁹

The activities most destructive of happiness are ones related to passive leisure: watching TV or in other ways becoming a consumer of the entertainment industry. Active leisure activities such as pursuing hobbies or participating in activities that require skills development and high levels of concentration such as sports, gardening, and the arts, in contrast are autotelic and produce happiness. Isolating activities also produce unhappiness, while social activities tend to produce more happiness.

Csikszentmihalyi points out that what all of the positive happiness producing activities have in common is that they produce flow. He describes this condition as follows.

A typical day is full of anxiety and boredom. Flow experiences provide the flashes of intense living against this dull background. ...[A] person in flow is completely focused. There is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings. Self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. A sense of time is distorted: hours seem to pass by in minutes. When a person's entire being is stretched in the full functioning of body and mind, whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake; living becomes its own justification.⁵⁰

This type of experience is also closely connected, in Csikszentmihalyi's studies, to feelings of energy. Flow produces high levels of energy and excitement, while passive acceptance of biological or cultural fate, boredom or doing nothing results in "psychic entropy" which, Csikszentmihalyi reports, is highest when people report that "what they do is motivated by not

having anything else to do.”⁵¹ He sounds downright Daoist, and almost to be discussing *qi* when he claims that the most important life activity, for any person is to learn to “control psychic energy.”⁵²

It might seem that Csikszentmihalyi’s claim that the social life produces more happiness than the solitary life contrasts with Aristotle’s stress on contemplation as the best of human achievements and the Daoist stress on meditation as an important process for achieving an advanced energetic state. But Csikszentmihalyi argues that the *via activa* of politics and the *via passiva* of divine solitude actually coalesce in the most autotelic people, who enjoy both solitude and social stimulation⁵³. He points out that advanced level scientists and artists and other extremely creative people usually enjoy both the solitude of their work and thoughts, and the company and conversation of others. After all, Aristotle called his study of intellectual and moral virtue “politics,” and Daoists formed societies of Holy Immortals and initiated their members into social ranks in the societies.

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that Daoism promotes an embodied form of mysticism, which bears intriguing parallels to Aristotle’s conception of *eudaimonia*, Maslow’s conception of peak experience and Csikszentmihalyi’s conception of flow. Western psychology has just begun to study the promotion of health and happiness, as opposed to the identification and cure of disease and disability. I’m suggesting that Daoism has been studying this topic for ages. While the Daoist sages clearly took some wrong turns, such as the ingestion of mercury, in their explorations, they also learned a lot about the psychological, ethical, social and health habits that promote long term happiness and self-transcendence. Western distinctions between secular and religious practice or philosophical vs. religious texts have turned out to be false dichotomies when discussing these Daoist practices, in which religion, ethics and good health, in both the physical and mental senses are united. Perhaps the western distinctions also obscure our ability to see happiness clearly, as the expression of both good health and spiritual self development.

NOTES

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1. J.J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West* (London, UK: Routledge Press, 2000), p. 44.
 2. Russell Kirkland, *Taoism, the Enduring Tradition* (London, UK.: Routledge Press, 2004), p.3.
 3. Livia Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991).
 4. Jon Herman, *I and Tao* (Albany, NY SUNY Press, 1996), p.162.
 5. Ibid. p.133-135.
 6. Steven Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1983).
 7. *Xisheng jing* (*The Scripture of Western Ascension*,) is a Daoist scripture that dates to about the fifth century and there were at least nine editions of it during the Song Dynasty. It presents itself as instruction given to the guardian of the pass, Yin Xi, by Laozi, and parallels the *Dao de Jing* in structure. But it is of sufficiently late origin to incorporate some Buddhist influence, and it combines insights of the

elite intellectual Song version of Daoism, as it existed in Huizong's Dynastic court, with practices of southern Daoists.

8. Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy*, p. 96.
9. Ibid. p. 97.
10. Ibid, p.101.
11. Ibid. p. 101.
12. Ibid.
13. Kohn, *Taoist Mystical Philosophy*, p. 99.
14. Kirkland, *Taoism, the Enduring Tradition*, p. 192.
15. Ibid. p. 200.
16. Kirkland, p. 204 While the reference to "suchness" in the tradition shows Buddhist influence, Kirkland points out that Daoist conceptions of transcendence were never as other-worldly, as Buddhist conceptions. The Daoist goal of transcendence is a realized or perfected person who lives a very long life, understands "*life's deepest and most rarified realities*" and practices daily renewal of *qi*, far more often than it is a Buddhist escape into nothingness or avoidance of rebirth.
17. Kirkland, p. 201.
18. Ibid. p. 205.
19. Ibid. p. 84.
20. Kirkland, p. 59.
21. Herman, *I and Tao*, p. 48.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid. p.50.
24. Kohn, p. 151.
25. Ibid. p. 151-152.
26. Dan Lusthaus "Aporetic Ethics in the *Zhaungzi*", in *Hiding the World in the World*, ed. Scott Cook, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), p.194.
27. Kristofer Schipper, *The Daoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), p.136.
28. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, p. 137-138.
29. Ibid. p. 130.
30. Ibid. p. 3.
31. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Bk.1,ch.7, 1097b 1-8, in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, NY: Random House, 1947), p. 317.
32. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1098a, 13-14 p. 318.
33. Ibid., 1098a 16-17, p. 319.
34. Ibid. 198a 8-10, p. 318.
35. Ibid. 1099b, 30-35, p. 323.
36. Ibid. 1103b, 20-26, p. 332.
37. Ibid., Bk. 2 chap 4, 1105a, 20-27, p.336.
38. Ibid., Bk.10 chap. 7, 1177a,12-19, p 532.
39. S. Mark Cohen, Patricia Curd and C.D.C. Reeve, eds., *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1995), p.774.
40. *Nichomachean Ethics*, Bk 1 ch.13, 1102b, 22-35, p. 330.
41. Ibid. Bk. 2 ch.9., 1109a, 19-31, p. 346.
42. Cohen, Curd, and Reeve, *De Anima* , 414a 15-30, p. 644.
43. Ibid. 414a, 28.

44. Ibid. p. 783-784.
45. Abraham Maslow, "Psychological Data and Value Theory" in *New Knowledge of Human Values*, ed. A. Maslow, (Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Co., Gateway edition, 1970), p. 120.
46. Abraham Maslow, "Psychological Data and Value Theory" in *New Knowledge of Human Values*, p. 124.
47. Ibid. p. 133, 127.
48. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow, the Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life*, (New York, NY: Basic Books, Harper-Collins, 1997), p. 117.
49. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Finding Flow* p. 128-129.
50. Ibid. p. 30-32.
51. *Finding Flow*, p. 23.
52. Ibid, p. 127.
53. Ibid. p. 93-96.