

Why I Write

The first lines of the *Tao Te Ching* state very simply and clearly: written or spoken words do not, can not, express the true, full essence of the Tao. As a Taoist, this presents an interesting quandary when I feel moved, drawn, compelled to write. Why engage in any activity that does not follow the natural process described by Taoism?

I have bumped up against this question a number of times during 30 years of exploring a Taoist path. Lifestyle and daily decisions have gradually and noticeably shifted as there is less interest for anything not resonant with the natural way of things. Curiosity continually arises to inquire, explore and experiment with the simplicity of a genuine Taoist life. So, why do I write?

The question initially brings up many experiences of writing and different types of writers. Authors and professional writers frequently describe writing at least 1000 words each day. They build skill and hone their writing craft this way. Journalists typically have a set amount of words on an assigned subject with often short, intense, even daily deadlines. Others, whether professionals or not, identify their self as writer. They don't feel good about themselves or feel like they are not being themselves unless they are writing something, anything. Then there are careers or professions that require writing. College professors are one example, who are often greatly influenced by the phrase, publish or perish. Some people write because they need to, *really* need to process, understand, communicate some vital aspect of their lives: childhood, relationships, emotions.

These types of writer can all be satisfying for particular goals or reasons, and I admire the many resulting good works. At times I've adopted these various approaches to being a writer. They each produce different writing flavors, useful or appropriate in certain circumstances, but not the flavor I'm currently most drawn to, curious about. When I sit quietly, none of these approaches deeply answers the key question: why write?

No Writer

A few years ago I took an extended break from the question entirely by not writing or reading about Taoist meditation practices. One reason for this was a noticeable craving for the next new Taoist book or translation, with a strong undercurrent of lacking something, missing a key element. Maybe *the* answer is in the next title! Somewhere along the way, both writing and reading had become obstacles in the meditative process, not aids to deeper understanding and clarity.

That break was useful as it helped illuminate some deeply conditioned approaches to words and books. And, as all phases do, this one passed. I returned to Taoist books with much less charge about filling up some lacking space. Reading became more nourishing and supportive of my practice. The interest to write returned, too.

Reluctant Writer

The motivation to write can sometimes feel quite compulsive - I have to do this. Partially this may be explained by the intense influence and training of formal education in a culture heavily

dominated by written communication. Even stronger than this conditioning may be the internal urge. This may be described as guidance, intuition, a calling, our muse - whatever the inspiration is to put spiritual experience/understanding into words. Periodically my meditations were insistent promptings to write, sometimes feeling like a download of full-length book manuscripts. Other times they were simple outlines or short poems. Often these internal "voices" would not quiet until I put pen to paper. "I'll do it, I'll write, but I'm a *reluctant* writer." Reluctant because I'd rather not. I'd rather be sitting in spacious silence, exploring the path to emptiness. To quiet the consistent interruption of meditation, I wrote, but didn't enjoy it much. How could I? Surprisingly, this writing was not very clear or satisfying. It reads like whining. Hmm . . . Fortunately, this phase passed, too.

Still sitting with the question, an obvious resistance appears. Language is such a poor way to communicate. It is an unspoken assumption that modern language is highly evolved. I wonder. Certainly, looking back a few thousand years, language seems to have greatly progressed compared to knotted cords, hieroglyphics, grunts and pointing. That is only a one-directional perspective. Looking forward, maybe not even thousands of years, could reveal a process that makes current writing and speech seem, well . . . primitive. Imagine, communicating at levels not requiring words. And . . . words are what we have now. Better than before, not as evolved as that to come. Acceptance.

Sitting Writer

With more experience I clearly recognize the benefit of allowing written work to sit a while before returning to edit and fine tune. It's a nice practice in patience, loosening around the push to get it done, finished and turned in. There is less focus on outcome, results. It's definitely slower. The writing is noticeably better, clearer, like letting wine sit, improving with time. Except . . . with more observation of this sitting process, a smile erupts into laughter. I think of and describe it as if the words on paper are sitting, changing, aging like wine in a cask. Or, maybe some fairies or elves are making revisions overnight. The reality is me sitting. I'm clarifying, settling, improving with time. Hmm . . . this sounds suspiciously like the often described, yet usually elusive, *writing process*.

A writing piece is started, then put to the side. Return to morning practice, evening cushion. Sit. Let go. Empty the mind. And then spontaneously, mysteriously, seemingly appearing of itself, a shift: words arise, this change, that different angle. Fresh eyes to read and move this phrase just there. Ahhh . . . better. Let it/me sit a while.

What is the question?

Continued sitting and the question still calls clearly. Not pondering the question, turning it over and over in the brain, trying-working-efforting for an answer, solution, outcome. Quiet sitting. Empty sitting. Letting go sitting. Returning to ground, center, calm silence. Within this spaciousness, an old friend appears. Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi, with his clear illumination of the way, communicating beyond time and space.

All movement is from the mover.

Ahhh . . . a deep exhaled breath, only now aware of something held as it releases. Resonance ripples like a gong vibrating its single note message. Confusion disperses. Cloudy water changes as mud settles to the bottom. Clarity. All writing is from the writer. A subtle transformation in the questions occurs: *who* is the writer? Losing the 'I' emphasis opens another level. Again sitting. Still, spacious silence provides a reply. Awareness. Writing does not produce words, words naturally and spontaneously appear within silence.

Basho, 17th century Japanese poet, points in this direction:

*In writing, do not let a hair's breadth separate you from the subject.
Speak your mind directly;
go to it without wandering thoughts.*

When the subject is Tao, the mystery, the natural way of all 10,000 things, writing is about merging with Tao, no separation.

So, why write? I write because the words are there to be written. That's all. When the words appear, write. When there are no words, sit. It has little, if anything, to do with a me. I am not the writer. The words are written through me. In the process, I am written.

It's an exquisite, delicious contradiction: being the writer; being written. It's like being the singer and also being sung. Being the painter and being painted. Teacher and taught. Gardener and gardened. Parent/parented. Sculptor/sculpted. Cook/cooked. Oh, look at that! It's not only writer, writing, written. Anything can be a similar process, leading to the same place. Lover-loved. Holder-held. No separation.

Still, the Effort is Joy

Close cousins to Taoists, Chan (Chinese) and Zen (Japanese) Buddhists purposely use simple and complex contradictions (gong an/koans) to release constrained, confined, limited mind, body and spirit into a natural enlightened state.

Tao, the natural way of things, can't be fully and completely expressed in written or spoken words. And yet, there is a natural way of trying to do just that. Practice is not the expression, completion or outcome of writing, it is the process, listening to the call and answering. Sit, empty, listen, write, sit, empty, listen, don't write . . . it doesn't matter. It is the journey joyfully undertaken to explore the inherent contradiction so fully and deeply that it becomes the path itself, a gateway leading to no separation, merging with that inexpressible, non-writable, unspeakable experience called Tao.

Ah . . . yes! That's why I write.