

Does a Daoist genuinely value close relationships?

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the close interpersonal relationships of a Daoist by examining the Daoist characteristic of *fasting the heart-mind* and the practice of *wu-wei (non-action)*. Although the capability of a Daoist having close relationships has been previously established in other publications, it might be called into question whether Daoist detachment is sufficient to convey value and care for their loved ones. This paper delves deeper into this investigation by establishing how the fundamental practice of *wu-wei* not only promotes emotional resilience, but also presents an alternative way of genuinely valuing their close interpersonal relationships.

INTRODUCTION

The Zhuangzi is a text that provides insightful teachings that allows one to reorientate how they approach life so that they can be in tandem with the transformation of the Dao and lead a better life. To be in accordance with the Dao, one must adopt certain characteristics that cause them to transcend the human condition while still being grounded in the reality of their physical being. The human condition that is being referred to are the shared experiences, emotions, and challenges that are common to all human beings. Some may insist one of the key aspects that makes life worth living are the meaningful relationships we forge with one another. However, the Daoist characteristics that allow the transcendence of the human condition seemingly advocate a certain detachment from oneself and other individuals through the fasting of the heart-mind. The fasting of the heart-mind allows attaining the ideal character of *wu-wei* (non-action) -- the effortless way of properly responding. One might wonder how *wu-wei* would be a good trait in maintaining a close relationship. These teachings in the Zhuangzi have caused me to wonder if a Daoist genuinely values close relationships. I will explore this using Ziporyn's translation of the Zhuangzi.

In section I, I will begin by defining these Daoist characteristics by examining and defining fasting the heart-mind, clarifying what *wu-wei* (non-action) is and examining how attaining this ideal characteristic does not inhibit a Daoist from having close relationships. I

will be using Joanna Iwanowska's conclusion in her paper, *Can a Daoist Sage Have Close Relationships With Other Human Beings* to establish the foundation that Daoists are capable of having close relationships with others. More specifically, I will emphasize her analysis of the Daoist Sage versus the close-relationship competences to decipher how Daoist values align with this and how it would implore them to engage in these close relationship competences. In Section II, I will provide an objection using Chapter 18 of the Zhuangzi (where Zhuangzi's wife dies), which addresses a Daoist response to the death of individuals whom they share a close relationship with. This raises the critique that others who do not practice this philosophy would not be able to feel genuinely valued. In section III, I will use Wong's *The meaning of detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism* and Alexis Elder's *Zhuangzi on friendship and death* to show how Daoist detachment and acceptance of the inevitability of death is an alternative way of valuing people and relationships. To do this, I will also revisit Chapter 18 of the Zhuangzi. Through this examination, I argue that Daoists do indeed value genuine close relationships but in a non-conventional way.

I. *Fasting the Heart-mind* (心)

The character 心 (*Xīn*) is most commonly understood as heart when translated to English but, in the original Chinese concept, 心 (*Xīn*) represents not only the heart but also the mind, conjoining these essential bodily elements to become the heart-mind. In chapter 4 of the Zhuangzi, the art of emptying the heart-mind is referred to and explained as fasting the heart-mind:

Yan Hui said, "What is the fasting of the mind?"

Confucius said, "You have so single-mindedly focused your will that you have been constantly hearkening to it, not with your ears but with your mind, and not only with your mind but even with your vital energy (Qi). Instead let your hearkening stay positioned at the ears, your mind going no further than meshing there like a tally. The vital energy is then a vacuity, a waiting for the presence of whatever thing may come. The Course alone is the gathering of this vacuity. This vacuity is the fasting of the mind".....

Confucius said, “... Consider the gaps and cracks and hollows in things: it is in the empty chambers that light appears, and all auspicious things come to roost only where there is stillness. Whenever you fail to find such stillness for even a moment, you’re just ‘galloping around even while sitting.’ Instead, allow whatever is brought by the ears and eyes to enter into you without obstruction, kept always outside of the mind’s understanding....” (Ziporyn)

The concept of the heart-mind holds a great significance in the teachings of the Zhuangzi and emptying the heart-mind is the key to effectively follow the Dao. Emptying the heart-mind purifies our vital energy (*Qi*) and allows one to truly be able to examine the world around us as it is -- free from the influence of the false sense of self that is formed and fixed through our prejudgments. This false sense of self is known as our knowing consciousness (*Zhi*) and is the identity we have attached to ourselves which has been, and continues to be, influenced by our environment and other external factors. We use our knowing consciousness as a form of knowledge to distinguish and judge, restricting us to a specific course of action while also deciding what our moral decisions and desires should be. Without this cultivation of inner emptiness (*Wu*), one falls prey to having this knowing consciousness (*Zhi*) consume the heart-mind, blocking the vital energy (*Qi*) from flowing freely to nourish the heart-mind. By fasting the heart-mind, the empty heart-mind becomes the Daoist’s identity.

I. The importance of *wu-wei* (non-action)

Once the emptying of the heart-mind is achieved through the cultivation of inner emptiness (*Wu*), the ideal character of *wu-wei* which translates to non-action can be properly practiced. In other words, *wu-wei* is the manifestation of the fasting of the heart-mind and allows one to further act in accordance with the Dao. *Wu-wei* is the default response for a Daoist in any given situation and this would reveal to us their nature of morality and how this trait behaves in their relationships with others. Despite what many might think, *wu-wei* is a valuable practice in Daoist’s interactions with others and practicing this does not diminish the care and value Daoist have for others. In *Spontaneity and Nonspontaneity as an Ethical*

Concept in Early Daoism, Peter Gan references Slingerland and clarifies how *wu-wei* “refers to the state of mind of the agent in acting in such a way that is free, unbridled by internal conflict, spontaneous, and yet in harmony with the requirements of the moral normative or practical prudence of the external situation. *Wu-wei*, is in fact considered to be an enduring character rather than a fleeting state of mind. It is a spontaneous reaction like how the senses react to a pleasant or unpleasant stimulus. However, stresses Slingerland, it can also involve deliberate choices and the act of deliberation itself is spontaneous.” (Gan, 7). Evidently, *Wu-wei* does not mean simply not doing anything. Instead, it means striving to act spontaneously, responding to the moment as naturally as possible. If our heart-mind is empty, we are free from external influences and can purely exercise non-action in a way that provides a morally ideal response that supersedes the ego. In a passage in Chapter 18 of the outer chapters, the potential of *wu-wei* can be fully realised:

As for me personally, I regard *total lack, non-doing*, as the real happiness. And yet this is just what ordinary people regard as the greatest suffering of all. But I say, “When you reach happiness, ‘happiness’ is totally lacking; when you reach honor, ‘honor’ is totally lacking.”

What is right and what is wrong have never yet been stably determined in this world. But through this is so, *non-doing* can stably determinate what is right and what is wrong. The reaching of happiness, keeping the body alive — it is only non-doing that comes close to maintaining this. Let me try to explain what I mean. It is by non-doing that the sky is clear. It is by non-doing that the earth is tranquil. When these non-doings join together, there occur the transformations by which all things are generated. So oblivious, so unheeding, emerging from nowhere! All things busily working their works emerge from the root of this non-doing! Thus it is said, “Heaven and earth do nothing, and yet there is nothing they do not do.” But as for human beings, who among them can attain this non-doing?

A Daoist should be following and adapting to the transformations that occur in life and these transformations that occur also include interpersonal relationships. *Wu-wei* is a constant character trait that does not mean blindly going along with the other party but rather, it ensures that we are able to truly and authentically respond to the demands required of any situation; free from influence and desires, being able to adapt without overthinking.

I. Daoist Sage and close relationships

Now that I have cleared up what *wu-wei* or acting with an empty heart-mind truly entails and how it functions in Daoist's interpersonal relationships, I will hone in on *close* relationships. This distinction between casual relationships and *close* relationships is imperative as there is mutual effort that is required in close relationships that is not fundamental to casual relationships. I will begin by establishing the foundation that Daoist are indeed able to have close relationships with others which Joanna Iwanowska's concludes in her paper, *Can a Daoist Sage Have Close Relationships With Other Human Beings*. Then, I will be using her analysis of the Daoist Sage versus the close-relationship competences to examine how the previously mentioned Daoist values align with this and how they would engage in these close relationship competences. Iwanowska defines what a close relationship is by presenting the competences of a close relationship. These competences are: (1) Consensuality, (2) Reciprocity, (3) Non-instrumental treatment, (4) Trust, (5) Responsibility sharing and, (6) Persistence in time.

(1) Consensuality simply entails that in close relationships, both individuals need to be comfortable voicing and respecting one another's needs or boundaries in the dynamic of the relationship. For this dynamic to occur, (2) reciprocity amongst both parties needs to happen and this refers to an equal exchange in responsiveness. To engage in this level of mutual respect, the individual needs to be able to view the other as a full being and not an object that they can benefit from, this is known as (3) non-instrumental treatment. Regarding (4) trust, consensuality and reciprocity also plays a part in trust-giving and trust-receiving. What it means to trust in close relationships is to have confidence that the other will be able to accept and show up for you to the best of their abilities. This works in tandem with (5) responsibility sharing, where both parties make this shared trust a priority by honouring the truthfulness of each other's self-narrative by protecting it. As you can see, this level of responsibility sharing

cannot be taken lightly, and it is essential to note that all these competences require the (6) persistence of time. Iwanowska borrows this criterion of persistence from Aristotle which states that this shared responsibility of trust needs to stand the test of time for the close relationship to be maintained. So, for one to engage in close relationships, it is vital that all these competences are applied together as, without one or the other, one would not effectively have the ability to maintain a close relationship.

With the understanding of these close relationship competences, I will now use Iwanowska's analysis of the Daoist Sage versus the close-relationship competences to display how the Daoist values of fasting the heart-mind and *wu-wei* are in alignment with them and allows a careful engagement in these close relationships. In her analysis, she uses various excerpts from the Zhuangzi that showcase different Daoist Sage's engaging in these competences as evidence that Daoist values and ideals do not inhibit them. For consensuality and reciprocity, Iwanowska gives two examples from chapter 6 of the inner chapters of the Zhuangzi where the sages are in agreement and share a moment of willingness to forge a friendship amongst each other. The ideal trait of fasting the heart-mind and *wu-wei* comes into play as it is the "paradigm of proper responsiveness", allowing the sage to have a pure response when reciprocating close relationships instead of simply reacting to the action and misinterpreting the interaction. Iwanowska then provides another excerpt from chapter 4 of the inner chapters of the Zhuangzi that includes the story of Liezi and his teacher Master Huizi. After receiving a lesson on the art of emptying the heart-mind, Liezi goes home, and he not only cooks for his wife but feeds and treats the pigs as if they were human too. From this example, we can gather how an empty heart-mind that a sage achieves allows them to treat all things as equal without taking advantage of them, successfully employing non-instrumental treatment. Using the same excerpt but this time focusing on the interaction between Huizi guiding Liezi, we are able to discover how Daoist's can engage in trust and

responsibility-sharing. Both Huizi and Liezi trusted each other enough to debate personal matters and Liezi was receptive to Huizi's criticisms, showing that he not only "knows how to be inter-responsible for another person's narrative truth and moral agency, but also in the sense that he has the ability to share the responsibility for his own narrative truth and moral agency with another person." (Iwanowska, 39). The last competence is persistence in time, and this is the only competence that Iwanowska lacks textual evidence and is unsure if a Daoist can properly carry out. A Daoist has an empty heart-mind, and this ensures that they do not have a fixed identity. This would mean that they should always act in response to their surroundings and therefore cannot ensure consistency of the competences. However, as long as the other individual continues to display these close relationship competences, a Daoist should also respond and display them too. An empty heart-mind does not mean a Daoist will never be able to persist in displaying these competences but instead ensures that they do not continue believing and carrying out these competences when the other close individual does not want to continue the relationship.

Through these six close relationship competences, I have established the foundation that Daoist values do in fact align with having close relationships, and having an empty heart-mind that practices *wu-wei* allows them to properly respond in their close relationships.

II.

In Section II, I will provide an objection that addresses how a Daoist responds to the death of people they share a close relationship with, raising the critique that others who do not practice this philosophy and who are engaged in a close relationship with a Daoist would not feel valued and might not consider it genuine. I will be using the well-known passage in Chapter 18 of the Zhuangzi that details the death of Zhuangzi's wife to provide an interpretation that one who is unfamiliar with the Zhuangzi might have at first glance.

In Chapter 18 of the Zhuangzi, *Reaching Utmost Happiness*, the author Zhi le includes a passage that details the death of Zhuangzi's wife. In this account, it displays Zhuangzi's views on death and relationships through his lack of reaction to this event:

When Zhuangzi's wife died, Huizi went to offer his condolences. He found Zhuangzi squatting on the floor singing, accompanying himself by pounding on an over-turned washtub held between his splayed legs.

Huizi said, "You live with someone, raise children with her, grow old with her- not crying over her death is enough already, isn't it? But to go so far as to pound on a washtub and sing, isn't that going too far?"

Zhuangzi said, "No, it's not. When this one first died, how could I not feel grief just like anyone else? But then I considered closely how it had all begun: previously, before she was born, there was no life there. Not only no life: no physical form. Not only no physical form: not even energy. *Then in the course of some heedless mingling mishmash a change occurred and there was energy, and then this energy changed and there was a physical form, and then this form changed and there was life.* Now there has been another change and she is dead. This is how she participates in the making of the spring and the autumn, of the winter and the summer. For the moment a human life stiffened here, slumbering in this enormous house. And yet there I was getting all weepy, even going on to wail over her. Even to myself I looked like someone without any understanding of fate. So, I stopped." (Ziporyn)

How would you feel if someone close to you compared your existence and death to a transformation of energy? Like Huizi's reaction, this passage and Zhuangzi's aloof attitude might be perceived to a non-Daoist as a devaluation of his beloved wife's death and would be a blatant display of his lack of care. The conventional practice of grieving and mourning asserts that to truly convey value and care for our loved one, we need to go through the five stages of grief which are -- denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This suggests that we should be mourning our loved ones for a prolonged period of time. In Christine M. Koggel's *Remembering and Loving in Relationships Involving Dying, Death, and Grief*, she gives a short account on relational nature of grief and how "It happens in relationships through which we try to understand what matters to those we love and lose. To know them in ways that respect, honor, and celebrate who they are is to remember and love them when they are dying and then long after. The "long after" also places dying, death, and

grief in networks of relationships in which ones that end still have us remember and re-remember with others in processes that reshape existing relationships and shape new ones.” (Koggel, 1). Evidently, this conventional practice of grieving requires us to maintain a certain level of attachment to our lost loved one and this is demonstrated through the display of emotions which convey the care and value we have for them.

Unsurprisingly, a non-Daoist would expect these intense emotions of grieving to be reciprocated if the other party genuinely cared. However, this conventional practice of grieving is a deliberate act and directly opposes the previously mentioned Daoist practice of *wu-wei*. So, a Daoist would be unable to reciprocate these intense emotions. As we know, this would be in tension with the second close relationship competence- reciprocity- and would mean the termination of their close relationship. One might conclude that for this reason, an adequate genuine reciprocation of value and care might limit a Daoist to only having genuine close relationships with another Daoist. This way, both parties share a prior understanding that intense emotions towards and after death is not required to show one another they care.

III.

In this section, I would like to clarify how Daoist detachment through the acceptance of transformation and the inevitability of death is an alternative way of valuing the close relationship. Through the re-examination of chapter 18 using Wong’s, *The meaning of detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism*, I will evaluate Daoist detachment but avoid adopting Wong’s dual perspective. Instead, I will use Alexis Elder’s, more personal and human single perspective in *Zhuangzi on friendship and death* to reply to the misconception that for a Daoist to not experience prolonged grief in loss, they must have not valued the person to begin with.

David B. Wong's *The meaning of detachment in Daoism, Buddhism, and Stoicism* argues that Daoist detachment is not only in alignment with strong and deep attachments but equips a Daoist with a level of emotional resilience when it comes to death. Daoist detachment can only be possible through the practice of *wu-wei* and addresses:

“The inevitability of certain human feelings and attachments, and the reference to being without joy or sorrow implies that a kind of contentedness can arise from yielding to the dictates of these feelings and attachments rather than fretting (or exulting) over the possible consequences of acting on them.” (Wong, 214).

It is commonly misthought that Daoist detachment is a form of disengagement, but with our thorough understanding of *wu-wei*, we are able to recognize that non-action is still a form of engagement. Daoists are able to maintain a level of contentedness through asserting themselves over their inevitable feelings and attachments that would make them overly concerned with and regretful of outcomes that are beyond them. This way of detachment provides the most promising suggestions as to how one can adequately bond with others yet strengthen one's resilience in a genuinely human life.

Elder's *Zhuangzi on friendship and death*, makes a unique interpretation in her single perspective view that “Daoists value people as creatures who inevitably “transform” in death, rather than attaching to only certain qualities and stages of a person and pretending that these qualities exhaust the individual. The Daoist seems open to the possibility that objects may undergo great change, including dispersal of their parts, without ceasing to exist.” (Elder, 577). Daoists do not view death as a loss, valuing your loved ones means accepting their need for change and transformation regardless of whether your interaction between them is terminated. The beginning and end of a life are natural events that occur in life and are essential to being a human. A Daoist's understanding about how to care for the ones they love

is through the complete and selfless acceptance of valuing the other wholly; accepting them through the stages of change in their state of being, without ever clinging onto parts that cease to remain. They do still grieve the other, but not in a way our conventional practice of grieving suggests.

Re-examining Chapter 18, it becomes evident that Zhuangzi's lack of reaction is a kind of detachment that still conveys care and value but also endows him with emotional resilience when faced with the death of his wife. Zhuangzi does not deny that he shed a tear and admits he did feel grief initially. However, upon reflection he is well-aware of the loss he is faced with is not actually a loss but a transformation and surrenders himself to the inevitability of death that lies in all our fates. Aligned with the transformations of the Dao, he is able to reconcile his grief quickly. Daoists do not question the initial value of an object and instead reason how this value should be extended as time goes on and changes occur. Although practicing this same philosophy would help the other understand the Daoist more thoroughly, this is proof that Daoists do genuinely value close relationships but in a non-conventional way.

CONCLUSION

In the course of this paper, I began by showing the importance of emptying the heart-mind for a Daoist's identity and how achieving this state of being allows for the key characteristic of *wu-wei* to be practiced. To understand what the distinctive features of a close relationship are, I engaged with Joanna Iwanowska's six close-relationship competences. After examining these six close relationship competences with Daoist values, I established the salient foundation that these Daoist values do not inhibit them from having close relationships with others and in fact endows them with a responsiveness that lets them properly engage in their close relationships. In the next section, I touch upon the critique that those who are unfamiliar with Daoism would find it hard to appreciate the blunt but honest

sentiment Daoist have on death. Along with this, I present chapter 18 of the Zhuangzi which is a valuable excerpt that outrightly shows us a Daoist response to death of a loved one. Using our conventional practices of grief and mourning, I raise the objection that a non-Daoist would expect these stages of grief to be reciprocated and would not consider the Daoist response to be a genuine reflection of having valued someone. Although I agree that a Daoist might be better suited in maintaining a close-relationship with another Daoist, I contend that this still means that they can genuinely value close-relationships with another but, they do so in a non-conventional fashion where grief is not prolonged. I assert that Daoist detachment in accepting the inevitability of transformation equips them with emotional resilience that reconciles their grief. Using Alexis Elder's single perspective view, I provide an understanding of why this detachment still signifies care and value towards the other being. With this research, I feel confident in my reasoning that Daoist do genuinely value close relationships.

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