

Eastern Insights: Cultivating Our Humanity in Nature's Starlit Garden
A talk by Binyamin Biber, Humanist Chaplain at American University
given at the Sunday Assembly DC on 9/13/2015 - SA DC's 1st birthday*

Thank you all for coming this morning!
Glad to see some familiar faces, & meet many of you who I don't know.

Thank you also to Andrew & the rest of the Sunday Assembly DC team for organizing a whole year's worth of community gatherings, & for inviting me to come back a year after I helped you launch your group! Congrats to you all on reaching the milestone of your first birthday!

My talk today is called "Eastern Insights: Cultivating Our Humanity in Nature's Starlit Garden," In it I'll be sharing some highlights of my multicultural research on humanism & naturalism, which most people conceive as Western ideals, yet these concepts have parallel expressions in Eastern cultures, which is what I'll focus on to balance our Western sense of these.

Economic & cultural globalization is connecting people around the world in various ways - some positive, some negative - & those of us who are nontheists are connecting with people & ideas from many places in ways that are mutually beneficial, & that are helping us cooperate in developing & advocating for secular democratic progress. The majority of the world's population is in the Eastern hemisphere, & the fastest economic growth for the last several decades has been there too. Dire poverty, preventable health problems, & much suffering there have been reduced by various modern development & educational programs, yet we have so much more to do, of course. By exploring, understanding, & applying some of the key insights of the East, I hope that we Western nontheists will be enriched by such learning & become better partners in working for the improvement of the world, the lives of all who now share & steward it, & the lives of future generations of earthlings. So while we will this morning look back into the Eastern heritage of humanity, I trust that we will all be considering how these lessons may be applied to our present, & to the horizons of the world to come that we may bring forth.

*updated for print publication 2019

As modern progressives we can appreciate the usefulness of better understanding the various concepts & traditions of the East to build bridges to the many nontheists & progressives of Asian heritage who are who actively interact with or draw upon these ideas & practices. At the same time, we can identify the problems & challenges in such teachings & customs that may be engaged through Humanistic approaches.

The positive psychologists - Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman (2005) - pioneered an effort to identify a set of virtues or character strengths that promote human fulfillment & wellbeing, & are common to many cultures. They surveyed both Eastern & Western textual traditions, catalogued lists of virtue concepts, & identified six "core virtues" - five of which are common to major Eastern & Western traditions: humanity, justice, wisdom, temperance, & transcendence - with courage being found in some, but not all. Part of what I'll do this morning is share with you key points of their findings on the Eastern traditions.

Buddhism

Buddhism encompasses many diverse traditions - from the ancient to the contemporary, from religious & mystical to philosophical & practical. The focus of all Buddhist teachings is the reduction, relief, & prevention of avoidable suffering. The term "buddha" means "awakened being" & refers to one awakened to the vastness, causes, & cures of suffering. The historical person often referred to as "*the Buddha*" or the 1st Buddha was called Siddhartha Gautama in Sanskrit, though his name is different in the Pali language, in which the earliest Buddhist texts were written, & a few passages of which I'll share shortly. A key ideal of the later Mahayana movement is the "bodhisattva" - one awake who, motivated by compassion, helps others to awaken, & to reduce & end suffering, & to gain liberation. Such moral concern & action extends to all living beings. Buddhist teachings on how to live rightly are called the "dharma" & are regarded as a "middle way" between ascetic self-denial & problematic self-indulgence.

Buddhists practice a variety of meditation & mindfulness exercises, which a growing body of research shows to relieve stress, anxiety, depression, & pain, & to promote health. Many secular & scientific approaches have been developed for people to practice meditation & mindfulness in ways that are independent of religious content.

There is a Humanistic Buddhism movement, though much of Buddhist philosophy & practice across the spectrum of subgroups is nontheistic, humanistic & naturalistic. Still, Buddhist tradition includes references to gods & spirits & supernatural elements drawn from earlier Hindu & other cultural influences. Of course, these are found in the Western sources of humanism & naturalism too, such as Epicurus & Lucretius, & must not obscure the overall evolutionary directions or relevance of Buddhism.

The Dalai Lama, the world's best known Buddhist, raised eyebrows in 2012 when he posted the following on Facebook: "All the world's major religions, with their emphasis on love, compassion, patience, tolerance, and forgiveness can and do promote inner values. But the reality of the world today is that grounding ethics in religion is no longer adequate. This is why I am increasingly convinced that the time has come to find a way of thinking about spirituality and ethics beyond religion altogether."

(PRI 9/13/2012 - <https://www.pri.org/stories/2012-09-13/dalai-lama-tells-internet-religion-no-longer-adequate>)

Here are key statements attributed to the Buddha from the earliest texts.

"...mindfulness is to be practiced with the thought,
'When watching after yourself, you watch after others.
When watching after others, you watch after yourself.' "

("Sedaka Sutta: At Sedaka" (SN 47.19), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn47/sn47.019.than.html>.)

"...cultivate a boundless love towards all beings.
... radiate boundless love towards the entire world -
above, below, & across - unhindered, without ill will, without enmity.
... develop this mindfulness." (7-9)

("Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Discourse on Loving-kindness" (Sn 1.8), translated from the Pali by Piyadassi Thera. From *The Book of Protection*, translated by Piyadassi Thera (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1999) Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 29 August 2012, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.08.piya.html>.)

"Overcome anger with non-anger; overcome wrongs with goodness;
overcome stinginess with generosity; overcome dishonesty with truth.
Speak the truth; yield not to anger;
when asked, give, even if you only have a little."

(Dhammapada 17.223-224, based on translation from the Pali by Acharya Buddhārakkhita. From *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985. Online: <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.17.budd.html>.)

"Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise,
the wise one, gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good." (121)
"...find pleasure therein, for blissful is the accumulation of good." (118)

("Papavagga: Evil" (Dhp IX), translated from the Pali by Acharya Buddhārakkhita. From *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 1985. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/dhp/dhp.09.budd.html>.)

"Ardently do today what must be done.
Who knows? Tomorrow, death may come."

("Bhaddekaratta Sutta: An Auspicious Day" (MN 131), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), 30 November 2013, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.131.than.html>.)

The Buddha Gautama's final words described a "path" (in Pali: magge)
with a "fixed destiny of final awakening" (niyato sambodhiparāyano)
toward which all must "strive with diligence" (appamādena sampādethā).

(From *The Discourse about the Great Emancipation / Mahāparinibbānasuttam*, The Sixth Chapter for Recitation / Chaṭṭhabhāṇavāraṃ, 40: The Last Instructions of the Realised One / Tathāgatassa Pacchimā Anusāsanā; see last 3rd sentences. <https://www.ancient-buddhist-texts.net/Texts-and-Translations/Mahaparinibbanasuttam/40-Last-Instructions.htm>.)

"The Buddhas [- the awakened ones] came from this world
and they could not become the Buddhas in some heaven."

(from *Ekottara Agama / Numbered Discourses*, cited in Long, 2000; multiple translations from Chinese online, no citation found)

These quotes highlight the key Buddhist virtues identified by the positive psychologists: humanity, justice, wisdom, temperance, & transcendence, though courage is a focus of some later Buddhist teachers & communities, such as those who confronted oppressive rulers & empires.

Confucianism

Confucianism is a key element in East Asian cultures, affecting the ideals of proper ethical behavior in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Singapore, & elsewhere. At its core, Confucianism is a wisdom tradition that values the moral & intellectual cultivation of each person through education & the development of respectful & mutually beneficial relationships with others in the context of family, community, & an idealized social & political order. It emerged in the 6th century BCE in a context of war, barbarism, magical beliefs, & disorder; thus it came to over-value harmony, manners, ceremony, & order, mostly conceived of as hierarchy. Even so, it remains a key influence in East Asian societies, with a diverse array of expressions - from the backward-looking & ritualistic, to the modern & humanistic, the latter being of interest to us.

The core value of Confucianism is *ren* 仁 which translates as compassion, benevolence, humanity, humaneness, or goodwill. I'll now share with you a few passages from the collected sayings or *Analects* of Confucius, dealing with this & other core Confucian values. (*Ren* is also sometimes rendered into English as *jen*, but still pronounced *ren*; see Encyclopedia Britannica on *ren*: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ren>.)

"The person of compassion (*ren*) is one who, wanting to stand up & act rightly, helps others to do so, & wanting to cultivate an understanding of the Way of Compassion (*rendao*), helps others to do so - thus exemplifying [honesty, empathy, & care-giving], & showing the Way of Compassion."
(Confucius / K'ung Fu-Tzu (K'ung the Teacher) in *Analects* / Lun Yu 6:30. This & other translations by Binyamin Biber.)

"To learn much & in accord with one's aspirations, to ask in order to understand, & to think for oneself about how to apply what one learns - to do thus one may proceed along the Way of Compassion."
(19.6 blending Waley & Oxford translations)

"The [cultivated person / gentleman] can see a question from all sides without bias. The [uncultivated person / small man] is biased & can see a question from only one side." (2.14 blending Waley & Oxford translations)

"The Teacher would not discourse on mystery... & deity." 7.20

"The Teacher instructed on four matters: human cultivation, moral conduct, whole-hearted sincerity, & truthfulness." 7.24

[the latter two virtues being core elements of the Way of Compassion].

"When... asked how to serve the [ancestors] spirits & gods, the Teacher said:

'You cannot yet serve other human beings. How can you serve the spirits?'
[When asked]... 'what death is?' the Teacher said:
'You do not yet understand life. How can you understand death?' "

These quotes show a this-worldly focus on cultivating oneself, learning, helping others, acting properly with concern for others, & honesty. Confucianism emphasizes most the virtues of humanity, justice, wisdom, & temperance being studied by the positive psychologists I mentioned, while only poetically implying transcendence in referring to "Heaven" as an abstract & perhaps imaginary ideal, & not mentioning courage at all.

Confucian virtue ethics are presently being studied by a growing # of neuro-science-oriented philosophers & psychologists as they search for an evidence-based, teachable model of morality. Research has shown that our actions & decisions are more often regulated by "hot" - emotional, automatic, "know-how" - systems rather than by "cool" - rational, conscious, "know-that" - systems, showing that "willpower" is a key teachable & consciously adjustable variable, enabling some people to deal with adverse situations better than others.

(Slingerland, 2011; Walter Mischel & his "marshmallow test" in *Personality & Assessment*, 1968, & *The Marshmallow Test*, 2015)

Confucianism identifies the organ of the "heart"/ *xin* 心 as the place where we feel moral & other emotions, where we understand distinctions & language, where we reason, make moral decisions, exercise free will, & act with honesty. Yet the ideal framework in which each human heart may best feel & act is a set of cultivated character dispositions, habits, & social relationships (Slingerland, 2011) - a garden for our human flourishing. The training of medical & military people to stay calm in the face of extreme stress is an example of the kind of training of our emotional & physical responses that can allow us to think clearly & do the right thing under very difficult circumstances (Jonathan Cohen, 2004). Similar training is being developed to reduce corruption, prejudice, phobias, & other conscious & unconscious emotional & mental patterns (Nancy Snow, *Virtue as Social Intelligence*, 2009). Such training is a reasoned response to the limits of our normal state of consciousness and reasoning. Thus it is a very interesting ancient adaptation to our own evolutionary limitations & thresholds of possibility.

Taoism

Taoism is a smaller & mystical tradition of East Asia, originating in China, possibly in reaction to Confucian ritualism & formality. By contrast, Taoism emphasizes & idealizes naturalness or spontaneity (*ziran / tzu-jan*), & has inspired revolutionary, utopian, & anti-authoritarian movements, such as the ancient T'ai-ping Tao & the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, known for their "eat, drink, & be merry" ways (Roberts 2004; Bowker, 2000, LeGuin, 1998). Taoism also values balance & integration - depicted in the *yin-yang* sign (*taijitu*), symbolizing apparently contrary elements as actually complementary, interconnected, & interdependent in the natural world. Taoism developed both philosophical & religious forms which blended with one another, & with Buddhism, Confucianism, & other traditions.

Taoists idealize natural, uncontrived, uncontrolled, or effortless action (*wei wu-wei*), which can be understood as related to the positive psychology concept of "flow," that can result when an activity presents a challenge just at or beyond the skill set limit of the person engaged in it, so that one becomes absorbed in the activity, lose one's self-awareness, stretch one's abilities to meet the challenge, transcends one's existing self-image, & grows in the process (Barrett, 2011). Many experience such "flow" in athletics & the arts - as in "the dancer becomes the dance." Others experience flow in their jobs, in cooking, parenting, gardening, & such. Ongoing research is exploring how flow relates to health & various spiritual practices & concepts, including *wei wu wei*.

Health, wellbeing, & long life are key concerns of Taoism, & its religious magical currents aim for immortality, parallel to other traditions that idealize an eternal afterlife. To achieve long life, Taoists have developed various disciplines of exercise, meditation, & vegetarian or vegan diet - all of which have been studied & taught for their health benefits, apart from any ideal of immortality.

I'll share with you now a few illustrative passages from the *Tao Te Ching*, Taoism's central text, attributed to Li Er - better known as Lao Tzu, an honorary title meaning "Venerable Teacher."

These excerpts are drawn from several different translations.

"A person of the highest benevolence acts, but from no ulterior motive."

Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, 38.82 (DC Lau translation, made gender-neutral by B Biber)

"Three treasures I uphold & cherish: compassion, simplicity, & modesty.
... Compassion leads to courage. ...

Compassion: attack with it & win; defend with it & stand firm."

(67.164 - translation by B Biber based on Balfour 1884, p 41, + Addiss & Lombardo.)

"People who are good I treat well.

People who are not good I also treat well. [The virtue is] goodness.

Trustworthy people I trust. Untrustworthy people I also trust.

[The virtue is] trust."

(49 Addiss & Lombardo - Biber replaced "Te as" with "The virtue is")

"Knowing others is intelligent.

Knowing yourself is enlightened.

Conquering others takes force.

Conquering yourself is true strength.

Knowing what is enough is wealth.

Forging ahead shows inner resolve.

Hold your ground & you will last long. ... " (33 Addiss & Lombardo)

"To use words but [sparingly] is to be natural. ...

If even heaven & earth cannot go on forever, much less can [humanity].

That is why one follows the Way [- the Tao]." (23.51 Lau w/ bracketed edits by B Biber)

These quotes idealize acting naturally, honestly, & kindly, as well as valuing simplicity & modesty.

Of the virtues being studied by the positive psychologists I mentioned, Taoism emphasizes most humanity, justice, wisdom, & temperance, offering a few insights on courage

& implying transcendence in the abstract Tao, a profound expression of our sense of the natural limits of our perceptions & understandings, a sense which may inspire modesty, wonder, & explorations.

I could & would go on much longer,
but have, alas, nearly used up the time I agreed to speak.

So let me just touch briefly upon another important tradition of India, Jainism, which while now practiced by a rather small number of people, has had a profound effect on the world through a key value & practice, which in English we call non-violence, & in Sanskrit *ahimsa*.

The Jain tradition is nontheistic, humanistic, & largely naturalistic, & *ahimsa* is the core of its ethics, applying to interpersonal & intergroup relationships, as well as to humans in relation to other animals & the environment, which is regarded, correctly, as being full of living beings. Given the dangerous levels of violence between people - whether motivated by interpersonal, religious, tribal, or nationalist motives - the value of nonviolence / *ahimsa* has spread far beyond Jainism, thanks largely to the successful work of Gandhi & Martin Luther King in confronting the violence of empire, caste, classism, racism, & war with nonviolence & with what the Jains & Gandhi call *satyagraha* or in English "truth force" or "holding onto truth."

As people around the world confront violent extremists, as well as powerful corporations & governments protected by their hired police & armies, we must consider that nonviolence, the truth, & just actions to relieve & prevent violence & suffering will surely be more effective in undermining any claims of moral standing by the violent, than any mounting of greater forces of violence ever can be.

I'll conclude by saying that I personally have drawn great inspiration & insight through exploring such Eastern forms of humanism & naturalism, & I hope to share more with you as I continue the research & writing of my forthcoming book on such global approaches to these subjects.

Thanks again for the invitation to join you all in celebrating this morning the first birthday of Sunday Assembly DC! *Mazzal tov!*

References

Barrett, Nathaniel (2011). *Wuwei and Flow: Comparative Reflections on Spirituality, Transcendence, and Skill in the Zhuangzi*. *Philosophy East and West* 61(4), 679-706. University of Hawaii Press. Retrieved 9/12/2015, from Project MUSE database.

Le Guin, Ursula K. & Lao Tzu (1998). *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching : A Book About the Way and the Power of the Way*. Shambhala.

Long, Darui (2000). "Humanistic Buddhism: From Venerable Tai Xu to Grand Master Hsing Yun" *Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism*. Online for free at:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265006143_Humanistic_Buddhism_From_Venerable_Tai_Xu_to_Grand_Master_Hsing_Yun_1

Roberts, Moss - translator, Laozi - author (2004). *Dao De Jing: The Book of the Way*. University of California Press.

Stephon, Matt (1998/2016). "Ren," *Encyclopedia Britannica* - <https://www.britannica.com/topic/ren>