

# The Tao of Advising:



## Ancient Principles for Today's Professionals

By Chris George, Harper College (IL)

*"A tree that reaches past your embrace grows from one small seed.  
A structure over nine stories high begins with a handful of earth.  
The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step"*

*~ Lao-tzur (Dreher, 2000, p. 3)*

**M**ost of us have experienced times of being "in the flow," meaning everything at the moment was going according to our plans. For example, your programming board just completed a successful event. The board worked together well as team, the media gave positive reviews, the administration praised you and the board, and the campus was still buzzing weeks after the event.

There are also opposite feelings that occur: the programming board just lost most of its executive board to graduation, you are overwhelmed with countless projects on your desk, you are losing two highly effective graduate assistants, and you were just informed that because enrollment is down, the programming board budget is being significantly reduced.

These are reflections of the cycles of nature. As advisors we need to be aware of cycles of change and flow, like water moves in a stream. This is an example of following the way of the Tao, a path to both personal and professional development. When someone follows the Tao, they experience a sense of inner peace and balance, which is missing in much of our work as advisors and individuals in general.

## Principles of Tao Leadership

I would like to introduce you to four principles of Tao Leadership that have significant application to the field of student activities and the work you do as an advisor. As advisors, in order to be highly effective with our students and the groups we advise, it is crucial that we balance the yin (our contemplative side) of inner leadership and the yang (our active side) of leadership in action. In this article, I'd like to share with you principles of the Tao that have the greatest application to our work with student leaders. In the March 2007 issue of *Campus Activities Programming*, I will follow-up with an article on how Tao principles can help you as an advisor balance your work and personal priorities, manage stress and use "the path of least resistance," meaning to work without wasting a lot of energy—in other words, by working efficiently and in harmony with nature.

The Tao (pronounced "dao") means how: how things happen and how they work. It is a universal principle that underlies everything from the creation of galaxies to the interaction of human beings. To know the Tao, we need to be aware of what is happening around us and have an open mind. Just as important, we must set aside our current paradigm (our way of seeing the world). Just simply be aware of Tao and you will begin the journey. Follow the natural laws of nature and learn to translate those laws to your life and work in student activities.

### Four Principles

#### ● Cooperation

The first principle of Tao Leadership is **cooperation**—with your students and the campus community. The Tao gives us a vision of oneness, interconnectedness, helping us recognize how our energies flow together in all that we do. One strategy to build cooperation is to cultivate the spirit of teamwork. We have probably all had our full share of participating in teambuilding activities as students or facilitating them as advisors. However, many times the activity itself becomes the focal point and the true talents and strengths of the people involved are underutilized. Many students end up in roles and performing tasks that do not fit their strengths. Focus on those special talents and strengths that each of your students possess and then take time with your group on these questions:

- Who's good at initiating projects?
- Who's good in the middle of projects?
- Who are the idea people?
- Who's good with details?
- Who's good at solving problems?
- Who can you count on to finish the job?

Advisors should assist students in discovering their true talents and develop those talents into their strengths. Our society focuses very much on a person's weaknesses and tells us we should focus our energies on correcting them. However, our strengths hold the key to being a successful person in whichever career we choose. If we can teach our programming boards to focus on each member's strengths, the organization will set course for a sea of success that has never been seen before. Lastly, the gift of an advisor and

teacher is creating an awareness of greatness in others. To have this happen, we must strive for cooperation.

#### ● Yin and Yang

*"Be still like a great mountain and flow like a great river."*

~Lao Tzu ([spaceandmotion.com](http://spaceandmotion.com))

Any apparent opposite is part of a larger whole. We are speaking, of course, of the well-known model of **yin and yang** from Taoist philosophy. Most of you have heard of it before or have seen its symbol (see Page 18) in a variety of places. The outer circle represents "everything" while the black (yin) shape represents qualities of being contemplative, listening and adapting to change, while the white (yang) shape represents qualities of being active, speaking and creating change.

Looking at the symbol, it is easy to see that the shapes are formed to show the continual movement of these two energies, which causes everything to happen. Neither shape is completely black or white, just as things in life are not completely black or white, and they cannot exist without each other. It is important that we maintain a balance of yin and yang and be fully aware when we are in excess or deficient in either of the polarities.

So how does this model translate to our work in student activities and advising students? It takes time and effort up front, but if you can learn how to use this model in your work as an advisor, you will begin to feel a sense of balance. Spend time yourself on this model. After you are experiencing greater balance in your life, teach and role model it to the students in your organization. Teach them to balance their active and contemplative sides, when to speak and when to listen, and when to think and when to act.

For instance, many students use their Yang side but few take the time to reflect on their experiences as leaders. By being balanced, we can teach our students to slow down and make wiser choices regarding which programs to book, which careers to choose, which friends to spend time with, and so forth. The objective is not to eliminate the highs and lows from our lives, because this is impossible. However, we can all center our emotions to flow in gentle waves so that we eliminate high peaks and deep chasms and learn to flow with them. Ask yourself and your students the following questions:

- Where in your work is the point of excess? The active yang? What do you find yourself doing too much of?
- Where is the point of deficiency? The passive yin? Where do you feel diminished?
- What steps can you take to bring greater balance in your work?

I know from personal experience my excess yang comes when my work requires me to be in excessive social situations, i.e. Campus Activities Board events and meetings, campus-wide meetings and staff meetings. I always know when I need a period of quiet time alone. If you have the same kind of experience, this does not mean you just walk out of a meeting and go to your office and close the door. However, you do need to allow regular time for silent reflection. Turn inward and digest what has happened.

When group members have time to reflect, they can see

more clearly what is essential in themselves and others. For some, this could also mean a time to meditate or journal, but it is important to at least take a break after much yang time to bring the self back into balance. When you restore your balance, you will also be more centered, more effective in your work and happier, overall.

### ● **Zanshin**

*“We are born soft and supple; at death we are stiff and hard. Plants are born tender and pliant; dead they are brittle and dry. The hard and stiff will be broken. The soft and supple will prevail.”*

~Lao Tzu (Mitchell, p. 76)

In the martial art Aikido, **zanshin** is the ability to extend our energy outward, to blend with the energies around us to create harmony. Everything in us and around us is changing, including our programming boards. This principle of Tao leadership teaches us to be flexible and flow like water. We can look at nature for lessons on this principle. The wonderful and multi-useful bamboo plant is one of the most flexible plants on the planet. It is able to bend, blend with circumstances, adjust to change and overcome adversity. For example, some of the many uses of bamboo include shelters, bridges, fences, musical instruments, construction, furniture and boats.

The student leader must also be like bamboo. The rigid president of the programming board may not be able to manage the constant change of members who bring new ideas and personalities to the organization or those times of conflict that will occur. If the president can be flexible and flow with change, they will grow and become a better leader, more able to direct the group.

The Tao leader also works in different situations without complaining and also speaks simply and honestly. If the Tao leader can flow with zanshin, they will become part of the process. The leader should allow the group to progress naturally. If the group is pushed by the leader's emotions or a hidden agenda is involved, the overall health of the entire group will be harmed.

### ● **Timing**

The last Tao Leadership principle is **timing**. We need to teach our students and ourselves that everything moves in cycles. Student leaders should be able to blend with these cycles in their work with other students and the campus community. It is a skill to know the right time to speak, to be silent, when to act and when to do nothing. The four seasons, spring, summer, fall and winter, or beginning, middle, end and reflection, occur on many various levels in our lives, including our work with programming boards. The seasons repeat themselves with every school year, event or project.

Let's take a look at the seasons and how using their wisdom can be utilized in our work with a programming board. For each season, I provide a lesson(s), questions and challenges. I am using each season analogously. For example, when I say summer is the time to cultivate and work on planning your events, I don't mean this is the actual season it is done; rather, I am drawing upon the principle characteristics of the seasons.

## **SPRING: A Time of New Beginnings**

When your programming board is planning what events to book for the next semester, it is important to teach the lesson of *discernment* and pose the following questions:

- Does this event meet the needs of our students and campus community?
- Does it align with our mission and the goals we set at the beginning of the year?

It is extremely important to use the mission, values and goals of the board as the guide to making decisions that will affect the organization. If an idea for an event does not align, then you must challenge the board to seriously consider the impact it will have on the organization and campus.

The other important lesson associated with spring is *opportunity*.

- Is this the right time to book this particular event? Start a particular project?
- What other events are booked? What else is occurring on campus? In the community? For example, do we want to have two comedians in one semester?

Be cognizant of what is occurring in the news that also might affect a particular program.

## **SUMMER: A Time to Cultivate**

As you already know, there is a great amount of work that goes into planning an event. Summer is the time when we are busy with all the details. We must teach our student leaders the skills of *delegation*, *perseverance* and, most of all, *patience*.

Event planning is a process, as is growing crops on a farm. The farmer must cultivate the seeds and have patience for them to grow, just as our students must have patience with their events and the related planning process. A challenge to present to students as they are busy planning an event is to remember to manage time effectively. It is important that they stay well balanced and not become overloaded with so much programming board work that their class work suffers.

## **AUTUMN: A Time to Harvest**

This is the stage of completion, the time when the event occurs and all the hard work the programming board put into it comes to fruition. This is also the time when students are probably the most stressed and their energy begins to run out. We advisors must help them stay on track until the very end and not stop short of completing their goals.

For example, many students I have known think that once the day of the event arrives, there is no need to publicize it anymore, or they can just show up for the event. But for many events, there might still be sound to unload, flyers to put up or existing ones to be changed with a marker to say, “Event Today.”

It is important that the student serving as event coordinator be sure there are sufficient volunteers for the event and that they all have specific duties or roles. This should have ideally been done in advance of the event so every detail is covered and the event runs smoothly as possible. This season teaches the lesson of *timing*.

## WINTER: A Time to Reflect

Many of us skip the principles of this season because we want to jump to the next project or event. Winter is tricky because, on the surface, it seems as though nothing much is happening. However, beneath the surface, a great deal is actually going on. In nature, this is the time when animals and plants store energy for a spring of rebirth.

In programming, the lesson to learn is, *take time to take stock*. The event coordinator would be wise to hold a meeting with all volunteers to recap the event. Review all evaluations completed by audience members and go over any notes regarding the event. Questions to ask are:

- What worked?
- What didn't?
- What can we do better next time?
- What are some specific plans for improvement?

This final phase is essential in helping our students learn the skill of reflecting on how things went so that any mistakes do not get repeated at future events. Many of us are so busy we forget this phase or just "blow over it" because "there is not enough time."

## As Old as Time, as New as Tomorrow

The Tao moves in dynamic cycles. Its lessons can seem elusive, for they reflect a world of change. Yet the cycles and principles of timing endure throughout all creation.

The lessons of Tao are as old as time and as new as tomorrow. They can serve as guides through the journey of life. The leader's journey is yours and mine. We must have the wisdom to see beyond ourselves and our programming boards. If we flow with natural cycles, together we can create a new form of leadership to improve our students' lives and become more effective advisors.

*"With strength of character  
Nothing is impossible.  
When your heart expands  
To embrace the impossible,  
You are able to lead with Tao."*

~Diane Dreher,  
*The Tao of Personal Leadership* (p. 27)

## References

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## YIN AND YANG The Polarities of Life

### Yin

Feminine  
Darkness  
Adapting to Change  
Night  
Contemplative  
Water  
Soft  
Feeling  
Listening  
Knowing

### Yang

Masculine  
Light  
Creating Change  
Day  
Active  
Stone  
Hard  
Thinking  
Speaking  
Doing

## About the Author

**Chris George** is coordinator of Student Activities at **Harper College (IL)**. He previously served as director of Student Life at Columbia College Chicago (IL), as assistant director of Student Involvement at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and coordinator of Student Life at Prairie State College (IL). In NACA, he has served as chair of the Publications Review Committee, as project manager for the Student Development Book Review Series for *Programming* magazine and as the graduate student representative for the former NACA Illiana Region. In 1996, he was named the American College Personnel Association Commission IV Graduate Student of the Year. He has previously written articles for *Programming* on topics such as publicity and recruiting volunteers. He has also been published in *Campus Events Professional*. He holds a bachelor's degree in mass communications from Western Illinois University and a master's degree in college student personnel from Indiana State University.

