

The Tao of Wellness

By Chris George, Harper College (IL)

*The greatest wisdom
Is to follow the Tao.
The Tao is mysterious, unfathomable,
Yet within is all that lives;
Unfathomable, mysterious,
Yet within is the essence;
Shadowy, intangible,
Yet within are vital principles,
Principles of truth
Informing all creation,
The lessons of life
Inherent in Tao.*

Tao Te Ching (Diane Dreher, *The Tao of Inner Peace*)

For student activities professionals, the demands of our job can take a toll on us on all levels. How do we balance it all? For example, many of us work long hours, coordinate and attend events and programs, attend countless meetings, manage e-mail, phone calls, interruptions, deadlines, and other programs and activities. It is crucial that we take care of ourselves not only for our own personal and professional longevity but also as role models for our students, who observe our behaviors and work ethic. The goal is not to try to eliminate stress from our lives, as that will only produce additional stress. Therefore, we should strive to manage stress and not allow it to control us.

I will present strategies based on the ancient principles of the works of the *Tao Te Ching* written by Lao Tzu more than 25 centuries ago as a handbook for leaders. Those same principles have great relevance for us today and, if we incorporate them into our lives, we can attain a high level of wellness to help us be happier, have more energy, and have a sense of balance to manage our priorities and what matters most.

Reaching Regular, Deep Relaxation

If we are to follow the *Tao* or “the way,” we need to be able to reach a state of deep **relaxation** on a regular basis. This does not mean finding the nearest sofa and just taking a nap, although if you are deprived of sufficient sleep this could be necessary. The type of relaxation to which I am referring is reaching a few minutes of “deep calm” ideally everyday. The best way to reach this state is through meditation, although there are many other ways. I personally take time to meditate every day as close to the same time each day as possible in the early morning before leaving for work. The benefits are tremendous if it is practiced regularly and becomes a habit:

- ☉ Your stress and anxiety will be greatly reduced.
- ☉ You can become more proficient and productive in your job.
- ☉ You can experience decreased blood pressure.
- ☉ You can benefit from improved flow of air to the lungs, resulting in easier breathing.
- ☉ You can achieve a lower heart rate
- ☉ You can experience a sense of “inner peace.”

We can meditate anytime we want, as long as we do it in a quiet, uninterrupted place for a few minutes. Many of us have various spots outside or inside campus that could serve as potential meditative locations. Seek out one and experience the benefits for yourself. Just remember: like most new habits you try to implement, it will take patience and dedication. The benefits will not usually occur after the first time. Don't get frustrated—just stay the course.

Meditation can help us develop our “inner vision” to better able see our true path in life, determine how to make a difficult decision, and deal with various conflicts more constructively. Meditation can be done by anyone except for the unimaginative, as it requires a dive into the creative and a suspension of the everyday logical mind that will try to stand in the way of our efforts. If we can do this, we will open ourselves up to extraordinary experiences. The biggest challenge in meditation I have discovered is to learn to train the mind to keep it clear of the random thoughts that run through it all the time. In meditation, the goal is to not think of anything except your breath, which can be very difficult. Practice is the key and, as you meditate regularly, you will learn to keep your mind clear.

In addition to performing a meditation every day, there may be times when a quick breathing exercise would help. Breathing exercises are great because we can do them any time and anywhere. During a busy day I often take a quick break to do the following:

- ☉ Take a deep breath and hold it briefly.
- ☉ Exhale slowly, saying to myself, “Breathe out tension.”
- ☉ Inhale slowly, saying to myself, “Breathe in peace.”

To find a meditation that fits your lifestyle, check out the Web site www.1stholistic.com/meditation, which describes various types of meditations and breathing exercises.

Being Centered

“Be still

And discover your center of peace.

Throughout nature

The ten thousand things move along,

But each returns to its source.

Returning to center is peace.

Find Tao by returning to source.”

Tao Te Ching (Diane Dreher, *The Tao of Inner Peace*)

While our daily lives swirl around us and are in constant motion, we can get caught up in them and lose our true selves. It is not what we look like, what we do, but rather what we *are* that brings meaning and purpose. However, we can lose sight of this if we do not remain **centered**. When we introduce ourselves to someone new, what is usually the first thing we say? My name is _____ and I am (job title) at (institution). This is typical for most of us and not wrong, however, unless you have been working 60-70 hours a week for the last few months. What we don't want to do is begin to confuse our center with the roles we play in our lives. Remember that our center is none of these: jobs, relationships, bodies, institutions or students. For many of us, we spend so much of our waking hours at our jobs and institutions that after a while, it feels like they are, but this is a sign that we are not being centered. When we are being centered, we can look beyond externals and enjoy all that we are fortunate to have in our lives, but cannot possess them. They're part of the fluid movement of Tao, part of the process that flows like a river around and through us.

So, how do we begin to seek being centered? One method that is useful is through **reflection**. This is usually easier for someone who is an introvert, as they already probably spend time reflecting in some way. For extroverts, it may be more challenging to force themselves to spend time in reflection. Our lives are so busy that we may tend to disregard the value of inner stillness, but if you experience it a few times, you begin to notice that life is much more meaningful when you take time to reflect.

Reflection is not meditation. In reflection, we are typically in deep thought, as opposed to meditation, where we are intentionally not thinking of anything and are trying to clear our minds. One excellent way to spend time in reflection is through regular writing in a personal journal. I find it is so powerful to get my thoughts down in writing. It helps to clarify or change my thoughts about something. Another great method I use is music. I will put on my headphones and listen to some inspiring, reflective music to help me reach an ideal reflective state. Once I am in that state, my mind begins to reflect on whatever I have chosen to focus on. Whether one of these methods works for you or not, the key is to find your reflective technique(s) and allow yourself to “drift away” in a reflective flow.

Seeking Balance

Evolved individuals

*Avoid extremes,
Avoid extravagance,
Avoid excess*

Lao Tzu (Al Huang and Lynch, p. 280)

There cannot be a discussion on wellness without discussing **balance** and how to avoid the unstable extremes that detract from personal power and health. Our bodies have ways to let us know when we are “out of balance.” Sometimes they are subtle ways and at other times more extreme. We need to learn to listen to our bodies and the signs that show us when we either have too much **yin** (feeling, listening, reflective, rest) or too much **yang** (thinking, speaking, doing, action). Both active yang and contemplative yin are essential to a healthy and balanced lifestyle. We must achieve a holistic balance among the physical, social/emotional, mental and spiritual. However, if we concentrate on one at the exclusion of the others, we will experience inner turbulence, dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

To restore our balance, we need to step back, take time to center, and recognize the excessive patterns that are occurring in our lives. Here are some strategies we can pursue to maintain or regain balance:

- ① Follow a physical exercise routine such as Tai Chi, Yoga, or some other movement that you enjoy.
- ② Professionally, discover ways to maintain a balance. It is fairly common in student activities to have flexibility in scheduling, breaks, and arrival and departure from the office. Those days when we have to work a 12- to 14-hour day can often be balanced with perhaps coming in the next day near mid-day or for extreme long hours, even an entire day off.
- ③ Nutritionally, a healthy, balanced diet with much variety will improve your overall wellness and outlook toward life.
- ④ Have a plan for the personal and professional areas of your life!!! Create a personal mission statement, discover and live your values, maintain balance among all our roles, and plan weekly and daily. Schedule time with yourself to meditate, reflect, spend on your hobbies, or do nothing.

One thing to remember: what is a “balanced life” for one person isn’t necessarily a “balanced life” for someone else. The key is to find *your* balanced life.

Returning to Simplicity

*The more that is hoarded,
The deeper the loss.
Know what is enough.*

Tao Te Ching (Al Huang and Lynch, p. 290)

The Tao also teaches us the importance of returning to **simplicity**, which clears our vision, frees us from false values, and can help “unclutter” your life. All of these benefits can help lead us towards a high level of wellness. However, seeking simplicity in a world of impermanence is quite challenging. I am not suggesting we all need to throw away our mp3 players, cell phones and computers, but there are some simple solutions to simplify our lives and bring more happiness to them.

- ① Get rid of what you don’t need or want. When you catch yourself saying, “But I might need that someday,” make a statement of what is important to you or refer to your mission statement. Remember, everything is potentially important, but if you keep everything, you will need a warehouse.
- ② Simplify outside noise such as televisions, radio, computers and phones. Seek out periods of time during the day when you don’t answer the phone or check e-mail to read, write, or just spend in silence and reflection.
- ③ Simplify work. Ask yourself if you could work fewer hours and still be productive and a valuable employee. Wouldn’t life be simpler if you had more free time?
- ④ Consider being more honest and direct in your communication. This in itself makes it simple. Ask for what you want. Tell others how you are feeling instead of keeping it inside. Avoid gossiping and idle chatter. Listen closely to others. Life can get complex from miscommunication.

Finding a Sense of Joy

If we choose to follow the principles of the Tao, we begin to have a deep sense of joy. The joy we will begin to experience is really our “true self” that we are allowing to open up. Following the Tao often means slowing down and questioning the choices we are making. To be truly healthy, we all need a sense of purpose. If we make and live a personal mission statement and values, they will serve as a guide for all we do. Be sure you have joy in your profession. If you don’t, ask yourself how can you create joy. Do you have a personal relationship that is not as exciting as it could be? How can you create joy in it? Through doing what we love and sharing with others, we all have the capacity to be joyous individuals.

Reaching this sense of joy takes a great amount of time and effort, but can be achieved more easily if we can keep our inner thoughts positive. Most of us are faced with some degree of negative comments in our lives. How do we handle them? Maintaining focus on positive thought patterns can be a great challenge for some of us. Once we are aware of our negative thoughts and behavior, we can counterbalance them with positive actions more easily. By doing this, you will feel a greater sense of self and have more energy because it takes more energy to think negative thoughts.

- ② To cultivate greater commitment, cooperation, and communication among your staff and students with whom you work, finds sincere, truthful ways to encourage and compliment their positive attributes and strengths.
- ③ To affirm your holistic self, as well as the physical, social/emotional, mental and spiritual, maintain a pack of index cards containing positive personal phrases. Read a few at the beginning of each day. I keep mine in my briefcase for when I need a quick positive pick-up.
- ④ To transform negativity, remember that every cloudy day has a sunny day. Every aspect of every day of our life has simultaneously a negative and a positive charge. Notice how you feel when you focus on the positive aspects.

Following a Path Less Traveled, but Most Needed

As I stated in the beginning, the goal is not to try to eliminate stress but to control and manage it. In choosing to follow the Tao, we are likely to find ourselves in unknown territory. It is a path less traveled, but most needed. Our lives are a journey and making any changes in our wellness requires a desire to change, self-discipline and persistence. The key to achieving a high level of wellness is to listen closely to the inner voice of your own being. Each day you will be faced with challenges. Be patient and stay centered.

References

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About the Author

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