

Healing with the Dao:
Contributions to Psychotherapeutic Treatment of Stress

Sanja Dejanovic PhD



SANJA DEJANOVIC
P S Y C H O T H E R A P Y

line. bridge. body publication 2026 ©

A relatively recent study by Gradus (2017) indicates that stress related disorders are gaining wider consideration in the West, as it has been found that approximately half of adults are bound to experience a form of traumatic stress. As Comer and Comer (2019) discuss, individuals who have experienced stress throughout their lifetime are more likely to receive the diagnosis of posttraumatic disorder. Surely, Western sociocultural way of life, its emphasis on competitiveness, perpetual productivity, and consumerism, renders individuals vulnerable to particular stressors depending on their positionality in society, while simultaneously fostering an incapacity to adequately mitigate the effects of stress. Moreover, due to technological innovations, urban living, and capitalist accumulation, Westerners are more generally removed from relationship with other organisms and the natural world, which is conventionally understood through the prism of Cartesian mechanistic and instrumental logic, similar to how biology and anatomy are approached (Abram, 1996; Cheng, 2017).

The contrasting Daoist spiritual, philosophical, and healing tradition, combining spirit-mind-body provides invaluable contributions to the Western psychotherapist in treating stress and stress-related disorders. It does so primarily by seeking to reconfigure how the individual energetically engages their environment and reconnects them to the vaster *qi*-field of interconnectedly generated phenomena (Koller, 2018). This paper explores the foundations and philosophical trajectory of Daoism, focusing on Laozi's contributions, to demonstrate how it conceives of action in the midst of transformation and delves into the psychotherapeutic innovations that this ancient Asian wisdom affords.

Daoist Foundations and Philosophical Outlook

In her, *Taoism: An Essential Guide*, Eva Wong (1997) traces the history of Daoism from its shamanic roots (3000-800 BCE) to the emergence of Alchemical Daoism (200-1000 CE), as

well as its blending with elements of Buddhism and Confucianism (1000 CE-present), thereby demonstrating that Daoism is not a single nor a cohesive system. For those interested in tracing the rootedness of the Dao in the natural world, such shamanic origins referring to a group of people, among them the *wu* or shamans, who inhabited parts of China, provides intriguing insights (Wong, 1997). The Legend of Yu tells of a chief shaman who was endowed with the mythical sacred text *The Book of Power over Waters* or *Shui-ching* and thought to have “journeyed frequently to the stars to learn from the celestial spirits” (Wong, p. 12). Wong (1997) writes that “The Pace of Yu, a dance of power that carried Yu to the sky, is preserved in the Taoist texts. These movements were danced by generations of Taoist priests, mystics, and sorcerers, and by the practitioners of the internal martial arts today” (p. 12). In addition to this, Yu, as well as other shamans, were thought to have wisdom of the patterned transformations of nature endowed to them by the animal world and could through such apprehension divine favorable actions and futural events (Wong, 1997). Wong (1997) writes: “Thus, shamans in the Chou dynasty were adept in the knowledge of the *I-Ching*” (p. 15).

Though it was initially viewed as a divination tool, Koller (2018) notes that *Yijing* translated as the *Book of Changes*, has over three thousand years become the central text shaping Chinese cultural understandings of everything from cosmology to alchemy to medicine. It is thought by Li Guangdi as outlining “the creation of all things and the ordering of the world” influencing the main spiritual perspectives of China (Koller, 2018, p. 220). The question at the heart of *Yijing*, as well as many other ancient philosophies is, how might we understand existence and is there some underlying ground to experience. In the West, Plato’s being gained greater traction than Heraclitus’ becoming, the *Yijing*, conversely, formulates the notion that the only constant that can be observed in nature is transformation itself, what is referred to in the

West as the being of becoming (Koller, 2018; Dejanovic, 2013). According to this foundational Chinese text, all existing and interacting phenomenon in the domains of Heaven and Earth undergo continuous change from life to death to life (Koller, 2018). When we speak of transformation, however, we are also inevitably speaking of formation and differentiation, which is in the *Yijing* accounted for through *qi*, the “creative energy-stuff, [which] takes two basic forms, *yin* and *yang*” (Koller, 2018, p. 223). Though many qualities are attributed to the energetics of *yin* and *yang*, these two capture what are perceived as opposing, yet complimentary forces generating the constant trans/formation of nature (Koller, 2018). As I write elsewhere “nothing grows without holding its other in which it lay awaiting to begin” (Dejanovic, 2021). The reciprocal play of these forces frame the dynamic processes of nature, within which, in line with the *Yijing* and Daoism, reside the so-called ten thousand things (Koller, 2018).

By briefly reviewing some of the foundations of Daoism, we can perhaps begin to appreciate how the spiritual and philosophical orientations of the Daoist Classical period, most associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi, integrated already existing cultural trajectories. Consisting of brief 81 Verses, the *Tao Te Ching* (2001) is canonically deemed the primary book to inaugurate Daoism and is attributed to Laozi, translated as the old philosopher or master, though it is confirmed that it was written by multiple people (Chai, 2018; Wong, 1997). What is the Dao? The Dao is generally translated as the Way and perceived as the way of nature; though as Laozi writes in Verse 1 of the *Tao Te Ching* (2001), the Dao “is both named and nameless,” thereby pointing to the ultimate paradox of speaking that which is not utterable, the mystery of the Dao (Laozi, 2001; Dejanovic, 2013). While there are several opening verses conveying it, Verse 6 is most instructive as Laozi there depicts the Dao as “endlessly creating, endlessly pulsating [...] Tao is limitless, unborn, eternal;” the access to which is granted through the

feminine spirit of the Hidden Creator (Laozi, 2001). Despite reference to a Creator, the Dao itself is an impersonal generative source that flows through and entangles all beings (Koller, 2018), and it is, as Wong (1997) aptly writes, “hidden beneath transition and change, [as] the permanent underlying reality” (p. 23). Through the complimentary interplay of emptiness and fullness, the Dao is the ever-transforming imperceptible field that accounts for the flux that natural phenomena relationally undergo (Chai, 2018). As such, also due to its incomprehensibility, the Dao is often depicted through the metaphor of flowing water, reminiscent of the primordial *qi*-field that permeates the universe (Koller, 2018; Kelland, 2015).

Given this metaphor of water, the Dao embraces ultimate reality constantly in flux, ever-changing akin to the *Yijing*, but also resonant with the Buddhist perception of impermanence (Koller, 2018). Laozi (2001) hence says in Verse 8 “the best way to live, is to be like water” (p. 9); an orientation that is conveyed through the concept of *wu wei* (Koller, 2018). Before elaborating on the concept, it is worth emphasizing that in change lies one of the Daoist’s most profound contributions, that is, though existence can be understood through the dynamic processes and patterns of nature, it is fundamentally incomplete, an uncharted path, generated through the unknown (Chai, 2018). This is articulated by Laozi (2001) in Verse 11 where *wu* is defined: “*Wu* is nothingness, emptiness, non-existence [...] Thus, when a thing has existence alone, it is mere dead-weight. Only when it has *wu*, does it have life” (p. 13). Though Laozi uses parables to frame this understanding, referring to concrete phenomena like the empty space which becomes the potential for there being something (Barua, 2022; Laozi, 2001), it existentially signifies, not nihilism, but that sense or meaning is perpetually generated, with there being no transcendent meaning accessible apart from our concrete thereness (Dejanovic, 2013).

Moreover, *wei* translated as purpose, with two alternative connotations, “for the sake of” and “to act,” added to *wu* conveys non-purposive action (Chan, 1963). Due to the difficulties of the concept, translational issues, and cultural divergences, particularly in the West where the present moment is seen as wasted if not producing, doing, making, something that validates the ego-self and furthers one’s perceived desires, *wu wei*, non-action, is poorly grasped as lack of action or to do nothing, as kind of resignation (Koller, 2018). This is a misapprehension. Laozi’s *wu wei* pertains to non-forcing, and in line with the *Yijing*, means acting in a timely manner having cultivated stillness and in accordance with the flow of nature, *ziran* more aptly self-so-ness, as in being in synchronicity with the present moment (Koller, 2018; Laozi, 2001). Furthermore, as Buddhists, Laozi’s (2001) Daoism involves action detached from desires, free of self-centeredness and is heart-led (Koller, 2018). Accordingly, as Koller (2018) notes, living authentically in harmony with naturalness entails effortless action undriven by desires that would mean forcing, controlling, or imposing one’s way onto others, situations, or things.

Daoist Psychotherapeutic Treatment of Stress

Daoist reflections are removed from the capitalistic Western standards of busyness, productivity, and consumption due to which individuals experience stress-related disorders, including traumatic experiencing (Comer & Comer, 2019). It is for this reason that Laozi’s and other Daoist contributions are useful to psychotherapists. On a foundational level, the accumulation of stress signals to the Daoist that one is not attuned to the Dao, that is to say, that one is disconnected from the Dao “flowing through them” (Koller, 2018, p. 267). Simplified, this means that the individual is spiritually removed from the vibrancy, creative impulse, and interconnective impetus of nature, which implies becoming capable of embracing the unpredictable, unknowable, and uncertain in our lifepath. As Amy Suplee (2006) puts it: “Our

challenge in life is to face whatever it is that is presented to us by the universe, and to become enthralled by the mystery and unfolding of our lives, without knowing exactly how it will unfold. Since there are no guarantees, this concept is only grasped by truly understanding that everything is impermanent” (n.p.). Surely, a stressed individual in Western society facing harsh sociocultural and economic conditions will be unresponsive to the idea that they are not enough appreciating the unknown twists, turns, and transformations arising in their life, as these are the very conditions that are perceived and responded to as problems plaguing them.

As such, the work of the Daoist psychotherapist is to foster and recover hidden or buried sources of resilience by assisting the client to cultivate, as Laozi would have it, inner stillness, slowing down, and noticing the present moment, through meditation (Wong, 1996). By inviting the opposing *yin*-force in the form of slowing down in contrast to *yang*-excesses resulting in stress and affliction, we are more capable of reconnecting with our inner vitality, positive qualities, and strengths, rendered imperceptible during times of imbalance (Koller, 2018). In line with this, the practitioner is to encourage the client to observe the changing nature of their reality, noticing that, whether positive or negative, the situation is temporary and open to a revised approach, while worrying about futural doings, decisions, and desired outcomes, as Laozi writes, is “wasted energy,” precipitating our incapacity and ineffectiveness to act in a way that nurtures us in harmony with the Dao (Laozi, 2001; Suplee, 2006). The primary aim of the Daoist psychotherapist is hence to orient the client toward observing that experiences, relationships, or situations, are bound to change, nothing is lasting or permanent, and, indeed, that the way in which we are responsive to change aggravates one’s condition (Suplee, 2006).

The second aim of the Daoist psychotherapist in treating stress is to explore the client’s relationship to action in accordance with the principle of *wu wei*. According to Laozi (2001),

actions motivated by excesses of desire or egoic attachment to a projected way of being, have “no end,” lead to affliction, and inevitably result in exhaustion (p. 10). He hence promotes a minimalist and simplified lifestyle that would free the individual from seeking after recognition, esteem, and power, pointing to their opposing and often unfavorable consequences (Laozi, 2001). Understanding that people in Western society are unlikely to renounce material accumulations that serve their interests and fulfill their perceived life purpose, the psychotherapist can invite the client to explore the motivations directing their actions, personal characteristics, and corresponding emotional states, so that they can assess how their lifestyle of striving, seeking, and doing, may be giving way to discontentment, meaninglessness, imbalances, and an inauthentic relationship to self, as well as others. The more vital intervention, however, is the cultivation of awareness through the principle of *wu wei* of how the client’s actions may be misaligned with the present and thereby are furthering dis-ease. Akin to the *Yijing*, Laozi’s *wu wei*, as noted already, does not discourage action, rather effortless action allows the client with the assistance of the Daoist psychotherapist to reflect on the factors informing the present moment and thereby determine the timely course of action or lack thereof that would best align with them, as well as others (Laozi, 2001).

In accordance with the awareness that all things are ever transforming, including experiences, relationships, and situations, the aim of the psychotherapist should be to assist the client to release or let go of attachment to desired outcome, goal, or anticipated sameness when acting (Suplee, 2006). Where action is forced, seeking to control, or to serve some unmeetable desire due to fear of change, it can result in greater harm to self and other(s), despite a good we are seemingly acting for the sake of, such as preserving a way of being, relationship, or circumstance (Suplee, 2006; Koller, 2018). When things transform in unexpected ways, fall

apart, or pass away, our tendency is not to “go with the flow,” practice acceptance and letting go, thereby embracing *wu wei* which allows what is nascent to emerge (Suplee, 2006; Dejanovic, 2021). We instead become resistant and unyielding, striving after what was or could have been, while losing sight of what is, who we are becoming, and what there is to create with, as Zhuangzi would have it (Laozi, 2001; Koller, 2018). The Daoist psychotherapist therefore should assist the client to appreciate how actions precipitate unwanted stress, pain, regret, and grief when deviating from the effortless action of the Dao (Koller, 2018). Sometimes allowing what is to become apparent to do so through nonaction, rather than forcing it to be so or so despite indications otherwise, allows us to arrive at wiser decisions from a place of stillness, thereby alleviating and avoiding compounding stress (Laozi, 2001). It is in this way that the client can become more attuned to their inner creative agency, sense of empowerment, and capacity to discern how they invest their *qi* or energy, as well as direct their lifepath.

Lastly, the Daoist psychotherapist could engage Laozi’s and Zhuangzi’s contributions to *wu wei* in the sense of the naturalness of nonpurposive and selfless action by conducting sessions in nature (Zhuangzi, 2014). Ecotherapy, also referred to as nature-assisted therapy, is a growing field in the West, but has its antecedents in poetry, literature, and ecological philosophy (Feltham et al., 2017). As Nick Totton describes, “it believes that spending time outdoors around growing things and living creatures is inherently good for us and works to amplify this effect through various exercises and techniques” (Feltham et al., 2017, p. 535). The aim of nature-based healing is to immerse and intermingle the individual, as Zhuangzi (2014) conceived in *The Inner Chapters*, within the creative and inexhaustible plenitude of the natural world, thereby enabling a greater appreciation of the *qi* flow of the universe and our interconnection within it. As neurologist and naturalist Oliver Sacks (2019) wrote while observing the profound impact that

wandering in gardens has on his patients: “Clearly, nature calls to something very deep in us [...] The effects of nature’s qualities on health are not only spiritual and emotional but physical and neurological” (n.p.). Though Sacks is uncertain how it is that nature provides this healing power to patients, the Daoist psychotherapist inspired by Zhuangzi (2014) appreciates that being in nature transforms the perceptual orientation of the client by dissolving stringent understandings of beyond self in terms of self-reference, centeredness, and instrumentality, as well as fostering the ease of experientially moving with the self-so-ness of other lifeforms (Koller, 2018). The emptying of the self, which can serve as an impediment to healing, stifling becoming attuned to the Dao “flowing through” us, is thereby enabled through ecotherapy (Koller, 2018). Such experiencing could enable further Daoist nature-based healing, as Wong (1997) outlines, oriented around embodied “absorption of energy from nature,” including from earthly and celestial bodies, associated with the later school of inner alchemy (p. 220).

Such spontaneous wandering in nature akin to Zhuangzi (2014) modality of self-healing, also gave way to the increasingly utilized and deemed effective Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy (EMDR) invented by Francine Shapiro in 1987, particularly for treatment of stress-disorders, such as trauma (Shapiro, 2012; Feltham et al., 2017). Shapiro discovered the modality when noticing her rapid bilateral eye movement when walking in a park and attempting to relieve distressing memories (Shapiro, 2012). In more recent years EMDR practitioners have engaged Daoist approaches, particularly later Alchemical Daoist techniques which place greater emphasis on the body, which has been largely ignored in Western psychotherapy or treated under the deterministic rubric of biology based on mechanistic anatomy (Chia & Hilton, 2016; Cheng, 2017). The text *EMDR and the Universal Healing Tao* (2016) is one example of a budding collaboration of an EMDR practitioner and Mantak Chia, a Daoist

Master who has established the Universal Healing Tao. There is an abundance of texts exploring what the body is in Daoism (Kohn, 2006; Bokenkamp, 2007; Cheng, 2017), with the most simplified understanding being that our bodies are a microcosm of the vaster cosmic *qi*-field (Lockhart, 2010). As such, the Daoist does not in the Western sense distinguish between spirit-mind-body, but approaches these as an integrated and holistic system that must together be engaged for healing to happen (Bokenkamp, 2007; Cheng, 2017). Chia's Alchemical Daoist approach to healing provides a significant intervention and contribution to EMDR, indicative in Chia's response to Doug Hilton's exploration of how the desensitization technique operates: "You know that EMDR works but the emotions are still in the organs" (p. 4). The Daoist hence provides invaluable techniques that seek to process stress embedded in the bodily organs as a means to enable the free flow of *qi* (Chia & Hilton, 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has outlined some of the significant contributions that the Daoist spiritual and philosophical tradition has to make to psychotherapeutic treatment of stress conditions. Daoism is an unlikely source given that Western sociocultural conditions are radically divergent from its fundamental premise. However, as this paper has demonstrated through an exploration predominantly of the Classical school consisting of Laozi and Zhuangzi, Daoist understanding of transformation, *wu wei*, and naturalness provide useful tools to reconfigure how the individual energetically engages their environment and how they might reconnect with the wider *qi*-field of nature (Koller, 2018). Additionally, it has explored how the Daoist psychotherapist with an emphasis on treating stress related disorders, such as trauma, which is in great part experienced somatically, may find the later Alchemical school emphasizing techniques that engage spirit-mind-body simultaneously, to be especially instructive.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World*. Vintage.
- Barua, M. (November 2022). *Daoism*. [Lecture]. Theology, Martin Luther University College.
- Bokenkamp, S. (2007). What Daoist Body? in *Purposes, means and convictions in Daoism: A Berlin Symposium*. Wiesbaden.
- Chan, W. T. (1963). *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton University Press.
- Chai, D. (2018). Rethinking the Daoist Concept of Nature. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 43(3-4), 259-274.
- Cheng, L. (2017). The Symbolism of the Body in Daoism. *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 12(1), 54-71.
- Chia, M., & Hilton, D. (2016). *EMDR and the Universal Healing Tao: An Energy Psychology to Overcome Emotional Trauma*. Destiny Books.
- Comer, J. R., & Comer, J. S. (2019). *Fundamentals of abnormal psychology*. (9th edition). Worth Publishers Macmillan Learning.
- Dejanovic, S. (2013). The Paradox of Sense or the Event of Thought in Deleuze's Philosophy [Dissertation]. Political Science. York University.
- Dejanovic, S. (2021). Alchemicalizing Garden and the Altar of Broken Things. *Comparative Media Arts Journal*. Relations Issue.
- Feltham, C., Hanley, T., & Winter, L. A. (2017). *The Sage handbook of counselling and psychotherapy*. (4th edition). Sage Publications.
- Gradus, L. J. (2017). Prevalence and prognosis of stress disorders: a review of the epidemiological literature. *Clin Epidemiol*, 9, 251-260.

- Kelland, M. (2015). *Personality Theory in a Cultural Context*. OpenStax CNX.
- Kohn, L. (Ed.). (2006). *Daoist Body Cultivation*. Three Pine Press.
- Koller, J. M. (2018). *Asian Philosophies*. (7th edition). Routledge.
- Laozi. (2001). *Tao Te Ching (Daodejing)*. (J. Star, Trans.). Penguin.
- Lockhart, M. (2010). *The Subtle Energy Body: The Complete Guide*. Inner Traditions.
- Sacks, O. (2019). *The Healing Power of Gardens*. The New York Times.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/18/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-gardens.html>
- Shapiro, F. (2012). *Getting past your past: Take control of your life with self-help techniques from EMDR therapy*. Rodale.
- Suplee, A. (2006). The Art of Letting Go—A Taoist Approach. *Radical Spirituality*, 129.
<https://www.positivehealth.com/article/psychospiritual/the-art-of-letting-go-a-taoist-approach>
- Wong, E. (1997). *Taoism: An Essential Guide*. Shambhala.
- Zhuangzi (2014). *The Inner Chapters* (D. Hinton, Trans.). Counterpoint.