

TAOISM AND ITS COACHING APPLICATION

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How are Taoism and Coaching related and how can Taoism be utilized in Coaching Practice?

What is Taoism?

Dictionary.com defines Taoism as: The philosophical system evolved by Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, advocating a life of complete simplicity and naturalness and of non-interference with the course of natural events, in order to achieve a happy existence in harmony with the Tao.

The literal translation of Tao is the way. The world has a natural sense of balance and when we “force the action,” we disrupt this balance. Taoism follows the concept of allowing things to just “be.”

Here are the Taoist concepts we will relate to coaching practice:

The Uncarved Block – We are all born in a natural state of simplicity.

Non-Doing – Our actions should be effortless and spontaneous.

Selflessness – This has to do with redefining the ego.

Detachment – This is the idea of not identifying with the Yin or the Yang.

What is Coaching?

The International Coach Federation defines coaching as follows: Professional coaches provide an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives. A coach helps people improve their performances and enhance the quality of their lives.

As coaches we do not give advice nor do we give our personal opinions to clients. Instead, we ask powerful, open ended questions that support our clients to see new perspectives and discover their inner strengths. Coaching sessions are about the client. The coach’s purpose is to be present to listen and act as a co-creator, giving the client the responsibility to take action.

The Premise

The ancient philosophy of Taoism and the relatively new field of Coaching are a natural fit. The foundation of Taoism is to leave nature in its purest state and the world will be as it should be. The foundation of coaching is to be present as your client discovers their true self and becomes able to fully utilize their knowledge and strengths to realize their potential. The following will illustrate this by associating some specific Taoist notions with coaching concepts.

The Uncarved Block

“The essence of the principle of the Uncarved Block is that things in their original simplicity contain their own natural power, power that is easily spoiled and lost when that simplicity is changed.” The Tao of Pooh, page 10

The Uncarved Block is the purest form of being. It is who we are from birth. The further away we get from our original perfection, the more our lives may become unbalanced and unhappy. We may allow life experience to take us away from our nature, but with mindfulness, we can reconnect our true selves.

The universe is sacred. You cannot improve it. If you try to change it, you will ruin it. If you try to hold it, you will lose it. Tao Te Ching Chapter 29

For example, let us replace the universe with the client. The client is a complete being with strengths, weaknesses, knowledge and needs. As coaches, we do not try to change their essence. We merely support them in realizing their true self and in finding these qualities to apply them toward achieving their goals. Changing a client in any way goes against the basic concept of coaching. Each of us is capable of greatness. It is inside of all people. A coach is there to support the client in becoming their best self, not to create a new self. We should leave a client as the same person they have always been; someone who has gained the understanding of who they are.

When the block is carved, it becomes useful. When the sage uses it, he becomes the ruler. Thus, “A great tailor cuts little.” Tao Te Ching Chapter 28

If a client is altered from their original state, they may be able to reach their goal. However, it will be at the cost of losing part of their natural self. If the client recognizes their true and total being, they can “become the ruler.” This allows them to take full ownership of their life. It is comparable to the coaching concept of acknowledgement as the coach is recognizing who the client is.

The statement, “A great tailor cuts little,” is an applicable analogy for being an outstanding coach. It takes minimal effort to achieve the greatest results. This exemplifies a coach who does not change their client, while the client still transforms into the person they wish to be. The beautiful thought is that the person already existed in the client’s natural state.

It is more important to see the simplicity, to realize one's true nature, to cast off selfishness and temper desire. Tao Te Ching Chapter 19

As coaches, we know our clients already have the knowledge and strength to reach their goals. We ask the questions while the client always has the answers they are seeking. The client will not be changed by a coach. Coaches are not adding to the person's natural being, we are holding the client's vision. The vehicle to achieve this is for the client to incorporate structures in their life that will allow their knowledge and strength to blossom. Ultimately, the client will reach a state of self-understanding.

Non-Doing

The world is ruled by letting things take their course. It cannot be ruled by interfering. Tao Te Ching Chapter 48

Water flowing over rocks for millennia created the Grand Canyon. This is a natural function on our planet. This relates to coaching on a number of levels. Coaches do not give advice. Instead, we ask open ended questions. Our aim is to create a safe and comfortable space where our clients are free to be themselves. Just as nature left to its own devices will become what it is meant to be, coaching clients, finding the means to tap into their inner strengths will become who they are meant to be.

Therefore the sage goes about doing nothing, teaching no-talking, the ten thousand things rise and fall without cease, creating yet not possessing, working yet not taking credit. Tao Te Ching Chapter 2

Coaching is not about telling the client what to do. Coaches should leave nothing of themselves with their clients. During a session, we should listen more than we speak. Questions should be open ended, without being leading or colored by the coach's beliefs or opinions. This can be equated to the coaching concept of Co-Creation; being with the client in such a way that your combined energies create the client's desired result.

To talk little is natural. Tao Te Ching Chapter 23

This quote can be directly related to the 80-20 rule. Coaches should listen 80% of the time while speaking 20% of the time during a session. The coach's challenge is to come up with questions that allow the client to discover their true self. One of the most important talents of a coach is the ability to actively listen to the client. This means to connect to what the client is saying and to keep your presence during a session. A powerful way to exhibit active listening is to reiterate what the client says. For example, "I see you are saying 'you are having difficulty sticking to your exercise routine.' What structures might you add to your daily schedule that would support you sticking with the routine?" The questions should inspire deep reflection for the client.

Selflessness

Achieve results, but never boast. Achieve results, but never be proud. Achieve results because this is the natural way. Tao Te Ching Chapter 30

Coaching revolves around the client. Coaches should not set goals for a client. We do not bring our values or opinions into a session. Coaches do not take pride in their clients' accomplishments. Although it is good to acknowledge a client for their achievements, the results are solely the property of the client. We do not create the plan for a given coaching session. The direction and the outcome belong to the client. At the beginning of a session, one of the first questions to ask is what the client expects to achieve during the session.

Created without claiming, doing without taking credit, guiding without interfering, this is Primal Virtue. Tao Te Ching Chapter 51

This statement reflects the Co-Creation coaching concept. Coaches bring their energy and support to the client, always knowing it is for the good of the client. All the credit belongs to the client. They are the driving force behind the coaching session. Coaches are just passengers. We should not introduce our beliefs or opinions into the client's session. We must not take credit for the client's achievements.

Therefore the sage works without recognition. He achieves what has to be done without dwelling on it. He does not try to show his knowledge. Tao Te Ching Chapter 77

Coaching shares some similarities with careers such as psychotherapy, consulting, psychology and mentoring. Although coaching and these occupations utilize professionals who help people resolve issues, there is a distinct difference with coaching. Each of these disciplines employs specialists who are authorities in their chosen fields. Coaches are not experts in any situation. Therefore we can support any client with any situation. We do not allow our egos to get in the way of our work with clients. We need to be able to lose ourselves as the client may have different values and we cannot judge our clients in any situation. Coaches do not celebrate their own achievements, yet supports the client in celebrating theirs.

Detachment

Who can wait quietly while the mud settles? Who can remain still until the moment of action? Observers of the Tao do not seek fulfillment. Not seeking fulfillment, they are not swayed by desire for change. Tao Te Ching Chapter 15

This statement reflects a great challenge for many coaches. It is about the patience and restraint that must be exhibited when working with a client. How often might a coach feel they have the resolution to the client's issue? They may feel, if only they would do this, the issue would be resolved. Whatever "this" is may be the answer if the coach was in the client's shoes. Coaches need to resist the temptation to solve or fix the client's issue and allow the client to achieve that moment of discovery by

their own means. We may feel sympathy or empathy for the client. Coaches may also want the client to achieve their goals, but that involves us in their scenario. This is not what motivates us as coaches.

The sage stays behind, thus he is ahead. He is detached, thus at one with all. Through selfless action, he attains fulfillment. Tao Te Ching Chapter 7

Coaches do not hold a client's hand. We do not take ownership of a session, nor are we present when they take the action they decide to pursue. The coaching session is merely a safe place for the client to hold themselves accountable for taking the action. This is a reason why coaching relationships are usually finite in nature. The client will have a specific end result in mind when the relationship begins. Once they achieve that goal, the coach must accept the fact that they have served an important purpose in the client's journey of self-discovery and let them be.

Why is the sea king of a hundred streams? Because it lies below them. Therefore it is the king of a hundred streams. Tao Te Ching Chapter 66

This statement resonates most in its relation to coaching. What do we do as coaches? We support our clients with such things as work performance, health and wellness, personal relationship issues or simply making a decision about how to proceed in any situation. As coaches we have no say in which road the client will choose or how they will proceed in their life's journey. We are a source to be utilized in order for the client to find their own path. The client has all the answers. We are "below" them in the sense that we listen and support their strengths, beliefs and structures. No matter where the client may go, the coach is still available for them at all times.

In Conclusion

Acknowledging the connection between the ancient philosophy of Taoism and current coaching practice is a true revelation. The Tao Te Ching contains many ideas that can be utilized by coaches. The Taoist values of allowing things to take their own course and not changing the true nature of things are closely related to the role a coach plays in working with a client.

As demonstrated in this article, the Taoist concepts of the Uncarved Block, Non-Doing, Selflessness and Detachment may be seamlessly incorporated into a coaching practice. One who follows the Tao leaves the world in its pristine state, comforted in the idea it will be as it should be. A client who works successfully with a coach will find they always had the answer to their situation. The client comes away from a coaching engagement as they should be. A coach who integrates Taoist beliefs with their practice adds an element to their practice that can make them the ultimate support for their clients.

Bibliography

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