

How can Daoism benefit Western education?

Open Access Government speaks to Dr Tom Culham on the benefits of incorporating Daoism in Western education

The world is in crisis because we have emphasized reason and neglected the whole human including feeling and emotion in Western education. Daoism teaches us to embrace rational thinking and feeling to broaden and deepen our connection to others and the lived world.

How can a Daoist approach to education benefit students?

First, I think it is important to understand why Daoist approaches to education can benefit students and society.

Over the past 30 or so years, neuroscience has revealed that much of human decision-making is conducted automatically, unconsciously and related to our emotions. Daniel Kahneman (2011) popularised this understanding with his book titled *Fast and Slow Thinking*. Fast thinking is automatic thinking. Both fast and slow thinking are needed but our education system is primarily focused on educating the conscious intellectual mind typical of slow thinking. This approach to education is disembodied and focused on abstractions. Of particular importance is the discovery that ethical and moral decisions are embodied and based on unconsciously held emotions. For most of modernity, it was assumed that people made decisions consciously and rationally and ethics education was focused on the intellect with poor results. Daoists understood the importance of the body, emotions and unconscious and developed techniques for educating these aspects of our being. Therefore, we can learn from Daoism regarding pedagogy to educate the whole person.

Academics propose that hyper individualism is a cause of the crisis we find ourselves in today. The crisis involves the degradation of the environment, breakdown of social structure, ethical failures of business and government, financial failures, and the inability of many to look after their physical and mental health, despite knowing how to (Ivanhoe, 2017; Loy, 1996; Maté, 2011; McGilchrist, 2010; Rowson, & McGilchrist, 2013). The crisis is a result of the dominant extremely narrow view of the self, known as hyper individualism. This viewpoint assumes that the self is confined to the physical body and thrives by maximising “its own best interest”. This has both negative social and environmental impacts (Ivanhoe, 2017, p.4).

From a psychological and neuro-brain perspective, McGilchrist (2021) presents the brain as possessing two very different and opposing consciousnesses associated with the left and right hemispheres. The left side is oriented to getting things done and enables one to

categorise, acquire, and manipulate things. Without these evolutionary attributes, we would have been unable to hunt and would not have survived.

On the other hand, the right side is devoted to seeing the big picture and is orientated to being in relationship with others, being in connection with the world, and appreciating life. From an evolutionary perspective, this consciousness was necessary when hunting because it allowed us to be aware of threats in a way that the left hemisphere could not. It was also crucial in the sense that mammals are social and depend on relationship and the support of others for survival. In simple terms, the left enables one to manipulate the world while the right enables meaning and understanding of the world. McGilchrist acknowledges that both these attributes are necessary for survival but asserts that today's world over emphasizes left hemisphere consciousness. This domination has grave consequences for physical, emotional, and spiritual health; nature and society.

Hyper individualism is associated with left hemisphere consciousness which is “dependent on denotative language and abstractions, yields clarity and power to manipulate things that are known, fixed, static, isolate, decontextualised, explicit, disembodied, general in nature, but ultimately lifeless” (McGilchrist, 2009, p.174). It sees itself as separate, expresses self-centred values, is caught in a self-referential, self-reinforcing circle and is unable to consider other perspectives. On the other hand, right hemisphere consciousness is: “changing, evolving, interconnected, implicit, incarnate, living beings within the context of the lived world, but in the nature of things never fully graspable, always imperfectly known—and to this world it exists in a relationship of care” (p. 174). It expresses the values of empathy, justice, an inseparable connection to the world and relationship with others. McGilchrist believes that balancing the operation of both hemispheres will contribute to addressing the world's problems . This conclusion is very relevant to addressing the crisis we face as it points to a solution that McGilchrist (2009) proposed: balance can be achieved through engaging in the contemplative practices developed in Asian cultures which place emphasis on lived experience over conceptual thought.



Plato's allegory of the cave suggested that ordinary consciousness was like prisoners living in a cave mistaking reality for shadows of carved figures cast on a wall by the light of a fire. Enlightenment required a journey out of the cave into blinding light of the sun which Plato equates to goodness that illuminates the truth. Prior to Plato, Greek philosophers held that inner work was important to enlightenment while after Plato the emphasis shifted to observation of external phenomenon (McGilchrist, 2021). In Daoism, cultivating virtue through inner work is a path to enlightenment (Roth, 1999).

What steps can the Western education system take to implement a Daoist approach?

Daoism and Western science share the view that observation is critical to understanding nature to obtain enlightenment. In the West, this is assumed to be achieved through objective disembodied observation of external phenomena and the development of abstract theory describing how individual components give rise to the whole. On the other hand, Daoists' hold that enlightenment is achieved through embodied observation of internal and external phenomena resulting in an understanding through direct insight of the universe and one's place in it. The adept practitioner experiences a sense of oneness also known as nondual awareness that maintains the sense of the individual as observer while providing a deep experience of being at one with everything. This practice yields health, longevity, good social relations, and wisdom (Roth, 1999). To some extent, these views reflect the left hemisphere consciousness orientation of the West and the right orientation of Daoism.

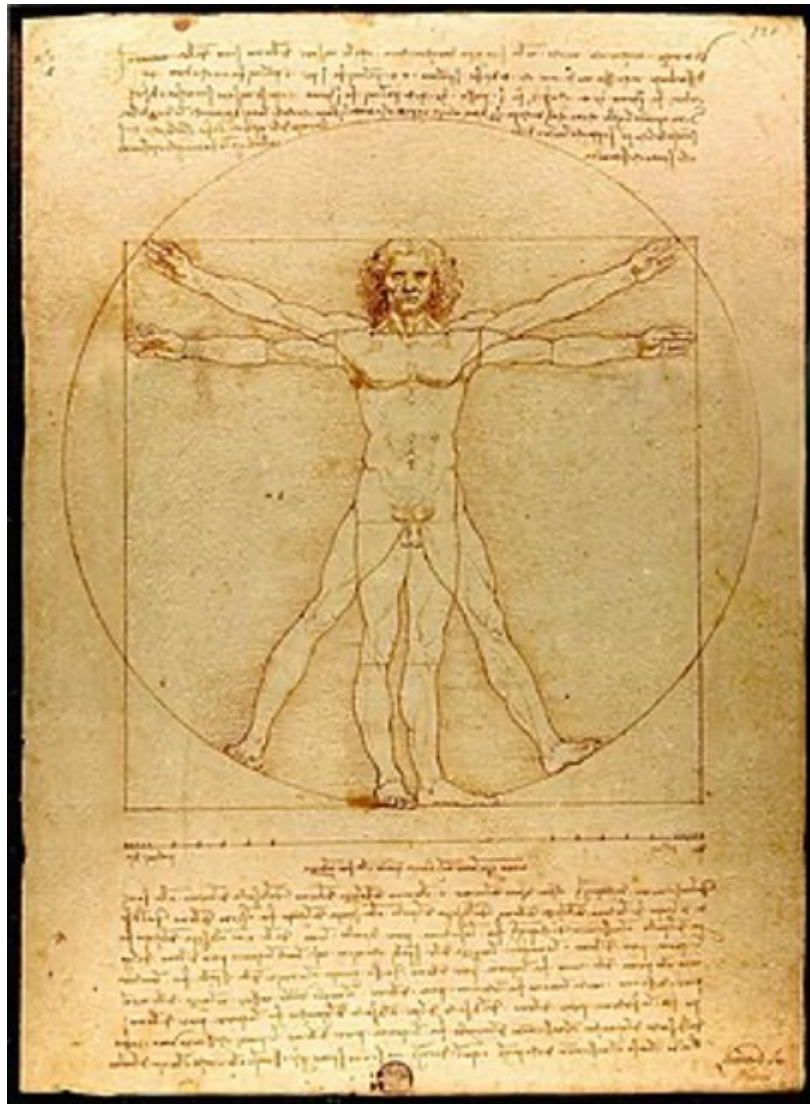
Carl Jung (1983) noted that science dehumanises and alienates people by insisting the only legitimate information is the average which denies the value of individual subjective experience. While science has delivered amazing technological benefits it has not addressed the human need for connection, meaning and community that individuals strive for as social beings. Daoism and other Eastern traditions offer a solution through contemplative practices that legitimise the individual's personal experience while paradoxically shifting the hyper individual view of self to a much broader inclusive perspective which according to McGilchrist is typical of right hemisphere consciousness. Jill Bolte Taylor (2006) a neuroscientist, who suffered a left hemisphere stroke described right hemisphere consciousness: "In the absence of my left hemisphere's negative judgement, I perceived myself as perfect, whole, and beautiful just the way I was" (pp. 71); my consciousness soared into an all-knowingness, a 'being at one' with the universe" (p. 41), and "it is completely committed to the expression of peace, love, joy, and compassion in the world" (p. 140).

Of course, no one wants to experience a stroke to access right hemisphere consciousness, but Daoist contemplative practices that cultivate virtue through developing tranquillity in body, breath, emotions, mind, and spirit make this possible. Essentially these practices slow down and ultimately stop conceptual thought. This is not mysterious or unusual as brief moments of right hemisphere consciousness can occur in everyday situations when one is deeply absorbed in activities such as dance, sport, performance, creation of art etc. where there is a feeling of being one with the activity and no thought is present. Thus, the role of cultivation is to expand and extend something that is available and present within everyone.

One might ask how is it possible that personal cultivation of virtue achieves this? The simple answer is that by quietening the left hemisphere, right hemisphere consciousness becomes more prominent. Daoist approaches inform the methods and the direction such an education might take.

Our current approach to education developed over hundreds of years is rich in methods that primarily address the left hemisphere. One can imagine that right hemisphere education might ultimately be as rich and be developed in the Western context through practice, research and development of theory. As I noted earlier, contemporary education and science is focused primarily on learning and researching external phenomena. Daoist education inverts this orientation onto internal experience known as inner work in the vein of the ancient Greek maxim Know Thyself. It involves developing a deep embodied knowledge of one's innate nature such as one's purpose, emotions, unconscious contents of the mind and body, through various exercises. Many of these activities are familiar such as: meditation, yoga, developing emotional intelligence skills, art, literature, music, reflective journaling etc (Culham, Lin, 2020). However, rather than applying these activities piece-meal, they need to be integrated in a holistic comprehensive way. Further, one can imagine that just as teachers are qualified in subjects such as science, art, or literature, a process of teacher training is required so that students' inner work may be effectively guided. Finally, in this era of climate change and environmental degradation,

Daoist cosmology sees humans as one with nature, part of a greater whole and connected through a life energy known as qi. This offers a perspective that is consistent with right hemisphere consciousness and in accord with Leonardo da Vinci's vision represented by the Vitruvian Man.



Leonardo's image illustrates the connection between art and mathematics during the Renaissance and demonstrates his own personal understanding of proportion. This picture provides a cornerstone example of his efforts to relate man to nature. Encyclopædia Britannica online states, "Leonardo envisaged the great picture chart of the human body he had produced through his anatomical drawings and Vitruvian Man as a cosmografia del minor mondo (cosmography of the microcosm). He believed the workings of the human body to be an analogy for the workings of the universe."

Have you seen any evidence of Western engagement with Daoism in recent years?

Carl Jung a German psychologist and Martin Heidegger a German philosopher both of the 20th century were influenced by Daoism. Ian McGilchrist has been influenced by Daoism. He is an influential British Psychiatrist knowledgeable in neuroscience who authored the

books *The Master and His Emissary* (2009) and *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*.

Buddhism shares many similarities to Daoism in its cosmological view. There are several organisations that investigate these world views such as: The Mind and Life Institute, The Dalai Lama Center for Ethics and Transformative Values at MIT, The Stanford Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education and there are many others. Most of these centres have been inspired by Buddhism.

Donald Hoffman a professor in the Department of Cognitive Sciences at the University of California, Irvine, has conducted interesting research suggesting that consciousness is the fundamental property of the universe. This is more consistent with Daoist views which see that qi as life energy is the foundation of the universe. As far as I know, he is familiar with Daoism and Buddhism but these traditions do not inform his research.

Is Daoist practice truly possible in a world obsessed with and ruled by technology? How are Daoism and technology compatible?

My response is to reference the title of Iain McGilchrist's book and Einstein.

Einstein said: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift." (Calaprice, 2011, p.477).

In McGilchrist's book 'The Master and his Emissary' (2009), the master represents right hemisphere consciousness which is connected to life, creativity and empathy and concerned with values such as justice and connection. It sees the whole and perceives itself to be in relationship and connected. It is the master because it is associated with life complexity and creativity. The emissary (the servant) represents the left hemisphere consciousness. It is self-centred and self-referential and is good at categorisation, reasoning, and abstraction all for the purpose of grasping and accumulating for survival. According to McGilchrist we need a balance of both.

However, as your question suggests, technology and rational thinking dominate. There is a hunger in students and people in general for meaning, and knowledge that goes beyond reason and the measurable. When pedagogy supporting right hemisphere learning is introduced into classes there is a bimodal distribution in response. Some students find it to be the best they have ever taken, while others are put off it, as they have been socialised to expect only left brain hemisphere education. There is a pressing need in society at large and in science to be open to right hemisphere consciousness which is what Daoist practices are aimed at. It is not likely that in most settings students will accept the idea that they are learning Daoism because it is seen as mysticism. However, there is a substantial amount of research available now showing that the application of the techniques such as meditation, self-reflection etc proposed in Daoism and Buddhism are supported by science in terms of physical, emotional and mental benefits. There is a

hunger for meaning and a hunger for personal self-knowledge and health that technology is not able to fully address that provides an opening for contemplative practices to become more prominent.

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