The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Spirituality and Social Work

Beth R. Crisp

Achieving dynamic balancing

Publication details

Celia Hoi Yan Chan, Xiao-Wen Ji, Cecilia Lai Wan Chan
Published online on: 27 Mar 2017

Accessed on: 15 Dec 2023

Please scroll down for document

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Achieving dynamic balancing
Application of Daoist principles into social work practice

Celia Hoi Yan Chan, Xiao-Wen Ji and Cecilia Lai Wan Chan

Introduction
Daoism (also known as ‘Taoism’) is one of the great indigenous philosophical traditions in Chinese communities, which encompasses philosophical and/or religious teachings and practices. The primary tenets were described in Dao De Jing, the most influential classic text. This chapter will briefly discuss the essential principles of Daoist teachings, based on the basic tenets of Daoist philosophy including ‘Dao’ (the way), ‘De’ (virtue) and ‘Yin-Yang perspectives’. On the basis of a comprehension of these three concepts, ‘Wuwei’ (non-coercive action), ‘Ziran’ (naturalness), ‘Su’ and ‘Pu’ (simplicity) will be introduced, which can also serve as the theoretical underpinnings in developing contemporary social work practice.

Daoist teachings acknowledge that human beings are living in a world with constant changes, which may bring pain and suffering in life. People are asked to go with the flow of nature and the universe so as to achieve personal growth and self-transformation. Informed by Daoist teachings, we proposed a new concept in psychosocial intervention termed ‘dynamic balancing’, explained as a constant self-transforming process interacting with the ever-changing external environment. By adopting a moving symbolic representation of Yin-Yang symbols, dynamic balancing can be comprehended as a state of mind or a way of living addressing the co-existence of strengths and weaknesses, resilience and vulnerabilities, positivity and negativity. This is in keeping with the person-centred and strength-based orientation of social work practices.

In this chapter, we aim to:

1. demonstrate how the Daoist concepts can be applied into social work practice, such as by enhancing clients’ internal capacity in facing life transitions and changes;
2. discuss the emotional competences of human service professionals with reference to elements in Daoist teachings;
3. review empirical studies that demonstrated the application of Daoist teachings into social work practice and research; and
4. introduce the body-mind-spirit techniques that have developed based on Daoist philosophy, which aims to help people achieve the internal state of dynamic balancing, accept changes in life and be aware of afflictive attachment to any desire.
Basic tenets of Daoist teachings

Daoism is an ancient Chinese tradition. Its primary tenets were recorded in *Dao De Jing* and were considered as the most influential classic texts in Daoist teaching and philosophy. Derived from Daoist teaching, a series of regime practices has been developed by followers over the centuries.

**Dao and De**

Dao, as interpreted and embedded with rich connotations, represents the way of nature and the universal laws (Lee 2003). The Chinese character ‘Dao’ consists of two pictorial parts: 1) ‘to go’ and 2) ‘head’, which also means the origin. The combined characters signify the meaning of going with the natural and right way by following the origin. The spiritual aspect of Dao is considered as a metaphysical path referring to ‘a vast oneness … generate the endlessly diverse forms of the world’, that has no form and cannot be described but can be perceived in its process of dynamic transformation between opposites (Lee *et al.* 2009: 70), such as Yin-Yang, moon–sun and female–male that describe the dynamic flux of the universe. As summarised by Chang (1977: 27), the meaning of Dao is ‘the substance of the cyclic and dynamic universe. It (Dao) seems empty but full, static but dynamic; it contains spiritual and materialistic attributes, time and space; and it produces and regulates activities of all beings’.

As elucidated in the classic texts of *Dao De Jing*, De is another pivotal concept, which was denoted as harmony with fellow human beings in terms of humanistic behaviours, virtues, characters, influences or moral forces. The Chinese character ‘De’ consists of three pictorial parts: 1) ‘to go’ or behaviours, 2) values or standards and 3) the heart or attitude. The word ‘De’ implies motivation by inward rectitude (Lee 2003). Watson (1993) defined De as moral virtue or power that one acquires through being in accordance with Dao; that is what one gets from Dao.

**Actionless/non-coercive action**

According to *Dao De Jing*, ‘Wuwei’ means non-action or non-doing. Human beings are supposed to be in harmony with the ‘Dao’ if they behave in a natural or uncontrived way (Yeates 2015). Therefore, the goal of Daoist practice is the attainment of the natural way of behaving, whereas purposeful manipulation or control will result in a counterproductive effect because it usually runs against natural rules or the Dao. Wuwei, as a non-acting status of an individual, can be applied into social work practice by facilitating people to be and become part of the universe. As elaborated by Chen and Holt (2002), Wuwei does not mean doing nothing; instead, it emphasises the importance of following the way of nature by doing nothing purposefully but accomplishing things as they unfold. It is the ‘good order’ illustrated by Laozi, the author of *Dao De Jing*, when he wrote, ‘When there is this abstinence from action, good order is universal’ (Chapter 3) and ‘The Dao in its regular course does nothing (for the sake of doing it), and so there is nothing which it does not do’ (Chapter 37).

**Metaphor of water-representation of Dao and De**

Water is an effective metaphor Laozi used to describe Dao because water resembles Dao’s attributes of softness/weakness, subordination and non-completion (Chen and Holt 2002). For example, in the *Dao De Jing* it is written:
The highest excellence is like (that of) water. The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike. Hence (its way) is near to (that of) the Dao … And when (one with the highest excellence) does not wrangle (about his low position), no one finds fault with him. (Chapter 8)

Moreover, the cyclical movement of water also features functions of dynamic and vigorous Dao. As Yu (2012) further argued, Dao flows as a river, continuously gaining strength by gathering streams together and exerting its impact by downward flowing without contentiousness. Thus, such features of water also denote essentials of the De (virtue) that is the operation of Dao in social and moral senses that can be perceived and performed by human beings. Lee (2008) further posited personality aspects of ‘wateristic’ features with five essential components: 1) altruism, 2) modesty, 3) flexibility, 4) transparency and honesty and 5) gentleness with perseverance. By nourishing everything in a non-coercive way and assembling strengths through weakness and from lower places, water-like characteristics give a reified image of De.

Ziran (naturalness) and Su and Pu (simplicity)

Along with the notion of Wuwei and the water metaphor, Daoist teachings take much notice of the concepts of naturalness and simplicity. Naturalness is the supreme principle (Dao is modeled on naturalness) that reflects ultimate concerns toward the world and human beings (Liu 2004). Meanwhile, Su and Pu (simplicity) are aligned with naturalness that describes a natural state of humanity. ‘Su’ refers to raw silk that is unstained and ‘Pu’ refers to an unprocessed log; both of which are in their natural state, and therefore praised by Laozi. In order to stay Su and Pu, one also needs to limit one’s own selfish desire. In this sense, simplicity does not mean an uncultivated state but a state that preserves the original beauty of human nature and avoids contamination by lusting on it. Thus, followers of Daoism over the centuries have spoken of the need to ‘return to Pu (simplicity) and back to Zhen (authenticity)’, which is now a well-known phrase in the Chinese community. This idea is crucial when living in an ever-changing world along with the flow of universal forces that denote impermanence and transition from one state to another (Yeates 2015). Therefore, Daoism advocates that human beings should live harmoniously with nature in a state of simplicity, following the universal laws and principles of nature that are beyond the will of human beings.

Theoretical underpinnings of Daoist teachings in social work practice

Maintaining harmony with nature and the universe

An ideal relationship between human beings and nature is ‘Tian Ren He Yi’, which means humans are absorbed into nature and the universe, and all are unified into oneness (Lee et al. 2008). To reach this state of oneness, an individual needs to cultivate ‘Qi’ and have a healthy lifestyle, harmonic life attitude and perform energy-generating physical exercise. One of the most distinctive practices is Qigong (Ai et al. 2001). Qi is a dynamic energy that flows constantly. The balanced Qi-flow through and around the body can lead to an intuitive connection to Dao (Kohn 2011). Qigong involves training in Qi-regulation that is vital to an individual’s life, and can facilitate communication between human beings and nature. Another traditional healthcare practice in cultivating Qi is acupuncture, which has long been utilised in Traditional Chinese Medicine. Qi, combined with Jing (life essence) and Shen (spirit), are three important
Daoist principles in social work practice

life energies in Daoism (Chan et al. 2014a). External energy is inhaled and progressively converted into higher forms (from Qi to Jing to Shen), and refined energy returns to the outside environment (Yeates 2015). Hence, by practicing Qigong, Taiji (one kind of dynamic Qigong, relative to static Qigong), the body and mind will be closely connected to the greater universe with the state of no-self (body-self), no-desire and authentic spirit as body-form merges with cosmic forces (Kohn 2011).

**Dynamic balancing through Yin-Yang completion**

Dynamic balancing in life is considered as the unification of two opposite but complementary forces, namely Yin and Yang. The existence of both Yin and Yang keeps a balanced equilibrium in the universe. When the two types of force join together and complement each other, balance will be achieved and Qi will also be generated. As written in Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing*:

> All things leave behind them the Obscurity (Yin, out of which they have come), and go forward to embrace the Brightness (Yang, into which they have emerged), while they are harmonised by the Breath of Vacancy.

Yin–Yang concepts are another fundamental and primitive metaphor rooted in Daoism. Everything in the world comprises Yin and Yang. Yin and Yang are considered as related to Qi in Daoism. There is a waxing and waning relationship between Yin and Yang and they can transformed into each other. As Yang expands, Yin reduces and vice versa. They are interdependent with and cannot exist without each other, with Yang giving birth to Yin and Yin giving birth to Yang. Hence, Yin–Yang is not static but dynamic; their nature flows and changes with time and context. The key attributes of Yin and Yang are described in Table 10.1.

Dynamic balancing highlights the transformational nature of Yin and Yang rather than being a comparison between polar opposites (Grønning et al. 2011). All entities are correlated with each other in this universe, and there is no cut-off or absolute essence of events. As noted in the *Dao De Jing*, the movement of Dao is in a manner of ‘to return’; hence, nature acts in a cyclical instead of linear pattern connoted in dynamic balancing. It also resembles the on-going process of life with co-existing opposite forces complementing and mutually transforming each other in a non-coercive manner, which has informed the existential concern of life and death, ups and downs in life, strengths and weaknesses. Basically, an on-going process of life is dynamic that is driven by various forces and keeps moving in physiological and mind–spiritual senses.

### Table 10.1 The attributes and symbols of Yin and Yang

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yang</th>
<th>Yin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculinity</td>
<td>Femininity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positivity</td>
<td>Negativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>Moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>Dark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>Water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hot</td>
<td>Cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive</td>
<td>Calm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Celia Hoi Yan Chan, Xiao-Wen Ji and Cecilia Lai Wan Chan

Thus, there is always a chance to change and to keep one’s balance alongside/inside dynamics of ‘the way’ by gradual strength-gaining processes, especially when an individual is struck with numerous life predicaments that can include physical illness, psychological distress and spiritual disorientation.

**Self-cultivation: observing and respecting the cycles of life**

In conventional social work practice, one of the objectives is to empower people to survive and thrive when confronting adverse life events. In order to facilitate better worker–client connections, which support people facing difficulties, practitioners have to learn to observe and respect the flow of developmental life cycles. It is the dynamic of action and non-action in the course of helping, especially when people are dealing with life unpredictability. The personhood of the practitioner can be understood as the emotional capacity to provide support to negative and vulnerable clients and not be prevented in the helping process. Therapeutic alliances built on a safe and nurturing environment could facilitate the therapeutic relationship between practitioner and client.

As informed by the *Dao De Jing*, the characteristics of softness and modesty are essential strengths needed in order for people to confront negative predicaments. Famous analogies of grass and tree, and tongue and teeth depict Laozi’s philosophy of ‘softness overcoming hardness’, denoting that when storms come, strong wood is more easily broken than soft grass. Similarly, it has been proposed that the soft tongue survives longer than hard teeth when aging. From this perspective, life difficulties can be understood as necessary developmental processes. Staying strong or hard is not necessarily an effective strategy in coping with stressful life events. Non-action in terms of acknowledging limitations and vulnerabilities and respecting simplicity is a way to maintain dynamic balancing in life. An individual needs to be aware of the calamity brought by being preoccupied with the physical self; as well as the need to reduce selfish and excessive desires (Chen and Holt 2002).

**Applications of Daoism into contemporary social work practice**

A growing body of literature has examined and discussed the applicability of Daoist philosophy to healthcare practices. Specifically, Traditional Chinese Medicine practices, such as Qigong, Taiji and acupuncture, which are derived from Daoism, have received attention from practitioners and researchers.

To capture the ideal state of Daoist practice, Yeates (2015: 22) proposed the term ‘flow state experiences’ (FSEs) in Taiji practices for patients with neurological conditions, which is defined as ‘experiential continuity, deep absorption, and a merging of self-awareness and activity’. Research has revealed unique benefits of long-term practice of Taiji (Wei et al. 2014). Given that neurological patients experience incoherent and fragmented cognitive states, Taiji is considered an effective intervention to facilitate consistency in FSEs. Various studies have also evaluated the efficacy of Taiji in other clinical groups. It has been reported that Taiji can improve physical functioning (flexibility, balance, muscular strengths, etc.) as well as some aspects of physiological wellbeing, such as cardiovascular function and immune system (Klein and Adams 2004; Lee et al. 2007). When compared with sitting meditation in dealing with uncontrollable rumination, Taiji practice can minimise the teaching and instruction of verbal knowledge and focus on embodied movement. A more recent review addressed psychological benefits that can be gained from Taiji, especially among those suffering from depression (Wang et al. 2014).
Likewise, different forms of Qigong were also found effective in improving holistic wellbeing. Recently, Chan and her associates have conducted a series of clinical trials examining the effectiveness of Baduanjin (also translated as Eight Section Brocade) on a wide range of physical and psychosocial areas including sleep quality, depression, anxiety, fatigue, physical functioning and telomerase activity for people with chronic fatigue syndrome, insomnia, depression and anxiety (Chan et al. 2014c; Ho et al. 2012).

Based on Daoist teachings and health philosophies in Traditional Chinese Medicine, Chan and associates (2002) developed the Integrative body-mind-spirit (I-BMS) social work practice. It embraces a holistic orientation, and the interconnectedness of body, mind and spirit as well as the environment. Further, I-BMS provides a unique framework in understanding changes, transition and illness, which emphasises mutuality, complementarity and balance. If a system is out of balance, it tends to polarise forces and the individual becomes disconnected and stagnant, manifested by bodily and emotional symptoms. A selection of body–mind techniques are described in Table 10.2.

In addition to body–mind exercise, Daoist philosophical themes comprise a far richer comprehensive implication in social work practice. A study found that rumination can predict chronicity of depressive disorder and anxiety symptoms, and it may be a particular feature of mixed anxiety/depression symptoms (Nolen-Hoeksema 2000). Setting off personal maladaptive attachments and excessive rumination results in states of imbalance and the need to depolarise these negative forces so as to return to a state of dynamic balancing.

**Empirical studies of I-BMS approach**

Informed by Daoist teaching, the affliction and equanimity framework is a valued effort to redefine the concept of wellbeing by emphasising the interconnectedness of body, mind and spirit (Chan et al. 2014a). Affliction is conceptualised as a consequence of maladaptive attachment. Affliction manifests as emotional vulnerability, including displays of resentment, jealousy and bitterness. Somatically, the affliction is in the form of irritability and nervousness. In the spiritual domain, an existential threat underlies affliction when the individual loses their direction and
meaning of life. On the contrary, equanimity is perceived as an ideal state of wellbeing, which is achieved by internal cultivation of mindfulness and compassion, while also abolishing the illusion of self. Specifically, equanimity encompasses a mindful awareness toward internal and external stimulus, a bodily vitality and expanded self in relatedness to others and the whole world. This framework has been operationalised by Chan and her colleagues (2014b) into a Holistic Wellbeing Scale (HWS).

I-BMS intervention has been found effective in various clinical trials since 2000. Recent research showed that people with anxiety and depression benefitted after participating in the I-BMS group intervention (Chan et al. 2012; Ho 2014; Sreevani et al. 2014). Beside psychosocial parameters, spiritual wellbeing was also enhanced as measured by the subscales of spiritual disorientation and spiritual self-care in HWS (Chan et al. 2014b). Similar results have been found in other effectiveness studies on sleeping disturbances and mood distress (Chan et al. 2015), and in our recent research on people living with psoriasis.

**Spiritual growth through dynamic balancing: ways of living with psoriasis**

From a perspective of dynamic balancing, clients coming to I-BMS groups are usually those feeling that their life is out of balance, and are finding it difficult to harness the energy and strengths needed to attain tranquility. That is to say, their life energy is mostly blocked in one pole. Accordingly, the I-BMS approach aims at facilitating participants to regain a new distinct form of dynamic balancing from their previous state via self-cultivation and self-transformation in the face of their personal difficulties. In the specific case of psoriasis patients, the main goal is to help them to find inner resources that can aid them to accept and appreciate themselves while living with this incurable chronic disease. Some participants realised a process of self-transformation from an ill patient to a helper, and were then able to benefit others with what they had learnt from I-BMS. Although they still face symptom fluctuations and difficulties in life, the participants became more aware of their relations to uncontrollable things and learnt to preserve their equanimity.

**From resolution to non-coercive action**

It is not uncommon that patients tend to treat disease as their opposite, the rival, enemy, and thus intend to defeat it for good as soon as possible. Yet, this may not be possible for patients with chronic physical conditions where the disease is incurable and the aetiology is also not clearly explained. Psoriasis is one such disease. In addition to a patient’s appearance being impacted, invisible joint pain is also common among sufferers. Mr T. is one of these patients. At the completion of the course, he had transformed his intention of curing his disease into an overcoming process with non-coercive action. He tells his story:

I have this chronic illness for more than 30 years. I always want to “overcome” or “solve” the psoriasis. But it was quite often that consequence did not meet my expectation, then I would become more depressed, unhappier resulting in generating negative energy. This conditions would definitely affect my illness negatively in return. Worker remind me of that indeed, the process of “overcoming” the problem is also important … working on something to solve the problem is already a very good attitude. Although things often do not come out in particular way we wished, you still can have some gains during the whole process. After I become aware of this point. I relax myself a little bit. I know there is no need to perceive solution of problem as a must … Body scan is also beneficial … when I
am scanning some painful joints before sleep, I will also smile to accept this fact gently that it is pain … today I feel painful, but I may have another kind of feeling tomorrow.

**Flow with the ‘naturalness’**

In the I-BMS framework, participants learn to experience a sense of simplicity and naturalness, by using simple body–mind exercises adopted to circulate Qi and blood inside participants and to facilitate interaction with the wider world. Through body–mind practices and spiritual reflection on Yin-Yang balancing, learning of acceptance and non-coercive action, Ms L. was able to respect and follow the flow of life, foster her physical and emotional capacities as well as transform her difficulties into life wisdom:

> Psoriasis is really very dreadful … it can be very severe … I plan to insist practicing things I learnt here and try to contribute my limited time to share with others and spread the benefits to other patients … When we do the reflection this week, I realised that for many things, I can let them go, do not need to bear them all.

In addition to Qigong movement, Mr Y. found that activities focusing on self-reflection and self-connection also helped to move him from psychological senses:

> Despite the body exercises, the most impressive moment is the lesson focusing on who I am. Previously, I never tried to inner talk before. I feel that this skill (talk to myself) I learnt from this course is very beneficial. I will do it regularly … Although I am quite nerdy and seldom went out before. Yet, after attending this courses every Saturday, I plan to commit myself to all these physical exercises, mindfulness and self-connections to keep it (the balancing) running.

Likewise, Mr S. felt he had overcome some of the negative impacts of his illness, and kept a healthy lifestyle by doing aerobic exercises. However, there were still some things he could learn to do in order to enhance the dynamic balancing he had already attained:

> Here I found that there are a variety of ways to express emotions. This is really a holistic course. Before this, my solution was quite unilateral. I found that there are many other means to keep myself healthy in mind-spiritual aspects … also, during sharing sessions, I witnessed various kinds of energy were released.

**Challenges and future directions**

Despite the promising results in empirical studies, the application of Daoist teachings into contemporary social work practices is still experiencing great challenges. The more salient predicament is the modern translation of Daoist concepts. Daoism has been developed and evolved through centuries, and the foundational tenets have been interpreted by scholars in various ways. Our work primarily focuses on the teachings generated by Laozi so as to avoid excessive complexity. Other Daoist Masters’ works (i.e. *Nan Hua Zhen Jing* of Zhuangzi) are still worthwhile to investigate.

In terms of the practices developed under Traditional Chinese Medicine, Qigong, Taiji and acupuncture feature as the most well-known, while the spiritual practices and reflections of Daoist teachings are largely neglected. I-BMS is almost the first attempt to address the core
concepts of Daoism and to integrate them into social work practices. Incorporating Daoist philosophy into healthcare or social work practice is still under an initial stage of construction.

Future research should be conducted to connect the theoretical underpinnings of Daoist teaching with the experiential practices of Qigong and TCM, as well as to investigate how effective it is in holistic patient care services. Given that Daoism bears strong features of Chinese culture, exploration into how it can be translated into other cultures with sensitivity would need effortful commitment. In terms of research, rigorous RCT studies and innovative study designs, such as Whole System Research (WSR), are warranted (Verhoef et al. 2005).

Conclusion

Daoist teachings and regime practices place great value on whole-person wellbeing in terms of dynamic balancing, which has been gradually recognised in the field of clinical social work. Concepts of ‘non-action’, ‘simplicity’ and ‘naturalness’ communicate ways of Dao achievement. In the context of social work practice, it can be understood and experienced through teaching and physical exercises so as to activate the flow of Qi. On the basis of Yin-Yang theory, the framework of dynamic balancing depicts a self-adjusted process in an ever-changing world. For the personal and professional development of the practitioner, water-like qualities can always be sources for self-reflection. Increasing evidence shows that practices rooted in Daoism can improve the total wellbeing of various groups of clientele.

References


