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The Tao of Water

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The Tao of Water *by Rod Giblett*

Homage to Heath Greville

In the late 1970s I discovered Taoism, or perhaps Taoism discovered me. It was a mutual encounter anyway. I bought and read Jane English's and Giu-Fu Feng's beautifully presented translation of the *Tao te ching*, the most famous text of Taoism. I had earlier read Alan Watts' *The way of Zen* with its admirable first chapter on 'The philosophy of the Tao.' This chapter is still probably the best short introduction to Taoism. Watts followed this up with his book on Taoism (and water), *The watercourse way*. In 1980 I moved to Sydney to undertake a Masters degree at Sydney University. I read a review of Geoff Pike's book, *The power of chi*, published in Sydney and I bought a copy in Sydney's Chinatown. This was my first introduction and exposure to Tai Chi. I did some of the exercises in the book but gradually realised I needed to find classes and a teacher of Tai Chi. In 1982 I moved back to Perth to do a PhD at Murdoch University. I was living in South Fremantle and saw classes in Taoist Tai Chi advertised at the Beacon Yoga Centre just around the corner and up the road. I could not believe my good fortune to find Taoism and Tai Chi combined, and classes in it available so close. I went along and joined in and I have been doing Taoist Tai Chi ever since. Heath Greville was my teacher, hence the dedication of this chapter to her in gratitude for being so. Eight years later she was also my teacher of Lok Hup Ba Fa (Lui Ha Ba Fa), an older Taoist art and another debt of gratitude.

I graduated from Murdoch University in 1988. Now that I had my 'driver's licence' as a researcher I started wondering what I was going to research next. It didn't take long to find a topic. In 1984 I had moved from South Fremantle to Forrestdale to build a house and live by Forrestdale Lake, an internationally important wetland west of Armadale. The water in the lake is home to nuisance, non-biting midges. The males swarm in large numbers and made a barbecue impossible in summer. It is the god-given right of every Australian to be able to have a barbecue, but the midges, and the lake, were denying the exercise of that right. Local meetings were held to call for action, such as spraying, to kill the midges. Some people at these meetings wanted to fill in the lake and make football fields out of it. One guy even threatened to dump a 44-gallon drum of dieseline into it. I started wondering why some people hated swamps and other wetlands. This was a research question that I then researched and answered in the book, *Postmodern wetlands: Culture History Ecology* published by Edinburgh University Press in 1996. This book could not help but touch on water, but Taoism was tangential to its concern with wetlands in European and American culture and in Australian indigenous and settler cultures.

At the same time as I was researching and writing this book, I was becoming aware of other wetlands in Western Australia and how they were regarded in a similar way to Forrestdale Lake. I also started wanting to present wetlands in a positive light. I was working at Murdoch University as a tutor after I finished my PhD and I shared an office with Hugh Webb who taught Aboriginal literature. We started discussing wetlands and comparing and contrasting how they are regarded

across indigenous and settler cultures. We decided we could research and write a really good book on Western Australian wetlands. We then applied for funding from the Indian Ocean Centre for Peace Studies, from Murdoch University and from Curtin University where I had taken up a lectureship. This funding enabled us to travel to all the Ramsar Convention wetlands of international importance in WA. We also had sufficient funding to enable a photographer to travel with us and photograph some of these wetlands. We wrote much of a book manuscript and collected stories and poems to go into it as well. We then applied for funding from the Lotteries Commission and ALCOA to publish the book, *Western Australian wetlands: The Kimberley and south-west* which was published jointly by Black Swan Press and the Wetlands Conservation Society in 1996. It is still the only book on the subject and it touched on water too, especially in May Durack's classic of pastoralist literature, *Kings in grass castles*. This chapter was reprinted in *Living with the earth: Mastery to mutuality* published by Salt Publishing in 2004. This was a general book about nature, culture, landscape aesthetics, wilderness, the bush, national parks, mining and Aboriginal country. Taoism was again tangential to its concern with wetlands in Australian indigenous and settler cultures.

Having now lived in Forrestdale for 20 years and been involved in local conservation issues and projects, I got involved in a local oral and natural history project to record and conserve the memories of past and present long-time residents. I was successful in gaining funding to have an oral environmental historian, Cath Drake, record interviews with these people. I was also successful in gaining funding to have the interviews transcribed. I was granted study leave in 2003 by Edith Cowan University to write up these interviews into a book, *Forrestdale: People and place* published in 2006 by Access Press with funding from the Lotteries Commission. This book has a chapter on water from the point of view of the residents. Taoism was again tangential, though some residents talked about water in an implicitly Taoist way.

I was also granted study leave in 2003 to research and write a book about Taoist Tai Chi. I wanted to document the health benefits that some people gained from doing Taoist Tai Chi. Edith Cowan University funded my study leave and travel to Canada where I interviewed a number of people who do this 'style' or 'form' of Tai Chi. After returning home, I transcribed the interviews and then wrote them up into the thematically-driven book, *Health recovery: The Taoist Tai Chi™ way* published by Shephard-Walwyn in London in 2008. This book makes no mention of water, but it has a lovely photograph on the cover of a statue of Guan Yin, the Buddhist Goddess of compassion, standing on a platform overlooking a placid pond in the grounds of the Taoist Tai Chi centre in Canada. This photo is the screen saver on my computer as I sit writing this. It sums up and expresses the calmness and calming quality of still and reflective water.

My interest in, and practice of, Tai Chi sparked a more general interest in the human body. I started researching and writing on this topic when I was at Curtin University in the early 1990s. At Edith Cowan University I had the opportunity to teach this material on several occasions. This work resulted in the book, *The body of nature and culture* published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2008. In this book I touch on the Taoist understanding of water in the chapter on 'The Taoist body' and in a section of the last chapter on Taoist ecology. In the previous books on wetlands I had never got around to addressing directly and extensively the Taoist understanding of water so now is the time and this is the place. The watercourse way has brought me back to water and to this place.

The *Tao te ching* contains two explicit and important mentions of water, the first in verse 8:

The best way to live
 is to be like water
 For water benefits all things
 and goes against none of them
 It provides for all people
 and even cleanses those places
 a man is loath to go
 In this way it is just like the Tao (Lao Tzu, 2001, p.21)

One of the places where 'a man is loath to go' is wetlands. Yet wetlands are a place where water already is. How can water cleanse a place where water already is? That is part of the paradox of water – and the Tao. It is already in places where a man is loath to go and it cleanses those places. Or perhaps more precisely, the plants of the place absorb the nutrients and filter the water to make it cleansing. This water provides for all people and benefits all things. It thus gives an exemplar of the way to live. By going low, by going to low places, by taking the lower part, by going into the nether lands and into the grotesque lower bodily and earthly regions, water not only goes to places men are loath to go but also cleanses, provides and benefits all people and all things (see Giblett, 1996, 2008).

The other mention of water in the *Tao te ching* in verse 78 also highlights the paradoxical power of water – and the Tao:

Nothing in the world
 is as soft and yielding as water
 Yet for attacking the hard and strong
 none can triumph so easily
 It is weak, yet none can equal it
 It is soft, yet none can damage it
 It is yielding, yet none can wear it away

 Everyone knows that the soft overcomes the hard
 and the yielding triumphs over the rigid (Lao Tzu, 2001, p.91)

The rock wears away from water flowing over it, but the water never wears. Water is the wearing agent. Water exemplifies the soft and yielding power of the Tao, and the Taoist body (expressed especially in Tai Chi or taijiquan), that overcomes the hard body and triumphs over the rigid body (expressed especially in the Fascist body and body building) (see Giblett, 2008).

The slow, graceful movements of taijiquan are like a gently flowing river; the stillness in movement and the movement in stillness of taijiquan are like the still waters of a wooded wetland reflecting the heavens above; the moving meditation of taijiquan is like a deep ocean pool full of waving and weaving mysteries; the power and grace of taijiquan is like a serpentine stream curving and straightening through the body of the earth; the strength and flexibility of the Taoist

body in taijiquan is like a continental river with deep currents carrying mighty ships and with shallow billabongs giving shelter to small fish; the internal circulation of energy in the body in the practise of taijiquan is like a underground stream coursing through the cavities of the lower earthly stratum cleansing and purifying them; the rising of energy from the feet, through the pelvis and up the spine to the top of the head in taijiquan is like a bubbling spring welling up from deep underground to bathe the brain, the 'palace of the mud brain,' in cerebro-spinal fluid; the internal alchemy of taijiquan rejuvenates like a delta or lagoon giving birth to new life, the most fertile places on the planet; the generating and storing of energy, the accumulation of chi, in taijiquan is like an estuary to which all good things flow and which expels bad things; yin and yang complementing each other are like the black waters of slimy swamps and the white waters of mountain streams, both part of the body of the earth — the Tao is like water.

In his notes to verse 78 of *Tao te ching* Jonathan Star elaborates that:

although each element of nature can be likened to the Absolute, water has always been the most endeared by the Taoist and the one closest to the nature of Tao. Water not only represents humility, gentleness, and a mind in perfect repose, but it is the element that gives birth to all life. Witness this brilliant passage on water from the Kuan-tzu – a Taoist work of the fourth century B.C.E: water is the blood of the Earth; it flows through its muscles and veins. . . It is accumulated in Heaven and Earth and stored up in the various things of the world. It comes forth in metal and stone and is concentrated in living creatures. Therefore it is said that water is something with a spirit. Being accumulated in plants and trees, their stems gain orderly progression, their flowers obtain proper number, and their fruit gain proper measure. Water gathers in jade, and the nine virtues appear. It congeals to form man. . . that is its most refined essence. . . Nothing is produced without it. Only he who knows how to rely on its principles can act correctly. (Lao Tzu, 2001, p.269)

For the Taoist, the earth is a body and water is the life-blood of the earth.

For Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) writing nearly 2000 years later on the other side of the northern hemisphere the body is like the earth too:

While man [sic] has within himself bones as a stay and framework for the flesh, the world has stones which are supports of earth. While man has within him a pool of blood wherein the lungs as he breathes expand and contract, so the body of the earth has its ocean, which also rises and falls every six hours with the breathing of the world; as from the said pool of blood proceed the veins which spreads their branches through the human body, so the ocean fills the body of the earth with an infinite number of veins of water. . . In this body of the earth is lacking, however, the nerves, and these are absent because nerves are made for the purpose of movement; and as the world is perpetually stable, and no movement takes place here, nerves are not necessary. But in all other things man and the earth are very much alike. (da Vinci, 1977, pp.45,6)

On this view, the body of the earth (the body and the earth) is inert, motionless, passive and unmoving, despite the lungs contracting and expanding and the pool of blood ebbing and flowing in Leonardo's pre-'heart as pump' view of the circulation of blood. These are counter-balanced

movements, or actions and reactions that are not particularly purposive; they just occur and recur in homeostasis

Although Leonardo does not explicitly mention the machine, it is implicit in the idea that the body is a passive assemblage of parts (anatomy) until and unless it is acted upon by the nervous system and made to move and function (physiology). The editor of a selection from Leonardo's notebooks argues that he 'looked upon anatomy with the eye of a mechanician' (in da Vinci, 1977, p.150). Leonardo also looked upon geology and geography with the eye of a mechanician. In a similar vein, Kenneth Clark (1939, p.175) comments that, to Leonardo a landscape, like a human being, was part of a vast machine, to be understood part by part and, if possible, in the whole. Rocks were not simply decorative silhouettes. They were part of the earth's bones, with an anatomy of their own, caused by some remote seismic upheaval.

To Leonardo the whole could be taken apart to be understood part by part without necessarily understanding, or leading to an understanding of, the whole. Water was not simply a pool of fluid but was part of the earth's blood with a physiology of its own caused by the shape and lie of the land, its topography, or anatomy. Both the human body and the body of the earth have veins as Leonardo suggests. Both the landscape and the body is a machine composed of parts. The body is figured as earth, but both are figured as machine. The machine is the master trope that serves equally well for the body and the earth.

Leonardo was not alone in the Renaissance in espousing the world-view of the body as earth, and the earth as body. Walter Raleigh in his *History of the World* propounded the view that:

his [sic] blood, which disperseth itself by the branches of veins through all the body, may be resembled to those waters which are carried by brooks and rivers over all the earth, his breath to the air, his natural heat to the inclosed warmth which the earth hath in itself . . . our eyes to the light of the sun and the moon. (cited in Tillyard, 1943, p.99)

The diabolic genius of da Vinci was not only to propound this view of the body as earth or landscape, but also to combine it with the view of the body as machine.

For Henry David Thoreau, a reader of Raleigh writing 400 years later, the body and the earth were master tropes for each other. For him, water is 'the most living part of nature' so it is 'the blood of the earth' (Thoreau, 1962, XIII, p.163). Water congregates in different configurations. Thoreau differentiated between various water bodies. A deep- and hard-bottomed lake for him is symbolic of a kind of highly philosophical self-reflexivity, rather than of merely narcissistic self-contemplation. For him 'a lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is the earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature' (Thoreau, 1982, p. 435; see also pp. 67, 339, 437 and 527).

The swamp, by contrast, for Thoreau is shallow and soft, the first birth of nature. It is also the soft and pliable centre of the human body as he suggested:

that central meadow and pool in Gowing's Swamp is its very navel, omphalos, where the umbilical cord was cut that bound it to creation's womb. Methinks every swamp tends to

have or suggests such an interior tender spot. The sphagnous crust that surrounds the pool is pliant and quaking, like the skin or muscles of the abdomen; you seem to be slumping into the very bowels of the swamp. (Thoreau (1962, IX, p.394; see his hand-drawn maps of this swamp, VI, p.467 and XIII, p.125 with its heavily shaded, dark centre)

The surface of the swamp is the soft spot of nature, even the breasts of Mother Nature when Thoreau (1962, IX, pp. 38,9) refers to 'the soft open sphagnous centre of the swamp' as 'these sphagnous breasts of the swamp - swamp pearls.' The soft centre of the swamp is also related to the human body for Thoreau (1962, X, p. 262) as 'the part of you that is wettest is fullest of life.' For Thoreau this region is 'the quaking zone.' This refers for him to the swampy mid- (and lower-) section of the body and of the earth (for the quaking zone, see Giblett, 2009, chapter 1). In 1856 Thoreau (1962, IX, pp.38 and 42) wrote in his journal about 'the soft open sphagnous centre of the swamp.' He summed up this centre of the swamp as 'quaking bog.' The quaking zone is a bodily and earthly zone, the womb of the great goddess earth, or in Bakhtin's (1984; see also Giblett, 2008a, chapter four) terms, the grotesque lower bodily stratum, and the grotesque lower earthly stratum (see Giblett, 1996, chapter six). The quaking zone is both a particular landform, such as a wetland as a place where the earth trembles, and a psychogeosomatic state, or affect, where mind, body and earth meet and tremble in fear or flight, in horror or terror, in anticipation or fascination, in dread or hope, or a mixture of both. The quaking zone in general is a place and space of both fear and hope (see Giblett, 2009).

As for Thoreau, so for the Taoist, as Allan (1997, p.4) puts it, water 'is the model for philosophical ideas about the nature of the cosmos.' It is also the model for personal conduct and for life itself. The Classical Chinese word, shui, conventionally translated as 'water' is thus, Allan (1997, p.32) argues, 'a broader category than the English 'water'.' Confucius (cited by Allan, 1997, p.24) said that 'water, which extends everywhere and gives everything life without acting (wuwei) is like virtue (de) . . . Its bubbling up, never running dry, is like the way (dao).' Water is thus the model for three of the central concepts of Confucianism and Taoism: the dao or tao, the way, itself; de, virtue; and wuwei, nonaction. For Allan (1997, p.31):

water served as a root metaphor in the formulation of abstract concepts that were the basis of system of social and ethical values. It also served in the same capacity in relation to environmental and corporeal values, and to the earth and the body.

'The Taoist body,' as Schipper (1978, 1993) aptly calls it, is conceptualised as 'a landscape with mountains, lakes, woods, and shelters' as Fulder (1990, p.355) puts it. Or more precisely, given that landscape is a surface phenomenon (see Giblett, 2004, chapter 3), the Taoist body is conceptualised as a land with depths and dynamism, not just surfaces and static parts. For the Taoists, "the human body is the image of a country" (Schipper, 1993, p.100), rather than the country as the image of the human body (and mind) of modernity in which, for example, mountains are figured as the heady heights of the superego and theory and swamps as the grotesque lower bodily stratum and the unconscious (see Giblett, 1996, p.26). Yet the image of the Taoist body as country is, as Schipper (1978, p.357) goes on to argue, 'a correspondence going beyond a simple metaphor.' For Liu I-ming 'the human body is the country.' An entire 'environmental ethics,' a whole ecological way of life, is implied here as 'the emphasis on country,' as Schipper (1993, p.101; 2001, p.92) puts it, 'reflects the interdependence of the human being

and his[/her] environment' to the point that the human being is not simply within his or her environment – rather, 'the environment is within us.'

The Taoists are concerned with 'the flow of energy in the land' (Wong, 2001, p.122). The ancient Taoist art of feng shui is concerned, as Skinner (1989, p.xi) puts it, 'with the location of dragon lines [or veins (Wong, 1996, pp.30 and 65-68; see also Wong, 2001, p.136)] of energy in the earth and their interaction with man [sic] as part of his subtle environment.' For Cheng (1994, p.123) 'dragon arteries wind through the landscape' or more precisely, as landscape is a surface phenomenon (see Giblett, 2004), they wind through the land, both its surface and depth. In Chinese languages, as Allan (1997, p.56) points out, 'there is no word for landscape as such.' Landscape is a western category that colonises the land conceptually and concretely (see Giblett, 2004).

In Chinese terms energy or 'life-force' is ch'i that 'flows through the earth like an underground stream' (Skinner, 1989, p.1). Ch'i also flows through the earth like energy through the body. Thus for Skinner (1989, p.1) 'a parallel can be drawn with the flow of ch'i through the acupuncture meridians through the body.' Conversely, a parallel can be drawn with the flow of energy through the earth. Feng-shui is a kind of ecological taijiquan as Wong (1996, p.46) defines it as 'the art of seeing the pattern of movement and stillness in the land' just as taijiquan is the art of performing movement with, and cultivating stillness in, the body. Acupuncture, feng-shui and tai c'hi are Taoist arts of health, longevity and well-being for the body and the earth, for the body of the earth.

The body and the earth form the body of the earth, what Rossbach (1984, p.8) calls 'a sacred metabolic system' of energy flows in living beings rather than the secular metabolic exchange of dead matter in industrial capitalism (see Giblett, 2008a, chapter 1). Whereas the former is enacted in the cultivation and circulation of energy in the living body of the earth, the latter culminates in the production of the commodity and in the exchange of dead matter and labour for money, and of money for dead matter. And whereas the latter gives rise to nature as 'man's [sic] inorganic body' from which 'he' is alienated and on which 'he' works in the production of commodities, the former is intimately related to nature as humans' body with which humans are united and (with) which humans work (see Giblett, 2004, 2008).

For the Taoist the body and the earth are consanguineous and conterminous because they are united and enlivened by the same energy flow, or Ch'i. Ch'i or matter/energy is central to a Taoist view of the body and of the earth, the body of the earth. Ch'i for Wei-Ming (1989, p.76) is 'the blood and breath of the vital force that underlies all beings.' The Guanzi (Chuang Tzu) calls water 'the blood and breath of the earth' (cited by Kuriyama, 1999, p.50). Ch'i/qi, or vitality as Allan (1997, p.60) as translates it, is 'closely associated with breath – and mist, the breath of the earth. . . and in later theory it is said to be that which everything is made of.' For Cheng (1994, p.117) 'the vital breaths simultaneously animate both the being of the universe and the being of man [sic].' One breath, two beings: human being and the being of the universe are distinct and not merged into one whole but breathe the same breath.

Ch'i/qi contrasts with some major western concepts, such as matter. It occupies according to Graham (cited by Allan, 1997 p.88):

The place in Chinese cosmology occupied by matter in ours. The basic metaphor behind the word matter is of timber (Latin *materia*), inert and cut up and to be assembled by a carpenter; *qi*, on the other hand, is in the first place breath, alternating between motion and stillness.

This alternation between motion and stillness is expressed in taijiquan. Taijiquan involves what Mauss (1992, p.469) calls 'dancing at rest;' it is also what he calls 'a technique of active rest.' In Kristeva's (1992, p.169) novel *The Samurai* the narrator describes taijiquan as 'a kind of tortoiselike eurythmics.' One character goes on to elaborate in Maussian terms that in taijiquan:

You dance with your arteries and veins . . . – it's not a matter of arms and legs. Your blood surges forward, draws back, and then the time comes when your body's transformed. It doesn't disappear, but the rhythm of your blood is in harmony with shapes you imagine in space – your body itself is all space, what's inside and outside are brought together and redistributed, magnified almost to infinity, anatomised to infinity.

Taijiquan is an external and internal dance of bodily limbs, organs and fluids choreographed to the imagined shapes and actions of animal movements: stork cools wings, snake creeps down, golden cock stands on one leg, and so on.

In Chinese cosmology the body and the earth are both made of the same living, vital breath (see Cheng, 1986, pp.362-363). In western cosmology the body and the earth are both made of the same inert and desiccated matter. Matter is dry whereas breath is wet.

Blood is wet too, and so *ch'i/qi* is linked to it, and both are linked to water which is the life-blood of the earth and the major component of the human body. Water in the *Guanzi* is 'the blood and *qi*-breath of the earth' (cited by Allan, 1997, p.123).

Conversely, *qi* is the water and breath of the body. Consequently for Wei-Ming (1989, p.78) 'we are consanguineous with nature.' We share the same blood, and breath, of *ch'i* as nature. The same *ch'i* is pumped and flows through our veins and arteries, airways and lungs, as flows through the rest of nature. Interestingly, in the four element (and humour) theory of western philosophy air and the gaseous are associated with the wet and sanguineous (see Giblett, 1996, pp.156-160).

The *ch'i* in the plural for Graham (1989, p.325) are 'the energetic fluids in the atmosphere and inside the body.' They are not a singular substance and they are not confined to a single, self-contained entities but run through the body and the earth. The Chuang-tzu states that 'running through the whole world there is nothing but the one *ch'i*' (quoted by Graham 1989, p.328). *Ch'i* for Sullivan (1962, p.7) is 'the breath of the universe.' The idea of breath for Cheng (1994, p.118) 'is at the core of Chinese cosmology,' including traditional medicine. Indeed, medicine is a part of cosmology as Cheng goes on to argue that 'every living thing is primarily conceived not as a mere substance but as a condensation of the different types of breaths that regulate its vital functioning.'

In Chinese cosmology and medicine the kidneys are associated with water (Wong, 2000, pp. 61, 69 and 119). The kidneys are the place or organ where ch'i is generated and stored (Wong, 2000, pp. 96-7 and 102). Correspondingly, wetlands as the 'kidneys' of the earth are the site or 'organ' where the life-giving vitality of water is generated and stored. Both are places of the life-giving flow of water, not of foul stagnancy. In Chinese cosmology and medicine the liver is associated with wood and 'in wood the sap must flow' (Hammer, 1990, p.57) or else the tree will die just as in the body of the earth water must flow or the earth will die. The liver energies, Hammer (1990, p.64) goes on to relate, 'play a major part in the movement and circulation of ch'i and the prevention of stagnation.' Although wetlands have been regarded as stagnant, they are dynamic systems often of subsurface water flows. They are vital for life. Like wetlands, the kidneys for Chung (Wong, 2000, p.121) are 'the root and foundation of life.' The human body and the body of the earth are connected in and by the life-giving movement of energy.

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