

## **Chuang-Tzu's Dream Conceptual Workshop**

Erin McCarthy

Department of Philosophy

St. Lawrence University

exeasmail@columbia.edu

### Additional Documents:

- About Conceptual Workshops (PDF)
- Student Worksheet (PDF)

### **Introduction**

This exercise was used in an Asian Philosophy class to transition from a study of Confucian philosophy to Taoist philosophy. The workshop could be used at the beginning of a first class on Taoism, serving as an introduction to some of the main ideas featured in the coming classes. The workshop replaces an introductory lecture — by moving through the reading using the workshop and the subsequent instructor-guided class discussion of the results, the students engage with the text right away.

### **Readings**

*The Analects of Confucius: A philosophical translation*, Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Trans., New York: Ballantine Books, 1998. Introduction, especially pp. 45-46; and 13.18.

“Chapter Five: Zhuangzi”, Paul Kjellberg, trans., in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001.

### **Classroom Activity**

Divide into groups of 3 or 4. Each group should try to agree on an answer to the following questions. Limit discussion of each question to about 10 –12 minutes. Select one person ahead of time to serve as “scribe” and write down the agreed-upon answer. If agreement cannot be reached in the allotted time, then the scribe should record the dissenting views as well. Select a second person at the start to keep an eye on the time and to make sure the group proceeds through the worksheet in a timely manner. Support your answers with the text. This should take you about 1 hour.

#### Part I: Questions

1. The Taoism of Lao Tzu, much like Confucianism, began as a result of frustration with social conditions of the times. Whereas Confucianism took the relationship between people as the starting (and in some ways, the ultimate) point for happiness, Taoism's focus was different. What was this focus?
2. So...what is the unity expressed in Taoism?

3. In *The Analects*, Ames and Rosemont discuss the concept of the *tao* or the way. Using the following selection from Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, explain how the Confucian concept is different from the Taoist concept of the way (you are not limited to words in your elucidation of the concept).

(From Chapter 4 of the *Tao Te Ching*)

Tao is empty (like a bowl).

It may be used but its capacity is never exhausted.

It is bottomless, perhaps the ancestor of all things.

It blunts its sharpness.

It unties its tangles.

It softens its light.

It becomes one with the dusty world.

Deep and still, it appears to exist forever.

4. What is the function of the concept of the *tao* with respect to nondualism? Or, how does the concept of the *tao* relate to the concept of nondualism?

5. From the reading, you will have noticed that Zhuangzi is very skeptical regarding the concept of knowledge, and it should also be clear that the basic principles of Taoism are beyond rational analysis. Yet Zhuangzi maintains that following the *tao* is a way of life that can or even should be followed.

- First, briefly explain a “conventional” position on knowledge (you may draw from Western or Asian sources for this).
- Second, try to elucidate the point of view expounded by Zhuangzi, referring to pp. 212-213 of the reading. Focus on the passage that starts with “Saying is not just blowing...” to the paragraph that ends with “Doing that without knowing how this are...”

6. Write a *Taoist* version (a la Zhuangzi) of the story of the father and son “sheep incident” from *Analects* 13.18 (be creative!!...and ready to explain how you arrived at your creation).

## Part II

Class discussion of the results.