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Emptiness and Coherence: Part 1

Integrating Emptiness with the Three Treasures of Love, Wisdom and Vitality

Michael Robbins, M.A., L.M.H.C.
michaelclearmind@gmail.com,
website: michaelrobbinstherapy.com

We join the spokes together in a wheel
But it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape the clay into a pot,
But it is the emptiness inside
That holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
But it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
But non-being is what we use.

Tao Te Ching, Chapter 11

Emptiness emerges when the mud in our consciousness has finally settled and all that is left is clarity. It is a great stillness. There are no words that can express it. This space of absolute absence becomes apparent when we dissolve the conditional mind and totally relax the armor and tension in our bodies. It is unmoving, contentless, timeless. It has no qualities and yet it contains all qualities in potential. It is the mysterious silence out of which emerged the first sound.

This first sound to emerge out of silence, or the first movement to emerge from stillness, is a profound mystery. Scientifically we might correlate it with the Big Bang. As soon as there is movement, there is duality. There is something that is moving and a space that it is moving through. As soon as there are two, the dynamism that gives birth to all things begins. In Taoism, this is the birth of Yin and Yang.

In every act of creation, we recapitulate the movement from emptiness to form. Creation is not something that happened in the past, it is something that is happening continually. The deeper our capacity to be truly present in the here and now, the more our awareness flows from emptiness to form and back to emptiness in an unbroken circle. In this state, we overcome the illusion of our separateness and resolve the fundamental duality of subject and object. For this reason, the Tao is often represented as a circle. As our awareness embodies this circle, we hold the wholeness of the movement from emptiness to form and back to emptiness from a place of the eternal witness. This is a state of deep coherence, integration and a realization of our full potential as a human being.

When movement emerges from emptiness and touches a human being, it manifests as different levels of energy. There are many ways of categorizing and working with this energy. In Yoga they talk about the chakras. In other systems they talk about the elements of nature. In Taoist practice, there are also many ways to explore the energy that emerges out of emptiness. In this essay, I am going to explore one central way that Taoist practice understands and cultivates this energy. These are the three treasures of vitality, love and wisdom (Peng, 2010).

In Taoist practice the center of vitality is our belly Dan Tien, the center of love is the middle Dan Tien of the chest, and the center of wisdom is the upper Dan Tien of the head. Emptiness moves into manifestation in a different way in each of these locations. In Taoist practice, cultivating and balancing the energies of these three centers, knitting them together through the central channel, and realizing their root in emptiness, is seen as essential to becoming a complete human being.

The belly, the chest and the head centers are gateways to different levels of consciousness. Each is a particular seat of awareness that gives access to a

different layer of experience. During practice, we examine and dissolve the fixations and obscurations in each center that cloud the flow of chi. Through each of these energy gates, emptiness moves into a different octave in the symphony of manifestation. To use another metaphor, it is as if a great light is shining through different stain glass windows at each level of our being. We can understand this light as a continuation of the explosion of energy that began with the Big Bang. This creative expansion is still happening.

Stabilizing the awareness of emptiness and clarifying the flow of energy through the three centers, is something that I will be working on for the rest of my life. Taoist teachings, as well as the mystical principles of many traditions, tell us that when awareness can hold emptiness in the middle of life, our relationship to outer conditions changes in a profound way. When we can do this, rather than experiencing an identification with suffering, we have a direct inner experience of an infinite, formless, openness that holds all of the forms of life. We understand in a deeply transformative way that this openness is our true nature. From this infinite openness and radical availability we approach the content of our lives with profound acceptance and compassion. Although we continue to live an ordinary life, internally, we have a sense of great freedom. We understand experientially that all of our experiences are bracketed by emptiness and our spirit flies free on the wings of non-attachment. This is not a spiritual bypass of our involvement with life. It is a deeply engaged care and love for all beings from a place of freedom and unconditional acceptance for what is. When we realize emptiness, we recognize that the narratives of our lives are always written on a blank page, and suddenly we become aware of the page itself. The unconditioned source of life takes up an abode in our being and its qualities shine forth like a luminous diamond.

This essay is born out of practice. It is a reflection of what I have been able to integrate experientially over the past 45 years. I am keenly aware that there are many levels beyond what I have been able to touch, so I offer these reflections with great humility. I am deeply indebted to all of my teachers who have so generously gifted me with their teachings and the transmission of the states of realization that they have been able to stabilize through their own practice.

Mostly this essay is rooted in Taoist practice*, but in addition to being a Taoist practitioner, I studied with the late Sufi Master Pir Vilayat Khan for more than a decade and currently I am a student in the Ridwhan school of A.H. Almaas, and also a student of the Austrian mystic Thomas Hubl. Because these reflections are based in my own experience, in much of this essay I will use the first person. I am also a psychotherapist and worked for 20 years as an energy healer and body-worker. Without the direct transmission of my teachers, the wisdom I have gained from the practice of their teachings, and the application of these teachings in my professional life, these words would be merely academic.

A note of caution. Without practice, these ideas can only have limited value. The direct transmission from a competent master or teacher that has integrated these states is essential. This type of 'nervous system to nervous system' transmission opens up possibilities that are difficult to discover on your own. May many teachers, healers and masters manifest in your life to give you skillful and specific guidance!

* My most important Taoist teachers have been Robert Morningstar, Mantak Chia, Michael Winn, Peter Wayne, Bill Ryan, and Bruce Frantzis.

Coherence:

Integrating Emptiness with the Three centers

When awareness flows in an unbroken stream from the subtlety of heaven to the density of earth through the emptiness of my central channel, knitting together and harmonizing my awareness of the three centers, I experience a deep sense of wholeness. My mind is quiet, I am at peace in my emotional world, and my body is relaxed and filled with vitality. I am able to listen to the current of creation with an acute sensitivity and clarity. When these energies lose coherence, my experience is disjointed. I am reactive in body and mind and my relations are full of noise and distortion.

In a coherent state, life is filled with musical resonance. As many Tai Chi, Qi Gong and Nei Gung teachers have said, during practice "when one thing moves, everything moves." My inner and outer world are integrated. Life is a symphony of vibrations, colors, textures and dynamic movement. Everything is alive. My insides speak to my outsides and my outsides speak to my insides. There is a

sense of order and harmony between my inner and outer world that I perceive directly. In the deepest reaches of this experience, my inner and outer world become unified. In this state of flow, the sense of duality, subject and object, dissolves and awareness holds the movement from emptiness to form and back to emptiness in an unbroken circle.

The miracle of all of this is that it is “simply happening”. I am not “making it happen”. The current of life itself is simply moving and I am along for the ride. It is the most natural thing in the world. No big deal. In this state, I recognize that the majority of my inner work is to dissolve the blockages to this natural movement so that it can happen without obstruction. When I do this well, I feel natural, relaxed, and in harmony with the rhythms of life. I recognize, in an experiential way, that “I” am occurring inside of emptiness and I allow creation to manifest as “me”. I let go of the deep layers of fear and control that normally motivate my actions and “go with the flow”.

This shift in perspective from emptiness emerging inside of my life to my life emerging inside of emptiness is profound. In the words of Thomas Hubl, “meditation is not something that occurs inside of my life, my life is something that occurs inside of meditation” (Hubl, 2020).

When this shift in the seat of consciousness is established, energy flows from its root in formless emptiness directly into transformational acts of creativity and compassion. This coherent expression of energy from emptiness into form is of great service to the world. It is a natural expression of the Tao.

Of course, this attunement is a process that comes and goes, depending on how identified I am with my grasping, reactive mind. I cannot claim to have attained a constant, unbroken awareness of non-reactive, centered, emptiness. I still get stuck and become an anxious mess under enough stress! Just ask my wife!

Can you coax your mind from its wandering
And keep to the original oneness?
Can you let your body become
as supple as a newborn child's?
Can you cleanse your inner vision
until you see nothing but the light?

Can you love people and lead them
without imposing your will?
Can you deal with the most vital matters
by letting events take their course?
Can you step back from your own mind
and thus understand all things?

Tao Te Ching
Chapter 10

As my practice has deepened over the years, I have come to understand that the flow of creative energy that emerges out of emptiness has an innate order. Without creating a metaphysics or a theology out of this, this simply seems experientially true. If I am deeply quiet, this wisdom and natural order reveals itself in a sense of inner guidance that I perceive directly through my intuition. This inner guidance can be applied to all dimensions of life. Over years of practice, my conclusion is that inner guidance is always present. The only question is whether I am listening! If I listen with attunement, right action unfolds naturally, and my interactions have a certain balance and harmony. What gets in the way of my listening are all of my reactive structures, my grasping, controlling mind, and my undigested traumas.

The Master allows things to happen.
She shapes events as they come.
She steps out of the way
And lets the Tao speak for itself.

Tao Te Ching
Chapter 45

Getting to this state of stillness and quiet listening involves confronting deep energetic, emotional and psychological blockages. These blockages are a result of the impressions and traumas that shape my individual life as well as the familial and cultural lineage that I was born into.

In my experience, these impediments to flow live in each of the three centers in different ways. Unwinding these obstructions needs precise and subtle attention. Truly transforming these blockages is a process that is multifaceted. Many methods and tools are necessary on the path to freedom. Along with the many methods available in the Taoist cannon I also advocate that contemporary seekers avail themselves of mindfulness informed, body-centered, psychotherapies.

As a teacher of Taoist practice as well as a psychotherapist and energy worker, I have the opportunity to observe how these blockages and energy fixations manifest in many people. My experience is that each imbalance has practical consequences and result in different kinds of distortions and “unskillful” life decisions. These distortions are unique and need subtle skill and attunement to address. I will examine a couple of case examples of imbalances in the centers later in this essay.

The Taoists call each center a “Dan Tien”, which loosely translates as an ‘elixir field’ or a ‘cauldron of energy’. As such, the development of each center is intimately related to the practice of Taoist alchemy. Taoist alchemy is the study of the transformation of chi or energy from one state to another. In Taoist alchemical practice, in each cauldron we do a different piece of alchemical work, a different kind of ‘cooking’. The classical formula is that the student cultivates the vitality in the belly into the compassion in the chest, the compassion in the chest into the wisdom in the head, the wisdom in the head into emptiness, and then shatters her attachment to emptiness to return to the Tao. (Liang and Wu, 1997, p. 92) The Tao is the complete circle from emptiness to form and back to emptiness. Taoist alchemical practitioners have many specific and subtle ways of achieving this transformation. Taoist alchemy is a profound subject that I will not have space to explore in this essay. However, the principals of alchemy will inform these reflections.

When the “chi” or energy of each center is balanced and in harmony with the other centers, my body/mind is like a well-tuned instrument capable of expressing a creative symphony of sound, color, emotion, sensation and thought. When this balance is present, I feel settled, in “my seat”, a part of the great orchestra of humanity-as-a-whole. In this state of balance, I am fully capable of contributing my unique voice to humanity’s evolution. I am coherent with my

own being and also with the greater flow of energy that is flowing through the “one body” of humanity. Like a healthy cell in this body, I naturally contribute to the survival, development and transformation of humanity with a deep awareness of humanity’s place in nature and the universe.

Man follows the Earth.
Earth follows the universe.
The universe follows the Tao.
The Tao follows only itself.

Tao Te Ching,
Chapter 25

The Belly Dan Tien

In Taoist training, one begins by developing and stabilizing the Dan Tien in the belly. This is the foundation of physical vitality. Without a coherent flow of energy in this area, our physical vitality is imbalanced.

My experience is that my belly center is the root of my joy and pleasure in being a physical being. It is deeply connected to my experience of sexuality and the sensual pleasure of being alive. When my belly center is open, I feel an electricity and eros that connects me to all of life. This energy naturally erupts in dancing, painting and writing poetry. Particularly when I was younger, it also expressed itself in a rich and juicy sex life. As I have gotten older, my sexual current is not as insistent or strong, but I still have a great appreciation for the rich variety of life’s sensual pleasures.

My belly center also feels directly connected to my capacity to be present with presence, here and now, in the practical realities of life. When my belly center is open, I am present in the circumstances of each moment. In a very practical way, I am coordinated physically and know where my body is in space. I am athletic and have access to physical strength. I also have a good sense of where other people’s bodies are in space and an intuitive sense of their movements. When I am dancing, or doing the Tai Chi practice of push hands, I am attuned to my partners body and can anticipate their movements. I also have a

good “gut sense” about people and know in a kinesthetic, direct way whether a situation is safe or threatening.

In my experience, paying attention to the energies of the belly is also a doorway to developing my sense of personal power and authority. When my belly center is open, I can have a commanding presence. I feel worldly, grounded and have a strong, practical capacity to deal with the challenges of life. If my belly is open and really settled, sometimes I even have a sense of “*gravitas*” and can settle the energies in a room simply by my presence. Of course, this isn’t always true! The inverse also happens - when I am anxious, irritated, or upset, the energies radiating from my belly can be quite unsettling and dysregulating for the people around me!

We intuitively trust someone with a balanced and integrated belly center because they are living in harmony with their instinctual energies. They project a kind of warmth and vital joy that is nourishing and re-assuring to our animal nature. Their mastery of their libidinal drives allows us to feel safe with our own instinctual impulses. The fact that they are settled at this level allows our own animal nature to settle. When this center is balanced, we feel a magnetism and libidinal warmth that awakens a sense of peaceful, contentment and harmony. We seek out people like this because it is a delight to be in their presence!

In my experience, this center can become imbalanced in two directions, it can be overcharged or undercharged.

When the belly center is overcharged, we tend to over express our instinctual appetites. We might ‘fly off the handle’ easily in anger. We could even be cruel and sadistic. Or we might be promiscuous and unbounded in the expression of our sexual appetites. We could have a proclivity to abuse drugs or alcohol. It is also possible that we will be afflicted with anxiety and a difficulty keeping our energy settled and grounded. Our energies might ‘pop’ quickly like a Mexican jumping bean and we might have a poor capacity to contain our frustration.

When the belly center is undercharged, we are lacking in physical vitality. Our connection with our physical appetites for food, sex and sensual pleasure will be low. We might feel like our feet barely touch the ground. If our head center is

over charged, we might live in an abstract intellectual world of ideas or fantasies. When we lack chi in our belly, we have problems accomplishing things in the world and following through with projects.

An Example of an Overcharged Belly center, a Charged Chest Center and an Undercharged Head Center

An example of someone with an overcharged belly center is a client of mine who I will call Jimmy. Jimmy used to be an all-state football player in high school. He has a big presence and a hearty laugh. He walks into a room with a challenging, 'don't mess with me' attitude. He likes to drink and party, and if things got rowdy, he is the kind of guy you definitely want to have on your side in a fight. He likes sex and has a big appetite for it. He is practical and cares more if something 'works' than if it sounds good. He shoots from the hip and trusts nonsense advice. He likes it when I go toe to toe with him about some of his self-destructive tendencies and respects me for challenging him. He is also not afraid to tell me that I am wrong or that I am not understanding him accurately if that's what he thinks. Although he comes off as a big tough guy, he has panic attacks and can fly into a rage over "stupid things". He frequently gets into screaming matches with his wife, and she has threatened to leave him if he doesn't learn how to control his temper. All of this is worse when he is drinking, which he does often and to excess. He feels ashamed of his inability to control his frustration and angry outbursts and wishes that he had a better capacity to contain himself.

In therapy we are working to help him stay 'in' himself and to keep his energies settled in his belly and rooted in the earth. Although he has tons of vitality, it is undisciplined, and he can be emotionally violent and cruel. When this happens, he goes into a fit of self-hatred over the consequences of his lack of self-control. Although he does have energy in his chest center, it too is unstable and lacks steadiness. He comes in and out of his capacity for compassion, empathy and love. His head center is his least developed center. He lacks mental discipline and has trouble focusing for long periods of time. As a child he was diagnosed with ADHD.

The energetic practices of focusing on his breath, settling his attention into his belly, and connecting his belly to the earth, are extremely valuable for him. (See Part 2 of this article for practices that balance the belly center.)

The Chest Center

The chest center is the seat of our emotions and our capacity to love and be loved. When the chest center is balanced, our emotional life feels balanced and stable. We naturally feel a sense of empathic connection, compassion and attunement with people, animals and nature. We have a deep sense of love and compassion. A good image of a balanced chest center is the Buddha's smile.

When this area of my body is open, I recognize the divine beloved in all beings. In a practical way, I am able to tune into someone's emotional reality with precision and warmth. From the seat of this Dan Tien, I feel connected to a source of compassion and kindness which transcends my personal capacity. I call this the "universal heart" because the energies at this level feel much more profound than my personal emotional perspective. I experience this energy communicating the message; "I see you", "I am interested in really understanding your experience", and "I respect and accept you exactly the way you are". It feels like this message is for both the person or people that I am talking to, and also for myself.

In this Dan Tien, I sense a depth and kindness which transcends time and space. When I have made a connection with someone from my heart center, the connection is not dependent on physical proximity. Inside of this depth, there is a sense of great stability and steadiness, as if we are sitting inside of the embrace of a great mother, like Kuan Yin or Mother Mary. My experience is that the main contribution that I can make to allowing this energy to emerge is to dissolve the emotional reactivity, fear and grasping that are the sequelae of my emotional history. When these emotional positions dissolve, the energy of the heart arises naturally.

This energy is balanced, open and spacious. It doesn't lean forward with intrusive overconcern for others, or back with aloofness and withdrawal. It is naturally engaged in activities that alleviate suffering without over-extending or exhausting itself. An awakened chest center understands the limits of its' resources, inside of the particularities of each life, and uses them wisely.

In my personal life, the energies of this center have helped me to integrate the paradox that I am at once inextricably interconnected with all of life and also

existentially alone and fully responsible for the consequences of my actions. This has helped me to develop good emotional boundaries and a balance between interactively regulating my nervous system in relationships and self-regulating through activities like meditation and creative work. When this center is open and balanced, I can be alone without becoming anxious and yet also deeply enjoy my contact with others. I feel an evenness to my emotional presence which enables me not to take my life so “personally”. I understand that my emotional responses are not “just mine” - they are also a voice for humanity as a whole as we all work to emotionally master whatever life has presented us. I recognize that there are more similarities than differences between me and my fellow human beings. Even the human beings that I disagree with!

As with the belly center, the chest center can be either over charged or undercharged.

When the chest center is overcharged, a person may be subject to frequent emotional storms. They might be a ‘love addict’ and seek out relationships with people that are destructive for them. They can merge easily with others and have great emotional empathy but not a lot of common sense about the friends and lovers they hang out with. Particularly if their head center is also undeveloped, they may make bad choices in love. When someone is really out of balance in this area, they might take everything personally and feel like one big, exposed emotional nerve. They might feel like everything is about *them*. If their friend is ten minutes late for a lunch date, it is because they don’t care about them and think that they are not worth their time. If something goes wrong at work, it is because their boss is out to get them. If their sports team loses in the play-offs they get depressed for a week and can hardly communicate with their spouse or friends.

On the other hand, when this center is undercharged, a person is aloof and untouchable. They live in a kind of icy, protected world with very little connection. They cannot touch their vulnerability and have contempt for other people’s vulnerability. Their energy field might feel prickly, like a cactus, or cold like an ice sculpture. When someone tries to approach them with emotional warmth they could run into sarcasm, arrogance or even cruelty. For this person, their first priority is to protect themselves from emotional harm.

An Example of an Overcharged Chest Center, a Charged Belly Center and an Undeveloped Head Center

An example of the major imbalance being in the chest center is a client that I will call Lisa. Lisa oozes emotional empathy. I often feel bathed in rosy loving presence as soon as she enters the room. Her smile lights up the space with an invitation that makes me want to crawl into her lap.

The difficulty for Lisa is that she keeps on falling in love with men who are really not good for her but to whom she feels very loyal. Her last boyfriend was an alcoholic who kept getting fired from jobs and never seemed to be able to “land” professionally. Lisa believed fervently in his possibilities, supported him financially through her job as a nurse, and was constantly giving him “one more chance”. During drunken binges, he would often be emotionally abusive and occasionally physically threatening as well. Through her therapy, she was finally able to end this relationship. However, she still wanted to be his friend. Because her boundaries are poor and there was still a strong erotic attraction, she would still have sex with him occasionally even when she was trying to develop another relationship.

Lisa has a lot of friends who “have issues”. She often spends long hours on the phone with them trying to resolve their problems. She is very dependent on her social network and often feels anxious or depressed if she spends too much time alone.

Lisa has poor self-regulation skills. Energetically, she is disconnected from her vertical relationship to emptiness through her central channel and very dependent on her horizontal connections with others to regulate her nervous system. Her weakest center is her head center and we have been working with practices to open and develop this Dan Tien. We have also been working with practices that open her connection to her central channel and the energies above her head. This can be a doorway into emptiness for many people and help to stabilize an energy system that is overly reliant on relationships with others for its coherence. We are also working with the other end of her central channel through her perineum to strengthen her connection to the ground. Although her belly center is open and she has a strong libidinal charge, she is actually not very

grounded in the earth's energy. Because her capacity to self-regulate is poor, it is difficult for her to meditate and find a sense of inner quiet.

The Head Center

A balanced head center is the seat of wisdom and a clear, quiet mind. When our head center is open and balanced, our attention is undistracted. We are able to quiet our inner dialogue and settle into a space of deep, immovable, inner silence. We are aware of the spaces between our thoughts and from this deep inner stillness we can have perspective about the narratives and patterns of our life. We may be visionary and have access to ideas that present innovative solutions to life's problems. We are able to think outside the box because we are not stuck in our positions or agendas.

When my head center is open, I am not stuck in redundant, obsessive thinking. I am able to question my beliefs and assumptions and shift my positions easily from one point of view to another. My mind is open to the deeper stream of consciousness that is flowing through me from the collective wisdom of humanity. I am aware that my brain and nervous system is one neuron in the collective nervous system of humanity, and I am permeable to the river of humanity's collective intelligence as it moves from emptiness into form through me. As I access this deep current of collective intelligence, I can access ideas that are creative, innovative and even visionary. I can catch the whispers of human evolution as it is beginning to emerge into its next unfoldment and can respond with intellectual and creative resources that contribute to this unfoldment.

When my head center is open and balanced, there is a quality of spaciousness about me. I am able to listen well and receive the thoughts of others without reactivity. I am not distracted by defending my position or getting my point of view heard and can build on the ideas of others. I understand many points of view and I am more loyal to the truth than to my personal perspective on the matter at hand. I speak clearly and express my thoughts succinctly. My mind is disciplined, and I can focus on my projects and think them through with common sense. When this capacity is linked with the gifts of the heart center, I make wise choices in my personal relationships. Through a developed head center, I have "discriminating wisdom" and evaluate the words and ideas of

others with objectivity. In the depth of this clarity, I understand the full impact of my actions, as the Native Americans say, for seven generations.

Like the other centers, the head center can be over charged or undercharged.

When the head center is overcharged, someone “lives in their heads”. They may have a great capacity for abstract, intellectual explorations, but often lose their connection with their emotional intelligence and the moment-to-moment stream of sensations in their bodies. We have difficulty “feeling” them. Sometimes their thinking jumps from one stream to another with tremendous rapidity, like a monkey jumping from branch to branch. This is the famous “monkey mind”. They might talk very fast and seem a little manic. This kind of person might have a very hard time slowing down enough to actually feel their emotions or sensations.

When the head center is undercharged, a person cannot think clearly and lacks intellectual rigor. They may express themselves in ways that feel “foggy”, redundant, or incomprehensible. They might seem “spaced out” or cognitively disoriented.

An Overcharged Head Center and Undeveloped Chest and Belly Center

An example of this pattern is a client of mine that I will call Johnny. Johnny graduated from a prestigious university. For the past three years he has been living with his parents, working on a book. He often talks about applying to graduate school in literature, but somehow, he always misses the deadlines. The book he is working on goes through endless revisions and the chapters never get finalized. He often spends days playing video games and gets lost in a virtual world of fantastic, virtual characters. He reads voraciously, two or three books a week, and has an avid interest in history. He has bright, curious eyes, gets excited about his projects easily, is extremely likable, and talks very fast. He often takes me on wild rides through abstract, intellectual worlds and loves to explain the intricacies of the various computer games that he is involved with. When he gets a new idea about something, his face lights up with an infectious glow that is filled with the joy of his ‘aha’ moment. Unfortunately, however, very few of these

'brilliant ideas' ever get carried through to completion. During sessions, I often have the impulse to say – "Earth to Johnny, earth to Johnny, come in please." His chest center is undeveloped, and it is hard for him to even know what he is feeling, let alone communicate his emotional life effectively. When he is off on an abstract ride through the stratosphere, I sometimes get bored and sleepy.

Johnny has never had a romantic relationship that lasted more than a couple of weeks. The women he gets involved with all become "friends" that are more interested in an intellectual connection with him than a physical one. He is an awkward lover and frequently freezes in a sexual situation. His belly center is quite weak and undercharged.

His healing work has been to land in his body to be able to feel himself from the inside. As his therapist, I am consistently inviting him to stay in his body and his emotions, in the room with me, and out of the intoxicating world of his video games and abstract intellectual questions. He has great difficulty tolerating the emptiness that happens when his mind is not captivated by an intellectual problem. There is also a deep emotional fear in his chest center connected with early painful experiences that are difficult for him to integrate. Because his belly center is very undercharged, his body as a whole is very thin. His legs are weak and disconnected from the earth.

Developing Our Capacity to Feel the Three Centers

In his beautiful book, *Healing Collective Trauma*, Thomas Hubl compares our nervous system to that of the Na'vi, a fictional race of beings that live on the planet Pandora in the movie *Avatar*.

"On Pandora, the Na'vi people, the souls of all of their ancestors, and the boundless flora and fauna are intimately connected through a vast bioluminescent neural network...When the Na'vi connect with one another or with their animals, they can feel the other from within. They no longer need speech or gestures to communicate with one to whom they are linked. When such a link has been made, it is customary for the Na'vi to say, "I see you"

... "The more present, clear and attuned we are, the more like the Na'vi our capacities for conscious connection becomes." (Hubl, 2020, P.120)

Thomas often advises his students to see each other as if there were “eyes all over their body”. This exercise enables us to more accurately create an inner picture of someone else’s experience. Modern neurobiology supports the idea that this capacity to “see” the intentional world of another through our nervous system is hardwired into our bodies through our “mirror neurons” (Siegel, 2012).

Using our inner senses to perceive the state of coherence or incoherence of someone’s nervous system and the three centers, is an art that may take years to master. The essential method that most teachers recommend is to develop our own coherence and inner stillness. When our body and mind are deeply coherent and quiet, they become like a reflection pool that accurately picks up the information in our environment. Like the still water of a lake that perfectly reflects the moon above, we accurately see the energies in the people around us. When we are turbulent and distressed, it is the opposite. We are a reactive mess and discharge or project our distress easily on the people we love and on ourselves. In this state you can only see the world and yourself through a dense filter of reactive beliefs and unhealed trauma.

Imagine that you can listen to yourself, your friends, or if you are in a helping profession, your clients, with coherence, inner quiet and attunement. Practice letting go of the words and content of someone’s communication and see what you perceive directly when you pay attention directly to their energetic, non-verbal communication.

Conclusion

The Tao is an unbroken circle that flows from the depths of absolute emptiness into the infinite richness of creation and back to emptiness. As emptiness flows into manifestation as a human being, it creates three octaves of energy that we experience as vitality, love and wisdom. According to the Taoists, the seat of vitality is in our bellies, love is in our chests, and wisdom resides in the head. Learning how to balance, integrate and dissolve blockages in the energies of these three centers is a major goal of Taoist practice.

In this essay I have explored the energetic qualities of the three centers of in the context of emptiness. I have presented my understanding of the

functioning and state of consciousness that each center allows us to access and looked at what happens when they are balanced and when they are imbalanced. I have looked at case examples of a couple of major patterns of imbalance that I have seen clinically. (For some other examples, see Robert Peng's (2010) book, p. 137 -153.) In part 2 to this essay I will also present some simple practices that can be used to balance each center.

My thesis is that if spiritual practitioners can create a balanced flow of energy and information between the three centers and stabilize their awareness of emptiness, it will contribute to a more balanced spiritual development as well as to a balanced and effective life in the world. For professionals in the healing arts, the capacity to maintain a stable and coherent flow of energy through their three centers and the capacity to observe imbalances in their clients and correct them can make an enormous contribution to their effectiveness. Much inner work and training is necessary before a practitioner can truly be effective at this energetic level. I encourage all healing practitioners to develop a spiritual practice as an essential part of their professional development.

I hope that these thoughts and reflections have been useful for you and that they inspire you to deeper practice and experiential integration of the circle that flows from emptiness to form and back to emptiness.

The Tao gives birth to all beings,
nourishes them, maintains them,
cares for them, comforts them, protects them,
takes them back into itself,
creating without possessing,
acting without expecting,
guiding without interfering.
That is why love of the Tao
is the very nature of things.

*The Tao Te Ching,
Chapter 51*

Endnotes

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