

Eastern Sources of Invitational Education

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Invitational education has epistemological roots in ancient eastern philosophies, particularly the better-known ones such as Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. These philosophies share the basic assumptions of invitational education—a sensitivity to and consideration of others' needs, emanating from a continuing awareness of self and inner truth. The purpose of this article is to give a brief introduction to the historical figures who advanced these philosophies, and to present a brief indication of the commonalties these belief systems share with invitational education. In addition, practical applications of each of these philosophies are offered for classroom settings. If this purpose is met, the reader will enjoy not only a broader appreciation of invitational education, but also its enhanced applications as well.

The Puritan ethic of Western civilization imbues us with the deeply held belief in a no-nonsense approach to hard work—only then do we "earn our keep," only then are we "worth our salt." Teachers of early American schools thrived on drilling their students with memory skills to the tune of a wavering hickory stick. Rapped knuckles and dunce caps were the dues of not "toeing the line."

Things are certainly different in today's classroom in the west, but we have much to learn. The philosophies of the east, particularly Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, have something to offer as we extend outward to empower others with love without trying to control or possess; to love and let go at the same time.

Just as we in the west preach the Golden Rule, the Indians preach self-understanding and the Chinese preach moderation and temperance. We in the west have chosen to focus on social striving with competition as a mode of personal growth, while the Indian culture emphasizes each person's self-understanding, and the Chinese culture centers primarily on human relationship with nature.

Buddhism

Buddha, the man, born over 2,500 years ago, was himself a teacher of philosophy. He was born into the wealthy Sakyamuni family carefully sheltered from poverty, disease and evil. But it took only one incidental exposure to the grim realities of life outside his father's estate to persuade the young Sakyamuni to leave his comfortable home, travel and study philosophy with whatever great teachers he could find along his travels. Eventually he was to become one of the greatest teachers of philosophy and metaphysics.

After years of deep and serious reflection, Buddha began to teach his doctrine of humanistic personal growth through one's own effort. Living his own philosophy, Buddha taught that all people are masters of their own fate, or can be if they so choose. He discouraged his followers from deifying him, encouraging them instead to find their own ways by searching within. Self-reflection and inner awareness were encouraged, along with the discipline of non-attachment to material goods and superficial ego supports.

One of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism is the concept of "dukkha," which maintains that a person's human perfection stems from the state of imperfection and incompleteness. Like the rambling banyon tree without a single trunk, our self-concepts are made up of a myriad of ongoing experiences. We grab at meaning from the chaos of the world and try to simplify such chaos into a theory that justifies a monolithic personality, but we are much more complex than that. Buddhism allows for this human complexity.

To label persons as shy, aggressive, lost, or successful is hardly the whole truth of the matter, for individuals are more than single entities. We all have the power to reach for ideals that we have only dreamt of until now. Those of us who teach, for example, can allow ourselves to be more open and honest with our students regarding our ongoing feelings about them and about our passion for what we teach. By being open to more in ourselves, we can be open to more in our students. The joy and power in being more of ourselves invite our students to experience more joy and power in being themselves in our presence.

Confucianism

The Chinese "patron saint" of teachers was Kung-fu-tzu, otherwise known as Confucius among Westerners. A contemporary of Buddha Sakyamuni, Confucius was first of all a school teacher, consultant and advisor to many. His teachings gave rise to such a strong intellectual movement that they eventually overpowered both Taoism and Buddhism in China, not so much as a religion but as a social movement and cultural ethic.

Confucius was probably China's first invitational educator. The basic Confucian virtue is "zren," the Chinese term for "man" or, more appropriately, "mankind" or "human-heartedness." This virtue is to the Confucian ethic what detachment is to Buddhism, what charity is to Christianity, and what righteousness is to Judaism.

Confucian morality emphasizes the hierarchical structure of social relationships. As such, the social context determines what is morally right. Discipline in the Chinese classroom does not come downward from a harsh teacher to submissive students, but rather goes upward from respectful students to an admired teacher.

This is probably one of the most difficult things for Westerners to understand when they visit Chinese schools: the combination of high motivation and strong sense of cooperation that exists in the absence of any externally imposed constraints. Invitational education flowers easily in such an environment.

Perhaps this is one of the chief differences between east and west. We in the west struggle for individual freedom and expression, which inevitably results in competition and feelings of alienation. In traditional China, the struggle is for self-less consideration of others (Confucian humanism) and collective achievement, which results in strong feelings of identity at home, at work and in the classroom. The

¹Although Confucius viewed women as little more than slaves, this was more a characteristic of Chinese culture than of his own predilections.

Confucian principles are best exemplified by the concepts of "yi," the principle of reciprocity, and "chung-shu," conscientious altruism expressed by empathy and moderation.

The essence of Confucian philosophy, as it applies to the classroom, can be characterized by an appreciation of each person's status in the classroom and a mutual respect between each student and teacher, which allow the fullest development of invitational education—moral feeling experienced with aesthetic sensibility.

Taoism

Another great Chinese teacher and contemporary of Kung-fu-tzu was Lao-tzu, the founder of Taoism and author of *Tao Te Ching* (The Way and Its Power).

Lao-tzu may have been the first exponent of open education. In a classroom setting, Lao-tzu would focus on the space within rather than on the walls. As a Taoist, he was more oriented toward processes than goals. Mystical awe of the universe is more important in Taoism than trying to change one's environment. The most important things in our world cannot be easily grasped.

The basic Taoist principle of "te," to be true to oneself, to one's true inner nature, is an excellent guide for invitational teaching. Teachers who hold to the core of their inner nature as accepting, understanding educators will encourage students who, in turn, are more likely to accept and understand their teachers. Attempts at coercive control often meet with resistance, but adherence to "te," trusting one's innermost feelings of true acceptance of others, is apt to bring out the more mature characteristics of students.

Successful teachers do not stress competition in the classroom by favoring only those students who accomplish the most. Rather, they encourage all to do as much as they can. Such teachers are patient with those who are slow. They know that a plant cannot be rushed as it grows. They are sensitive to the students' intrinsic nature, and invite the development of inner resources so that every student can develop the power within.

The Tao maintains that the teacher must also have respect from students. This involves a clear communication of the teacher's self-respect by making known the expectations and hopes of what is to take place in the classroom. Unless the teacher can successfully establish a sense of mutual respect in the classroom, attempts at sharing a joyful interaction will be met with mistrust and noisy distraction.

The Taoist code of reacting to threat is to yield to the natural flow rather than to resist. "That's fine in theory," some teachers might say, "but how do you apply that to a classroom of rambunctious students?" One possibility of coping with such a situation is to identify, first of all, the leader and then approach the situation according to the student's needs. Yield to the flow rather than resisting it.

An example of yielding to the flow can be seen with children who need more attention than they already receive. Instead of chastising and threatening them, teachers might approach them by name and warmly invite these students to join them at the head or center of the classroom. Sometimes the students respond by denying their behavior: "I didn't do anything, Teach, honest!" The teacher agrees and perseveres in the invitation for the student to join her or him. When I have used this approach, I invite the student to relate to the class however he or she wishes. The student may be embarrassed at first, or awkward, but soon realizes that I feel good about all the attention she or he is getting, so long as the student is honest about it and takes responsibility for his or her desires. Usually, the student and I become closer and the rest of the group becomes friendlier, too, rather than disruptive. It has worked for me every time.

Enjoying the Quiet of Zen in the Classroom

Zen Buddhism is a marriage of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism. Zen blends Buddhist non-attachment with Taoist mysticism. Zen teaching involves a continuing focus on the ongoing present moment.

There are times in class when it is appropriate to focus on the ongoing present. There is a time for structure and a time for flow, and each has equal significance in the classroom.

Zen presence in the classroom allows for the appreciation of silent moments. The first time this occurs, teachers might allow it to happen. Inevitably, someone will break the silence prematurely with an embarrassed nervous statement, "Isn't anyone going to say something?" A few others may nod in agreed exasperation. At this point the teacher might explain Zen presence.

Talk serves two functions: to communicate and to fill time and space with noise. Both are appropriate functions. There are times when we have nothing important to communicate, but talking still feels good. This doesn't mean that we have to talk all the time in order to feel good with others.

From my own experiences, when I am discussing something with the class, there may be a period of silence if I have said something of significance and the impact of that statement gives pause for reflection. If the class understands the importance of reflective silence, students can enjoy it in a most meaningful way. In that case, the silence is broken, not by nervous giggling, but by another meaningful reflection of a student who feels invited to share an insight or an emotional comment.

The whole tone or atmosphere of the class is now one of mutual reverence and deep reflection of whatever is shared. The teacher becomes a learner, too, as he or she invites independent thinking on the part of the students.

Now this may be quite surprising to most. The more one yields, the more one gets. Instead of pushing and forcing, simply allow the moment to be. If Zen presence in the classroom can be achieved, yielding to the moment allows for more independent, creative and open thinking. This is known as the "backwards law" of Zen: If we struggle to stay afloat, we sink, but if we just relax, we rise to the surface, effortlessly.

This, of course, makes teaching a much more invitational experience. More than that, these Zen moments of teaching can become the highlights of one's "working" day. To really share of oneself and to allow students to share of themselves creates powerful feelings of personal presence felt by all. These moments of "flow" will make structured time more comfortable as well.

Relevance to Invitational Education

Invitational education has a strong connection with these eastern philosophies. Buddhism encourages an openness to the richness and complexity of our deeper selves, and therefore invites students to be open to more within themselves, by example. Confucianism helps us understand how mutual respect between teacher and student is an important characteristic of a classroom in which the students feel sufficiently safe to respond to teachers' invitations. Empathy and altruism modeled by the teacher encourage a reciprocity in student expression of similar values. Taoism illustrates the very openness to natural growth within the student that is the essence of invitational education. Discipline need not be control against the student; it can be an attempt to guide the student to achieving greater self-control by meeting his or her own needs. Finally, Zen Buddhism illustrates the respect for silence that allows the less verbal students to share along with their more confident peers.

Practical applications for invitational education include:

- sharing more of one's inner self with students as a model for openness (Buddhism);
- garnering respect from students by respecting each one as an individual and expressing appreciation for the efforts of the class as a whole (Confucianism);
- yielding to demands for attention by allowing the student to learn to obtain "constructive" attention (Taoism); and
- nurturing the use and enjoyment of silent moments when deep reflection can take place, allowing for the quieter students to respond (Zen Buddhism).

Invitational education is a young movement. Appreciation of traditional eastern philosophies can help root it to a historical framework and stimulate a curiosity as to similarities with other philosophies. This may help us understand the underlying value of an approach that will hopefully expand with time. As well, studying the similar values and assumptions of traditional philosophies can help us feel more confident in the application of invitational principles in the classroom.

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