



# Harmony and conflict resolution in mediation – a classical Daoist contribution<sup>1</sup>

MICHAEL TOPHOFF

## Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of classical Daoism<sup>2</sup> – an indigenous Chinese religious tradition – for establishing harmony between disputing parties by means of conflict resolution through mediation. It focuses on the Daoist concept of harmony, on the loss of harmony, on the return to harmony, on the mediator's self-cultivation as well as on Daoist practices for mediator self-cultivation and conflict resolution. It outlines how classical Daoism offers a broad basis for establishing harmony in conflict resolution, both theoretically in its religious foundations, as well as pragmatically in its methods for self-cultivation and for applied interpersonal practice. It examines the ways in which classical Daoism can be relevant for the mediator, both as a person, as well as for enhancement of conflict resolution strategies.

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Note: This is the abbreviated form of the original, more detailed paper. If you wish to receive the original paper, please contact the author at: [michael@tophoff.nl](mailto:michael@tophoff.nl)

<sup>2</sup> Prior to the 1980s, also referred to as 'Taoism'

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## Introduction

As in preceding centuries, conflicts abound in the present time. Global, national, intergroup and interpersonal conflicts cause suffering and devour energies, resources, and even lives. Algorithms and big data technologies establishing forever shorter lines of communication between parties seem to correlate negatively with interpersonal distance.

In order to avoid needless suffering of both parties in a conflict and to constructively and effectively bring conflicts to a satisfactory closure, a *mediator* may be helpful. The mediator must be able to resolve interpersonal conflicts in order to establish degrees of harmony between the involved parties. To be effective, the mediator has to meet severe demands. These pertain to *internal* personal and *external interactional* functioning.

This paper examines how classical Daoism can be relevant for establishing harmony between conflicting parties by means of conflict resolution through mediation. Daoism is an indigenous Chinese religious tradition (Komjathy, 2013:318), which reached its classical period during the 4th-2nd centuries BCE. The paper first explores the Daoist concept of harmony, and discusses ways in which harmony may be lost and how a return to harmony might be achieved. It concludes with reflections on Daoist practices for mediator self-cultivation and conflict resolution.

## Harmony

'Harmony' derives from the Greek *harmonia*, signifying an accord of sounds, in music. In Daoism, harmony refers to an "innate dialectical balance, not in an ethical or moral sense, but as cosmic and natural" (Kohn, 2014:232). In Chinese cosmology, primordial harmony is not considered a goal to be reached but a source to return to; it is, since primeval times a dialectical balance of opposite forces, of *yin* and *yang*. As such, harmony, too, has to be considered dialectically with its seeming opposite, chaos. The Dao, literally 'Way', is the spiritual Way of Harmony.

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It is not accordingly a road leading instrumentally to a specific goal or to well-defined results.

Within the forces of *yin* and *yang*, Dao manifests in a vital energy known as *qi* (Kohn 2012:4). *Qi* flows through all of the cosmos which includes without exception all of existing nature. Within this endless and timeless landscape of the cosmos dwells the Shengren, the Sage – who might serve as an ideal role model for the mediator. The Sage knows intuitively – not rationally. The Sage acts – but without effort. This principle is called *wu-wei*: acting by not acting, which means acting in an effortless, natural way. The Sage is like the water which does not consciously and rationally look for what course to take, does ‘nothing’ and by obeying gravity finds the lowest point. The Sage indeed ‘acts’ natural. Naturalness, however, does not exclude intelligence. The Sage chooses, naturally, the best of options: in filling a vessel, the Sage knows when to stop, avoiding overflow. In this way, the Sage is not prone to burn-out.

Harmonious action, which is effortless and spontaneous, does not imply action without effort. *Wu-wei* is the obvious paradox: ‘do by not doing’. It requires work. Work in the Daoist sense refers to the difficult task of allowing. Here, it implies a letting go of control and thus a trust in the natural Way of the Dao: The Sage, or his or her adept, the mediator, from a still point, intelligently and sensitively discerns and appreciates whatever unfolds in front of him or her.

### **The loss of harmony: the roots of conflict**

While the Dao's Way is a Way of Balance, the course of the ordinary mortal is not towards but away from harmony. Neurophysiologically (Tophoff, 2019), the reason for this lies in the programming of man's brain structures by which incoming stimuli are coded instantly by the limbic system which infuses them with emotions, images, desires and anxieties, blocking the blood flow to the prefrontal neocortex and thus hindering or blocking quiet reflection. Some of this delivery of incoming sensate stimuli, some of which are loaded with emotion, sparks behavioural responses within fractions of a second –responses like fight, flight or

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freeze. We are bound to react in this way unless we are able to pause and to reflect. If not, unreflected perception dominates. Unreflected perception will necessarily lead towards discriminating value judgments and unreflected action. Within this type of action, all of the individual person's history, desires, emotions, remembrances, anxieties are programmed.

It is in the moment when we make the judgment between right and wrong that we create division, not only within ourselves – "I am doing something right" (not wrong) – but towards others too – "you are doing something wrong" (not right). The act of judging is a way to install difference. It is provoked by stimuli which then are coded within the individual's limbic system, leading to so-called 'rational' value judgments in the prefrontal cortex. These then, on their turn, 'decide' the course of the action.

The limbic system includes our learned responses, our cognitive and emotive histories, our tainted opinions. It continues to operate even as the ordinary person remains convinced that he or she is acting intelligently and objectively. Instead of critically reflecting on one's own 'truth', and realising that all of our judgments are entirely subjective, the desire to do something, to act according to one's values and visions takes over. Whenever these values don't coincide with those of the other, the ground for conflict is paved.

### **The return to harmony – the Sage: metaphor and model**

Komjathy (2014:81) offers a meaningful definition of the Sage, the spiritual ideal of Classical Daoism: "A Sage is someone who listens to the sonorous patterns of the universe and whose spiritual insights may be listened to by others."

Modelling the Sage, the mediator's task in conflict resolution, is to truly listen to whatever is presented to him or her, while behaving in ways towards the clients which reflect his or her inner state of harmony and thus helping them towards returning to harmony. Reaching an inner state of harmony himself or herself is of great importance to the mediator.

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The Sage's actions are not primarily dictated by knowledge or by fixed goals. He takes things as they come, appreciating their presence as well as their absence. The Sage “moves through different modes of reality ... he accepts all states as mere temporary phases, changes or transformations” (Kohn, 2014:40). The Sage is open for whatever there is. Whatever the transformation, it is embraced.

Good-humoured and relaxed, acting when the moment for action has come, authentic and transparent, tolerant and autonomous, quiet and not taking himself or herself too seriously – priceless ingredients in resolving conflicts. Indeed, as Komjathy (2014:82,83) rightly comments: The Sage, “as model for human possibility ... embodies attentiveness, carefulness, impeccability, expansiveness, sincerity, vastness, and connectedness (cultivating) the ‘three treasures’ of compassion, frugality and deference or humility.” His approach is always a gentle one.

Conflicting parties in general, however, don't show much gentleness. Instead, in fighting about issues, they tend to become more and more aggressive. The wise mediator does not join them in their negative emotions. Rather, from the mediator's vantage point of quietness, he or she is able to counter ‘strength’ with ‘weakness’, to counter aggressiveness with gentleness. Being reasonable and gentle, the Sage “incurs no disaster from Heaven, no entanglement from things, no opposition from man” (Kohn, 2014: The *Zhuangzi*, 15:168). By gently welcoming the response of the conflicting party, and by flowing with the other's energy – practicing *wu-wei* – instead of opposing it, the need for further aggression may diminish, in favour of more constructive forms of interaction between the parties.

One of the hazards of the professional mediator is over-involvement with clients, frequently leading to burn-out and stress-related disease. Daoism uses the mirror as a metaphor: a mirror does not look for something special, it welcomes nothing, it responds but does not store. Over-involvement is anathema to the metaphor of the mirror. The mirror simply responds, without adding anything or diminishing what it quietly reflects. The one looking in the mirror sees nothing but himself or herself – a direct and instant confrontation. Indeed, “Men do not mirror

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themselves in running water – they mirror themselves in still water” (Kohn 2014: The *Zhuangzi*, 5:69). Clients can only truly see themselves if their mirror image is quietly reflected to them by the mediator. The mirror doesn't keep or store the image. As soon as the person in front of it is gone, the mirror is empty again. While the mirror, as a material object, doesn't need training, the mediator, in the Sage's footsteps, does. This implies that the mediator has a twofold task: (1) to be actively involved in the cultivation of self, through meditation and movement practices, and (2) to manifest the behaviours of a Sage in establishing harmony between his or her clients.

### The mediator's self-cultivation

Daoist self-cultivation is committed to stillness as well as to movement. The dialectics of stillness and movement precisely reflect the Sage's dynamic position of both being fully *in* the world of movement and action, while dwelling in an inner world of stillness. Likewise, in order to function effectively, the mediator should be able to share and to flow with the emotional movements of his or her clients while – in doing so – keeping his or her inner still point. In this way, the mediator may create a constructive positive loop: returning to the inner world of stillness only to revert to the shared world with his or her clients from which he or she again may return.

Daoism emphasizes meditation, as a form of quiet sitting, in which whatever wants to happen in one's inner being happens, without holding on to it. It entails a quiet, appreciative mental attitude, as if watching a sunrise. Sometimes breathing may come to the foreground, as in the awareness of the inbreath and the awareness of the outbreath. In fully allowing a long outbreath, and in noticing the sequential relative short inbreath, the mind becomes more quiet. In this way, calm becomes possible, and this calm is one of the main tools of the mediator, who is often acting in the midst of emotions.

Movement is the dialectic component of stillness. The mediator may supplement meditation practice with movement practice. Chinese martial arts are

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quite popular nowadays in the West. Often they claim to be rooted in Daoism, which they are not. These practices only started to blossom in China by the end of the 19th century. Practices such as *Tai-ji chuan* and *Qj-gong* are useful. Daoist texts describe breathing and stretching exercises. Physical exercise is important, since “Anyone able to regulate his own body, can regulate a state” (Ge Hong, quoted by Kohn, 2002:1010).

## Daoist practices for self-cultivation

### *The practice of non-action*

One of the most fundamental pitfalls for the mediator is wanting to *change* the behaviours of each the conflicting parties. So, the mediator ploughs forward with all of his or her energy – only to realise in the end that no real change has taken place and that he or she, the mediator, has ended up exhausted.

Another pitfall the mediator is confronted with is the overt or covert distinction made between ‘me’ and ‘you’. If these distinctions become too blurred, the mediator may add to conflict instead of diminishing it. As, for example, when the parties oppose his or her stance, leading the mediator to redouble his or her energy, desiring *change* at all costs: the opposite of *wu-wei*.

When the mediator follows the Sage’s way of action instead, he or she practices non-action, *wu-wei*. The mediator *allows* harmony to unfold, he or she does not produce it. Fundamentally, this means that the mediator must let go of his or her goal, which is *change*, and, paradoxically accept and allow ‘stability’, which means to accept what, at that moment in time, just *is*. It is by this process of allowing that change can happen – by itself. Change, then, will be the result, not the goal.

### *The practice of softness and weakness*

The mediator wishes to be effective in his or her approach – “I want to resolve conflicts and create Harmony.” For whatever reason, conflicting parties may

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strongly resist any form of ‘solution’ proposed by the mediator. The more the mediator exerts pressure, the stronger the resistance. Frequently, an impasse results and all sides become fixed in rigid front lines.

Taking on the role of the soft and the weak, the mediator, in a non-confrontational stance, prevents power battles as well as defensive responses. If there is no attack, there is no need for defence.

### *The practice of yielding and withdrawing*

Practicing softness and weakness is the ingredient of yielding and withdrawing. Wu-wei is not intruding, it is not forcing something on somebody. It is ‘timid’, rather hesitating, slow, modest. It is also not profusely emotional. On the contrary, it respects emphatically the distance of the other – cautious, timid and reserved: again, low levels of emotional arousal allow space to manoeuvre and facilitate calm thinking and an adequate assessment of the given situation.

Yielding and withdrawing is often the best option. Confronted with high levels of emotional arousal, like anger and aggressive behaviour, the mediator’s response is yielding with empathy and understanding.

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**Michael M Tophoff**, PhD, is a clinical psychologist-psychotherapist who received his doctorate at the University of Utrecht. He teaches Conflict Management at the University of Amsterdam Business School. Currently he is studying for a Master of Theology and Religion.