

## **Life Work Balance - The Nature's Way**

Prof. Dr. Patrick Kim Cheng Low, Chartered Marketer  
Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Brunei

Ang Sik-Liong, MBA, PhD Candidate  
University Brunei Darussalam, Brunei

### **Abstract:**

Here in this human resource management paper, the authors examine and interpret the concept of Taoism that the Chinese believe and practice for many centuries, and the paper is oriented towards attaining life/work balance in the light of modern day living. The authors also explain the ancient Chinese studied and followed the nature way which is the foundation of Taoism, and subscribing to living simply as in the nature's way, makes for a more wholesome and balanced living. Here, the Taoist's wisdom of 'being empty' is also expressed and explained. Using various examples and analogies, the authors indicate, draw parallels as well as examine and highlight the key lessons drawn from nature.

**Key words:** Taoism, *Tao Te Ching*, Chinese Concepts of *Tao* 道 *Yin* 陰 and *Yang* 陽 and *Chi* 氣.

### **Introduction**

Nowadays, we are living in a world of accelerating economic turbulence and rapid change. Our pace of life is getting faster that we seldom stop to take a rest from working, and over time, our work/life becomes imbalance. We become constantly worried and stressed up, hoping to do our best at all times, and catching up or at least, trying to be on par with the rest of the world. As a result, we tend to exhibit the rush- rush attitude towards deadlines /goals in our daily living. Even children who are at their early age have to be disciplined or straight-jacketed. They have no freedom of choice or no time as they have to be immersed quickly in play schools to prepare themselves based on their parents' choice to live and work with other people in the future. In this respect, it can be said that we are subjected to daily intangible pressures and we are becoming more robotic/routines in our lives each day. We could not find time to relax and in that sense we have no time for ourselves. We also have limited freedom of choice and it is like a singing bird

who is kept in the cage. This is very unhealthy. In this paper, the authors attempt to examine and explain the ancient concept of Taoism and its practices to have a simple and relaxing life naturally or as in the nature's way.

### **The Paper's Purpose & Objectives**

The paper seeks to explain the ancient Chinese way of following nature which is the foundation of Taoism. The paper also resorts to the use of various examples and analogies as well as highlight the simple lessons drawn from nature. Where appropriately, Chinese visor or perspective is added in the discussions. An interesting outshoot is a discussion on living simply; the nature's way can help one to achieve a healthy and balanced lifestyle in this modern age and time. This paper also complements the other paper presented in the e-Leader CASA Zagreb paper (Low, 2011).

### **What is Taoism?**

*Taoism* (道, Hanyu Pinyin: *Tao*) is associated with the teachings and writings of *Lao Tzu* (604-531 BC) as purportedly indicated in the *Tao Teh Ching*, the most influential Taoism text. Taoism reflects the philosophical and religious traditions that influenced Eastern Asia more than two thousand years. The *Tao* refers to the "Path" or "Way" of life.

According to the Ten Wings (十翼, hanyu pinyin: *shí yì*) of the Book of Change, *Tao* can be described in three ways namely the Tao of heaven which is built upon by the theory of the *Yin* and the *Yang*; the Tao of earth which is based on the soft and the hard; the *Tao* of mankind which stands on humanism and justice. Differing greatly from Confucius, Lao Tzu used the balance of the yin/yang and the soft/the hard to teach and explain the *Tao* of Nature (heaven and earth). He propounded *wu wei* (action through inaction) instead of *Ren Yi* (humanism and justice) which Confucius used as a foundation for his philosophy (Cheng, 1981).

Taoism ethics and propriety stresses on Lao Tzu's three treasures, that is, simplicity, patience and compassion (Low, 2009a). Extreme desire and greed is no good, and as a practical philosophy, Taoism is based on avoiding or eliminating desire in favor of natural simplicity, quietude and

tranquility. Simplicity leads one to be humble while patience also incorporates moderation and avoidance of extremes. The Taoism practitioners often likened the *Tao*, or spiritual reality, to water. Water, always seeks the lowest level, resembles humble. Water conforms to whatever shape it finds itself in. Though soft, water will in time carve even through solid rock. Similarly, if human beings are humble, adaptable, and patient, we can cut through the obstacles in our lives and discover the flow of *Tao*. A Taoism believer is kind to other human beings as, because in part, such an action tends to be reciprocated. Taoism generally focuses on nature, and that there is harmonious relationships between humanity and the cosmos (天人相应 hanyu pinyin: *tian ren siang eng*), health and longevity, and *wu wei* (action through inaction), which is thought to produce harmony with the Universe.

The Tai-chi way, the Great Way is so interesting; whenever there is yin (female), there is yang (male), and when there is yang, there is yin. (Low, 2009b). All in all, Taoism stresses on unity between human beings and the universe, and it is precisely this loss of unity that causes much desire, disharmony, competition, pain, sufferings, and losses Unlike in the Western tradition where nature is to be conquered by man, Taoism preaches that humans live in harmony with nature, and as such, such a way is compatible with humankind's taking care of nature and the surrounding environment of the communities they live and work.

### **What Is *Tao*?**

*Tao* is the first cause of the universe. Lao Tzu said that *Tao* is 'the way' and he emphasized this in the first verse of his *Tao Teh Ching* (Cheng, 1981) that:

道可道。非常道。

名可名。非常名。

無名天地之始。有名萬物之母。

(老子道德經, 第一章)

Translated as:

*The Tao that can be said is not the everlasting Tao.*

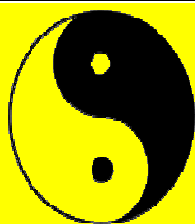
*If a name can be named, it is not the everlasting name.*

*That which has no name is the origin of heaven and earth;  
That which has a name is the mother of all things.*

*(Lao Tzu's Tao Teh Ching, Verse.1).*

Therefore *Tao* is always without a name and that it is the origin of heaven and earth. *Tao* can also be said to be the “Absolute” that it can be said to be the movement and a stillness without a beginning, *Yin* and *Yang* (also known as *Tai Chi*) are things that can be said to be with-out a beginning (Cleary, 1993).

The *Tai Chi* (Ultimate Principle of Existence) involved “The two dynamic powers” (the white space represents the *Yang* and the black space represents the *Yin*) exists in equilibrium and from which a coordinated and vigorous force is produced. (Diagram adapted from Low and Ang, forthcoming, *Taoism and Corporate So-cial Responsibility*, in S. O. Idowu (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Corporate Social Responsibility*, Springer.)



*Tai Chi Diagram*太極圖

The *Tai Chi* 太極 (Ultimate Principle of Existence) involved “The two dynamic powers” (the white space represents the *Yang* 陽 and the black space represents the *Yin* 陰) exists in equilibrium and from which a coordinated and vigorous force is produced. (Diagram adapted from Low and Ang, 2010a. *Taoism and Corporate Social Responsibility*. in S.O. Idowu (Ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Corporate Social Responsibility*, Springer.)

Figure 1 *Tai Chi Diagram*太極圖

### **What Is *Yin* and *Yang*?**

This classic symbol for *Yin* and *Yang* appears like a pair of fish swimming in a circle around each other; the tail of one is formed from the head of the other. Here, we can see that *Yin-Yang* are born out of each other and are transformed into each other. Each of the *Yin-Yang* contains the seed of the other; there is a tiny seed circle of dark *Yin* contained in the white part of *Yang*, as there is a seed circle of white *Yang* contained in the darkness of *Yin*. *Tao* is the force, which flows through all lives. Each person is to nurture the breathing or what is also known as the integral life force (“*chi*” or “*Qi*”) that has been given to him/her. Unlike Western thinking, time is not linear but cyclical. Besides, as previously said, in Western thinking nature is to be conquered but this is not so in Taoism. And overall, the *Tao* Way is not static but dynamic; and each and every Taoism believer’s goal is to align him(her)self, by having a balance (the perfect sense of balance is embodied in the idea of *Yin-Yang*) or being harmonious with nature and the *Tao* (Low and Ang, forthcoming a; Low, 2009; 2009a).

Living healthily is about living simply by following the nature’s way. It is significant to note that in the universe, there should always be a balance of nature and in line or merging with the *Tao*. *Ying* (female) and *Yang* (male) are always at work, and there should be a good balance between them; and hence the avoidance of extremes. This is indeed what the concept of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) or healthy living the traditional Chinese way, which is anchored in Taoism roots, is based on.

### **Living the Nature’s Way To Maintain Good Health**

Yes, we should be living, the nature’s way, in order to achieve or maintain good health.

In Taoism, one who should know how to maintain good health, and one would always carry out one’s daily life in accordance to nature. One would thus need to follow the principle of *Yin* and *Yang* and keeps in conformity with the art of predicting the consequences of what would happen based on the interaction of *Yin* and *Yang*. By doing so, one would be able to modulate or transform one’s life in harmony with nature. By way of recuperating the essence and the vital energy (*chi*), one would then master and practice the way of maintaining harmony as well as

good health. For in-stance, if one's behavior in daily life is kept in regular patterns including one's food and drink intake, its fixed amount, as well as one's daily activities where one would not overwork one's body. And if, one is also based on Taoism practices, it is taken that one should be aware and, in fact, be sensitive of the balance of *Yin* and *Yang* in nature. One can also take it as axiomatic that in the morning after a good night sleep, one is often re-freshed and energized. In the morning when the *Yang* (*Chi* or energy) is at its high and at its abundance, one becomes naturally active, thereby, as one uses one's energy, one gets tired. One needs to balance the *Yang* with *Yin* (taking rest or naps) during the day so that one maintains one's energy level (This is very true when one gets older). When the evening comes, the *Yin* (*Chi*) becomes abundant or overwhelming; one then has to conserve the *Yang* energy as well in balance to be ready for rest. If the *Yang* energy is used in a way that it is in an extreme manner, one's whole body is not in balance and one becomes totally exhausted so much so that one may not even rest well. One, thus, needs to follow the way of nature and be in balance. Also, in the same way, one cannot pull the seedling to assist its growth. Thus, the Chinese saying: "to pull seedlings to help them grow", meaning to work hard in a self-defeating way or going against nature for quick results; and this is foolish. The Western equivalent here is that of "penny wise and pound foolish". And in fact, in everything, nature must take its course. And by understanding the balance of Yin and Yang in nature with regards to the daily living, one could live a healthier life in body and in spirit.

### **Living the Nature's Way By "Being Empty"**

There are ten ways of "Being Empty", and they are as follows:

- 1 De-Stressing Oneself By Emptying One's Mind
- 2 De-Stressing Oneself By Emptying One's Feelings
- 3 Living Healthily By Emptying One's Sadness and Dissatisfaction
- 4 Living Healthily By Emptying One's Categorizations
- 5 Living Healthily When Emptying One's Bowels, the Squatting Way
- 6 Living Healthily By Emptying One's Stomach
- 7 Living Healthily By Emptying the Seat
- 8 Living Healthily By Emptying the Kitchen or the Storeroom
- 9 Living Healthily By Emptying the Room

10 Living Healthily By Emptying the Office  
(See figure 4)

## **1 De-Stressing Oneself by Emptying One's Mind**

We can and should de-stress ourselves by emptying our mind.

When emptying one's mind, for *Lao Tzu*, it is different from that of pursuing knowledge. In pursuing knowledge, one adds to it and accumulates daily. However, in practicing *Tao*, the practitioner reduces desires daily until one reaches the state of non-desire hence non-action. He remarked that when one reaches the state of non-desire/non-action, there would be nothing left undone. (*Lao Tzu* verse 48).

Besides, for *Lao Tzu*, human beings are encouraged to go on 'empty mind', one can then meditate to attain the clarity of mind and the purity of heart, one does what one would do. Live like the birds and the bees, no worrying of where one needs to get their food.

## **2 De-Stressing Oneself by Emptying One's Feelings**

One can also adopt emptying one's feelings posture to avoid or minimize stress and anxieties, and it really makes for a healthier living. For instance, parental love seems to be a natural instinct and that parents are always worrying over the health, education and well being of their children from their young age even until they grow up to earn a living for themselves and to have their own families. It is also very common that grandparents would continue and extend their care and love as well as worrying over the well beings of their grandchildren. The question one would like to ask is when is the imaginary cutoff period when offspring become accountable for their own actions, and that their parents can stop worrying about their well-beings? Another question critically raised is that when will there be some wonderful moment when parents can become detached. Is there a magical moment when parents become spectators in their lives of their children, shrugging off, "It's their lives anyhow." and FEELING NOTHING? Therefore, one needs to learn to empty one's feelings in order to smartly minimize stress, worries and anxieties.

One becomes detached. When one is detached from the worldly possessions, one is similar to the bird that does not worry of what it has to eat for the day as it is totally dependent on the providence of nature. (Low & Ang, forthcoming b). *Lao Tzu* said that when a person does not put any feelings on anything (he or she is detached), one would not spend too much energy and be too stressful in having to assess/judge and talking about the surrounding things. One would become calm and serene in carrying on with one's life. One's mind would be merged/ in line with the mother nature and one would value more on one's taking sustenance (energy) from the mother nature. (*Lao Tzu*, verse 20 & verse 49). In fact, it is much healthier for one to follow the nature's way by emptying one's feelings.

### **3 Living Healthily by Emptying One's Sadness and Dissatisfaction**

Life would be terrible when one is not happy or dissatisfied; one gets annoyed, worried or puzzled, and at times, confused. And when one feels down and, most of the time, frowns, one's eyebrows become drawn together, and one is only creating wrinkles on one's face. Imagine when one comes home from work and continues to bring one's unfinished work and work problems to one's home. Grumpy and moody, one frowns towards one's spouse and children, and the whole family is affected and there is indeed the ripple effect; looking at or being aware of the parent's unhappiness, the other family members would also be affected by the breadwinner's feelings and moods. So one needs to smile and think positive! Would one smile for oneself? Would one help oneself by smiling and in turn help others, not making them unhappy or feeling moody? Think again, think about the benefits.

It is said that long-time sadness would slowly lead to psychological repression. Psychological repression can have an accumulative effect and reappear as unattributable anxiety or dysfunctional behavior. A high level of repression can cause a high level of anxiety or dysfunction. Repression plays a major role in many mental illnesses, and in the psyche of average people. In psychoanalysis, repression is an involuntary or unconscious process. (Laplanche, 1988). To avoid depression, it is important to live happily by emptying one's sadness and dissatisfaction. A happy life is a healthy life.

### **4 Living Healthily by Emptying One's Categorizations**

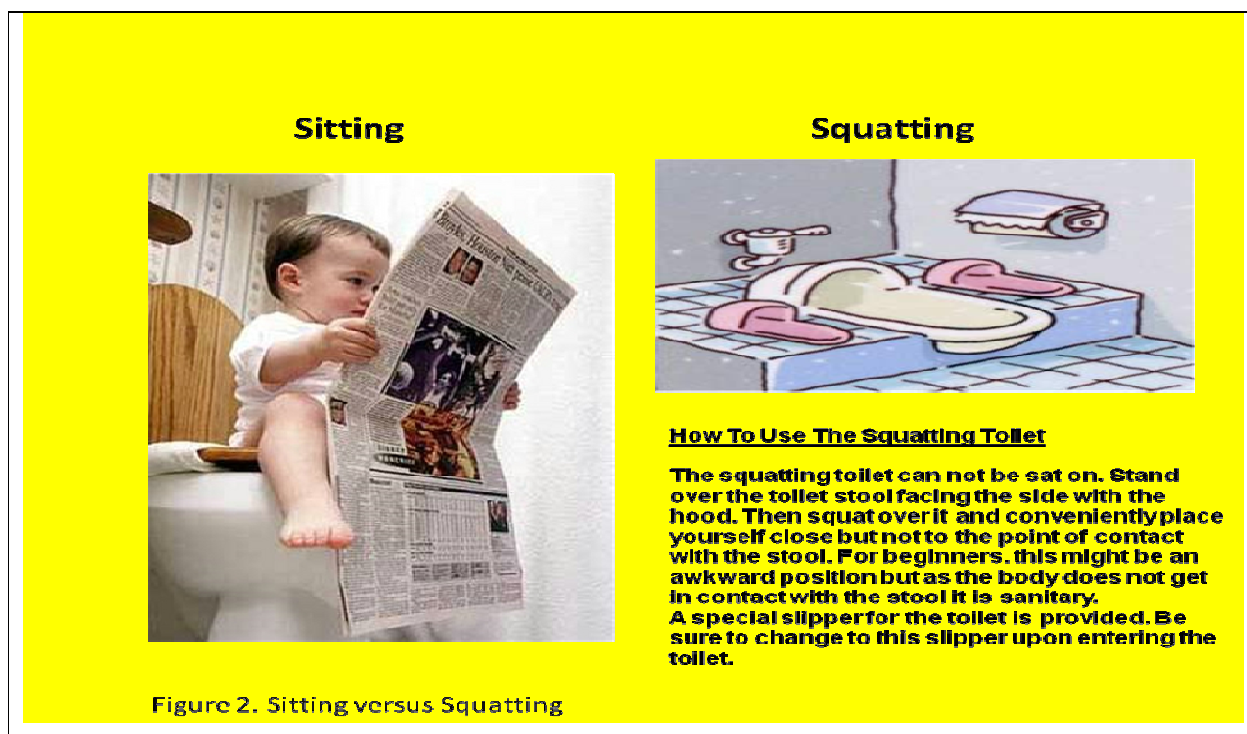


Categorization or groupings mean the act of distributing/arranging people or things into classes or categories of the same type. In another words, if people or things are divided into categories, they are divided into groups in such a way that the members of each group are similar to each other in some way. Over-categorizing is not good. Take for example, when one teaches a class of 30 pupils, one would teach them according to the prescribed syllabus of a certain time period to cover the whole syllabus of the year. It is unwise to further categorize them into fast or slow learner, good or poor student, extrovert or introvert, talkative or quiet student and various other categories. Further categorizing the pupils would not help the teacher in doing his or her work well. As long as the teacher can control and discipline the class and that the pupils pay attention to his or her teaching, the teacher can be said to have perform his or her work.

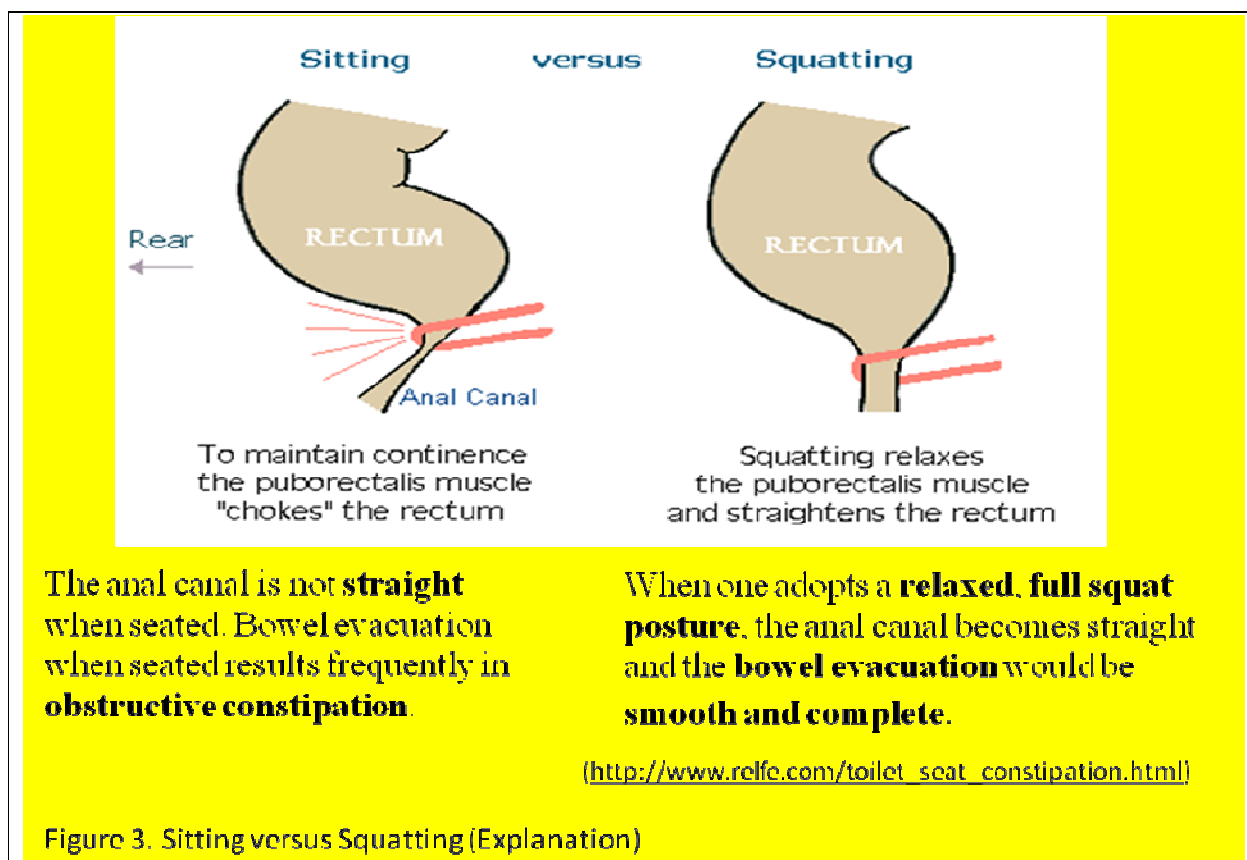
When one stops categorizing about anything in this world, one does not need to take the trouble of looking at and argue things at many angles. One does not differentiate between human beings, loving and liking some while disliking some and/or others. One does not need to compete with others on things. When one does not categorize things one would be like water and would not have a set mind. *Lao Tzu* said, “The supreme good is like water, which benefits all of creation without trying to compete with it. It gathers in unpopular places. Thus it is like the *Tao*.” (*Tao Te Ching*, Verse 8) *Lao Tzu* further remarked, “A sage is without a set mind, however, (s)he understands the mind of the people. To those who are kind to him/her, (s)he treats them kindly. To those who are unkind to her/him, (s) treats them kind as well. This is how (s)he attains true kindness. (S)he trusts people who are trustworthy.(S)he also trusts people who are untrustworthy. This is how (s)he attains true trust. The sage, when in the midst of the worldly, does it calmly and slowly. People with set minds look to him/her in anticipation. Yet (s)he treats them all as children as (s)he has merges with the mother nature.” (*Tao Te Ching*, Verse 49). Therefore in order to live healthily, one should empty one’s categorization.

## **5 Living Healthily When Emptying One’s Bowels, the Squatting Way**

It is only in the industrialized West, where the modern toilet was invented, that people ‘sit down’ to defecate just as they sit down to eat. Modern human’s toilet habits are, in fact, not good or unhealthy. (See figure 2).



Here, the passing motion way is not in line with the nature's way, that is, sitting on the toilet bowl to excrete. In the 'sitting down' way, the colon is not aligned with the rectum and anus. On the other hand, excretion through squatting is good; squatters do it better (Reid, 2001). (See figure 3). While squatting to defecate, the puborectalis muscle (the fibers which form a sling for the rectum) relaxes its grip, which results in the straightening of the final pathway, making it easy for waste to be expelled. On the other hand, in the sitting position the puborectalis muscle grips the rectum in a 'choked' position to maintain continence. Bowel evacuation is more difficult because of the natural resistance of the bend (Reid, 2001; Tagart, 1996). Therefore, the 'sitting down' way can, in fact, lead to bowel movement problems such as obstructive constipation and other health problems.



Look at nature, all animals squat to defecate, our closest ancestors squat down with their knees close to their chests when nature calls. When squatting the colon, aligns itself naturally with the rectum and anus which opens completely and effortlessly in the squatting posture.

## 6 Living Healthily By Emptying One's Stomach

Here the authors take it that one should eat when one is hungry but stop before one is full, in fact, it is good to stop eating at the point just before one feels full. In other words, eating only when it is necessary and overeating is to be avoided. Here, one can accordingly refer to a Chinese proverb that says, "To extend your life by a year take one less bite each meal." According to the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), it was stated that "People in the ancient times could all survive to more than a hundred years old because they knew the way of living the nature's way. They were able to modulate their daily life in harmony with nature. In this way, they could master and practice the way of recuperating the essence and the vital energy to preserve good

health. Their daily behaviors were all kept in regular patterns including their food and drinks were of fixed quantity and their daily activities were all in regular times. They were never overworked...” (Wu et al, 1997) A prominent Asian statesman who exemplified this kind of behavior is Singapore Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew. In an interview, he remarked, “I take every day as it comes. I see the sun rise, I see the sun set. I eat less than I want to. I swim and I cycle. I sleep well at night, and I enjoy my work.” (Lee Kuan Yew, 2008, cited in Li Xueying (2008) ‘I don't think I'll reach 94’, 23 Sep 2009, SGForums.)

## **7 Living Healthily by Emptying the Seat**

In this modern age, most people adopt a sedentary lifestyle, doing little exercises. Most office workers sit in front of a computer for eight hours a day, and then go home and head for the couch to surf the Web or watch television, exchanging one seat and screen for another. Even if one tries to squeeze in an hour at the gym, is it enough to counteract all that motionless sitting?

Recent research has shown that that the amount of leisure time spent sitting in front of a screen can have such an overwhelming, seemingly irreparable impact on one's health that physical activity doesn't produce much benefit. The study has concluded that recreational screen time has an “independent, deleterious relationship” with cardiovascular events and death of all causes, possibly because it induces metabolic changes. (Rabin, 2011). Therefore, in this respect, one should live healthily by emptying the seat most often, make a lot of movements and do a lot of walking when opportunities arise.

## **8 Living Healthily by Emptying the Kitchen or the Storeroom**

We can also live healthily by emptying our kitchens and/or storerooms. If possible, we need to keep only enough food in your kitchen to last two or three days. Large stores of fresh foods kept for longer than three days get spoilt or stale; besides, they attract rats, roaches and other pests, and indeed lose their vitality.

## **9 Living Healthily by Emptying the Room**

We also live more healthily by emptying our rooms. We need to un-clutter our homes. We should, in fact, avoid having excessive crowdedness or clutter and noise in our private living quarters. This is more so, especially in our bedrooms and the room(s) where we exercise and meditate.

## **10 Living Healthily by Emptying the Office**

It is very common nowadays that most people do not know when to stop working. Or that they lopsidedly concentrated too much on work at the expense of the non-work areas. And even during recreational times such as at parties, sad though, their conversations centre on talking shop. There are people who spend their day working in the office/institution and continue to work or worry about their work even during the night. Take, for example, the Americans have increased the number of hours they work in the past 20 to 30 years, exactly the time frame one might hope would have offered increased free time or holiday. Americans have been well-known to work more hours per year than the Japanese, the British, or the German workers and they, on average, do not use their paid time off available (Porter, 2008). Just as one might expect these people seldom take a break and as a result, their whole life becomes stressful, miserable and unhealthy. What more, a recent report indicated that one in six people in high-stress Singapore suffer from some form of mental illness, with the rate expected to rise. The Singaporean Health Ministry was also mapping out a five-year blueprint to curb the city-state's trends of deteriorating mental health (The Earth Times, 2007 cited in Low 2008).

On the contrary, in old China, the scholars who followed *Tao* were very good in following the nature, waking up when the rooster crowed. They sit calmly meditating when the sun was rising; it was felt that this gave them energy for the day. After reading and writing for a long time, they walked into the open air admiring nature. When time for them to sleep, they got rid of any worries by telling themselves not to ponder on them; they cleared their mind of any concerns. Such ways, attitude or consciousness enabled them to live or experienced a less stress, if not, no stress at all. As everything is centered on the nature, Taoism encourages man to take the path of nature because the path which nature itself would follow is not for human interference or interventions. Water flows downwards and that it is the natural flow or spontaneously natural. Forcing one's way against nature, going against the grain, forcing nature to bend to one's will is

not good as it harms oneself. But by relaxing and allow nature to go its way, everything will fall into place. It's *wu wei er wu wei* – by doing nothing, everything is done. One should not overdo things; one should operate and aspire to be part of nature, simple, unimportant and unadorned. (Low & Ang, forthcoming).

In a similar fashion, one should not work too long like working from early in the morning till late at night without taking breaks. One should live healthily by emptying the office at the end of the day business and one should not bring back their work to finish at home. This would indeed help a person to change the pace of life and live healthily by spending a relaxing time with the family and loved ones at home.

### **Living Healthy, The Nature's Way**

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10. Living Healthily By Emptying the Office

Figure 4. Taoism, The Nature's Way And Living

## Conclusion

The authors are highlighting the ancient Chinese ways of healthy living by pinpointing that we need, most importantly, to lead a simple life. The authors have examined and interpreted the concept of Taoism, what the Chinese believe and practice in terms of living simply as in the nature's way in an attempt to adopt wholesome living. That wholesome living would also lead to a good work/life balance and allow one to lead a healthy life. The Taoist's wisdom of 'being empty' has also well expressed and explained for the purpose of our living healthily.

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