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The benefits of a daily personal growth practice: An Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract

The aim of this poster will be to describe autoethnographic research evaluating the benefits of a daily personal growth practice. For the past four years Dr. Richard Bargdill has taken a reading from one of the 81 chapters of the Tao de Ching as well as a reading from one of the 64 I-Ching excerpts daily. In addition, he writes his own commentary for each chapter of the Tao and a comparative American idiom for each I-Ching reading. The numbers corresponding to each excerpt pulled have all been recorded in an excel file to be examined for numerical trends. This personal growth autoethnographic research has provided us with both qualitative and quantitative data to analyze for the purpose of sharing the transformational power of daily meditative practice.

Introduction

The Tao Te Ching is a Taoist text that dates back thousands of years, credited to be written by the great Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu. This text contains 81 chapters that delve into advice on how to live in accordance with the Tao, a life philosophy involving soft emotions, such as: humility, kindness, gentleness, forgiveness, and balance. These chapters advise against acting out of emotion and rather, promote walking away from conflict and taking time to process the situations that may arise around us. For example the Tao Te Ching always wants us to remain neutral, balanced, and calm in the face of adversity. This text is like a bible highlighting the most important aspects of Taoist Philosophy: surrender to life's circumstances, rejecting violence and anger, and remaining kind and virtuous towards all living beings.

The I-Ching contains 64 one page excerpts of hexagrams that can be drawn upon in order to predict future conflict and advise the seeker on how to act in situations that may surface in their day to day life. These daily drawn readings create a meditative practice and give the reader something to think about and ground their thoughts and energy towards during the natural cycles of each day.

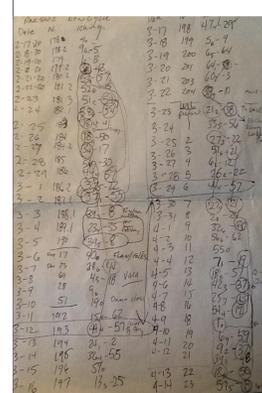
Methods

Autoethnographic work must consist of five key features, which are included in the research we plan to present. First, there should be at least one participant in the study who is also a researcher. Second, the study must utilize methodological reflexivity suggesting that there is a framework that the researcher intentionally brought to the experience. Third, there is a clear narrative presence in any written texts meaning that the researcher/participant's experiences are being described or elaborated upon. Fourth, the primary researcher shares the information so that it is not a private project, and the research should be dedicated to an agenda of empirical analysis aimed at enhancing a theoretical understanding of wider social phenomena. We assisted Dr. Bargdill in his research by transcribing both numerical and qualitative data into excel and word documentation to evaluate and share with others. Dr. Bargdill's raw numerical entries documented over the past four years were analyzed for trends in excel and his commentary on both of these profound texts were put into word documentation to share

Commentaries on Dao Chapters

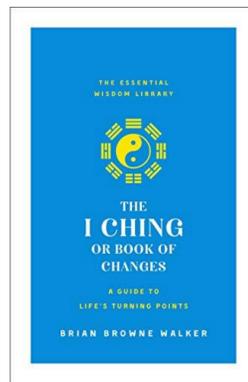
The Tao Te Ching is not only a spiritual and philosophical text on how to live, but it also carries with it the ancient tradition of writing commentary on each chapter that is read. Dr. Bargdill honored this tradition throughout the past four years of his daily Tao readings. With each Tao excerpt he has a paragraph or two describing the rich meaning of the text that he just read which can often be perceived as vague.

For example when writing his commentary on Tao chapter twenty nine which is quite short and to some potentially unclear, Dr. Bargdill writes elaborate paragraphs putting this excerpt into words any person could grasp. An example of his commentary on this chapter says, "Anytime we try to control a situation or any person we ultimately push away what it is that we want to stay close. It is not by holding on that we get love but by letting go." A beautiful expression that embodies the energy of the Tao, non-attachment and acceptance

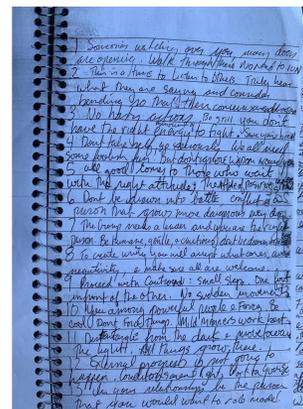


of what is.

Summaries of I Ching Hexagrams



The I Ching, rather than just being a book, is a tool to randomly draw an excerpt or "hexagram" from to then read for insights and predictions on the day ahead of you. Each of the 64 excerpts are just about a page long each and offer guidance on topics such as love, friendships, conflict, humility, and more. Often times the reading you pull you will be able to find a way to relate to whatever is going on in your life. Dr. Bargdill took each of these readings and assigned them quite a few comparative American idioms to relate to their meanings, to give himself a deeper understanding and now to share this simplified meaning with others. An example is excerpt 28, "Preponderance of the great," this reading speaks of how there may be great pressures on us currently. It advises to resist the urge to act in aggression or flee this pressure, we must stay modest and patient and we will survive and succeed. One of Dr. Bargdill's comparative idioms for excerpt 28 reads, "Stay calm, cool, and collected there are a lot of pressures on you." By simplifying these chapters daily Dr. Bargdill managed to highlight the key points to each reading for himself and now to share with others.



I Ching Numerical Trends

After documenting the number of each of the excerpts he pulled daily for four years we took all of this data and entered it into an excel sheet for further analysis. We found a few number clusters as well as frequent numbers that would repeat on special dates, such as his birthday. Each day he used a random number generator so certain instances of numerical trends defied the given probability of pulling one in sixty four. An example would be on March 3rd & 5th of 2020 Dr. Bargdill pulled I Ching excerpt 39 on both days, just a day apart. March 3rd of 2020 was the presidential primary election day and excerpt 39's message basically states, "When something obstructs your path turn to self-examination and seek guidance from a trusted friend." This repetition just a day apart is unlikely in terms of probability and goes to show that there was a certain message Dr. Bargdill needed to take into consideration. One other example is on Dr. Bargdill's birthday, I Ching reading 44 was pulled two years in a row, given the probability and the repeating number occurring on his birthday, it also shows perhaps the message of I Ching 44, "Heed situations that tempt your ego, bringing you into anger and conflict" needed to be considered. This message set the tone for Dr. Bargdill to be prepared for negative situations even on a day of the year his guard may be down and he may be expecting good things.

Discussion

The goal of Dr. Richard Bargdill's research into Taoist texts began with a hunger for change and personal growth. This very personal practice that had no intention of being shared turned into very profound and helpful autoethnographic research. For centuries psychologists such as Karen Horney and Carl Jung have emphasized the importance of practices like introspection and journaling, in the modern day "mindfulness" has surged to prominence as a way to improve mental health. Eastern philosophies are being embraced more and more in our western society as so many people are struggling with chronic stress. Dr. Bargdill's practice of taking a reading from the Tao Te Ching and a reading from the I Ching every day for four years became his own form of journaling and meditation wrapped up into one.

In his commentary he deeply absorbed the messages of the Tao and the I Ching and each daily reading prepared him for hiccups life so often throws at us. As this daily practice grew stronger so did his dedication to avoid the "anti-Tao" emotions that arose within him. These emotions consist of arrogance, anxiety, rigidity, judgement, anger, fear, and desire. All of these emotions throw us off balance and put us in a headspace that cannot achieve tranquility. As his daily readings influenced him to be a more patient and gentle being, he improved not only the way he interacted with others, but also improved his relationship with himself. Emotional regulation is one of the greatest gains from a daily personal growth practice, improving both the internal world and interpersonal relationships. Overall, this research on a daily personal growth practices has inspired each member of this team greatly as we have learned the importance of embracing positive emotions and learning to avoid unnecessary conflict.

References

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