

Lessons from grass... being like bamboo
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Bamboo is a wondrously diverse organism. It can be used for construction, decoration, fishing. Many people also enjoy for what it is - a unique grass that has touched people for generations. What I would like to address is its significance as a philosophical symbol or analogy. As anyone who has ever visited an Asian-themed establishment or home can see bamboo plays an important part of the overall aesthetic. This is a manifestation of bamboo's importance in Asian consciousness. The radical character for bamboo is 竹. Pictographically it represents the stems and leaves of bamboo. It is also part of many of other characters. When I was getting my second tattoo, I wanted something to express my desire to simplify my life, as well as express my appreciation for Chinese culture. I looked into getting the word 'simplify' in Chinese. I asked my Chinese philosophy professor, who speaks and writes Chinese, to write it out for me. As it turns out, the character for simplify is 简化 which, although difficult to see, contains the character for bamboo. He explained to me that the character could be broken down as having bamboo over a door, which is 簡 plus the second part of the character, which is a qualifier (the act of making things simple). The bamboo over the door means to open the door to the fresh air, to open oneself to life.

One of the things that first turned me on to bamboo was a short passage in a book on Taoism, "Everyday Tao: Living with Balance and Harmony" by Deng Ming-Dao. He writes, "Why is bamboo a symbol of exemplary conduct? Because it makes use of emptiness." Like a cup whose usefulness relies on being empty, the bamboo's hollowness gives it some unique qualities. In Taoism, as well as in Buddhism, there is a concept called "no mind," which is a state of no-ego. According to Ming-Dao, "Human beings' problems, the ancients felt, were caused by egotistic self-identification, an insistence to see people as separate and even superior to nature. A person with 'no mind' would have no such self-identification, and would therefore be wholly integrated with the great natural order. Therefore, when discussing proper conduct, the ancients used bamboo as an example it was empty inside and yet it was vigorous and long-lived."¹

Another key aspect that Ming-Dao touches upon is bamboo's flexibility, stating, "When challenged by a storm, the entire plant bends, but does not give way. It sways, but it can seldom be broken."² This is also a very Taoist notion. To be flexible in life is a key to being in harmony with it. I think that is why I'm really drawn to bamboo, it has an innate grace and gives off a profound sense of stillness; even in the greatest of storms it is in harmony with the storm. This contrasts sharply with, say, an oak. Oaks are strong and formidable, growing tall and thick. However, this strength and rigidity can also be its downfall, as a strong wind can knock its limbs off or even knock the whole tree down. Bamboo

¹ Everyday Tao: Living with Balance and Harmony. Mind-Dao, Deng. HarperSanFrancisco. 1996. Pg 125.

² Ibid.

is not as susceptible to this, since it will bend with the wind and then move back to its original state. This flexibility is effortless; it is part of the bamboo's nature to be such. Taoists believe that we should emulate this aspect of bamboo, and use bamboo as a guide through life, for non-mind, flexibility and emptiness. As odd as it might sound, I have found that when I try to emulate bamboo, and be more flexible in life, that I am happiest. As I was getting ready to move to California from Florida, when I found myself stressed about one thing or another, I found that if I made a conscious effort to "be like bamboo" and go with the flow, my stress would ease significantly. So, next time you gaze at your bamboo, remember that not only is it an incredible grass, it can also be a philosophical symbol, a guidepost to inner strength and harmony.