



## **Teaching philosophy of Taoism to children: Comparative study of Ruth Oskolkoff's 'Voyage to the sun: The Tao te Ching for children' and Stephen Mitchell's 'Tao Ching: A New English Version'**

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### ABSTRACT :

It is beneficial to incorporate philosophical elements at a young age. This not only boosts the morale of the child but also helps to shape a healthy society. As the concepts of philosophy expands the imagination of a child, it encourages it to choose the right path, to feel secure, to live in happy atmosphere, to help improving the memories of childhood with goodness of righteous thinking. It encourages group activity, supports open environment for expression and makes learning a fun activity with group studies. Taoism is a difficult concept to be realised and it is the best philosophy to be instilled in children uncorrupted with too many thoughts. It shapes up goodness in a growing child. In accordance to the aims of Early childhood education, teaching of Tao elements help in fostering curiosity and good thinking in children.

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When Isaac Newton (Sir Isaac Newton, FRS 1642-1727) was working on his experiments at the University of Cambridge he was constantly interrupted by his cats scratching at the door. So he called the Cambridge carpenter to saw two holes in the door, one for the mother cat and one for her kittens! The smaller hole was never used because the little kittens preferred to follow their mother and pass through the one with the larger diameter. Such is Tao - Philosophy of Ease, tricky to comprehend.

In acknowledgments page, the poet says:

*"I looked around for a children's version so I could read it to my son. Not finding one, I tasked myself with creating a version."*

Stephen Mitchell's verse 5 says:

the more you talk of it, the less you understand. \*

\*Tao Te Ching : A New English Version, By Stephen Mitchell, Imprint: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, ISBN: 9780061142666

Ruth in her verse, 'What does the word Tao mean?' says:

*When you become calm and unworried,  
when you do not want so many things,  
you will begin to understand. (4)*

Stephen Mitchell's verse 8 says:

The supreme good is like water,  
Which nourishes all things without trying to.  
It is content with the low places that people disdain.  
Thus it is like the Tao.

In dwelling, live close to the ground

In thinking, keep to the simple

In conflict, be fair and generous

In governing, don't try to control

In work, do what you enjoy.

In family life, be completely present.

When you are content to be simply yourself

And don't compare or compete,

Everybody will respect you. \*

Ruth in her verse, 'Water in a cup' tries to explain this to the children:

*Being good is to become like water in a cup*

...

*When you go to find a place to live,*

*live near the ground so you can garden.  
 Watch the plants. See what is happening outside.  
 Be close to the people on the street.  
 When you see fights, try to stand back and think  
 Try to figure out if one person is bullying and mean.  
 In school and home, try to figure out what you really like,  
 What kind of toys do you think are fun?  
 What kind of hobbies will you have?  
 Find time for what really interests you.  
 When you are yourself and realize you are just fine,  
 others will think that, too. (6)*

This is how Ruth, the poet of Voyage to the sun, tries to interpret the moral values of Tao to young minds. She talks of toys and hobbies, tries to make the child understand to figure out its likes and dislikes.

Stephen Mitchell's verse 12 says:

*Colors blind the eye.  
 Sounds deafen the ear.  
 Flavors numb the taste.  
 Thoughts weaken the mind.  
 Desires wither the heart. \**

In her verse 'Learning to hear', Ruth says:

*A lot of bright colors  
 make it so you cannot see  
 tiny patterns and designs.  
 A lot of loud sounds  
 make it so you cannot hear  
 things that are quiet and magical.*

*A lot of spicy foods  
 make it so you cannot enjoy everyday foods  
 like bread, rice and pasta. (8)*

When trained to appreciate details, teaching the benefits of silence and developing healthy eating habits in children may take them to new heights of calmness.

There is this beautiful teaching of Tao on success that asks one to have faith in the way things are and care for all things. The poet here explains it in 'The star student', To the question, Where is the Tao? the poet answers cleverly in her verse:

*Sometimes it is better just to relax:  
 do your schoolwork,  
 listen to your parents,  
 be nice to others,  
 and have fun with your friends. (12)*

Ruth explains to the children about the learning of imagination, knowing the real from unreal, way with the people, way to organize with such ease that it feels appealing to the children.

In her poem, 'The voyage to the sun' Ruth says:

*If you know of anyone  
 who is a really good person,  
 they will probably seem imperfect  
 when you talk to them.  
 The best drawings are simple.  
 Special things can seem plain.  
 The voyage to the sun is inside you. (28)*

Stephen Mitchell's verse 65 says:

*The simplest pattern is the clearest.  
 Content with an ordinary life,  
 you can show all people this way  
 back to their own true nature. \**

Not only humility but the poem, The voyage to the sun also teaches the children to be careful about other persons at such a very young age. This character of taking everything with a pinch of salt may help in future, to avoid heart-breaks and disappointments. Mental health is very important, and the educational institutions strive hard to improve the ability of children in this aspect. Ruth addresses such a difficult topic in a simplistic yet appealing manner.

Stephen Mitchell's verse 44 says:

*Fame or integrity: which is more important?  
 Money or happiness: which is more valuable?*

Success or failure: which is more destructive?

If you look to others for fulfillment,  
you will never truly be fulfilled.

If your happiness depends on money,  
you will never be happy with yourself.

Be content with what you have;  
rejoice in the way things are.

When you realize there is nothing lacking,  
the whole world belongs to you. \*

Ruth in her verse, 'La-sing is curious' asks the children with elan:

*Firs , what is worth having?*

*Do you want to be popular with the other kids,  
or do you want to do the right thing?*

*What if you had to choose?*

*Second, do you want to have all the best toys,  
or do you want to spend some time*

*having fun with your friends and your family?*

*What if you could choose only one?*

*Third, I will ask you the hardest question,*

*Would you rather win a game*

*you play with your friends,*

*or would you rather lose? (30)*

Stephen Mitchell's verse 46 says:

There is no greater illusion than fear,  
no greater wrong than preparing to defend yourself,  
no greater misfortune than having an enemy. \*

Ruth in her verse 'The big cities' explains:

*No need to fight with other kids;*

*there are other ways to deal with mean kids.*

*If there is no way, sometimes it is better*

*to go somewhere else and leave.*

*It is sad to make an enemy. (32)*

In this poem the tao way of explaining the government is not so easy to capture in child's imagination and the poet makes an effort to explain about unfortunate happenings that grip those governments that are not with the tao way, and hence fall to wars and lead her people to live through miserable sufferings.

Stephen Mitchell's verse 49 says:

The master has no mind of her own.

She works with the mind of the people.

She is good to people who are good.

She is also good to people who aren't good.

This is true goodness. \*

Ruth in her verse 'Teachers' puts the same to the school teacher and hence describes:

*The great teacher is good to all the good children;*

*she is also good to all the bad children.*

*The great teacher wants to be good to everyone.*

*People just do not understand that, but it is true.*

*The great teacher is kind to everyone.*

*just as if she is everyone's mother. (34)*

Stephen Mitchell's verse 67 says:

I have just three things to teach:

simplicity, patience, compassion.

These three are your greatest treasures.

Simple in actions and in thoughts,

you return to the source of being.

Patient with both friends and enemies,

you accord with the way things are.

Compassionate toward yourself,

you reconcile all beings in the world. \*

Ruth in her verse, 'Three things' tries to explain this to children:

*One, try to understand what is natural:*

*the birds, the trees, growing up, learning,  
 fun with your family and friends.  
 Two, try to be patient with everyone,  
 even when they are angry or yell.  
 Three, practice compassion with everyone,  
 be understanding and kind,  
 even if you are the only one who is. (38)*

There are some cultural barriers to be overcome to understand Taoism, the moral way. It is difficult to grasp, the essence is too good to be true, and coming to practicing Tao it is difficult. With such hurdles, thinking about bringing these philosophical values to the level where a child could understand and accept it, is indeed a daunting task. In that Ruth Ann Oskolkoff has tried her best with success and the book 'Voyage to the Sun' has wonderful illustrations that helps the child to color its imagination.

Teaching Taoism for children helps realise a society as explained in Taoism itself. It would be necessary to note down the way Tao is taken by different people.

Stephen Mitchell's verse 41 says:

When a superior man hear of the Tao,  
 he immediately begins to embody it.  
 When an average man hears of the Tao,  
 he half believes it, half doubts it.  
 When a foolish man hears of the Tao,  
 he laughs out loud.  
 If he didn't laugh,  
 it wouldn't be the Tao. \*

Ruth in her book for children could have progressed in little chapters, thus teaching them of school, home, work, play and also about a few responsibilities luring them for good behaviour. Just like fish in a bowl can take on any water, a child introduced to such a lofty philosophy will care for it and shapes up goodness at an early stage. It is beneficial to incorporate philosophical elements at a young age. Ruth's book helps to realise the aims of childhood education by fostering curiosity and good thinking. An impressive collection of verses, one book leads on the mind to search for another and for more. That impact on reader's mind is positive and encouraging.

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#### REFERENCES :

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2. Ruth Ann Oskolkoff, Voyage to the sun: The Tao te Ching for Children, Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015