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How the West was won over

The sprawling new Taoist temple north of Toronto is a reflection of the growing popularity of China's ancient faiths

Aug 04, 2007 04:30 AM

STUART LAIDLAW
 FAITH AND ETHICS
 REPORTER

ORANGEVILLE—Mary Biddulph was raised Catholic in Montreal. She was married in a Catholic ceremony, baptised both her daughters and buried both her parents in a Catholic church.



RENÉ JOHNSTON / TORONTO STAR
 Mary Biddulph practises Tai Chi in front of the Fung Loy Kok Temple in Orangeville. Biddulph was raised Catholic but now embraces Taoism as well.

But the faith that drives her daily life and brings her the most peace these days is Taoism, the ancient Chinese religious philosophy that finds its physical expression in the Tai Chi martial arts.

Biddulph wasn't looking for a new religion when she discovered Taoism, but the Barrie nurse was drawn to it when patients began telling her about Tai Chi's ability to help with musculature and circulatory problems, to boost the respiratory system and reduce stress.

It doesn't really matter what you believe, or think about the universe.

What matters is behaviour Michael Szonyi, Harvard professor

opening next month.

The \$13-million temple and adjoining halls, meditation rooms and accommodations were built by Toronto's Taoist Tai Chi Society as a place of refuge for those exploring China's three ancient faiths – Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.










A planned three-day opening celebration will feature chanters and religious dignitaries from around the world, culminating in a gala festival Sept. 8.

The ancient faiths are resonating with a growing number of people today.

Between 1991 and 2001, the number of Buddhists

"As a medical professional, I could see that there was something very special to this art," she says.

Today, Biddulph is preparing the new 450 square metre Fung Loy Kok Temple north of Toronto for its grand

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Pathways to enlightenment

China's three traditional religions are based on the belief that enlightenment comes by returning to an original state of purity, but take different approaches.

Taoism takes a physical approach, such as Tai Chi, as a form of meditation to achieve both greater health and mental purity.

Buddhism stresses emptying the mind of

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in Canada, for example, jumped 84 per cent, though at 300,300, they still represented only about 1 per cent of the population. The number identifying themselves as Taoist doubled, to 3,400.

Part of that growth can be attributed to people like Biddulph, who incorporate parts of Taoism into their lives alongside the religious beliefs they grew up with.

Prone to back pain and with a mild case of scoliosis, Biddulph found herself slouching a few years ago and feared she'd develop a dowager's hump as her mother had. Desperate for an answer, she decided to take her patients' advice and give the slow-moving martial art a try.

"My back is a lot stronger doing this," she says, and a lot straighter.

Tai Chi instructor Andrew Hung describes Tai Chi as a form of "physical meditation," since the mental concentration needed to move so precisely and to breathe as instructed forces participants to push all other thoughts from their minds.

The result, he says, is that life's stresses and conflicts are pushed from the mind as well.

At a time when some faiths demand strict adherence, Chinese religions allow followers to adapt only as much or as little as they are comfortable with.

Harvard professor Michael Szonyi, formerly of the University of Toronto, says Chinese faiths emphasize practice over doctrine.

"It doesn't really matter what you believe, or think about the universe," the East Asian civilizations expert says. "What matters is behaviour."

Hung, who has been instrumental in setting up the temple, says that if some people want to simply practise Tai Chi for their health, that's okay. If others want to go further in their exploration of the three faiths, that's okay, too.

"We don't force people to become Taoist," he says.

Szonyi says the tradition of mixing the faiths dates back centuries. While the purest forms of the religions were reserved for monks and monasteries, ordinary people have long picked and chosen which elements of each faith to embrace.

He said the three faiths are sometimes described as a mountain with three peaks. From the base, where most people are, the peaks appear largely as one. Further up the mountain, among the most devoted, the peaks begin to be differentiated.

Groups like the Taoist Tai Chi Society, he said, tend to appeal to people further down the mountain, including many non-Chinese.

The society was set up in 1970 by Tai Chi master Moy Lin-shin, newly arrived from Hong Kong, to explore the common elements of the three traditional religions and to promote the use of Tai Chi as a way to introduce people to Chinese philosophies.

Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism all emphasize living in peace with others by pushing negative thoughts and impulses from your consciousness.

Marsha Eberhardt, a founder of the Tai Chi Society's Stratford branch and a volunteer at the Orangeville temple, sees a direct correlation between the physical and philosophical elements of the faiths.

"If your body is more flexible, your mind will be, too," the 57-year-old former nurse says. "Stress and worry just beat people down. It ages them."

Moy died in 1998 before fully realizing his dream to establish a monastery-

thoughts through quiet meditation, freeing it from distractions and anxieties caused by desires.

Confucianism emphasizes personal behaviour, with identifiable manners through which a better society can be achieved.

type setting where practitioners could focus on meditation and Tai Chi away from the distractions of the city. The temple and adjoining buildings can accommodate up to about 1,000 people.

Eberhardt, who was attracted to Tai Chi by the beauty of the movements, says the nurse in her was soon drawn to its physical benefits, as well.

The gentle exercises help those with muscular or joint problems regain control and strength, while the breathing exercises can help with respiratory problems and boost a person's energy.

Patients recovering from an accident, with arthritis or Parkinson's Disease have also found Tai Chi helpful.

"We don't make claims to cure Parkinson's or anything else," says Eberhardt, who now runs a health food store with her husband. "But we can help you to use better what you have."

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