



Learning by Living: A Dialogue between Daoism, Buddhism, and Experiential Socialization

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Abstract

Cultural learning does not always begin with instruction. For many people, it begins with observation, silence, correction, and lived consequence. This reflective paper develops that premise through my own learning pathway, where Daoism arrived early as a way of noticing how life settles when one interferes less, and Buddhism later became the closest label I could write on school forms to express a similar experiential grounding. Drawing on scholarship on Buddhist Daoist interactions in medieval China and their mutual borrowing across practices and concepts, this paper argues that Daoism and Buddhism converge most strongly at the level of diagnostic attention rather than belief claims. To widen the comparative frame, I also situate this experiential orientation alongside the more explicitly dialogical and often boundary conscious forms of Christian engagement with Daoism and Buddhism, as well as an example of experiential learning embedded in Islamic educational practice through communal and ritual life. Across these traditions, socialization can be understood as a gradual shaping of attention, ethics, and communication through practice, dialogue, and consequences rather than through mere doctrinal transfer. The discussion also links this lived approach to experiential learning and dialogue-based pedagogy in contemporary education, emphasizing how reflection on experience becomes a durable form of ethical self-regulation and cultural communication.

Keywords: Daoism; Buddhism; Experiential Learning; Cultural Socialization; Interreligious Dialogue

Introduction

Cultural learning does not always begin with instruction. For many individuals, it begins with observation, silence, correction, and lived consequence, where meaning forms before we have words to name it. In that sense, socialization is often an apprenticeship in attention. What we learn first is not a doctrine, but a pattern: how people speak, how they hold back, how they repair mistakes, and how life responds when the ego insists on control. This paper reflects on such a process, examining how Daoism and Buddhism can function as experiential learning systems rather than as belief-based identities. The aim is not to claim that traditions are identical, but to show how lived practice and diagnostic awareness can become a shared ground for cultural learning and communication [1, 2], and how this grounding can be understood through experiential learning theory as a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptual formation, and renewed action [3].

My own learning did not start with scriptures or religious institutions. It started with watching people, listening to conversations, observing outcomes, and learning from mistakes. Daoism entered my life early, not as a declared philosophy but as a way of noticing how things unfold when one interferes too much, speaks too quickly, or insists on being right. The Dao De Jing itself reads like this kind of training in attention, offering a language of restraint, humility, and non-forcing that is tested in ordinary life rather than proven by argument [4].

Later, when filling out school forms that required a declared religion, I wrote "Buddha." This was not a theological decision. It was an intuitive alignment with a way of learning that treated suffering, failure, and restraint as sources of insight rather than moral failure. This resonates with how "lived religion" approaches describe practice as something negotiated through everyday experience rather than defined only by formal statements, and this is especially relevant in teaching and learning contexts where students bring their own histories into conversation with religious practice [5]. It also resonates with classic expository presentations of early Buddhist teaching that emphasize inquiry, responsibility, and testing insight within life, rather than treating belief as the entrance requirement [6].



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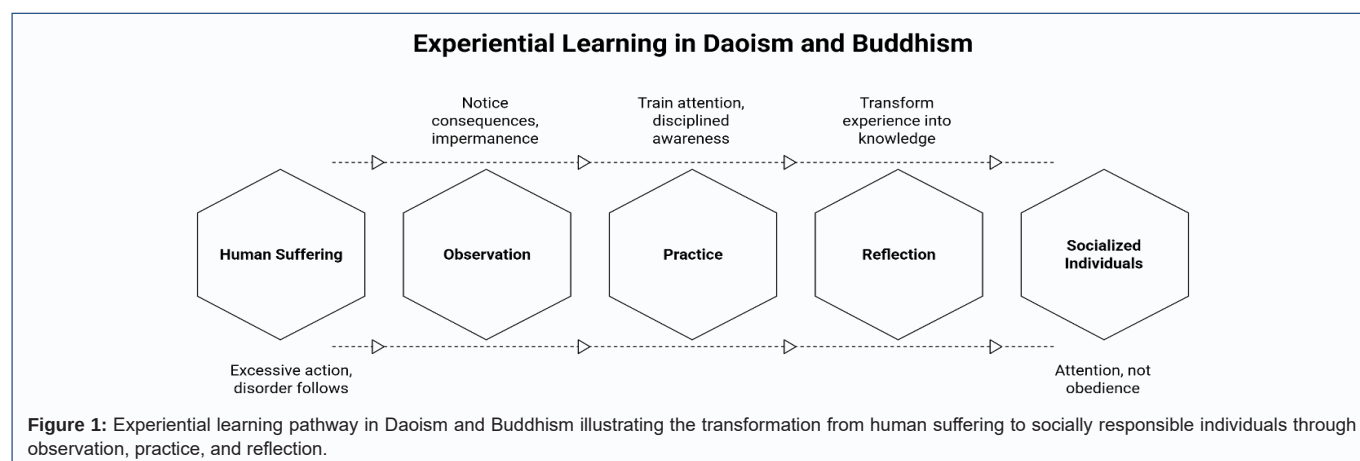
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This paper argues that Daoism and Buddhism converge most strongly at the level of lived experience. Their teachings remain grounded because they emerge from careful human observation of both living and non-living surroundings, and because they invite verification through practice. Historically, Daoist Buddhist encounters in China show mutual influence without collapsing into a single blended system, which is important because it illustrates how traditions can learn from each other while remaining distinct [7, 8]. Yet, when we broaden the comparison to Christianity and Islam, the contrasts also become instructive. Christian Daoist and Christian Buddhist dialogues often have to work deliberately against inherited misunderstandings and negotiate doctrinal boundaries through structured interreligious engagement [9, 10]. Islamic educational settings, by contrast, often show how experiential learning is carried through communal and ritual practices that socialize skills and ethics through participation and habit, not only through explanation [11]. These comparisons help clarify what I mean by “learning by living” as a cultural process.

Daoism and Buddhism as Experiential Frameworks

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of experiential learning rooted in Daoist and Buddhist philosophical traditions. The framework illustrates how the human condition often begins with suffering, which arises from excessive actions, uncontrolled desires, and imbalance in life. The first stage emphasizes observation, where individuals notice impermanence, consequences of actions, and the realities of existence. This awareness naturally leads to practice, where disciplined attention and mindful engagement with life cultivate self-regulation and deeper understanding. Through sustained practice, individuals enter the stage of reflection, transforming personal experience into knowledge and wisdom. The final outcome is the development of socialized individuals, whose behaviour is guided not merely by obedience to external rules but by internalized awareness and ethical responsibility. In this way, the model shows that learning in these traditions is not abstract or theoretical; it is a lived process in which observation, disciplined practice, and reflection gradually transform suffering into insight and socially constructive behaviour.

The Dao De Jing does not present a systematic theology. Instead, it offers reflections drawn from nature, governance, human behaviour, and imbalance, teaching through contrast and consequence. Its emphasis on softness, non-forcing, and humility reads like a diagnostic stance toward human suffering: when action becomes

excessive, disorder follows; when speech multiplies, meaning declines [4].

This kind of diagnostic wisdom becomes more visible when placed beside Buddhist frameworks that also begin from observation and practice rather than from belief declarations. Historically, the Buddhist Daoist encounter in China was not merely a political or institutional event. It was also a long learning process in which ideas, methods, and ritual sensibilities moved across communities and shaped new forms of religious practice [7]. Even specific conceptual borrowings, such as the use and adaptation of Buddhist ideas within Daoist soteriology and ritual life, show how learning occurs across traditions through lived religious technologies rather than purely abstract debate [8].

Similarly, the teachings of Gautama Buddha begin with observation rather than belief. The Four Noble Truths are often approached as descriptions of how suffering arises and how it may cease, tested through practice and introspection. This practice centered orientation is strongly reflected in standard presentations of Buddhist teaching that emphasize personal verification and disciplined awareness, rather than mere acceptance of authority [6].

What matters here for cultural socialization is that both Daoism and Buddhism educate attention. They do not only tell you what is right. They train you to notice what happens when you cling, rush, or insist. Both traditions therefore socialize individuals through attention rather than obedience. Learning occurs through noticing consequences, observing impermanence, and recognizing how ego generates misery. This aligns closely with experiential learning as a social process where reflection and dialogue transform experience into knowledge [12], and where learning deepens through interaction rather than through passive reception [1], in a pattern that is also consistent with the experiential learning cycle described by Kolb (1984) [3].

Learning from Mistakes and Human Interaction

Figure 2 illustrates the process through which mistakes become a source of learning and moral growth. The model begins with initial missteps, where errors are recognized not merely as failures but as moments that reveal moral or practical shortcomings. These experiences lead to information gathering, where individuals attempt to understand the causes and context of the mistake, recognizing the roles of timing, restraint, and personal attachment. The next stage,

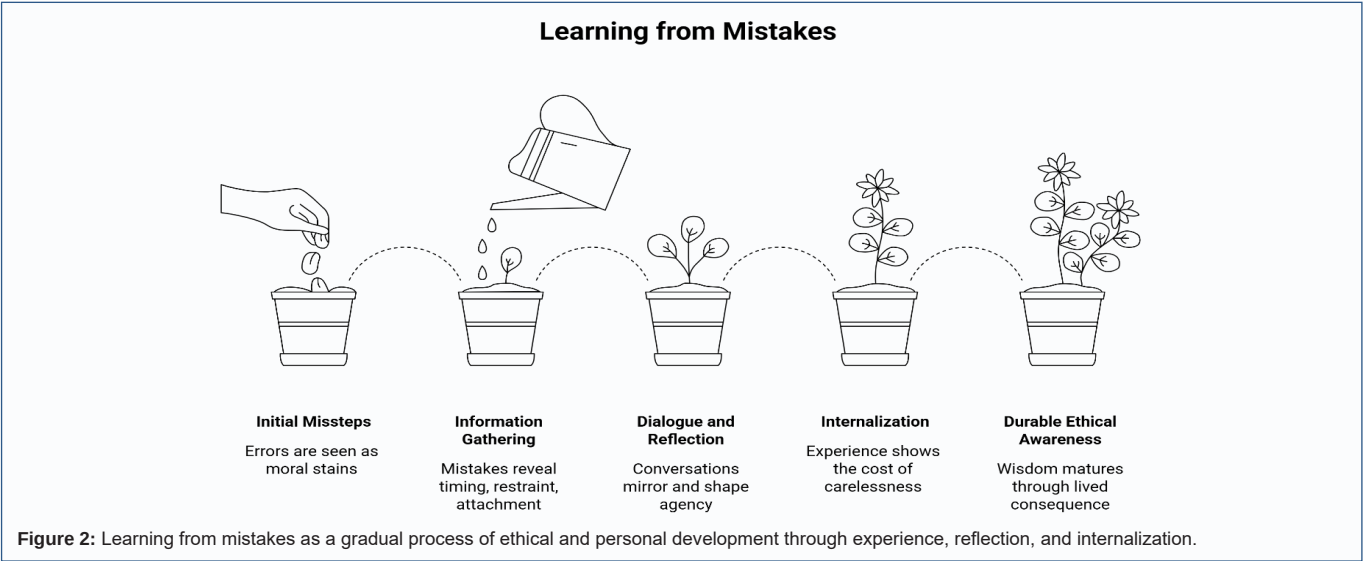


Table 1: Human Origins and Grounded Teachings: A Synthesis.

Theme	Key Summary	Foundational Source/Scholarship
Source of Authority	Derived from human observation, disciplined engagement with hardship, and sustained attention rather than purely external dogma.	Rahula (1974); Dhiman, (2018): Practical, inquiry-oriented nature of Buddhist awakening.
Nature as Manual	Nature (rivers, valleys, seasons) serves as a measure for self-regulation; the <i>Dao De Jing</i> acts as a functional guide for living.	Laozi & Roberts (2019): Nature as a teacher for self-regulation.
Historical Synergy	Mutual influence in cosmology and cultivation enables traditions to communicate and coexist through shared "groundedness."	Kohn (2014): Medieval Buddhist-Daoist mutual influence.
Sensory Learning	Knowledge is carried through "ritual technologies" (scent, body practices) that shape the senses and create shared meaning.	Ro (2025): Scent and ritual as sites of meaning-making.
Cross-Cultural Accessibility	Teachings depend on universal attentiveness rather than specific authority structures, making them resonant in multicultural contexts.	Romano <i>et al.</i> , (2021); Kolb (1984): Reflective adjustment and experience cycles.

dialogue and reflection, emphasizes the importance of discussion, feedback, and self-examination, where conversations act as mirrors that help individuals understand their actions and agency. Through this reflective process, individuals reach internalization, where lived experience reveals the consequences of carelessness and encourages more mindful behaviour. Ultimately, repeated reflection and experience cultivate durable ethical awareness, where wisdom emerges gradually from the lessons of past actions. In this way, the figure highlights that mistakes, when examined carefully, can function as an essential pathway toward deeper understanding, responsibility, and mature ethical judgment.

One of the strongest convergences between Daoism and Buddhism lies in their treatment of mistakes. Errors are not moral stains. They are information. Daoism often treats imbalance as misalignment rather than sin, a sensibility that fits the *Dao De Jing* tone of returning to simplicity and reducing forced action [4].

Buddhism often treats suffering as a signal rather than punishment, and frames the task as understanding conditions and causes, not condemning the self as permanently flawed, which is clearly emphasized in classic introductions to Buddhist teaching [6].

Much of my learning has come from missteps in speech, writing, relationships, and expectations. Each mistake revealed something about timing, restraint, or attachment. Conversations with others, their responses, silences, and behaviours became mirrors. Over time, this cultivated caution rather than fear, and humility rather than withdrawal. Here, socialization is not a classroom lesson. It is an ongoing negotiation with people and situations, where dialogue becomes a method of learning. In educational research on

experiential learning, dialogue is not just a technique for expressing ideas but a social condition that shapes agency, empathy, and the ability to learn across difference [12]. Relatedly, dialogue-based learning frameworks show how participants can convert differing assumptions into resources for learning, especially in cross cultural and ethically complex settings [2].

This mode of learning differs from formal moral instruction. It is slow, sometimes uncomfortable, and deeply internal. Yet it produces durable ethical awareness. One becomes careful not because rules demand it, but because experience has shown the cost of carelessness. This process is central to cultural socialization within Daoist Buddhist contexts, where wisdom matures through lived consequence, not quick judgment [5, 7], and it also fits the broader logic of learning through reflective transformation emphasized in experiential learning theory [3].

Human Origins and Grounded Teachings

Table 1 summarizes how Daoist and Buddhist traditions maintain their relevance and cross-cultural accessibility through empirical observation and lived practice.

A key reason Daoism and Buddhism align so closely, at least in my experience, is that both are strongly rooted in human observation. Their authority is persuasive because it is recognizable. The Buddha’s awakening is narrated as the outcome of disciplined engagement with hardship, reflection, and sustained attention, and the practical, inquiry-oriented tone of Buddhist teaching is repeatedly stressed in standard presentations of the tradition [6].

Daoist teachings similarly arise from watching rivers flow, valleys

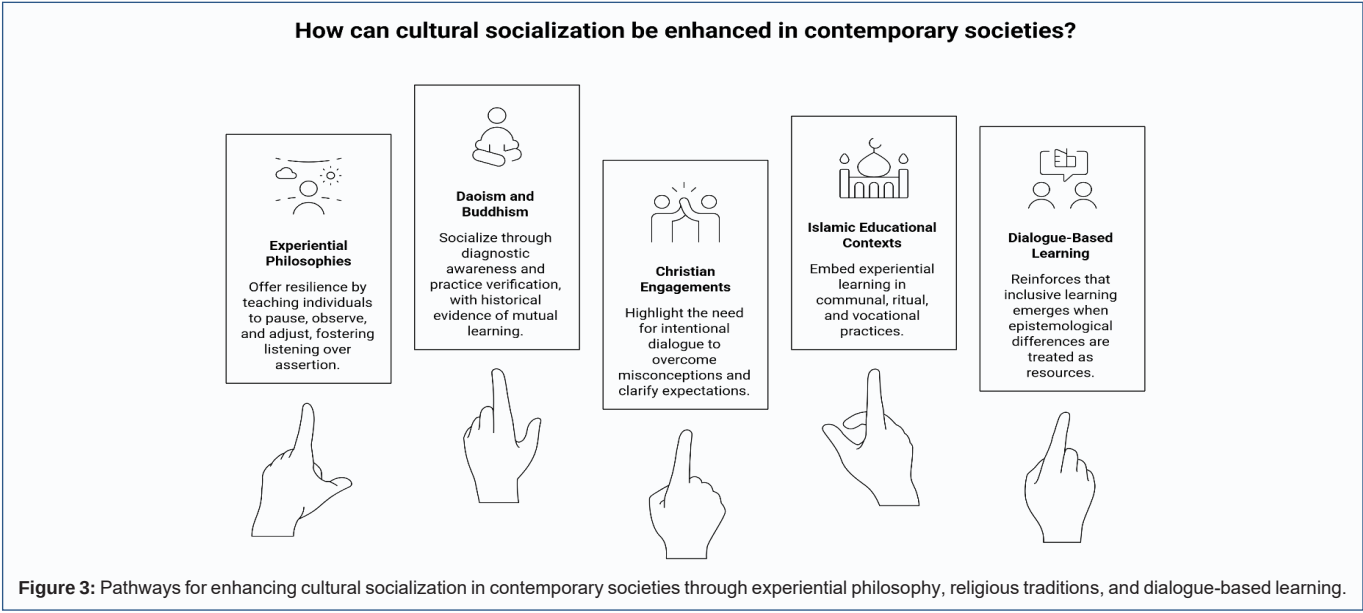


Table 2: Synthesis of writing, identity, and ongoing learning.

Theme	Key Summary	Philosophical/Methodological Root
The Nature of Writing	A process of self-cultivation where personality and discipline meet; it improves through correction and restraint rather than simple imitation.	Buddhist/Daoist Refinement: Growth through repetition and reflection.
Learning as Awareness	A form of self-protection and vigilance to avoid "traps" and "miseries." Failure is defined as remaining unaware, not as falling.	Continuous Vigilance: Grounded in lived consequences rather than abstract perfection.
The Role of Identity	Not a dogmatic badge or a declaration of metaphysics, but a shorthand for a specific "learning style" committed to growth.	Identity as Practice: A diagnostic and grounded approach to self-definition.
Interreligious Dialogue	Meaningful engagement requires unlearning inherited frames and moving beyond debate toward contemplative and socially engaged practice.	Dialogical Humility: Reworking frames to avoid exoticism, as seen in Christian-Buddhist and Christian-Daoist scholarship.

endure, and seasons repeat. Nature is not romanticized. It is treated as teacher and measure, which is part of why the Dao De Jing can be read as a manual for self-regulation rather than a creed [4].

Historically, the Buddhist Daoist relationship in China illustrates how grounded teachings can travel across communities and still remain practical. The medieval period shows not only philosophical conversation but also mutual influence across cosmology, cultivation practices, and religious life, suggesting that grounded Ness is precisely what enables traditions to communicate rather than merely compete [7]. Ro's analysis of scent, ritual, and soteriology adds another dimension: practices that shape the body and senses can become shared sites of meaning making, reinforcing that learning is often carried through lived ritual technologies rather than propositions [8].

This grounding also helps explain why Daoism and Buddhism can feel accessible across cultures and centuries. Their teachings do not depend only on authority structures. They depend on attentiveness. Anyone willing to observe carefully can enter the learning process. This openness becomes especially resonant in multicultural and interdisciplinary contexts where socialization must work across difference through practice, humility, and reflection rather than through a single imposed vocabulary [2], and it can be described in educational language as learning that consolidates through repeated cycles of experience and reflective adjustment [3].

Writing, Identity, and Ongoing Learning

The integration of personal discipline and philosophical

reflection defines a unique approach to self-cultivation, where writing and identity are viewed as iterative practices rather than static achievements. As outlined in Table 2, this framework suggests that writing serves as a vehicle for internal refinement, mirroring Buddhist and Daoist traditions by prioritizing reflection over mere assertion. In this context, identity becomes a diagnostic "learning style" focused on vigilance and the avoidance of cognitive traps, while interreligious dialogue provides a platform for "unlearning" inherited biases. Ultimately, this synthesis emphasizes that true growth is found in the humble reworking of frames—whether linguistic, spiritual, or personal—transforming identity from a badge into a continuous, lived practice.

Writing, for me, has followed the same path as learning. It improved not through imitation but through correction. Early writing errors taught clarity. Overconfidence taught restraint. Silence taught timing. This mirrors Buddhist and Daoist learning, where refinement comes through repetition and reflection rather than assertion. In that sense, writing is not only communication. It is self-cultivation. It is where personality, discipline, and ethical care meet.

Even now, learning continues as a form of self-protection. Avoiding traps, miseries, and unnecessary conflicts requires continuous awareness. Neither Daoism nor Buddhism promises perfection. Both emphasize vigilance. Falling is not failure. Remaining unaware is. This is one reason the label I once wrote on a school form matters to me as memory, not as dogma. Writing "Buddha" was not a declaration of metaphysics. It was a shorthand for a learning

style: grounded, diagnostic, and committed to growth through lived consequence.

This is also where dialogue with other traditions becomes meaningful. Christian interreligious dialogue, as discussed in scholarship on Christian Buddhist engagement, often develops through multiple forms, including conceptual dialogue, socially engaged dialogue, and interior or contemplative dialogue, each grounded in practice traditions rather than only in debate [9]. Christian Daoist dialogue likewise requires humility and a reworking of inherited frames that once reduced Daoism to exoticism, showing that even dialogue itself is a practice of unlearning and re learning [10]. These perspectives sharpen my own point: identity, when rooted in learning, is not a badge. It is a practice.

Implications for Cultural Communication and Socialization

Figure 3 presents a conceptual framework illustrating several complementary pathways through which cultural socialization can be strengthened in contemporary societies. The framework begins with experiential philosophy, which encourages resilience through reflective teaching practices that emphasize pausing, observing, and adjusting one's responses, thereby cultivating attentive listening and balanced self-assertion. A second pathway is found in Daoism and Buddhism, where socialization develops through awareness, disciplined practice, and the verification of understanding through lived experience and shared learning traditions. Christian engagements emphasize the importance of intentional dialogue to address misunderstandings, clarify expectations, and foster mutual respect among individuals and communities. Similarly, Islamic educational contexts integrate experiential learning within communal rituals, moral instruction, and vocational practices, allowing ethical values to be embodied in everyday life. Finally, dialogue-based learning highlights the importance of inclusive communication environments where differences in knowledge, belief, and interpretation are treated not as barriers but as valuable resources for mutual understanding. Taken together, these pathways demonstrate that effective cultural socialization requires the integration of philosophical reflection, religious traditions, and open dialogue to cultivate ethical awareness and responsible citizenship in pluralistic societies.

This reflection suggests that cultural socialization need not rely solely on formal instruction or belief transmission. Experiential philosophies offer alternative models where ethics, communication, and identity form through lived engagement. In contemporary societies marked by complexity and pluralism, such models may offer resilience. They teach individuals to pause, observe, and adjust rather than react or impose. They cultivate listening over assertion and understanding over certainty.

The comparative frame helps here. Daoism and Buddhism often socialize through diagnostic awareness and practice-based verification, with historical evidence of mutual learning across communities through lived religious life [7, 8]. Christian engagements with Daoism and Buddhism often highlight a different socialization challenge: dialogue must be intentionally cultivated to overcome historical misconceptions and to clarify expectations, partners, and modes of exchange [9,10]. Islamic educational contexts, meanwhile, illustrate how experiential learning can be embedded in communal, ritual, and vocational practices that shape skills and ethics through participation, suggesting that lived socialization is not unique to

Daoism and Buddhism, but a broader human pattern expressed through different traditions [11].

For cultural communication scholars, these traditions offer lenses for examining how meaning forms outside institutional structures. They show how culture lives in practice, silence, and correction as much as in language. Dialogue based learning research reinforces this by showing that inclusive learning emerges when participants treat epistemological difference as a resource rather than a threat, and when learning is anchored in sustained conversation and reflection [2]. In my own life, that is the simplest truth I can offer: I learned most deeply by living, watching, failing, adjusting, and returning again.

Conclusion

Daoism and Buddhism, as I have encountered them, are not primarily about declaring belief. They are about training attention. They are grounded because they begin with the human condition as it is: reactive, attached, easily trapped by pride, and yet capable of clarity through patient observation and practice. When compared with Christian and Islamic contexts, the contrast does not diminish Daoism and Buddhism. It clarifies them. Christianity's interreligious dialogues show how learning across traditions must often be deliberately structured and ethically negotiated. Islamic experiential education shows how communal and ritual participation can also be a powerful vehicle of lived learning. Across all these traditions, cultural socialization can be understood as an ethical education of the self through practice, dialogue, and consequence. For me, this is why "learning by living" remains the most honest description of how I became who I am, and how I continue learning without pretending that I have finished.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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