

the tao of
intimacy and ecstasy

*realizing the promise
of spiritual union*

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what is taoism?

*The Tao is an empty vessel;
it is used but never exhausted.
It is the fathomless source
of the ten thousand beings!*

LAO TZU, *TAO TE CHING* (CHAPTER 4)



What Is Tao?

“The Tao that can be told or described in words is not the eternal Tao.” So begins the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tzu, written some twenty-five hundred years ago. This book has become the most widely translated book in the world after the Bible. It contains much wisdom in its few pages. Lao Tzu’s writing is spare and poetic and leaves much room for reflection and meditation.

In addition to being the most well-known book on Tao, it is still studied and chanted each morning in Taoists temples all over China. Lao Tzu was a scholar and spiritual teacher in ancient China, during the Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC). Society in that time was falling apart, with each state making war on the other. Civilization, as the ancient Chinese knew it, was crumbling. Despite holding an important and well-paid position in the royal archives, Lao Tzu thought it was time to leave. He headed out to the wild west of China, riding a water buffalo. When he reached the farthest edge of the kingdom, he

met up with the person in charge of the garrison there, Yin He, who begged him to write down something of his teachings, so students of Tao would have something to refer to. The legend says that Lao Tzu spent one night there, writing eighty-one short, simple chapters. The next morning he struck out into the wilderness, never to be seen again.

The term *Tao* is used to describe the indescribable, to put into words what is wordless, to give sound to the great silence. Tao can only be pointed to, or referred to, say the ancient sages. It cannot be held, only experienced. It cannot be touched, only felt. It cannot be seen, only glimpsed, with the inner eye. Yet Tao is our source, our path, our end as it is our beginning.

The Chinese word *Tao* is made up of two characters. One means “to follow or to run,” and the other means “a human face.” Together, these characters can be translated as “a person moving along a path.” Tao can also be thought of as the path, or way, itself. Hence, Tao is often referred to as “the Way.”

Lao Tzu says:

You look at it and it is not seen,
it is called the Formless.
You listen to it and it is not heard,
it is called the Soundless.
You grasp it and it cannot be held,
it is called the Intangible.
(*Chapter 14*)

Tao is at once the universal pageant of the constellations and the budding of each new leaf in the spring. It is the constant round of life and death and all that falls between, an undying cycle of change and renewal. While Tao is not personalized, it sustains all of creation, giving life and supporting all living beings—human, plant, animal, water, even the very rock foundation of the earth itself. And, in the end, when we have shrugged off this mortal coil, we return to the bosom of undifferentiated consciousness, Tao.

Followers of the Path of Tao are dedicated to discovering the dance of the cosmos in the passing of each season as well as the passing of each precious moment in our lives. By paying attention only to what we can see with our eyes, we will miss seeing what is really there. It is only by seeing with the inner eye that we can see the true Way. By connecting to our eternal self, by finding a way back to our source, we can experience a sense of peace, of safety, and of harmony with the world around and within us.

The Path of Tao, with its emphasis on self-cultivation and self-responsibility and its many forms of energy work and exercise, is perfect for today's world.

Tao is easy to lose, hard to find, impossible to describe, difficult to see, yet is ever before us, shining like a light in the darkness. Lao Tzu says:

My words are easy to understand and to apply,
yet no one understands them
or puts them into practice.
(Chapter 70)

The Path of Tao

Once there lived men and women who were not conscious of their separation from Tao; therefore, they were at one with it. Chuang Tzu, one of the most important Taoist sages of ancient times, describes this kind of person like this:

They did not mind being poor. They took no pride in their achievements. They made no plans. In this way, they could commit an error and not regret it. They could succeed without being proud. They could climb mountains without fear, enter water without getting wet, and pass through fire without being burned. They slept without dreaming and awoke without anxiety. Their food was simple and their breath was deep.

They did not love life or hate death. When they were born they felt no elation, when they died there was no sorrow. Carefree they came. Carefree they went. That was all. They did not forget their beginning yet did not seek their end. They accepted all that was given them with delight and when it was gone, they gave it no more thought. (*Chapter 2*)

Nowadays we strive and struggle, never content, always sure there is something greater to achieve, something of greater value to attain, if only we can become successful in the eyes of the world. Yet at the end of the day, in the deep of the night, or in the first glare of the morning light, we feel empty and bereft. We have lost the Way and are very far indeed from those ancient men and woman who lived so lightly and so well.

It is in acknowledging the interconnectedness of all life that we can open ourselves to experiencing life in all its manifestations. By paying close attention to the flow of life around us, we can feel ourselves being carried along on the currents of energy and spirit that make up the universe.

The Path of Tao gives us ways to cultivate ourselves spiritually, energetically, and emotionally. It gives us specific practices to bring all our varying and vying selves into focus, harmony, and the oneness where we truly dwell—the eternal, ever-evolving Tao.

Tao, then, is the Way—as in direction, as in manner, source, destination, purpose, and process. In discovering and exploring Tao, the process and the outcome are one and the same. The Way to the goal, the Way along the way, the one who is going along the Way—they are all one and the same. Those who think that they can separate out what is spiritual from what is not spiritual, what is real from what is not real, what is eternal from what is not eternal—they are lost and confused. There is no way out or through but through the Way, or Tao, itself. But just as there are many different kinds of trees in the forest, so too are there many different approaches to Tao.

All paths are aspects of the one path; all truths are but the one truth. Everything that rises must converge. The men and women of Tao understand this and act accordingly. For them, the past, the present, and the future are all of a piece. They make no distinctions between things, persons, or states of being. In this way, they free themselves from the cycle of change and dwell in the infinite Tao.

It has been said that words can actually get in the way of true communication. It is when we leave the world of words behind and enter deeply into the world of spirit that we can truly be said to be saying something.

How then are we to be able to “know Tao”? How can we experience, consciously, our connection with the divine? For without the connection to that eternal part of ourselves, all our suffering is in vain. This has been the mystic quest for thousands of years, in many different cultures.

We come from the eternal—before birth—clear and whole. We are then immersed in the dust of the world and lose our clarity, our wholeness. It is only through spiritual work that we can regain that original pure nature, so that at death we can go back into the eternal realm with clear vision and pure understanding. What is good and true about our natures must be cultivated.

Thus, on the Path of Tao, we call spiritual work self-cultivation. We plant the spiritual seeds into our beings and wait patiently for them to grow. We attend them and water them with our tears of joy and grief and mulch them with the negative experiences of our life. And then, if we are patient enough, we can experience the flowering of our Tao nature and flourish like a great flower in the sun.

The Taoist seeks to dig deep beneath all the layers of cultural and psychological silt that has accumulated in us humans over the millennia and to bring forth the shining pearl that lies there.

To enter the Path of Tao means simply to be the best, the most sincere, the most devout, the most understanding, the most patient, the most conscious person we can be. And as such, we can truly call ourselves followers of the grand and divine Way.

The Roots and Branches of Tao

Taoism has its roots in the ancient practices of Chinese shamanism. It has evolved over the millennia, mixing shamanism, folk rites and beliefs, the deep self-cultivation practices of many sages—both men and women—as well as the two other great philosophies of China, Confucianism and Buddhism. It is eminently flexible. Indeed, flexibility is one of its most prized principles (more on this later).

Over the years, there has developed in modern China two different strands of Taoism: *Taojia* and *Taojiao*. *Taojia* is sometimes called philosophical Taoism, classical Taoism, or lay Taoism. This is the Taoism of many modern practitioners of chi gong, tai chi, or other Taoist arts such as feng shui, internal alchemy, and Chinese medicine. This is also the kind of Taoism that is found most often in the West. It is said to date to the ancient sage-king Huangti (Huangdi), the Yellow Emperor, who reigned during the third millennium BCE. It continued down through the sages, such as Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Ge Hong, Lu Dong Bin, and countless other “invisible” sages, who carried on the ancient traditions and created new practices. Even today, the ancient traditions are being blended with the new practices of contemporary sages.

Taojiao, on the other hand, is referred to as religious Taoism or liturgical Taoism and is the Taoism of monks and nuns, temples and liturgy. This type of Taoism also incorporates divination, exorcism, talismans, chanting, officiating at funerals, and other rituals. This is the type of Taoism one finds at many modern temples in China and Hong Kong and even at a few in the West. It contains both celibate, vegetarian monks and nuns and priests with families. This type of Taoism was created by Zhang Daoling around 142 CE as a movement called the Heavenly Masters (*Tian Shi*). It incorporated various strands from shamanism, magical practices, and Buddhism, which was becoming very popular in China at the time. Today there are primarily two branches of religious Taoism: the Heavenly Masters and the Complete Realization (*Quanzhen*), and several subsets of each, such as the Dragon Gate sect of the Quanzhen school. There is a lot of debate among Western scholars

about these two terms and whether they are indeed two different strains of Taoism. But from my Chinese Taoist teachers here in the West as well as my interactions with Chinese Taoists in China, it seems very clear to me that they do exist as separate forms.

Spirituality on the Path of Tao is seen as a tangible, even physical thing. Followers of Tao believe that spirituality is connected to chi (*qi*), the life force or vital energy of our bodies. It is this basic life force that enables us to experience spiritual insight and feel a connectedness to All That Is, Tao itself. Whether we are practicing meditation or chi gong, or studying the words of the ancient masters, we are utilizing this life force to enable us to see more clearly into our own lives. In this way, we can begin transforming ourselves from our low, often troubled states into higher, more refined stages of spiritual life.

The early sages of Tao, like Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, used images from nature or metaphors of a sage-ruler to teach us how to become more balanced, more harmonious, and more in touch with our essential spiritual nature. Indeed, the character for “Master,” *Tzu*, is also the character used for “child.” Much like Master Jesus, who said that we must become as a child to enter the kingdom of heaven, Lao Tzu says:

Holding the body and spirit as one,
can you avoid their separation?
Concentrating your chi and becoming pliant,
can you become like a new-born baby?

(Chapter 10)

It is in attaining this childlike state of purity, flexibility, humbleness, and innocence that we become spiritual beings. It is in learning how to not only go with the flow, but also become one with it so we may be better able to live our lives in joy, harmony, and with a deep sense of wonder and delight in the world around us.

Taoism teaches us that all life forms exist in relation to all other life forms. Indeed, it may be said that nothing in the universe has its own

intrinsic reality but exists only in relation to everything else in the universe. Taoists do not view the world as a static form but as something that is continually coming into being. Not only that, in Tao all parts of the world are coming into being in relation to all other parts. They are, in turn, acting upon or influenced by these other “coming into being” things.

On the Path of Tao, each person is looked at as a microcosm of the universe itself. Looking at the subject of human relationships in this way, we see that aspects of the universe “coming into being” are being acted upon, and how each act—each decision, each time we come into relationship with another—affects a long line of karma, energies, and emotional outcomes. Taoism was not and is not a primarily monastic tradition, and there is much to be learned from the ancient masters, as well as contemporary ones, about human relationships. In the rest of the book, we will explore the teachings on this essential and important subject—the Tao of intimacy and ecstasy.

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the way of harmony

Harmony is an achievement, not a gift.

HUA-CHING NI, *THE GENTLE PATH OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESS*



TO THE CHINESE, one of the most important principles is that of harmony. Chinese music, painting, astrology, architecture, philosophy, even cooking are all areas where the principle of harmony is of utmost importance. How much more so for relationship! The question is, how to attain harmony and, perhaps even more important, just what is harmony?

To begin we can take a look at another Chinese principle, one that is used quite extensively in Taoism: yin/yang.

The Cosmic Dance of Yin/Yang

The principle of yin/yang is fundamental to any understanding of Taoist philosophy or sexual yoga. It is of prime importance in working with relationships—whether those relationships are between two or more people or with groups of people.

Notice that I write this as *yin/yang* instead of the more commonly seen *yin and yang*. This is because it is important to understand that the principle of yin/yang is not two distinctly different things but a single entity with two sides. In order to understand the principle of yin/yang,

we have to divide it and describe yin and yang individually yet always keep in mind that they are actually one thing, not two.

The ancient Taoists, those natural philosophers of change and balance, used the concepts of yin and yang to symbolize the polarities of existence. Everything that exists can be assigned either to yin or yang; thus, by identifying something as yin or yang, we also automatically suggest its polar aspect. In this way, all elements are paired and balanced with each other—night and day, sun and moon, moist and dry, dark and light, fire and water. It is through this interdependence and interrelationship of polarities that the universe—and we humans within it—remains in balance and harmony.

As do so many Taoist ideas, these concepts of yin and yang come from nature. Originally yang stood for the light side of a hill, the side facing the sun. Yin stood for the shady side, away from the sun.

The qualities of yang are brightness, heat, activity, upward and outward direction, aggressiveness, expansion, and what we might think of as maleness. The qualities of yin are darkness, water, cold, rest, inward and downward direction, stillness, receptivity, and what we might think of as femaleness.

It is very important to understand that when we talk about yin/ yang, we are not talking about gender or sex. We all have both yin and yang qualities, whether we are male or female. The balance of these two qualities within us is not static and concrete but ever moving and shifting. At times our yin side may assert itself; at other times it is our yang side that does. By being aware and sensitive to the balance and subtle shifts of our own yin and yang qualities, we are better able to make proper decisions and conduct ourselves with greater integrity and foresight in our dealings with others.

Again, yin and yang are not two completely separate forces; they are different facets of one unified principle. Each of us contains these different facets or sides in our personalities. As we learn and grow, different sides of our selves come into being. Sometimes it can take a little work to discover the yang within our yin or the yin within our yang.