

An Introductory Primer on Taoism

What is Tao?

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Table of Contents

A. Preface: What is Taoism?	p.3
B. Introduction: What is Tao?	p.4
C. Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Pt. I	p.6
D. Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Pt. II	p.8
E. Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Pt. III.....	p.10
F. Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Pt. IV.....	p.13
G. Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Pt. V.....	p.16
H. Chuang Tzu / Inner Chapters	p.18
I. The I-Ching: Book of Changes	p.21
J. A Chinese View of Death	p.23
K. 22 Questions on Taoism	p.25
L. Addendum	p.28
M. References & Resources	p.29
N. About the Contributors	p.29

A. Preface: What is Taoism?

What is Taoism? That's a good question, one what people have been attempting to answer now for nearly 2,500 years. Maybe it would help to start with a definition. The word Tao means the way or the path. So, Tao appears to relate to either a way of doing or perceiving things, or perhaps, a road or path leading towards something or somewhere.

In the book which is essentially the bible of Taoism, The Tao Te Ching, by Lao Tzu, Taoism's founder, in Chapter 1 he says this:

“The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name”

So, from the very beginning, we are told not to trust things which can be named or defined too much. In Chapter 1, Lao Tzu goes on to say,

“The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth
The named is the mother of ten thousand things”

So it is suggested that out of what cannot be explicitly named all things emerge, “the beginning of heaven and earth”, he says. And yet, out of what can be named, the ten thousand things emerge. In Chinese, the phrase “the ten thousand things” refers to the rest of creation or manifestation.

So, what does all of that mean to us? This vastness which cannot be explicitly named? In a way, one could say that it sounds almost quite similar to how many might describe God, is it not. A vast creator beyond naming? Sound familiar?

B. Introduction: What is Tao?

To be able to discuss the question "What is Tao?" we must first turn to chapter one of Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching. In chapter one, he clearly delineates that "Tao can be talked about but not the eternal Tao." That is, we can discuss Tao endlessly, but we can never encompass the eternal Tao in words. In chapter forty-two the essence of this dilemma is described as *"Tao gave birth to One, One gave birth to two."*

As the eternal, unspeakable Tao, it gave rise to Oneness. We can say that this unity, the undifferentiated reality. Another way of describing this state is by saying before the beginning. That is, before any differentiation or manifestation there was Tao.

In chapter fourteen, Lao Tzu states: *"its name is formless. Its name is soundless. Its name is incorporeal; these three attributes are unfathomable; therefore they fuse into one."* The Tao as formless, soundless incorporeal is always beyond manifestation and symbolic representation, what we can speak of is the Tao in its activities as the two, as the interaction of yin and yang. Of these two much can be said.

In chapter two, Lao Tzu describes their interaction in the polarity of concepts, and interdependence and relativity of descriptive evaluation.

"Difficult and easy. long and short. high and low."

Once the Tao manifests it is characterized by relativity and interdependence.

The crucial difference between Confucius and Lao Tzu is their attitude toward self-cultivation. For Confucius with his emphasis on learning, self-cultivation by method of "rectifying the heart," the evolving human must make an effort to develop the "good qualities of their nature."

For Lao Tzu, this approach is short of the mark. It emphasizes an attitude of acquiring more relativity.

In chapter forty-four he states *".an excessive love for anything will cost you dear in the end."* The secret to happiness is *"to know when you have enough. To know when to stop is to be preserved from perils."* To avoid troubles and problems involves the muting of desire, the blunting of excess.

To Lao Tzu, the Confucian method is excessive; it creates problems by preferring the "good to the bad," by over emphasizing the effort of "self-cultivation." For Lao Tzu the method of happiness lies in attuning and aligning oneself to the eternal principle of the Tao as it manifests through you and all other manifestation. In order to do this we must eliminate desire and attachment, and practice "daily diminishing."

In chapter forty-eight he states *"Learning consists of daily accumulating; the practice of Tao consists in daily diminishing."* This emphasis rests upon the belief that if we remove the cultural conditioning and desires, that our essential nature is perfect as it is, that is does not require additional learning but rather constant un-learning. This un-learning and diminishing is complete when we reach the state of wu-wei,

nonintentional action. In this state the sage or perfected human naturally expresses virtues, practices non-action and is the only person truly fit to govern because he has no desire and self-interest.

In chapter twelve the specifics of the sage's practice are stated as being the practice of *"taking care of the belly, not the eye."* This means that the sage focuses in his belly (Tan-Tien) and not upon the delight of the senses which blind, deafen and obscure the experience of Tao. When the sage has done this, the omniscient quality of the eternal Tao becomes active in the sage and he becomes able to manifest virtue and knowledge as a natural consequence of his level of consciousness.

Lao Tzu describes this in chapter forty-seven *"without going out your door you can know the ways of the world."* This virtue of wu-wei finds its highest expression in helping others, in chapter sixty-four, *"the Sage desires to be tireless. Learns to unlearn his learning, and induces the masses to return from where they have over passed. He only helps creatures to find their own nature, but does not venture to lead them by the nose."* For Lao Tzu this is the perfect manifestation of the Tao.

C. Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World

Taoism: Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Part I

Ted Kardash, Ph.D., Taoist Priest

Taoism is an ancient Chinese philosophical tradition whose origins extend back to 3000 B.C. The first actual written works to promote the Taoist outlook appeared around 500 B.C. and were attributed to the legendary Taoist sages, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. Lao Tzu is the author of the Tao Te Ching (The Classic of the Way and Its Power), currently very popular in the United States with an increasing number of new English-language translations. Less well known, but equally important to an understanding of Taoism, are the writings of Chuang Tzu. His Inner Chapters is gaining wider attention as is The Way of Chuang Tzu, an excellent translation of selected writings by Christian mystic Thomas Merton.

Taoism is organized around several key principles and, like any philosophical outlook, presents a way of seeing and understanding reality. The word Tao itself translates as the Way, or Path. This meaning includes both the way in which we perceive the world around us (how do we behave? what are our actions?). The manner in which we perceive reality influences our way of being in the world, our path of action.

Taoism's central principle is that all life, all manifestation, is part of an inseparable whole, an interconnected organic unity which arises from a deep, mysterious, and essentially unexplainable source which is the Tao itself. Everything conceivable is contained within this principle. Various Western translators have compared this concept to the idea of God, Universal Mind, or Absolute Reality, to name but a few examples. Taoism views the Universe and all of its manifestations as operating according to a set of unchanging natural laws. As an inseparable part of the Tao, human beings can gain knowledge of these laws and become attuned to them. It is these natural laws that constitute the core principles of Taoism. Aligning ourselves with these principles provides a universal perspective and understanding and allows life to be lived in harmony with the Tao. Indeed our way of life becomes the Way, a full expression of the Tao.

Taoism has become increasingly popular with Americans for a number of reasons. As our lives become more stressful and complex, dealing with mounting crises on personal, local and global levels, we naturally seek solutions that will restore us to a more balanced, harmonious, and satisfying way of living. It may be here that Taoism exhibits its greatest appeal for not only does it represent a way of harmony and balance, its Way is one of naturalness and simplicity!

Taoism states that all life forces tend to move toward harmony and balance because it is in their nature to do so. From the Taoist viewpoint we, as humans, have the choice of consciously aligning ourselves with the Way, or remaining in ignorance and resisting the natural order of the Tao. To choose the latter means to remain disconnected from our own personal processes, our own Tao, as well as life's grand flow. Taoist teachings are intended to be utilized as a guide to daily living. Their

greatest value lies in their ability to direct us toward our own process of self-exploration, growth, and transformation which connects us deeply to ourselves and to the world around us. The writings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu provide us with excellent counsel on how to achieve this state of connectedness, harmony and balance, union with the Tao. In future articles we will study four main concepts of Taoist thought and how we might apply these to our daily lives.

D. Taoism - Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Part II

Ted Kardash

This is the second in a series of articles on Taoism. This article deals with the concept of Te, or virtue.

Taoism, an ancient Chinese system of thought, views the Universe as an interconnected, organic whole. Nothing exists separately from anything else. The Universe is governed by a set of natural and unalterable laws, which manifest themselves as a flow of continuous change. This natural order and flow is referred to as the Tao, or the Way. By recognizing and aligning ourselves with these laws, humans can attain a state of being which combines the experience of total freedom with one of complete connectedness to life's process - being one with the Tao.

To help gain this level of existence, Taoist writings offer us various principles to be followed in the course of everyday living. Understanding and adopting these values presents the opportunity to become whole and complete, to consciously become an inseparable part of life's flow.

A central concept in Taoist thought is that of Te, or virtue. This word appears in the title of the famous work by the legendary sage, Lao Tzu, the Tao Te Ching - The Power of the Way. Though virtue is the literal translation of Te, the word is used in Taoist literature to indicate power or strength (as the Latin root, virtus, indicates). Te refers to the fact that all things contain an inherent power or strength that comes from their own essential being or true inner nature. This power derives from the fact that our true self is an expression of the Tao, because it is intrinsically connected with the power of the Universe. However, the idea of Te is that of power exercised without the use of force and without inappropriate interference in the existing order of things.

In our modern society much attention is devoted to promoting self-awareness: "finding ourselves", "knowing who we truly are." Many traditions, including certain schools of Western psychology, regard this discovery and acceptance of self as central to personal well-being, an important step on the path of individual self-awareness and responsibility, without which it will remain impossible to resolve the many social and environmental problems currently facing mankind.

What guidelines does Taoism offer in this area? How can we manifest our Te, know our true selves in a manner that connects us with the rest of our world?

Our conventional Western outlook is based on the assumption that humans are all separate entities, existing apart from each other and from the surrounding environment. Te, on the other hand, implies a trust and belief in one's own inner nature and in the interconnectedness of all life.

Lao Tzu writes that *"All things arise from Tao. They are nourished by Virtue (their own inner nature). Virtue is goodness (and) is faithfulness."*

As a first step, we are asked to believe in ourselves, in our own inherent goodness, in the process that is Tao. "The great Tao flows everywhere. It nourishes the ten thousand things. It holds nothing back," Lao Tzu states, encouraging us not to give in to our doubts and fears.

As a means of developing this trust and belief in the Tao and expressing our inner nature, Lao Tzu counsels us to move beyond conventional values, those social mores and norms which tend to strengthen our view of ourselves as separate egos or selves and which are rooted in doubt and fear. These values only serve to lock us in our sense of separation and rob us of the power of our true being.

The sage tells us: "Accept disgrace willingly. Accept being unimportant. Do not be concerned with loss or gain. Love the world as you love your own self. Then you can truly care for all things."

To help manifest our Te, Lao Tzu gives us his "three treasures" which assist us in developing our perception of the unity of life and in cultivation a way of being that is harmonious with the Tao. The first treasure is compassion, the second is frugality or balance, and the third is humility, "daring not to be ahead of others."

We must feel and experience our connection with all of humanity, all of life. In this way we are able to respond to various situations in an appropriate, helpful manner, serving the higher good. This is compassion. Practicing frugality works to preserve the delicate balance that exists in life and harmonizes our actions with those of the Universe. The Tao will nourish us if we make wise use of its resources. And adopting an attitude of humility allows us to be guided by the creative forces of the Tao and orients our actions towards service to all mankind and the Universe as a whole.

In this way our Te emerges. More and more we find our actions truly expressing our inner nature. More and more they are in harmony with the Tao. As our Te manifests we experience ourselves as an integral part of our environment, moving effortlessly and naturally along life's path.

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E. Taoism - Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Part III

Ted Kardash

This is the third of a series of articles on Taoism. This article deals with yin-yang, the principal of harmony and change.

Taoism's central organizing principle is the interconnectedness of all life, with its flow of continuous change. Nowhere is this idea expressed in such a unique and exquisite manner as in the concept of yin-yang, which describes the underlying unity of life through the interplay of opposites.

Taoist writings state that all things and all processes contain two primal energies or forces. These two basic aspects of manifestation often are described as masculine and feminine, light and dark, negative and positive, creative and receptive. The original meaning of the term signified the light and dark side of a mountain. Our common English-language expression, "there are two sides to everything," expresses this concept quite succinctly.

From a Taoist point of view, however, these two polar opposites are not seen as distinctly separate or in conflict, but rather as interdependent and complementary. In actuality, one creates the other. "Is there a difference between yes and no?" Lao Tzu, one of Taoism's immortal sages, asks. "Is there a difference between good and evil?" His reply is that "Under heaven all can see beauty only because there is ugliness. All can know good as good only because there is evil."

Chuang Tzu, another legendary Taoist sage, states with delightful wit and humor: "Everything can be a 'that'; everything can be a 'this'. Therefore, 'that' comes from 'this' and 'this' comes from 'that'- which means 'that' and 'this' give birth to one another. When there is no more separation between 'that' and 'this', it is called being one with the Tao."

These two sages are telling us that the seeming opposites of life - the "yes" and "no", the "good" and "bad", are merely expressions of a deeper underlying unity, the connectedness that characterizes life in all its forms and processes. They advise us to not get caught in these apparent contradictions, rigidly choosing one side against the other. We are urged rather, to perceive them in their relatedness, to experience how one grows out of the other. In so doing we can partake in the reconciling of opposites, "in blunting the sharpness and untangling the knot," as Lao Tzu states. Nature's tendency is to constantly move to a state of harmony and balance.

The idea of change leading to harmonious balance underlines another aspect of yin-yang. These two polar forces are not static or rigidly locked in battle with one another. Just as one side of the mountain does not remain sunny all day, but gradually becomes shady as the sun moves across the sky and lights the other side, so also do the two

forces of yin and yang constantly move and interact. When one energy becomes full and complete, then the other begins to grow and ascend. "That which shrinks must first expand. That which fails must first be strong. That which is cast down must first be raised." Lao Tzu is telling us that life is a process. There is constant change, one thing flowing into another, one thing becoming another. Furthermore, within this constant change is a recognizable cyclical pattern, like the alternating of the day night or the turning of the seasons. For all things there is a natural expansion and contradiction, of both the most minute and grandest levels. It is the breathing pattern of life itself.

What implications does this have for us on a personal level? How can we apply the concept of yin-yang in our daily lives?

For the past two thousand years traditional Western thinking has been dominated by a dualistic, either-or approach: either something is good, or it is bad; desirable or undesirable; someone is an ally or an enemy. We perceive experiences to be either positive or negative and we expend much energy in trying to eradicate that we consider to be negative. From a Taoist point of view, this is like trying to erase the negative current from electricity because it is not "positive."

Because we perceive ourselves as separate from others, we often find ourselves in opposition to them, locked into "this and that," merely because of skin color, language, or beliefs. Taking these "differences" for the way things "really are" leads to breakdowns in relating, arguing, fighting, and even killing. All because of "this" and "that". We do the same with ourselves. We dislike or disown parts of ourselves and struggle to change, not trusting that our own inner nature, as an expression of the Tao, will of its own accord move towards a harmonious balance.

"Everything can be a 'that'; everything can be a 'this'," Chuang Tzu writes. "Thus, the sage does not bother with these distinctions, but beholds the light beyond right and wrong." As strange as such thinking may seem to us, we can recognize that every good negotiator and mediator certainly looks beyond 'right' and 'wrong' in order to reconcile opposites, to "soften the glare and untangle the knot." By Being yielding and receptive, by remaining in relationship with others as well as with ourselves, we learn to flow with life's myriad of changes. Indeed we become an agent of change ourselves, rather than resisting it while desperately clinging to one pole, one experience or perception, or the other.

"What goes up must come down," and "Every cloud has a silver lining." Our own language echoes the wisdom found within the concept of yin-yang. Bad luck becomes good luck and crisis contains the opportunity for growth. We can choose to cooperate with this complementary of opposites by not denying, suppressing, or struggling against unwanted discomfort or pain, but rather by accepting all facets of our existence, "good" and "bad", as the natural flow of the Tao.

By following the path of acceptance and responsiveness to change we can become, in the words of Chuang Tzu, true women and men of Tao. The true person of Tao "is not always looking for right and wrong, always deciding 'Yes' or 'No'. The true person has no mind to fight Tao and does not try by her own contriving to help Tao along. All that comes out of him comes quiet, like the four seasons."

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F. Taoism - Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Part IV

Ted Kardash

This is the fourth in a series of articles on Taoism. This article will explore the concept of we-wei or "non-doing."

The essential message of Taoism is that life constitutes an organic, interconnected whole which undergoes constant transformation. This unceasing flow of change manifests itself as a natural order governed by unalterable, yet perceivable laws. Paradoxically, it is the constancy of these governing principles (like the rising and setting of the sun and moon and the changing of the seasons) that allows people to recognize and utilize them in their own process of transformation. Gaining an awareness of life's essential unity and learning to cooperate with its natural flow and order enables people to attain a state of being that is both fully free and independent and at the same time fully connected to the life flow of Universe - being at one with the Tao. From the Taoist viewpoint this represents the ultimate stage of human existence.

The writings of the legendary Taoist sages, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, furnish us with specific principles as a guide to attaining this state of oneness. Through understanding these principles and applying them to daily living we may unconsciously become a part of life's flow.

A key principle in realizing our oneness with the Tao is that of wu-wei, or "non-doing". Wu-wei refers to behavior that arises from a sense of oneself as connected to others and to one's environment. It is not motivated by a sense of separateness. It is action that is spontaneous and effortless. At the same time it is not to be considered inertia, laziness, or mere passivity. Rather, it is the experience of going with the grain or swimming with the current. Our contemporary expression, "going with the flow," is a direct expression of this fundamental Taoist principle, which in its most basic form refers to behavior occurring in response to the flow of the Tao.

The principle of wu-wei contains certain implications. Foremost among these is the need to consciously experience ourselves as part of the unity of life that is the Tao. Lao Tzu writes that we must be quiet and watchful, learning to listen to both our own inner voices and to the voices of our environment in a non-interfering, receptive manner. In this way we also learn to rely on more than just our intellect and logical mind to gather and assess information. We develop and trust our intuition as our direct connection to the Tao. We heed the intelligence of our whole body, not only our brain. And we learn through our own experience. All of this allows us to respond readily to the needs of the environment, which of course includes ourselves. And just as the Tao functions in this manner to promote harmony and balance, our own actions, performed in the spirit of wu-wei, produce the same result.

Wu-wei also implies action that is spontaneous, natural and effortless. As with the Tao, this behavior simply flows through us because it is the right action, appropriate to its time and place, and serving the purpose of greater harmony and balance. Chuang Tzu refers to this type of being in the world as flowing, or more poetically (and provocatively), as "purposeless wandering!" How opposite this concept is to some of our most cherished cultural values. To have no purpose is unthinkable and even frightening, certainly anti-social and perhaps pathological in the context of modern day living. And yet it would be difficult to maintain that our current values have promoted harmony and balance, either environmentally or on an individual level.

To allow oneself to "wander without purpose" can be frightening because it challenges some of our most basic assumptions about life, about who we are as humans, and about our role in the world. From a Taoist point of view it is our cherished beliefs - that we exist as separate beings, that we can exercise willful control over all situations, and that our role is to conquer our environment - that lead to a state of disharmony and imbalance. Yet, "the Tao nourishes everything," Lao Tzu writes. If we can learn to follow the Tao, practicing "non-action," then nothing remains undone. This trusting our own bodies, our thoughts and emotions, and also believing that the environment will provide support and guidance. Thus the need to develop watchfulness and quietness of mind.

In cultivating wu-wei, timing becomes an important aspect of our behavior. We learn to perceive processes in their earliest stage and thus are able to take timely action. "Deal with the small before it becomes large," is a well-known dictum from Lao Tzu.

And finally, in the words of Chuang Tzu, we learn "detachment, forgetfulness of results, and abandonment of all hope of profit." By allowing the Tao to work through us, we render our actions truly spontaneous, natural, and effortless. We thus flow with all experiences and feelings as they come and go. We know intuitively that actions which are not ego-motivated, but are responsive to the needs of the environment lead toward harmonious balance and give ultimate meaning and "purpose" to our lives. Such actions are attuned to the deepest flow of life itself.

To allow wu-wei to manifest in our lives may seem like a daunting task. And yet, if we pause to reflect on our past experiences, we will recall possibly many instances when our actions were spontaneous and natural, when they arose out of the needs of the moment without thought of profit or tangible result. "The work is done and then forgotten. And so it lasts forever," writes Lao Tzu. By listening carefully within, as well as to our surroundings, by remembering that we are part of an interconnected whole, by remaining still until action is called forth, we can perform valuable, necessary, and long lasting service in the world while cultivating our ability to be at one with the Tao. Such is the power of wu-wei, allowing ourselves to be guided by the Tao.

G. Taoism - Ageless Wisdom for a Modern World, Part V

Ted Kardash

This is the fifth and final article in the series on Taoism. This article focuses on the concept of the Sage.

In the earliest Taoist written works, which appeared around 500 B.C., there are numerous references to the Sage. From a Taoist viewpoint, this term refers to one whose actions are in complete harmony with his surroundings - both the immediate environment and the universe as a whole. Through the example of the Sage, Taoism offers us a model of a way of being that is in accordance with the natural laws that govern life. To think and act like a Sage is to attune oneself to life's flow and to the Tao.

In the English language the word "sage" describes a wise person, one of sound judgment. It also means "to perceive keenly." Within the Taoist tradition the Sage has gained a wisdom that extends beyond mere intellectual knowledge or information and reflects a deep, intuitive understanding of life.

Earlier articles in this series examined four principles basic to Taoism: the interconnectedness of all life (the Tao); the underlying unity of all apparent opposites (yin-yang); the power derived through alignment with the Tao (te); and non-ego motivated action (wu-wei).

The Sage expresses her wisdom by directly manifesting these principles in daily living. Because she truly experiences the unity of all life, the Sage perceives and understands all opposites as part of the same system. As she does not oppose these opposites, she can bring harmony and balance to all situations. Because she resides in a state of interconnectedness, the Sage's actions do not arise from the needs of a separate age but are called forth by the needs of the environment, which includes the Sage herself. These actions are natural, effortless, and spontaneous and are imbued with the power of the Tao.

Taoist thought maintains that cultivating sage-like attributes is part of the process of human transformation. While we may think that to become sage-like happens only at the final stage of this transformation, we also can presently recognize and foster those attributes already within us. The early Taoist writers, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, themselves legendary sages, offer us numerous examples of behavior based on sage-like virtues. Most well known are Lao Tzu's "three treasures": compassion, frugality, and humility.

"Whoever has compassion can be brave. Whoever has frugality can be generous. Whoever dares not to be first in the world can become leader of the world." Lao Tzu maintains that these values are not foreign neither to our understanding, nor to our

experience and that we are all capable of cultivating such sage-like characteristics because they are a natural part of being human. It is through our caring that we connect with others and with all of life. By practicing frugality we maintain a balanced existence with our environment and develop simplicity in action and thought. And by learning to follow, we determine the needs of the environment and provide the necessary service.

The Sage, in "perceiving keenly" sees past the dualities of right and wrong, and harmonizes all opposites. Lao Tzu states, "The Sage is good to people who are good. He is also good to people who are not good." This is true goodness. The Sage does not judge, but accepts everything as part of the intrinsic flow of life and then acts accordingly. In this manner he (or she) provides the opportunity for all beings to become aware of their own self-worth and to express this as goodness.

The Sage lives her life not by conventional standards, but according to the principles that are a reflection of the Tao. Chuang Tzu writes, "Rank and reward make no appeal to her. Disgrace and shame do not deter her. She is not always looking for right and wrong." Thus the Sage is truly at peace with herself and with the way of the Tao. She believes that "the world is ruled by letting things take their course."

Chuang Tzu also writes that, as we become attuned to the Tao by living in harmony with the natural order of the Universe, we become fully realized beings, or "true persons."

"They took life as it came, gladly. Took death as it came, without care. They had no mind to fight Tao. They did not try, by their own contriving, to help Tao along. These are the ones we call true persons."

Thus, to live in harmony with the Tao, cooperating with the natural laws that govern the Universe means to grow and transform as individuals, to become sage-like in our behavior. Initially this process occurs because we consciously adopt and follow those principles which reflect the workings of the Tao - yin-yang, wu-wei, and te, among others. In time we find that your sage-like behaviors manifest reflexively and naturally. They emerge from us without conscious effort. We reach what Taoism considers to be a person's highest calling - a life in service of the Tao. "The Sage has no mind of her own. She is simply aware of the needs of others." Just as the Tao "nourishes all things," as it continually returns things to harmony and balance, so too does the Sage. And this is the ultimate expression of the natural wisdom, the "sageliness," that is the essence of our being.

H. Chuang Tzu / Inner Chapters

Chuang Tzu is Taoism's other great legendary sage. The central theme of his Inner Chapters is how to attain human freedom in everyday affairs. Chuang Tzu invites the reader to shed those conventional beliefs and values that hinder self-transformation.

By cultivating new attitudes, perceptions and behaviors one is able to expand awareness and, in the words of Chuang Tzu, "wander in the infinite".

Everything can be a "that"; everything can be a "this". There is right because of wrong, and wrong because of right. Thus, the sage does not bother with these distinctions but seeks enlightenment from heaven.

When there is no more separation between "this" and "that", it is called the still-point of Tao. At the still-point in the center of the circle one can see the infinite in all things. Right is infinite; wrong is also infinite.

Therefore it is said, "Behold the light beyond right and wrong".

(Gia-Fu Feng, Inner Chapters, Ch 2)

The man in whom Tao
Acts without impediment
Does not bother with his own interests
And does not despise
Others who do.
Rank and reward
Make no appeal to him
Disgrace and shame
Do not deter him
He is always looking
For right and wrong
Always deciding "Yes" or "No"

(Merton, The Way of Chuang Tzu)

When an archer is shooting for nothing
He has all his skill.
If he shoots for a brass buckle
He is already nervous.
If he shoots for a prize of gold
He goes blind
Or sees two targets - He is out of his mind!

His skill has not changed.
But the prize
Divides him.
He cares.
He thinks more of winning
Than of shooting -
And the need to win
Drains him of power.

(Merton, The Way of Chuang Tzu)

Tao Te Ching

Excerpts from the *Tao Te Ching* (Gia-Fu Translation)

The highest good is like water.
Water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive.
It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.

In dwelling, be close to the land.
In meditation, go deep into the heart.
In dealing with others, be gentle and kind.
In speech, be true.
In business, be combatant.
In action, watch the timing.
No fight: No blame. *(Ch 8)*

Knowing others is wisdom;
Knowing the self is enlightenment.
Mastering others requires force;
Mastering the self needs strength.

He who knows he has enough is rich.
Perseverance is a sign of will power.
He who stays where he is endures.
To die but not to perish is to be eternally present. *(Ch 33)*

In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
In the pursuit of Tao, everyday something is dropped.

Less and less is done until non-action is achieved.
When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.

The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering. (*Ch 48*)

I. The I-Ching: Book of Changes

The I Ching (Book of Changes) is an ancient Chinese source of wisdom. Its origins extend back to 3000 BCE and it is said to be the oldest existing book in the world. While the I Ching originated as a source of divination, that is, predicting the future course of events, its usage extends far beyond the scope of "fortune telling". Over the centuries it has been employed by scholars and laypersons alike to gain insight into one's motives and actions, to understand the meaning of life's events, and to align oneself with the forces of harmonious change. It is widely regarded and used as a highly effective tool for personal growth and transformation.

The I Ching is made up of 64 hexagrams, 6-lined pictographs which describe the 64 basic patterns of change inherent in human experience. Knowing these patterns of change allows one to be in harmony with oneself and the surrounding environment, and to act in accordance with the forces of Nature. Each hexagram offers guidance on action that is appropriate to the given circumstance. (It is interesting to note that the 64 hexagrams correspond exactly to the construction of the DNA molecule when represented in binary form!)

Three hexagrams from the I Ching (*Wilhelm-Baynes edition*)

No.11 T'ai/Peace

This hexagram belongs to the first month (Chinese calendar) of February-March when the forces of nature prepare for the new spring.

The Image

Heaven and earth unite, the image of PEACE.

Thus the ruler

Divides and completes the course of heaven and earth;

He furthers and regulates the gifts of heaven and earth,

And so aids the people.

No. 34 Ta Chuang/The Power of the Great

This hexagram is linked with the second Chinese month (March-April) and describes the union of movement and strength which gives the meaning of THE POWER OF THE GREAT.

The Image

Thunder in heaven above:

The image of THE POWER OF THE GREAT.

Thus the superior man does not tread upon the paths
That do not accord with the established order.

No. 43 Kuai/Break-through (Resoluteness)

This hexagram is connected with the third Chinese month (April-May) when, as a result of resolute action, a change in conditions occurs.

The Image
The lake has risen up to heaven;
The image of BREAK-THROUGH.
Thus the superior man
Dispenses riches downward
And refrains from resting on his virtue.

J. A Chinese View of Death: From the Yellow Spring to the Family Altar

Death and transformation are a key element of the Chinese culture and psyche. Along with marriage, death is the most important event in the life of the family and individual. Death marks the transition from life to another world. It allows the family to express its strength and solidarity by coming together to share in the funerary rites of passage. Death requires that the attention of the living be focused upon the larger meaning of life and family. For the Chinese, family identity is primary to individual identity. The clan name comes first, followed by the individual's name. The position of birth, i.e. elder son, elder daughter, has an identity of its own that transcends the individual's hopes, wishes, and desires. When a member of the family dies, a reordering occurs. Thus the funerary rites serve this purpose.

In ancient China the world after life had three major possibilities:

1. Heaven as a divine ancestor.
2. Earth as a hungry ghost or lost soul.
3. Immortality as a Taoist immortal.

The most auspicious result was to become a divine ancestor and take up residence in heaven. This was auspicious from the viewpoint of the family. Taoist priests would make a series of dots upon the tablet representing the body of the deceased and then the characters for the family name and individual name would be written. In this way the ancestor was present in the tablet. They were able to hear the daily prayers and problems of the living because this helped the family. Heaven was composed of a heavenly bureaucracy much like that on earth. The Lord on High, Sheng Ti, was the Emperor of Heaven and his ministers controlled the different heavenly functions. The ancestor was the representative of the family who influenced the functionaries of heaven in order to benefit or to punish the family. The living family in return offered daily sacrifices in the form of incense and food at the family altar.

Not all persons could become divine ancestors. Only those who lived a reasonable long life and died of natural causes could become the family representatives in heaven. Those who died unnaturally or violently met with a different fate. "Hungry ghosts" or guei were the souls of those who died violently or at an unnatural time of life. Due to the means or location of death, these souls were not cared for and became wandering, semi-conscious entities. These "orphan souls" were resentful and confused and attempted to injure and possess other living beings. They were doomed to this fate unless freed by an adept at exorcism or by the annual ceremony of the Universal Salvation. Until then they wandered the Earth making trouble for the living.

The best of all possible outcomes for the individual was to become an Immortal. Through extensive purification practices and meditation the spirit soul of the person was consolidated so that upon death they could consciously leave the body and retain powers of movement and form. The Immortal would take up residence in heaven and

perform meritorious acts to relieve the suffering of the people and to inspire others to achieve immortality. While this is the best fate for the individual, the family loses its direct representative in heaven; the Immortal must help all people, not just the family members.

These three possibilities were expanded with the entry of Buddhism into China around 10 A.D. The Buddhists brought the idea of reincarnation to China. Now an individual could be reborn as another individual. However, this did not mean that the family would necessarily benefit from this rebirth. The impact of Buddhism was resisted in part due to its perceived negative impact upon the family and its fortunes.

The Ceremony of Universal Salvation is performed in the Seventh Moon period (Oct.) to honor and free the "hungry ghosts" who wander the Earth. With wars and all of the other calamities the planet begins to accumulate too many troublesome souls. In order to preserve the living and avoid calamity they need to be released to the underworld. The ritual involves a large ceremonial feast and ritual that is performed to both Taoist and Buddhist priests. The souls are invited to the feast and then each family or person lights a candle, which is then floated on a river, lake or ocean. The candles attract the souls to the underworld called the Yellow Springs. There they enter under the control of the Lord of Hell where they remain until they are reabsorbed into the Tao. This prevents them from getting into further trouble and ends the worry of living relatives about the fate of their deceased loved ones. Following the evening ceremony, the next day the gravesites of the ancestors in heaven are visited, cleaned, and made offerings to. This prepares the family for the harvest and for the Winter Solstice where the rebirth of the light giving yang energy is celebrated.

The major contribution of these ceremonies is to reaffirm the family identity and to maintain the transition in order of succession. It also reconnects the people with the seasonal cycles of the Tao reminding them of their true place in nature.

K. 22 Questions on Taoism

**Answers by Rev. Bill Helm, Director of the Taoist Sanctuary of San Diego
Submitted by a student seeking answers to their college paper**

1) How does Taoism affect your daily life?

Taoism gives me a daily perspective on the reality of a changing universe filled with Qi energy which enables me to more gracefully bump along inside it.

2) Describe a Taoism major holiday. What is its purpose and how is it celebrated?

The Winter Solstice would be a “marked event” that is celebrated by doing ritual that involves acknowledging the importance of the time and its special relation to each of us and the natural world.

3) What about Taoism do you appreciate most?

The non-denominational aspect is very special and the ability of Taoism to recognize the limitation of words which enables a person to participate in multidisciplinary practices each of which seeks to acknowledge and recognize the Divine Infinite Source that gives rise to every tradition.

4) What part of Taoism might you have problems practicing/believing/ agreeing with?

The culture-heavy Chinese religious traditions which have evolved from the original source teachings of the founders.

5) Does Taoism teach a belief in reincarnation? What happens to the soul after death according to Taoism?

Depending on the historical beginnings of different traditions within Taoist religions there may be a belief in reincarnation.

The older systems see the soul as separated into the *Hun* and *Po*, the spirit and vital souls which separate at death. The *Hun* may be developed sufficiently to retain integrity and move to a higher vibrational plane or simply be reintegrated with the source. The *Po*, the vital soul becomes reintegrated with the earthbound source energies of the planet.

6) Do you believe in more than one God?

Taoism recognizes the multiple manifestations of the one Infinite Source of all manifestation.

7) How does Taoism resemble any other religion?

Taoism has a tradition of humanitarian values that honor the divine Tao within all of us and recognizes the value to practicing human kindness and service.

8) Do you have any dietary restrictions or requirements?

During certain time periods the value of a restricted vegetarian diet is recognized as helpful to purifying the practitioners Qi energy body.

9) Does Taoism promote the preaching, dissemination, or conversion of others to your faith?

Since Taoism is essentially a wisdom tradition it does not proselytize or seek to convert others to its practice. At the same time it is a reality that you must make your service and teaching accessible to the general public to sustain a viable level of members and teachers.

10) Who influenced you to convert to Taoism? How has your life changed since then if you were not born Taoist?

Since I never converted to Taoism that question is not relevant. How I became a practitioner of Taoism was as a result of meeting a Taoist teacher and other practitioners who impressed me with their level of function and the knowledge that helped them achieve that level.

11) Are your other family members Taoist?

My wife is a practicing Taoist.

12) Do you visit a Taoist temple on a regular basis?

I am the director of the Taoist Sanctuary, which is a non-profit educational-spiritual school for teaching traditional Taoist and Chinese practices. I go to the Sanctuary on a regular basis.

13) If given the opportunity, would you convert religions or stay with your beliefs?

I usually try to avoid my beliefs and move toward my experiences of Tao.

14) What are your views on other religions? How do your Taoist beliefs affect these views?

My general view is towards accepting the origin of all traditions as being uniquely inspired by someone's culturally based experience of the Divine Infinite Source of all manifestation. This enables me to accept many religious traditions as being valid expressions of the Divine Infinite Source.

15) In your opinion, what makes Taoism unique compared to other religions?

The unique aspect, if there is one, is the appreciation and value of the body as an expression of the Divine Infinite Source. The body is the vehicle for developing an evolving consciousness and not the barrier to evolution which should be despised and repressed.

16) What is your opinion on *wu wei*?

My opinion is that it is a state of consciousness that is very hard to maintain. It is hard to react to life as it is happening and not try to control the Tao as it is manifesting.

17) Which Taoism branch are you most associated with (philosophical, religious, folk)? Why? Which do you think is most important?

We are a part of the wisdom traditions and have a strong philosophical-healer-warrior flavor. Probably because of the teachings and personal preferences of myself and my teachers who came before me.

18) Do you have a favorite Taoism phrase or quote?

Yes

Chapter Sixty-Four (64), The Tao Te Ching

Peace is easily maintained;
Trouble is easily overcome before it starts.
The brittle is easily shattered;
The small is easily scattered.

Deal with it before it happens.
Set things in order before there is confusion.

A tree as great as a man's embrace springs from a small shoot;
A terrace nine stories high begins with a pile of earth;
A journey of a thousand miles-starts under one's feet.

He who acts defeats his own purpose;
He who grasps loses.
The sage does not act, and so is not defeated.
He does not grasp and therefore does not lose.

People usually fail when they are on the verge of success.
So give as much care to the end as to the beginning;
Then there will be no failure.

Therefore the sage seeks freedom from desire.
He does not collect precious things.
He learns not to hold on to ideas.
He brings men back to what they have lost.
He helps the ten thousand things find their own nature,
But refrains from action.

19) What is your favorite Taoism document?

Chuang Tzu's *Inner Chapters*
Gia-Fu Feng, Jane English translation

20) In your own opinion, where do you think Taoist people stand in society today?

They stand on their own two feet, as thinking, feeling, energetic individuals.

21) Have you yourself influenced another to become Taoist?

Yes

22) What part of Taoism motivates you to keep practicing it?

The mystery of the Divine Infinite Source.

L. Addendum: 13 March 2010

1. Where does the origin of life and everything that exists come from?

It comes from what is called `No-nothing-ness`, `before the beginning`, the double negative indicates that there is a point of `maturation in the potential of a beginning that comes from the great mystery of which we cannot formulate words, concepts or images about which to describe.

This is the idea in the Tao te Ching where it says you cannot talk about the eternal Tao. After this stage there is the emergence of yin and yang the two primal energies and the manifestation of all things. These we can and do speak of endlessly.

2. How do you determine between right and wrong?

In the Taoist philosophical tradition the concept of right and wrong is a relative truth. See chapter on `if beauty-ugliness` etc., ethics and laws come at a stage of degeneration in social life that requires such devices.

The true person/sage intuitively is able to feel the correct way to behave thus alleviating the need for right and wrong. They have what is called `true virtue`.

3. What is your purpose in life?

According to the Tao Te Ching, the true purpose in life is to fulfill your own personal Tao. The inner part that is connected to the eternal manifesting Tao of the universe as it expresses itself in the natural world of things.

4. What is your destiny? (What will happen to you when you die?)

Depending on the time of Taoism you refer to that could be either a simple shedding of the denser energies of the body and a re-absorption of the lighter energies of consciousness into the eternal Tao or a trip to heaven if you are a relatively good person or wandering the earth until the dim light of your less developed consciousness is re-absorbed into the earth level of energies.

M. References & Resources: Books, Magazines, Podcasts

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Feng, Gia-Fu; English, Jane (1974). *Lao Tsu, Tao Te Ching*, A. Knopf, New York

Wilhelm, Richard; Baynes, Cary (1950, 1967). *The I Ching or Book of Changes*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey

Magazine

The Jade Dragon, San Diego

For more information, see these resources:

Website: www.taoistsanctuary.org

Website: www.taoistinstitute.com

Taoist Podcasts: What's This Tao All About?, by Dr. Carl Totton and Tod Perry. Subscribe to the program on *iTunes* or go to the website at www.whatsthistao.com

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