

# Taoism

## WHO IS GOD?

Tao is God, but Tao is not a being. Rather, Tao is the source of all and the ultimate reality, and Tao is the cause of all change in life. Tao can only be experienced through mystical ecstasy. Humans seek to reunify with this reality and bring about harmony and live a life of virtue. Tao is the cause of creation and is the force sustaining all life.

## WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Tao is the source of all nature. There are two forces that interact and cause change (creation) in nature. These forces are the Yin and the Yang. Yin, which is the Mandarin word for moon, represents the female, darkness, wetness, coolness, etc. Yang, which is the Mandarin word for sun, represents the male, lightness, dryness, heat, etc. The tension between Yin and Yang causes endless change through production, reproduction and the transformation of energy. Yin and Yang bring about change and balance in life and their interaction is the cause of all creation.

The universe is hierarchically organized in such a way that its entirety is reproduced in its individual parts. Thus, man is a microcosm within the macrocosm (small universe within a larger one). Man's parts correspond to parts of the universe and nature. All is from the Tao, and all will return to the Tao.

## WHY ARE WE HERE?

We are here to reunite with Tao through the transformation from disharmony to harmony. Disharmony causes a destructive or waning cycle of the Five Elements (metal, wood, earth, water and fire). This cycle consists of metal destroying wood (wood is cut by a metal ax); wood dominating earth through its roots (domination through power); earth mastering water and preventing floods (anti-nature forces); water destroying fire (pollution is caused by anti-nature, and destroys the beauty of the world); fire melts metal (causing pollution). Through personal and social transformation, humans can convert the destructive cycle of the Five Elements into a creative or constructive cycle of the Five Elements. Metal in the earth nourishes underground water (purification); water is the source of life for vegetation, including wood (nourishment); wood is the fuel for fire, which causes ashes, which then form earth (natural recycling). The formation of metal in earth completes the cycle.

## HOW DO WE KNOW?

The main sources for Taoism are the I Ching, or Book of Changes, and Tao te Ching, by Lao Tzu. Taoism is thought to have been revealed to different sages in Chinese history, but Lao Tzu's Tao te Ching, a short, 5,000 word piece, is the foundation of philosophical and religious Taoism, just as the I Ching is thought to be the foundation of Tao te Ching. Other major sources include Chuang-tzu and Lieh-tzu.

## **WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO?**

A Taoist seeks to reunite with the Tao, the force that creates and sustains all nature. This is an individual effort, with wide social ramifications. When an individual achieves harmony through the leading of the Tao, they in turn affect the social order. This path to harmony often includes six characteristics. These characteristics are:

- \* Understanding the Tao, which leads to working with the Tao when making changes.
- \* A laissez-faire attitude, which allows nature to follow its own course as the guideline for change.
- \* The modeling of one's life after the sage and nature, each of which are modeled after the Tao.
- \* Emphasis on the Tao's strategy of reverse transformation (destructive to creative).
- \* A focus on that which is simple (simplicity) and origin (originality).
- \* The search for intuitive awareness and insight. This includes a deliberate de-emphasis of purely rational or intellectual pursuits.

Lao Tzu taught that people (including governments) should act without doing, and work without effort. By this he meant that an awareness of the Tao in our own nature would enable us to do what is right without striving or working at it, i.e., doing what is right naturally. Since humans and nature are inherently good, Lao Tzu felt that people could, through an awareness of the Tao, act in a good and right manner. Tao is able to balance life on its own, and humans need to give up their controlling instinct. Lao Tzu said "Those who want to know the truth of the universe should practice...reverence for all life; this manifests as unconditional love and respect for oneself and other beings."

Individuals also seek to free themselves from obstructive notions and distracting passions so that the Tao will be able to move unhindered in their lives. Thus the Tao will enable individuals to act with spontaneity (tzu-jan). This spontaneity will seem completely natural. In fact, Lao Tzu believed that when the Tao moves totally unhindered in individuals and society, it will seem as if things happened of their own accord, without being caused or brought about.

The law of Tao, in respect to nature, means that all is continually reverting to its starting point (all is from the Tao, and all is returning to the Tao). Life and death exist in the eternal transformation of non-being to being to non-being, but the Tao remains the same. Thus all action in society must be done with an eye to reform, reform which will return individuals to their original purity. Individuals must work to conform to the rhythm of the universe, or Tao. When an individual moves in rhythm with the Tao, it is described as wu-wei. Wu-wei is that action which is so in tune with nature, or the Tao, that there is no trace of the individual's actions, so it seems that nothing has been done. It is the concept of apparent inaction, but is, in fact, actions which are completely natural, and that achieve that which the Tao intends.

## **WHAT'S GOING ON TODAY?**

Taoism is practiced mainly in the Far East (China, Korea, Japan). The main enclave of pure Taoism is Taiwan, which still has formally established priests and rituals. Taoism is gaining popularity in North America as well. The immense respect that Taoists hold for nature and the natural order have made them a particularly potent force for environmental activism and protection. According the Encyclopedia of Christianity, there are some 2.7 million adherents of Taoism around the world. However, some figures place the number at 150 million. Bear in mind that people in the Far East can be members of any combination of religions at the same time, including Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Shinto.

## **HOW DO WE RECOGNIZE IT?**

Taoism has a very recognizable symbol. It is the Yin-Yang, a circle divided in two equal parts of dark/black (Yin) and light/white (Yang). Within the dark, there is a circle of light, and within the light, there is a circle of dark. The two parts are equal because they signify the balance in the world caused by the Yin and Yang forces in all things. Each has a circle of the other to symbolize that each contains elements of the other, and that each cannot exist without the other. Sometimes, the Yin-Yang symbol will be surrounded with trigrams, or sets of three lines with breaks in various positions. Each trigram stands for a certain principle in Taoism. In a trigram, a solid line symbolizes yang, and a broken symbolizes yin. The trigrams are as follows:

- \* Sun, it symbolizes wind and gentleness (yin sensing)
- \* Li, it symbolizes fire and thinking (yin thinking)
- \* Tui, it symbolizes a lake and feeling (yin feeling)
- \* Kun, it symbolizes earth and the will (yin willing)
- \* Ken, it symbolizes mountain and the body (yang feeling)
- \* Kan, it symbolizes water (river) and the soul (yang thinking)
- \* Chen, it symbolizes thunder (lightning) and the spirit (yang sensing)
- \* Chien, it symbolizes heaven and awareness (yang willing)

### **The 411 on the founding of Taoism**

**Who:** Taoism was founded by Li Erh (better known as Lao Tzu), a contemporary of Confucius in the sixth century BCE (which stands for Before the Common Era, formerly BC, or Before Christ). Lao Tzu was the keeper of the imperial library and the author of the book *Tao te Ching*, or the *Book of Tao and Virtue*. The foundations of Tao are thought to have been laid by Fu Hsi, who lived around 2900 BCE. Fu Hsi developed Pa Qau (eight trigrams), and the arts of divination, which reveal the principles of Tao. Pa Qua is the foundation of the *I Ching*, or *Book of Change*, which, in turn, forms part of the basis for Lao Tzu's *Tao te Ching*.

**What:** Tao is the cosmic, mysterious, ultimate principle that underlies all forms, substances, beings and change; Tao encompasses all there is. The goal of Taoism is to remove the barriers between human beings and Tao (reunification with Tao), to transform what is known as the *Lo Shu*, or *Later Heaven* (disharmonious existence) into the *Ho To*, or *Earlier Heaven* (the ideal state of existence and harmony).

**When:** Lao Tzu lived in the sixth century BCE, but the foundations of Tao are thought to be eternal. Tao has appeared as the sages and teachers of humanity, including Fu Hsi, thought to be the developer of Pa Qua, the foundation of the *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. The *I Ching* helped to shape Lao Tzu's *Tao te Ching*.

**Where:** Taoism was founded in China, and is still practiced mainly in China, although it has a growing number of adherents around the globe

## **WHAT IF I WANT TO KNOW MORE?**

There are numerous Web sites about Taoism. The following are great introductions:

- \* [www.religioustolerance.org/taoism.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/taoism.htm)
- \* [www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com) Taoism section
- \* [www.edepot.com/taoism.html](http://www.edepot.com/taoism.html)

## **Sources:**

Chung, Douglas K. (1995). Taoism: A Portrait. In Beversluis, Joel. A Sourcebook for Earth's Community of Religions. Ada: CoNexus Press. pp. 85-86.

[www.religioustolerance.org](http://www.religioustolerance.org) -- Taoism section

[www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com) -- Taoism section

[www.vedicreader.com/articles/iching/baguafamily.htm](http://www.vedicreader.com/articles/iching/baguafamily.htm)

[www.ichingwisdom.com/IChingWisdom/trigrams.html](http://www.ichingwisdom.com/IChingWisdom/trigrams.html)