

The Tao and Taoism

Dr. L. Kip Wheeler

The Word Itself: As D. C. Lau notes, "The English term 'Taoism' is ambiguous. It is used to translate both the Chinese term *tao chia* (the school of the *tao*) and *Tao Chiao* (the Taoist religion)" (Lau 124). It is in some ways a political practice, in some ways a personal or individual philosophy. In other ways, it is a mystical school of religion or oriental magic, depending upon the word's use and the century in which the word appears.

The word *Tao* is itself a fairly vague term. (It rhymes with "wow," the initial *t*-sounding more like a *d*-.) *Tao* in Mandarin Chinese means "the way," including all the English variants such as "the path," or "the road," or "the method." It is often used especially in the sense of "the path of life" or "the way of nature" (Schafer 62). The paradox is that by talking about the *Tao*, and by attempting to define the *Tao*, we ensure that the reader does not actually grasp the concept. At its heart, the *Tao* is nonverbal in its essence, beyond the confines of language. The *Tao* is an experience rather than definition. The imagery used to describe this path is one of emptiness and fullness, fluidity, and constant change. In some lines in the *Tao-te Ching*, the document describes the *Tao* as the allness of the universe, as the true reality of existence beyond the "shadows" of false appearance, as nothingness, as a synonym for God, as a state of mind or being, as a method for leaders to rule invisibly by example, as a paradox of opposites, as wisdom through emptiness. It is at once all these things and none of them.

Lao-Tzu, the First Taoist: The first Taoist philosopher was a semi-mythical figure named Lao-Tzu. The suffix *-tzu* means "master" or "teacher" and the word *Lao* means "Old man." Thus, Lao-Tzu simply means, "The Old Teacher," which makes some scholars suggest that he might not be a historical figure so much as wisdom personified in folklore. One tradition states that Lao-Tzu's actual name was Li Erh and he was born in the state of Ch'u before 551 BCE, which would make him a slightly older contemporary of [Confucius](#). Lao-Tzu supposedly worked in the court of the Chou dynasty for most of his life, but eventually grew tired of people who failed to pay attention to his ideas. In the face of relentless warfare, human suffering, and an unresponsive government, he decided he would leave human society and pursue a life of contemplation as a hermit in the wilderness. The gatekeeper, however, had always been deeply impressed with Lao-Tzu's teaching. He refused to let Lao-Tzu exit the court until he had written down his teachings. The legend has it that Lao-Tzu sat down and wrote the *Tao-te Ching* in its entirety at one sitting, entrusted it to the gatekeeper, and then left the state of Ch'u, never to appear again in human society.

It is clear that the *Tao-te Ching* was originally meant for an audience of Chinese rulers, much as Confucius intended his philosophy of the five harmonies for an audience of

Chinese rulers as well. The *Tao-te Ching* was "a philosophical document as much about good government as it [was] . . . about moral behavior," as Stephen Mitchell suggests in the introduction to his translation of the *Tao-te Ching*. In the same way that Confucius' political thoughts eventually evolved into a state religion, Taoism also became infused with mystical leanings. About the year 150 CE, a Taoist disciple named Chang Tao-Ling founded Taoism as a religion. This infusion of mysticism was especially attractive following the collapse of the late Chou and early Han periods, when Chinese culture fragmented into three kingdoms and the collapse of political order left a spiritual vacuum in the land. The old nature religions in China had been virtually annihilated by zealous Confucianists, and that void was filled by two competing yet mutually dependent belief systems, Taoism and Buddhism. Suddenly, Taoism embodied the philosophical aspects of the Tao in a stylized religious form.

Taoism as a Religion: While many Western religions emphasize a duality between good and evil, urging devotees to embrace the good and spurn the evil, Taoism saw these moral qualities as two extremes of a single spectrum. Virtue did not lie at one end or the other of this spectrum, but through carefully maintaining a balance between the two. This idea is often expressed through the terms **Yin** (rhymes with English *mean*) and **Yang** (rhymes with English *long*). The two words together mean the fundamental and opposite forces or principles in nature. *Yin* originally meant "sunless" or "northern." It was associated with darkness, femininity, emptiness, coolness, and passivity. The opposite state was *Yang*, which originally meant "sunny" or "southern." *Yang* was associated with light, fullness, masculinity, heat, and action. These traits appear oppositional on first inspection. However, that opposition is only a surface illusion in Taoist belief. In fact, the two states of nature require each other. Just as an art student knows that negative space around an object is what creates the outline of positive space in a drawing, the enlightened Taoist knows that suffering, pain and misery are necessary for traits like contentment, pleasure, and happiness to exist. Sickness and health are the same phenomenon; they are just at far ends of that same phenomenological spectrum. Masculinity and femininity are also the same thing; they are both the phenomenon of gender expressed in opposite ways. Love and hatred are also the same phenomenon, and so on. When the Taoist realizes the falsity of these divisions, the Taoist realizes that extremes of either sort are temporary and unnatural. It is the cycle of nature for the pendulum to swing back and forth from one to the other. By resisting or refusing to experience these swings, the human throws himself out of balance with nature, and intensifies the lack of balance and alignment. The great aim of all Taoists was to conform to the way of nature. They believed that all attempts to behave in accordance with strict codes of discipline, either personal or governmental, were artificial and temporary; they tended "to deform human nature and waste life" as Schafer puts it (62). Rather than trying to embrace one of the two opposite and reject the other, the enlightened individual sought balance between the two.

When one realizes the need for balance between *yin* and *yang*, and stops struggling against that which is natural, one can gain contentment through *wu wei*, enlightened

non-action. This involves discarding elaborate or needlessly complex plans to improve oneself and the world. Instead, one must accept the world (and oneself) as it is. It involves giving up materialistic desires and living life unplanned, from one fluid moment to another. This route leads one to *Te*, a word that in various forms can mean "moral virtue," "bounty," and "power or force," or "gratefulness." One learned to live life spontaneously rather than become trapped in the process of preparing for the unpreparable, avoiding the inevitable, or seeking the unobtainable. Such a route always leads to a lack of balance.

Taoism as Magical Practice: By the Han period, *Taoism* took on connotations of magic as well. The Taoist religion aimed to enhance vitality and life by living in accord with nature's shifting balance. Legends arose that Taoist masters learned to extend their lives indefinitely, to fly through the clouds, to become invisible. In the late Han period, a fragmentary anonymous work called, *A Chart of the Magic Art of Being Invisible* appears, apparently a compendium of the techniques of the Taoist adepts (see Birrell 41). Many of these beliefs originated in literal readings of the *Tao-te Ching* and the *Chuang-Tzu*--especially in passages that were probably meant to be read allegorically. In any case, hordes of alchemists and magicians streamed into the Han courts where they attempted to refine crass material substances and make men immortal. From the imagery in Taoist poetry, they created a complex symbolism based on red. The holy color red represented the alchemical furnace and its beautiful, red-robed patron goddess. Another common symbol was the Manchurian crane, a symbol of longevity with the red spot of divinity on its crown. Cinnabar, that red compound of mercury and sulfur, was thought to have magical potency because it could be turned into a silvery liquid and then back into a solid. They valued gold--one of the few substances known to be indestructible (Schafer 62). They experimented with jade, which traditionally had preservative powers against decay.

Their own bodies became experimental labs as well. These oriental magicians attempted various athletic practices to strengthen their life-force--yogalike gymnastics and stretching exercises. They prepared and quaffed magical elixirs. They followed strict dietary restrictions such as avoiding cereals and grains. Wang Ch'ung (circa 100 CE) described the Taoist magicians this way: "They dose themselves with the germ of gold and jade, eat the finest fruit of the purple polypore fungus. By eating what is germinal their bodies are lightened, and so they are capable of spiritual transcendence" (quoted in Schafer 63). A being who achieved this spiritual transcendence through knowledge of the *Tao* was called a *hsien*, the same word used to describe an angelic "feathered folk" with winged or feathered images appearing in Chou art of the period. The book of *Chuang-Tzu* pictures *hsien* as white-skinned, delicate superhuman beings: "These are divine persons dwelling there, whose flesh and skin resemble ice and snow, soft and delicate like sequestered girl-children; they do not eat the five cereals; they suck the wind and drink the dew; they mount on clouds and vapors and drive the flying dragons--thus they rove beyond the four seas" (quoted in Schafer 63).

The abstract concepts of *Yin* and *Yang* ultimately became linked with concrete divination. In the *I-Ching*, or *The Book of Changes*, *yang* was used to describe the continuous lines and *yin* the broken lines in a hexagram. Random drawings in sets of six would then be deciphered using the *I-Ching* as a divinatory manual at the courts. Far from philosophical terms to discuss the process of abstract cycles in human experience, the magical school of the *Tao* attempted to nail the ideas down to practical, concrete results.

The Later Influence of Taoism: These magical beliefs may seem alien or bizarre to western readers. Keep in mind, they are the result of what happens when one reads Taoist literature literally, rather than attempting to gain the essence of Taoism. If we read the *Tao-te Ching* or the *Chuang-Tzu* writings too literally, we will almost certainly miss the point, which is usually ethical, political, or spiritual. What *is* vital is that the reader realize how important these ideas are in shaping Chinese poetry, literature, and philosophy. These Taoist ideas permeate Oriental thinking to the same degree that Aristotelian binary logic permeates Occidental thinking. Taoism has influenced art, painting, the martial arts, the military strategies of Sun-Tzu, certain Mandarin ideas about reincarnation in adopted Buddhist beliefs, the designs of Feng-Shui architecture, and the outlook of China generally.

After Lao-Tzu's *Tao-te Ching*, the second most famous Taoist text is the ***Chuang-Tzu***. It is truly a Chinese classic--a text filled with rich allegories emphasizing the ever-changing-but-always-the-same nature of life. The author, according to the *Shih Chi*, was named **Chuang Chou** and he lived Chou Dynasty as a contemporary of King Hui (369-319 BCE) of Wei and King Hsüan of Ch'i. It is commonly asserted by scholars that his thought was largely derived from Lao-Tzu. Still, the *Chuang-Tzu* is a striking and mixed collection. Some of the earliest chapters probably represent the original author's thought, but the later chapters probably were added during the Ch'in and early Han periods. D. C. Lau notes that two interesting developments that separate Chaung Chou's thought from Lao-Tzu's: his tendency toward moral relativism and his almost Cartesian struggle with sensory perception (see Lau 118-119, and Schafer 62).

An example of this relativism appears in the *Chuang-Tzu's* discussion of the happy dead. Judgments about right and wrong by necessity are made from a specific point of view. Thus, sometimes people who observe the same phenomenon arrive at different conclusions about it. It is also impossible to decide on the relative merit of these different perspectives. As a solution, the *Chuang-Tzu* suggests a higher point of view which remains impartial in its attitude toward all the potential viewpoints. They are all treated as equally valid (or perhaps equally invalid). It follows that life is desirable and preferable to death is perspective that comes only from the point of view of the living. How does one know that the opposite stance is not the case from the perspective of the happy dead? The result of this conundrum is that there is no reason to prefer one view to another, according to Chuang-Tzu.

An example of the *Chuang-Tzu's* struggle with sensory perception appears in the dream of the butterfly:

Long ago, Chuang Chou dreamed that he was a butterfly. He was elated as a butterfly--well pleased with himself, his aims satisfied. he knew nothing of Chou. But shortly he awoke and found himself to be Chou. He did not know whether as Chou he dreamed he was a butterfly, or whether he actually was a butterfly who now dreamed he was Chou.

If a sleeper can dream so vividly that he is unable to ascertain that his experiences are actually unreal, how can he ever be certain that anything he experiences is real? Unlike Descartes's attempt to use logic to verify his sensory perception, the *Chuang-Tzu* responds with a Taoist acceptance of the conundrum, and prefers not to value the dream as any less "real" than the waking state, and vice-versa. It suggests that all natural life and all experiences are in essence interchangeable. A butterfly's existence is just as valuable and meaningful as a human one, and a dream is just as valuable and meaningful as an experience one has while awake.

Taoist philosophy is in many ways much more flexible than Confucianism. Taoist writers seek to avoid being "boxed" by rules, definitions and empty words. They encourage a sort of intuitive and non-logical way of seeking balance in the world by resisting the desire to interfere with normal processes of nature. Taoism emphasizes *wu wei*--enlightened non-action rather than needless bustle and "busy-work" for its own sake. [Legalism](#) emphasizes *wu yu*--active attempts to modify human behavior for the better by restraining the evil impulses of humanity in a rigid hierarchy of law. [Confucianism](#), while not completely incompatible with either philosophy, suggests that thoughtful contemplation is necessary in making decisions rather than blindly following rules (the Legalist philosophy). Confucianism also rejects the irrationalism of Taoists. Taoist philosophy rejects the Confucian idea that traditions are valuable for their own sake. It also rejects the Legalist idea that human nature is inherently evil. Rather, human behavior simply is.... It is artificial and pointless to force humans to always behave in a certain manner. People who behave virtuously out of fear, according to Taoist thought, aren't really virtuous at all. Rather than agonizing over virtue and morality, and splitting hairs over fine points of ethics, it is far better to rule with a relaxed hand and lead by example, as Lao-Tzu describes his "Master" in the *Tao-te Ching*. Ultimately, if people stop worrying about virtue, virtue can become intuitive, instinctive, almost second-nature, as the *Chuang-Tzu* suggests in the allegory of the butcher. In this allegory, the best, speediest butcher in the village has been chopping meat for so long that he doesn't need to think about where to cut, or pause and consider where the best slice should fall. Instead, *chop-chop-chop-chop!* he instantly and precisely cuts the meat by force of habit. If he stops to think about what he does, that perfect efficiency and thoughtless speed would be lost. In the same way, the Taoists seek to live their lives just as the butcher chops his meat. That is the *Tao*. It is done, rather than described.

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