

#7 TAOISM

Literally meaning "the way," Taoism is one of the two religious philosophies that have shaped Chinese life for the last 2,000 years. (The other is Confucianism.) It is difficult to describe Taoist concepts simply because Taoism is about defining the undefinable. It evolved into a religion with many different manifestations and dominated China for several centuries before being supplanted by Buddhism. Taoism still has many practitioners throughout the world, however. Its philosophy remains an important influence in eastern Asia and has a growing following in many other parts of the world.

The History of Taoism

Also known as Daoism, Taoism originated as a philosophy in ancient China during the Warring States period from ca. 475 to 221 B.C. Lao-tzu is considered the founder of Taoism for his teachings described in the *Tao-te ching*, although it is unclear whether Lao-tzu was a legendary or historic figure. The classic Chinese book *Zhuangzi*, by fourth-century-B.C. author Zhuangzi, states that Lao-tzu was a Taoist master who was an elder contemporary of Confucius. Another account in the *Shiji* ("historical records") states that Lao-tzu was an archivist in the royal court and met Confucius before heading west, never to be heard from again. Modern scholars question whether Lao-tzu even existed.

Nonetheless, the *Tao-te ching* and later writings by Zhuangzi provided the foundation for a philosophical Taoism that came to dominate imperial courts throughout much of China until the second century A.D., when a religious form of Taoism evolved in the province of Sichuan (Szechuan). Zhang Daoling claimed to receive a revelation from Lao-tzu, who instructed him to implement his "orthodox and sole doctrine of the authority of the covenant." Zhang Daoling later earned the title "heavenly master." A succession of followers, also called heavenly masters, founded an independent organization to instruct the faithful on the work of Lao-tzu, with an emphasis on teaching the right actions and good works.

Heavenly masters often acquired influential roles in Chinese courts as intermediaries between the ruler and the people. By A.D. 300, most of the powerful families in northern China had become adherents of Taoism. Before long, religious Taoism was being imposed on southeastern China. As Taoism spread, the heavenly masters practiced increasingly diverse and elaborate ceremonies and rituals, including hygienic and respiratory techniques, exorcisms, and other activities. They also organized a system of temples and hereditary priesthods. Some Taoist sects developed monasteries where religious communities facilitated everyday observance of Taoist meditation, liturgy, hygiene, and other matters.

In the fourth century, Buddhism made significant inroads into China, and the two religions, although very similar, were at constant odds with each other. By the sixth century, Buddhism had overtaken Taoism as the dominant religion in China. However, Taoist philosophy remains an important influence in daily life in much of eastern Asia. Religious Taoism is not nearly as widespread as it once was other than in Taiwan, where the religion has enjoyed a renaissance in recent years. It has also become influential in the New Age and environmental movements, where various beliefs have been adopted as providing guidance for a better world.

The Elements of Taoism

A vast quantity of sacred Taoist texts exist. The founding document is the *Tao-te ching*, which lays out the five fundamental principles of Taoism: Tao, relativity, nonaction, return, and government. The other fundamental Taoist scripture, *Zhuangzi*, describes Taoist philosophy and includes accounts of "spirit journeys," descriptions of Taoist masters and disciples, and techniques on breathing, meditation, sexual activity, and diets. Two other significant texts are the *Tai ping jing* (*Classic of the Great Peace*) and the *Baopuzi* (*Master Embracing Simplicity*). Both were written in the third and fourth centuries A.D. and describe ways for Taoists to seek immortality through special diets, sexual activities, and alchemy substances (the Taoist research for different chemical compounds resulted in the discovery of gunpowder).

The Tao is a single, imperceptible, formless state that underlies both being and nonbeing. It is a purposeless, amoral, and impersonal cosmic entity that serves as the underpinning for everything that exists. "Look, it cannot be seen—it is beyond form," states the *Tao-te ching*. "Listen, it cannot be heard—it is beyond sound. Grasp, it cannot be held—it is intangible." The law of the Tao states that all phenomena go through a process of reversal in which they return to their original state. Since the Tao becomes everything, everything returns to the Tao.

The concept of nonaction as representing the natural course of things is a fundamental belief in Taoism, although it does not mean that Taoists adhere to anti-action activities. Rather, it refers to the constant interaction between the yang and the yin, two antithetical and complementary aspects of the Tao that create the natural order. The yang represents good, masculine, warmth, and positive principles. The yin represents cold, feminine, evil, and negative principles. However, the concept of relativity withholds any judgment of good and bad, large and small, or beauty and ugliness as absolutes. They are not polar opposites but rather values imposed by people, depending on their individual circumstances. All dualities, Zhuangzi said, are not really opposites but identical aspects of the same reality.

Tao religious practices are aimed at allowing people to discover the Tao through a variety of rituals and ceremonies. The goal is to strip a person of the cluttering outside influences that obstruct his or her understanding of the cosmic Tao forces and allow him or her to become one with the Tao. Taoists discourage passions and emotions that deflect the spiritual power of the Tao. They encourage the mastery of the physical senses so that they can be used to focus on the Tao. The avenues for understanding are many. Perhaps the most important of the Taoist contemplative practices is the *shouyi* (or "meditating on the One") in visualization exercises of the heavenly bodies and planets.

Taoism Questions:

1. What does Taoism mean?
2. Taoism is mostly practiced where?
3. Who is the founder of Taoism's scriptures in Tao-te Ching?
4. What is the most important Taoist ceremony?
5. What is "shouyi"?

6. What is Tao?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

7. What does yang represent?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

8. What does ying represent?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.

9. Tao allows followers to discover Taoism through what?