

# TAOISM

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Taoism is a subtle and complex facet of traditional Chinese culture. Its precise dimensions have often been debated, by Eastern and Western interpreters alike. Such debate is understandable, for Taoists historically eschewed self-definition: the contours of their tradition have almost always been fluid and unbounded. Often the only feasible method of determining a "Taoist" viewpoint is by comparison with other traditions (especially Confucianism), from which Taoists sometimes distinguished themselves.

To most, in China as well as the West, the term "Taoism" has usually (though inaccurately) been understood as referring most properly to ideas and values expressed in two Chinese texts of the classical period (viz., of the 4th-3rd centuries BCE) -- the *Tao te ching* (otherwise known as *Lao-tzu*) and the *Chuang-tzu*. Each was traditionally regarded as an exposition of the thought of a single great mind, though modern research has demonstrated that each is actually the product of a prolonged period of accretion, i.e., that each text contains ideas from numerous minds, generations or even centuries apart.

In addition, however, the field of Taoism actually includes much more. Most importantly, "Taoism" includes a coherent religious tradition that began to evolve in late antiquity. That tradition has never enjoyed the same celebrity or respect among intellectuals (Chinese or Western) that the "Lao-Chuang" Taoism of classical times has enjoyed. In fact, to the present, many teachers and writers continue to dismiss later Taoism as a degeneration: many continue to call it "popular Taoism," insisting that it consists of nothing more than the superstitions of the ignorant masses. Such is certainly not the case, as extensive research of the 1970s-1990s has clearly demonstrated: the Taoist religion actually reflects the ideals of thoughtful men and women who were often highly educated, well-to-do, and deeply respected by China's cultural and political leaders. The ideals of such later Taoists reveal some of the deeper values that characterize Taoism as a whole, and its significance for issues of education, society, and culture.

At first glance, Taoist concepts and values might seem irrelevant to the philosophy of education. Certainly no Taoist writer of any period advocated any form of public education. In fact, Taoism can be sharply contrasted in that regard with Confucianism: Confucians of all periods deeply valued education as an indispensable prerequisite for social/political order and meaningful human life. Taoists disagreed, because they disputed the Confucians' notions of (1) a healthy society, (2) responsible government, and (3) desirable change. The positions of each tradition rested in turn upon contrasting assumptions regarding human nature and the nature of the world. The Confucians were essentially humanistic: they assumed that human society was the primary locus of all meaning and value. Taoists, on the other hand, always conceived the ultimate locus of meaning and value to lie *not* in the activities of human beings, but rather in a deeper reality, a universal natural reality that they called *the Tao*. Though "the Tao" eludes definition, the *Tao te ching* generally describes it as the creative/ harmonizing impulse behind all natural phenomena: it provides all things with an environment conducive to their natural development, and is constantly at work in the world in subtle and imperceptible ways, guiding all things to a natural and healthy fulfillment. The intuitive certainty of such a reliable universal reality led certain people in ancient China to reject emphatically the Confucians' assumption that human beings are qualitatively distinct from and superior to all other living things. Such people generally remained anonymous, but for convenience, we may employ the term "classical Taoist" for those who contributed to the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuangtzu*. Those people believed that it is precisely such human peculiarities as rationality and the ability to effect change in the external world that has alienated us from the natural order, and created all of the world's problems. The world, they asserted, had been in perfect harmony until humans began trying to "improve" things. So the true goal of human life, both individually and collectively, is to "un-learn" such typical but "unnatural" behavior, and to return to the patterns implicit within the benign natural order.

From this perspective, the classical Taoist attitude toward education becomes clear. Just as the contributors to the *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu* were sceptical of the institutions of government, so also were they deeply cynical concerning the idea that humanity could *ever* devise *any* program or system that could *create* a healthy, peaceful society. From the classical Taoist perspective, acting upon such ideas could really only *increase disorder* in the world, for the true source of all order and harmony is the natural reality of the Tao, and willful human activity of any kind -- however well-intentioned -- can only interfere with it. Thus, the *Tao te ching* and *Chuang-tzu* often ridicule the very notion of "learning." It is upon this fundamental premise that Taoists are generally at odds with the Confucians, as well as with most of Western thought: they reject not only the value of formal education, but also the assumptions that underlie the insistence of Confucians and Westerners that such education is even desirable. Taoist thought clearly implies that *children have no need whatsoever to be molded or uplifted*: young humans, like all living things, are naturally guided to a natural fulfillment, in harmony with the rest of the world. But unlike other living things, humans have gone astray: something about our uniquely discriminating consciousness engenders a non-holistic perception of the world. Humans (especially campaigning humanists like the Confucians) fail to appreciate the reality of the Tao, so (like virtually all Westerners of every stripe) they harbor *mistaken fears that we must act to create a good world*. The classical Taoists had such faith in the natural harmony of the world that they regarded "education" as not only unnecessary, but actually viciously destructive to individual, society, and the natural order alike. Westerners are likely to be shocked by such arguments, because the dominant Western concept of life shares the Confucians' premise that the world inherently tends toward chaos and requires the redemptive activity of human society. Whereas Westerners and Confucians thus assume a moral responsibility to educate, Taoists assume a moral responsibility *not* to do so.

While the classical Taoists would have had no use for any policy of organized schooling, their writings are nonetheless replete with models for education in other senses. The very composition and transmission of the materials that we find in the *Tao te ching* and *Chuang-tzu* indicate that the classical Taoists did value the verbal communication of important insights. When the contributors to those texts disparage "learning," what they are rejecting is any deliberate effort to induce an artificial transformation that would turn us yet further away from our inherent harmony with each other and the world around us. But in another sense, the classical Taoists clearly did agree on the need for some form of instruction, for they insist that most people embrace deeply misguided ideas about life. The Taoist classics (and later Chinese literature as well) are full of stories of wise people who help disabuse others of such deluded ideas. In so doing, these wise individuals help others "follow the Tao" by guiding them in a healthy direction. Thus, there is an abiding Taoist ideal of assisting others in a profound personal transformation, generally described as the attainment of true wisdom. Within that context, there is a suggestion of a positive role for a teacher, in the sense of one who has attained such wisdom and assists others in their process of reattaining harmony with the Tao.

It is within the later Taoist tradition (the so-called "Taoist religion") that we see these ideals articulated and put into effect. The earliest Taoist religious movements (second-fourth centuries) seldom seem to stress such goals: their concerns were generally (1) integrating the socio-political order with the deeper forces of the world, and (2) enhancing the physical and moral well-being of individual men and women. Their ideal was the condition known as *T'ai-p'ing*, "Grand Tranquility":

It was a state in which all the concentric spheres of the organic Chinese universe, which contained nature as well as society, were perfectly attuned, communicated with each other in a balanced rhythm of timeliness, and brought maximum fulfillment to each living being (Anna Seidel, "Tai-p'ing," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion* [New York: Macmillan, 1987], vol. 14, p. 251).

Indeed, many medieval Taoists conceived their purpose to be neither individual accomplishment nor social amelioration, but actually a *universal* actuation of *T'ai-p'ing*, to effect a physical, social, political *and* spiritual perfection that encompassed all people. Some even worked to extend such benefits to other living things, or even to the shades of the deceased.

Increasingly, however, the concern of Taoists came to be focussed upon the spiritual perfection of individuals. Leaders provided moral guidance, and instruction in various forms of meditation. Occasional individuals saw themselves as the guardians of heavenly secrets, to be vouchsafed only to those who could demonstrate their worth in terms of ritual mastery and/or the knowledge of secret data concerning otherworldly forces. Such esoterism remained a

characteristic of the Taoist priesthood to the twentieth century. Religious education in that context was exclusivistic, and sometimes seems to have ignored broader social concerns. Another strain of Taoism, however, worked to integrate all levels of society by incorporating local religious activities into a common liturgical framework, alongside elements of the ritual tradition of the imperial court. It was that persistent ideal of the *universal integration of society* that led to later Taoism being misnamed "popular Taoism."

In general, Taoism in pre-modern China stressed ideals of personal spiritual cultivation. Those ideals contributed both to the acceptance of Buddhism in China and to the rebirth of Confucianism in the eleventh-twelfth centuries. Most accounts of Taoism (in Asia and the West alike) continue to perpetuate the simplistic and mistaken assertion that those ideals were the core of the sublime philosophy of *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu* but were thereafter lost, to be replaced by a foolish pursuit of physical immortality. In actuality, it is dubious whether anyone in traditional China was really intent upon achieving *mere* physical longevity, as *opposed* to a spiritual immortality: indeed, such misconceptions project upon Chinese culture the quite alien concept of a body/spirit duality. In actuality, Taoists of all periods aspired to a state of spiritual perfection, which they describe as transcending the apparent boundaries of life and death. Occasionally, aspirants may have succumbed to romantic illusions that their efforts would magically transform them into sublime beings who were immune to death. Such beings (called *hsien*) populate much of Chinese literature. But Taoist writings of all periods insist that the goal of life is *not* some magical transformation, but rather the attainment of spiritual perfection through moral purification and the careful realignment of personal consciousness. Contrary to the charges of both traditional Confucians and modern Western (or Westernized) intellectuals, Taoists actually sought not to evade or escape reality, but rather to contribute to a spiritual transformation of reality, beginning with oneself.

A key issue for modern minds is whether or not anyone and everyone can follow such a path and achieve the highest goals. Most Asian systems of thought (including Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism) answered such questions in a way that modern minds often struggle to understand. Modern liberal beliefs insist that "everyone is equal," and therefore that "the path to success" *should* be "open to everyone." Most Asian traditions begin from quite different premises, which, they would argue, are much more realistic. It hardly needs noting that no Asian society has ever advanced any notion of universal equality; indeed, before contact with the modern West, few Asian thinkers of any stripe would have even entertained such notions. In China, both Confucians and Taoists began with the observation that in real life, people are quite different, and some simply do not succeed at undertakings at which others succeed. The Chinese examination system, which recruited government officials, was certainly elitist in that it was designed to separate the sheep from the goats, certifying only those of the greatest talent and ability. And yet in another sense, the system was actually anti-elitist, in that anyone could enter the system, regardless of parentage, wealth, or social background. (Of course, no one ever gave any thought to the modern notion that it could or should have been open to women.) The spiritual life, for Confucianism and Taoism alike, was understood in similar terms: moral and spiritual perfectibility is assumed of everyone, and the undertaking of the process of self-perfection is theoretically open to anyone, but in real life most people will never attempt such things, and few will actually persevere to achieve the goal. Both Confucians and Taoists assumed that some people have a moral/spiritual talent that others lack, and that our true concern should be to identify those who possess such talent, and to facilitate their development. More particularly, Taoism assumed that such people would be self-selecting: certain individuals will distinguish themselves by their alacrity in understanding and pursuing moral and spiritual goals. And unlike Confucianism, the Taoist religion included women in this pursuit. Stories abound of men and women of exceptional perception and dedication who succeed where others fail. Sometimes such people pass tests of their character and determination without even realizing that they are being tested; sometimes they prove their worth not only by forgoing worldly fulfillments, but more importantly by shedding all self-centeredness, and misconceptions about the spiritual life. Some texts stress that since each person is intrinsically different, mentors must mold both the content and the form of each individual's guidance to that person's unique needs. Hence, no coherent curriculum or teaching style was possible. In fact, in contrast to Zen Buddhism (which Taoism deeply influenced), Taoism never formalized the master/student relationship, or even insisted upon its necessity: aspirants of sufficient talent might need little more than an occasional gentle nudge, and sometimes *hsien* provide such assistance without anyone even knowing it.

Taoism presented the goal of life as a highly subtle refinement of the spirit, which presupposed moral refinement, but did not necessarily require any formal system of training. Taoist "education" was thus highly personalized and highly spiritualized. Historically, however, prominent Taoists were often highly educated in more traditional senses as well, not only as scholars, writers, poets, bibliographers, and historians, but also as botanists, pharmacists, chemists and astronomers. The Taoist life was thus understood not as an alternative to all other human pursuits, but as a path toward the holistic unification of one's personal reality with all that is truly real and valuable, encompassing both society and the natural world.