

TAOISM

Taoism is both an alternative and a supplement to Confucianism and Buddhism in China. These 3 religions coexist in the same country and can even exist within the same individual.

BELIEFS:

The Tao is the path or way that is indefinable and has to be experienced. It is the ultimate reality of the universe and the source of everything. It is the power that surrounds and flows through all things both living and non-living. It regulates nature, brings balance to the universe and embodies the harmony of opposites through the concept of the Yin - Yang. By eliminating obstacles in one's life one can live in harmony with the Tao.

The goal of the believer is to unite with the Tao, to leave behind the cares of the world. The Taoist seeks to reach balance and harmony in life by resolving problems through inner meditation and outer observation. Those who attain such harmony are called chen jen, or perfected persons. To the Taoist, God is not personal, is not a creator God. Taoists do not pray to God because God is not a God who hears prayers.

Time is cyclical, not linear as in the West.

Taoists believe people are compassionate by nature, and will show compassion without expecting reward.

The Yin-Yang is a popular Taoist symbol representing the chi force which has two interacting aspects which are opposites in the universe. When both are equally present, there is peace. When one is predominant, it is because people have intervened in nature and have upset the natural balance causing conflict and confusion. Traditionally Yin is the feminine aspect of life, including the soft, cool, calm, inner and healing aspect of life. The Yang is masculine, hard, hot, energetic, exterior and sometimes aggressive.

The Three Star Gods Taoists believe in are:

Shou Hsing: the god of long life

Lu Hsing: the god of wealth and official rank

Fu Hsing: the god of happiness.

There are also personal gods to be worshiped that were average people who achieved immortality and divinity through great deeds. These could be prayed to for help and as a personal example. Some gods called Kuei were like demons who had to be placated with elaborate rituals to ward off illness or unhappiness.

PRACTICES:

Taoists promote health, vitality and long life through regulating the energies of the body through:

- 1. Quiet, contemplative life in natural surroundings.**
- 2. Sexual abstinence**
- 3. Peaceful mind through meditation**
- 4. Health-maintaining herbs**
- 5. Special exercises to strengthen inner organs and open meridians including breathing exercises**
- 6. Use of talismans (power objects) and magic formulas.**
- 7. Tai-chi Chuan: body-centered exercising to become one with the Yin-Yang, blending movement and stillness.**

Each person must learn to flow with the Tao through:

- 1. Living in harmony with the Tao by..**

Experiencing the transcendent unity in all things.

Remembering everything has its own nature and function./

Accepting things as they are, not setting moral standards, but by nurturing the Ch'i (air, breath) that has been given to them.

2. Practicing wu wei, letting nature take its course by “doing nothing”, by letting go of everyday action and thought. Such inaction is humble and wise and helps people participate in the spontaneity and simplicity of the Tao. It is harmful and unnecessary to strive to be virtuous or successful. Taoists take a low profile in the world. They take no action which could harm nature. They act naturally, spontaneously, without ego, without interfering. They accept not-knowing.
3. The contemplative life withdrawing from society and finding a still center, a quiet way of life. This includes following a natural way of living called feng - shui (geomancy) to decide the best location for a building, a grave, any furnishings.

One's main task is to develop virtue by seeking The Three Jewels of compassion, moderation and humility.

Spiritual alchemy involved secret ascetic practices, passed down by great Taoist teachers who were hidden in the mountains. They taught that the human body contains the Three Treasures:

1. Ching: the creative force (centered in the cauldron, inches below the navel)
2. Ch'i: the vital life force.
3. Shen: personal spirit/mind (centered in the head).

Using breath and exercises one can build up ching energy...

which raises up the spine and transforms into ch'i energy

which raises up and becomes shen energy

which drops down to illuminate the heart center

which drops down to the inner area of the cauldron becoming the Immortal fetus,

which experts can raise through the heavenly gates at the top of the head

which becomes preparation for life after death

Taoists emphasize planning in advance and considering carefully each action before acting.

Taoists are kind to others since kindness brings kindness in response.

Tai Chi is a particular physical exercise and movement practice which is designed to balance the flow of the body's chi or intrinsic energy. Traditional Chinese medicine teaches that illness is caused by blockages or lack of balance. So healing occurs when balance and harmony occur with a constant flow of chi throughout the body.

HISTORY:

Many scholars believe Taoism was founded by Lao-Tse (604-531 BCE), a contemporary of Confucius. Some also believe he was mythical. Real or mythical, “he” wrote the Tao-te-Ching to provide a way to avoid the constant feudal warfare of his time.

Taoism emerged from ancient Chinese philosophies and shamanistic traditions and developed early into a mix of psychology and philosophy. It became a religious faith when in 440 CE it was adopted as a state religion and Lao-Tse was worshiped as a god. Along with Buddhism and Confucianism it became one of the 3 great Chinese religions. Under the influence of Buddhism Taoists organized monastic orders. They also developed temple worship and forms of divination using the I Ching.

Sectarianism:

Throughout its history many sects have arisen, with all subscribing to the

philosophical roots of the religion, some emphasizing faith healing, exorcism, sorcery, the worship of “the immortals”, meditation and alchemy. Some sects were strongly influenced by Confucianism and others by Buddhism. Some sects operated as secret societies.

Hsien Taoist sects emerged in the second Century CE worshipping the Immortals or many gods and ancestral spirits.

Highest Purity Taoism was an elite sect.

Complete Perfection Taoism united alchemy with Ch’an Buddhist meditation and Confucian social morality. It had monks who emphasized meditation and detachment from society.

State support for these 3 religions ended when imperial rule and the Ch’ing Dynasty ended in 1911. The ensuing warlordism destroyed much of the Taoist heritage. Communism won control of China in 1949 and severely restricted all religions, forced monks into manual labor, confiscated temples, plundered religious treasures so that by 1960 the once several million monks were reduced to 50,000. The Cultural Revolution between 1966 - 1976 destroyed most of what remained. Since 1982 some religious tolerance has been restored.

Taoism currently now has about 20 million followers and is mainly centered in Taiwan, though some still practice it in Hong Kong and mainland China. Around 30,000 live in North America. Currently Taoism is significantly influencing North American culture through acupuncture, herbalism, holistic medicine, meditation, the practice of Tai Chi and various martial arts.

SACRED TEXTS:

The Tao-te-Ching (The Way of Power or The Book of The Way) is the main text and is said to have been written by Lao-Tse. It describes the nature of life, the way to peace and how a ruler should live. The fourth Century BCE author Chuang-tzu wrote a book called by the same name that contained additional Taoist teachings and emphasized detachment from society. Both authors had significant influence on twentieth century writers like the Trappist monk Thomas Merton.