



Taoism 101

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Important notes

-I am not a Taoist

-Not even an "expert"

-Translations vary

-This translation by
Stephen Mitchell

-Tao mentioned 159 times in Whole World is a
Single Flower

-Personal
connection

-Forward in Compass of Zen / Dropping
Ashes on The Buddha compiled and edited
by Stephen Mitchell



Overview

Why is Taoism referred to so much in Zen, and in our school in particular? Buddhism originated in India around 6th-5th century BCE, and it came into China around 1st century BCE. As Indian Buddhism entered China, it encountered Taoism, which had already been deeply influencing Chinese thought and culture. Chan Buddhism, the Chinese precursor to Japanese Zen, emerged during this cultural and philosophical blending, especially around the 6th to 9th centuries CE.





Contributions from each

1

From Buddhism, we have the emphasis on meditation. Concepts like “emptiness,” non-attachment, enlightenment. Lineage based teaching and transmission of insight.

2

From Taoism we have naturalness, spontaneity, and effortless action (“Wu Wei”). Use of paradox and intuitive understanding. Focus natural world, and less concern with rigid doctrinal structures.

3

So, metaphorically speaking, you can say that Zen is the birth child of Indian Buddhism (original) and Taoism.

4

Zen retains core Buddhist aims and insights (liberation from suffering, meditation), but it’s expressed in a way that resonates with Taoist aesthetics & philosophy (paradox, simplicity, spontaneity).



So What exactly *is* Taoism?

Chinese philosophical and spiritual tradition that emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao (“The Way”). It is linked to a text, The Tao Te Ching, believed to be authored by Laozi (Lao Tzu).



Key Concepts



Tao

The ultimate principle. Natural order of the universe. **Wu Wei**, which can be summarized as acting in harmony with the flow of life rather than forcing things (mastery of instrument as an example). Yin and Yang, or interdependent opposites that create balance and transformation. Also has strong emphasis on nature, and living in harmony with nature. This often is equated to simplicity, humility, and observing how natural processes unfold without resistance.

Beyond words / definition. Like water, it flows naturally. Taoism is about aligning with that flow.





Practices in Daily Life

Stillness, balance, and energy cultivation are achieved via meditation and breathing practices. Tai Chi and Qigong movement practices are inspired by Taoist principles. Rituals and alchemy involves spiritual longevity, harmony with nature and sometimes religious Taoism. Keeping to minimalism and simplicity. Flowing with change instead of resisting it. Seeking balance in relationships, health, and work. Harmony with environment.



Additional thoughts

- Taoism's influence can be found in Chinese medicine, martial arts, poetry, and art.
- Tao Te Ching had quite a bit to say about ruling the people in a way that aligns with the Tao (political?)
- Applying We Wei to Kong An practice ("Just do it")?
- Where Taoism differs from Zen:

+Immortality vs Enlightenment

-Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) contributed to Taoism by expanding on foundational ideas through parables and stories in the Zhuangzi, emphasizing spiritual freedom, the relativity of perspectives, and embracing the fluidity of reality. His work promoted an individualistic spirit, challenging conformity and offering a transcendental, apolitical philosophy that influenced Taoism.

-I Ching provides a framework for understanding the cosmos through concepts like the eight trigrams, which are fundamental to Taoist cosmology. I Ching is older than Tao Te Ching and includes some concepts from Confucianism.



Chapter 1

The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding.





Chapter 2

When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly. When people see some things as good, other things become bad.

Being and non-being create each other. Difficult and easy support each other. Long and short define each other. High and low depend on each other. Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the Master acts without doing anything and teaches without saying anything. Things arise and she lets them come; things disappear and she lets them go. She has but doesn't possess, acts but doesn't expect. When her work is done, she forgets it. That is why it lasts forever.





Chapter 5

The Tao doesn't take sides;
it gives birth to both good and evil.
The Master doesn't take sides;
she welcomes both saints and sinners.

The Tao is like a bellows:
it is empty yet infinitely capable.
The more you use it, the more it produces;
the more you talk of it, the less you understand.

Hold on to the center.





Chapter 11

We join spokes together in a wheel, but it is the center hole that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space that makes it livable.

We work with being, but non-being is what we use.



Chapter 18

When the great Tao is forgotten,
goodness and piety appear.

When the body's intelligence declines,
cleverness and knowledge step forth.

When there is no peace in the family,
filial piety begins.

When the country falls into chaos,
patriotism is born.





Chapter 21

The Master keeps her mind always at one with the Tao;
that is what gives her her radiance.

The Tao is ungraspable. How can her mind be at one with it?
Because she doesn't cling to ideas.

The Tao is dark and unfathomable. How can it make her radiant?
Because she lets it.

Since before time and space were, the Tao is.
It is beyond is and is not.
How do I know this is true?
I look inside myself and see.

Chapter 28

Know the male, yet keep to the female: receive the world in your arms.
If you receive the world, the Tao will never leave you and you will be like a little child.

Know the white, yet keep to the black: be a pattern for the world.
If you are a pattern for the world, the Tao will be strong inside you
and there will be nothing you can't do.

Know the personal, yet keep to the impersonal: accept the world as it is.
If you accept the world, the Tao will be luminous inside you and you will return to your primal self.

The world is formed from the void, like utensils from a block of wood.
The Master knows the utensils, yet keeps to the the block:
thus she can use all things.



Chapter 71

Not-knowing is true knowledge.
Presuming to know is a disease.
First realize that you are sick;
then you can move toward health.

The Master is her own physician.
She has healed herself of all knowing.
Thus she is truly whole.





Thank you.

