

# What is Taoism?

## (part 1 of 2): An Introduction



Taoism is an ancient Chinese tradition of philosophy and religious belief also referred to as Daoism which is said to be a more accurate way of saying the Chinese word in English. The Tao (in Taoism) is usually translated as ‘the way’. It is very difficult to estimate the number of Taoists in the world, especially in mainland China where religion was outlawed under the strict communist rule. However estimates have ranged from 30 million to 300 million in China alone. It is believed that there are more than 30 million Taoists in Taiwan, Macau, and Hong Kong and smaller populations scattered through Vietnam, Korea, Laos and Thailand. The USA and the United Kingdom are thought to have Taoist populations of about 30,000 each. Although this is a relatively little known religion outside Asia its adherents make up quite a significant proportion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world population.

Although we may know very little about the philosophy and religious beliefs of Taoism it is unlikely that we have not been influenced by one or more Taoist practice. It is the philosophy /religion responsible for acupuncture, feng shui, the popular yin and yang symbol, Zen, and the martial art Tai Chi. Taoism’s influence can also be seen in the very fashionable Chinese herbal medicine and the practice of meditation.

The origin of Taoism is obscure. The early teachings are usually ascribed to Lao Tzu who, in the fifth century BCE wrote the influential Taoist text, the Dao De Jing (The Way and its Power). While the only other popular Chinese philosophy at the time, Confucianism, stressed ethical action, Taoism encouraged the virtue of Wu Wei (non-action), or going with the flow. The power of emptiness, detachment, receptiveness, spontaneity, the strength of softness, the relativism of human values and the search for a long life are other Taoist themes. The proficient Taoist was at that time concerned with achieving immortality, and this led to the development of alchemy and the methods of meditation.

Taoism provided an alternative to the Confucian tradition in China and the two traditions have coexisted easily sometimes within the same individual. However, as the centuries past Taoism did find itself in direct competition with Buddhism. In order to survive Taoism incorporated Buddhist practices and ancient Chinese folklore to create a religious dimension to go with the philosophical precepts of the early teachers. The original, more philosophical Taoism has inspired Chinese painters and poets through the ages.

## **Taoist concepts, beliefs and practices**

According to Taoists, Tao is the absolute principle underlying the universe, it combines within itself the principles of yin and yang and it signifies the way or the code of behaviour. The power of the Way is referred to as Te. Tao, they say, flows through all life and a believer strives to harmonise with this force. As far as Taoists are concerned the Supreme Being or ultimate truth is beyond words or conceptual understanding. This is similar to other religions ideas about God, however Taoists seldom refer to or use the word God. However, Traditional Taoism did not believe in the existence of a Creator. It was non-theistic, and Lao Tzu's teachings never gave the impression that the Tao or (Way) could in any circumstance be regarded as God.

Taoists do not recognise the theme of good against evil; rather they see the interdependence of all dualities, thus the yin and yang concept of opposites. Any action has some negative (yin) and some positive (yang) aspect to it. Thus when one labels something as good, one automatically creates evil.<sup>[1]</sup> Taoists also do not accept the duality of salvation vs. damnation. There is no concept of heaven or hell; the ultimate goal is to return to the Tao – the universal life force. Living simply in harmony with Tao, and not excessively pursuing material wealth, stature, or prestige, will lead to a joyful life.

Taoists believe there are Three Jewels all Taoists should live by - compassion, moderation and humility. The religious aspect of Taoism is polytheistic. There are a number of deities each believed to be a manifestation of some aspect of the Tao. Taoists, however, do not pray to these deities, they are not personified nor can they solve any of life's problems. Taoists solve problems through meditation and observation.

The heart of Taoist ritual is the concept of bringing order and harmony to the cosmos as a whole. Taoist rituals involve purification, meditation and offerings to the many deities. The details of rituals are often highly complex and technical and therefore normally left to priests, with the congregation playing little part. The rituals involve the priests (and assistants) chanting, dancing and playing instruments (particularly wind and percussion). Taoism also involves several physical practices; breathing exercises, massages, martial arts, yoga and meditation. These are designed to transform a person both mentally and physically and bring them into harmony with the Tao.

Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism are the three most dominant religions amongst the Chinese people. They all have long and colourful histories and all have at one time or another been referred to as a philosophy rather than a religion. Taoism is in the unique position of being a philosophy that was able to take on religious aspects, derived from folkloric Chinese customs and thus satisfy all adherents and prospective adherents.

In part two we will look a little deeper at the three jewels of Taoism and ask whether or not these are the only aspects of Taoism in common with Islam. We will also discuss the concept of God in Taoism in a little more depth and compare it with the monotheism of Islam.

---

#### Footnotes:

[1] (<http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/Taoism/What-Do-Taoists-Believe.aspx?p=7#ixzz1tOXjJXT7>)

## (part 2 of 2): Common virtues do not make a religious connection

Compassion, moderation and humility; these are the three jewels or attributes that Taoists live by in order to live a good and worthwhile life. They are the same moral characteristics valued by Muslims. The first of the three jewels (sometimes known as treasures) is *ci*, literally compassion, tenderness, love, mercy, kindness, gentleness, or benevolence. It is also a [Classical Chinese](#) term for mother. The second is *jian*, literally moderation, economy, restraint, to be sparing. The third treasure is a six-character Chinese phrase instead of a single word; *Bugan wei tianxia xian*. It translates as humility but it really means more than that; according to Taoist wisdom it is the way to avoid premature death. To be at the world's front is to expose oneself, to render oneself vulnerable to the world's destructive forces, while to remain behind and to be humble is to allow oneself time to fully ripen and bear fruit.

Let us see how this compares with the same virtues taught in Islam. The most important thing to note is that compassion is number one and that it is a word linked with the classical Chinese word for mother. We know that in Islam God is known as the Most Merciful. The dictionary defines mercy as disposition to be kind and forgiving, and the feeling that motivates compassion. The Arabic term for mercy is *rahmah* and the Arabic word for womb, *raheem*, is derived from the same root word. It is significant that there is a unique connection between God's mercy and the womb. God nurtures and shelters us, just as the womb nurtures and shelters the unborn child. The connection between mercy, compassion and motherhood are obvious in both the Islamic term *rahmah* and the Taoist jewel, compassion.

What about moderation? It is clearly an important virtue in Taoism, but what about in Islam? In accordance with Islam's holistic approach to life, everything must be done in moderation. There is no reason or excuse for extreme or fanatical behaviour. The Quran refers to those who truly follow Islam as the community of the middle-path.

**“Thus, have We made of you a nation justly balanced...”  
(Quran2:143)**

The third jewel, humility is also a virtue highly praised in Islam. However Islam stresses that humility is a trait that will lead us to a blissful life ever after while Taoism seems to place great emphasis on humility in this life in order to live a full and worthwhile life. *Ibadah* is the Arabic word for worship, however the root of the word *ubudiyyah* means to express one's humility or humbleness. It is the complete sense of humbleness that overcomes one who is totally submitted to the will of God, the Almighty. Worship is submission to God, and the essential part of submission is humility. Thus we are able to see that the essential virtues of Taoism and Islam are virtually the same. This is not surprising because most religions emphasise the necessity of high moral standards and virtuous behaviour.

Places for Taoist activities are called Taoist palaces (gong) or temples (guan). Taoists originally preferred to build their temples in serene mountains and forests, but as it spread more and more temples were built in urban areas. Each of them came to enshrine a great number of statues of deities and immortals. This leads us into asking an essential question, what exactly does Taoism say about the basis of Islamic belief, the oneness of God? How does Taoism view God? There is some concept of God in the religion of Taoism however as we learned in part 1, although Taoists accept the necessity of a supreme being they believe it to be beyond human understanding.

Consequently Taoism does accept the concept of God. However, according to A Personal Tao, “This question is irrelevant. God could or could not exist, and either state doesn't change the way we lead our lives. Our lives are expressions of action between ourselves and the universe. To respect our surrounding environment is a furthering of respect to ourselves. This manner of living doesn't change regardless of the nature of God or the Tao”.<sup>[1]</sup> In part 1 we lightly touched on the fact that Taoism was able to embrace the other philosophies and religions existing in China because it is possible to practice Taoism at the same time as other religions. Many Chinese Buddhists are also Taoists. However this has led to a unique polytheism in Taoism that did not exist when it was first practiced.

There is a hierarchy of gods and immortals in Taoism. At the top of the hierarchy are the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning, the Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure and the Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Virtue. Below them are the gods of the lower ranks, who are entrusted with responsibilities according to their attainments. The highest among them is the Jade Emperor, followed by the four major deities, and other celestial beings

and immortals. Different deities and immortals have different responsibilities. Among the most popularly known are the celestial beings in charge of wind, rain, thunder, lightning, water and fire, the God of Wealth, the Kitchen God, the God of the Town and the God of the Land.<sup>[2]</sup>

Idolatry and polytheism have no place in Islam, nor do Muslims believe that it is possible to practice more than one religion at a time. Although there are commonalities especially in the area of virtuous behaviour these do not connect the two religions in anyway. Muslims believe in One, Unique, incomparable God, Who alone is the Almighty, the Creator, the Sovereign, and the Sustainer of everything in the whole universe. He alone is to be worshipped, supplicated to, and shown all acts of worship. He stands in need of none of His creation; rather it is they who depend on Him for all that they need. Islam gives a clear purpose of life and has given laws that lead a person to a successful and content life in this world and eternal bliss in the Hereafter.

---

#### **Footnotes:**

<sup>[1]</sup> A Personal Tao By Casey Kochmer

<sup>[2]</sup> (<http://www.taoist.org.cn/webfront/English.jsp>)