

Daoism (Taoism)

By Douglas Groothuis, Ph.D.

Founded By: Lao Tzu

Founding Date: Approximately 500 BC

BACKGROUND

Daoism (or Taoism) is not a major world religion numerically, but it is ancient and exercises an influence disproportionate to its size. Its principal text, *Daodejing* (or *Tao Te Ching*), is one of the best-selling and most-translated books in the world. Thus, anyone interested in comparative religion or Chinese religion in particular should take this mysterious path seriously.

There are few Daoists worldwide or in the United States.¹ Perhaps only 30,000 would identify as such in America.² Daoism is not a missionary religion, as are Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism. Nevertheless, Daoism is one of the three classic religious teachings of China, along with Confucianism and neo-Confucianism. Daoists can be found in many far eastern countries, such as China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, estimates of total adherences varies wildly. According to worldatlas.com “There could be as many as 173 million Daoists globally or as little as 12 million.”³

Daoism appeals to those who yearn to live in harmony with the deepest principles of the universe. Those who want to “go with the flow” resonate with Daoism, as do those who shun convention and formality in favor of spontaneity and naturalness. Although few call themselves Daoists, many hold Daoist ideas. It would be unusual to find a large bookstore lacking copies of the *Daodejing*, the central text of Taoism. It is likewise common to find many books with Tao in the title, such as *The Tao of Physics* or the popular *The Tao of Pooh* or even *The Tao of Jesus* (a New Age perspective). The famous statement, “The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao,”⁴ encapsulates a distinctive approach to the sacred, which claims that the ultimate reality lies beyond the reach of words and thoughts.

HISTORY

Daoism is known for a text by its Chinese founder, Laozi (or Lao Tzu [b. 604 BC]), but little is known about him. His name means “old sage.” The events in Laozi’s life are rather incidental to the message he left, since he is deemed a sage, not a prophet (like Jeremiah), much less an incarnation (Christ) or even an avatar (Krishna). Laozi purportedly found wisdom without the aid of God or the supernatural.

Laozi was supposedly born at the age of seventy-two because “anyone as wise as this man could not possibly have been born as a squalling infant. Instead, he came into the world possessing white hair and the ability to speak.”⁵ He was a likely contemporary of Confucius, but some doubt his very existence. Laozi probably lived a quiet life as an archivist at the court of a nobleman and gathered a few disciples. He decided to leave China to travel west. When he reached the western boundary of China, Laozi was greeted by a gatekeeper at the border that demanded he write down his wisdom for posterity before he would let him through. The sage complied, and in one sitting wrote the short book, the *Daodejing* (sometimes called *The Laozi*) which means, “the way and its power.”

The eponymous *Zhuangzi* (or *Chuang-tzu*) followed, which develops the themes of the *Daodejing*. This is the second central text of Daoism. It agrees that the Dao is beyond words. Scholars debate the roles that Laozi and Chuang-tzu had in the texts that bear their name, but both are probably collaborative efforts, whose origins recede into misty antiquity.

DOCTRINE

The worldview of Daoism is difficult to summarize; however, it claims that reality is ultimately unified through one controlling principle, the Dao. This Dao manifests through the opposites of Yin and Yang. The Dao is an impersonal principle, not a personal being. It gives form and shape to nature, but can only be discerned by transcending the conventions of society, even its moral codes. The Daoist returns to “the uncarved block” of original nature—which is the Dao itself—and forsakes the artificial in favor of the organic. Instead of taking charge and molding the world into one’s egotistic image, one should, rather, take the way of non-action or wu-wei. Many of the aphorisms of the *Daodejing* speak to this. “Man was not made to blow out air -- He was made to sit quietly and find the truth within.”⁶

Daoism shuns the moralism of Confucianism and teaches that moral rules arise when people and governments get out of synch with the Dao, thus tending toward a naturalistic amorality.⁷ The Dao does not speak, and, therefore, does not command, reward, or punish.

Daoism did not change from being a philosophy to a religion until long after Laozi’s death. It later “became the undergirding for endeavors in alchemy and in the search for immortality. Then, it eventually evolved personal gods and religious rituals.”⁸ Much later, Daoist ideas were synthesized with the teachings of the Buddha to produce Zen Buddhism,⁹ an iconoclastic and direct experience-oriented variant of Buddhism, which has been popular in the West.¹⁰

The Daodejing

The Daodejing a collection of eighty-one short sayings, usually divided into two sections. Printings usually put only a few sentences on each page, giving the sense that one should read slowly. John Minford, one of the myriad translators of *Daodejing*, writes, “The book proceeds in an intuitive, poetic, non-logical, zigzag, often repetitive, and sometimes incoherent fashion.”¹¹ Much of it seems to have been written for political rulers. “The more restrictions, the more poverty -- The more weapons, the more fear in the land -- The more cleverness, the more strange events -- The more laws, the more lawbreakers.”¹²

What of this defining statement, “The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao,” which begins the book? It has been translated in several ways, but all this writer has seen claims the Dao’s *ineffability*—the Dao cannot be described in words, since it transcends rational thought. This seems profound, but it needs to be analyzed, since nonsense sometimes wears the robes of mystery.

The statement certainly means that “the Dao itself lies beyond human categorization in terms of language and rational thought. Trying to put its nature into words produces a mere imitation that does not convey the reality of the Dao.”¹³ Koller argues that the Dao cannot be named because it is without “divisions, distinctions, or characteristics. It is unified, like an uncarved block.”¹⁴ It cannot be named since “it is the very source of names and descriptions.” Thus, Dao is really “a non-name.” It is “that from which being and non-being proceed.”¹⁵

But there is no obvious reason why “the very source of names and descriptions” should lack a name or description, especially if we assume that *like causes like*. Moreover, if the Dao is the ultimate reality and is “unified, like an uncarved block,” it cannot explain the *diversity* of things (or particulars) that exist in nature: trees, rocks, mountains, flowers, humans, and the like. Diversity must be either denied as illusion or remain unexplained.

In one way, “The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao,” is simply true. A statement about the Dao is not the same as the Dao itself. A statement about my dog, Sunny—“Sunny is a goldendoodle”—is not the same as Sunny, the goldendoodle. But that point is trivial, and not worth enshrining in the spiritual hall of fame.

“The Dao” means, roughly, the way of nature and the right way of life. But as Corduan notes, the “basic notion of Dao, consisting of the right balance between yin and yang, is the property of all of Chinese thought in all of its schools, though subject to the schools’ particular interpretations.”¹⁶ The *Daodejing* breaks new ground for Chinese philosophy by asserting that the complementary elements of Yin and Yang are placed into a monistic whole, the Dao.¹⁷

Despite its ineffability, certain qualities are attributed to the Dao and certain qualities are withheld from it. Koller calls it “unified,” which is different from “diversified.” Such attribution is not surprising, since to discuss anything coherently, some qualities must be affixed and some withheld. If so, then something *has been spoken* of about “the eternal Dao,” appearances to the contrary. The Dao is called “eternal.” Therefore, the Dao must not be temporal. Nor is the “eternal Dao” another incidental fact of nature, such as, “Fireweed appears in Willow, Alaska, in July, but soon dies.” Rather, “the eternal” is limitless in both directions of time, past and future—unlike fireweed. The Dao is not identical to any one thing in nature. It is more than that, but what exactly?

Alan Watts (1915-1973), the Episcopalian priest who became a prominent and eloquent exponent of Eastern religion for the West, called Daoism “the watercourse way.”¹⁸ The word “water” appears frequently in the Dao. *Water* is a metaphor, not a metaphysic. The way of water is the way of least resistance. Water will find the lowest point available; it will seep wherever it finds passage; it will work slowly but surely in its way.

The Best is like Water.
Water Benefits the Myriad Things.
Water does not Contend.
It abides in that.
Which the Multitude abhor.
It is close to the Tao.¹⁹

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The Christian writer, C. S. Lewis, wrote of the Tao. In *The Abolition of Man*, a book defending objective moral value, he writes of the various religions and philosophies that have agreed that there is an irreducible moral good beyond the contingencies of culture, the urges of instinct, and personal preference. He writes, “This conception in all its forms, Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, Christian, and Oriental alike, I shall henceforth refer to for brevity simply as ‘the Tao’.”²⁰ Earlier in the book he explained the original concept of “the Tao.”

The Chinese also speak of a great thing (the greatest thing) called the Tao. It is the reality beyond all predicates, the abyss that was before the Creator Himself. It is Nature, it is the Way, the Road. It is the Way in which the universe goes on, the Way in which things everlastingly emerge, stillly and tranquilly, into space and time. It is also the Way which every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic progression, conforming all activities to that great exemplar.²¹

Whatever Lewis else says about the Dao is disqualified if it is “the reality beyond all predicates.” If it is, then the Dao cannot serve as the moral foundation for anything, since it cannot be described. Lewis’s description seems faithful to the Daoist understanding, but if it is, it cannot be identified with morality. To be “beyond all predicates” is to be unknowable, since to know anything, we must identify and believe in some predicate of a subject.²² I know that my wife Kathleen is gentle and kind. The adjectival predicates (gentle and kind) are attributed to the noun, Kathleen (the subject of the predicates). To say that X is “beyond all predicates” is to precisely say nothing about it.

Consider the contrast the wordlessness and silence of the Tao with the Old Testament (Psalm 19:1-4) view of God *speaking* through creation.

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

Moreover, the Christian Scriptures depict a God who is Lord over nature, who owns it and rules it with sovereign goodness (Psalm 24:1-2). This is antithetical to the Dao, which is a flow or a process. Watts says that Daoism knows of no ruler and ruled dichotomy; there is nothing monarchial about the universe,²³ the Psalmist to the contrary in Psalm 33:6-9:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses. Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

It seems that something muffled the voice of creation for Laozi. He heard murmurs, but not words. However, he left us many murmuring words.

The *Daodejing* gives us a Dao that cannot be spoken of with clarity or finality. Nor does the Dao itself speak of anything to anyone. However, we can limn some of its meaning from the book’s allusive comments. The Dao is not lord over nature; nor does it command humans. It may not be entirely synonymous with nature, but somehow pervades nature as an elusive presence and subtle power. One can be out of sync with the Tao, but one cannot sin against it. The Dao’s nature can be intuited, but not proven; it is more felt than thought.

If words help understand the Dao at all, they must be poetic, illusive, allusive, gnomic, paradoxical, and enigmatic. One Daoist writer disclosed the essential problem with *The Daodejing*.

Those who speak Know nothing; Those who Know Are silent. Those Words, I'm told, Were uttered By Lao-tzu. If we're to believe. That he himself Was someone who Knew, Why did he end up Writing a Book Of Five Thousand Words?²⁴

The traditional answer is that he was forced to write his philosophy by the border control agent. Nevertheless, his words have been preserved, treasured, and interpreted ever since. But the first aphorism invalidates all that follows. This is certainly not true of the Old or New Testaments, since God is a personal, relational, and communicative being. To take one example, Jesus speaks of those who hear the word of God and are blessed by it to produce an ample crop (Matthew 13:23).

Daoism is not a system of thought based on a perspicacious written authority. Daoism has sages, but no prophets. Laozi hailed the way of water, while the prophet Jeremiah had fire in his bones from the living God of judgment and mercy (Jeremiah 20:9). He was given a distinct message from God for the people, a message that demanded a response. But the Tao demands nothing, promises nothing, and does not love or care for humanity, since it is more like an impersonal and amoral force than a living, acting, and personal being who marks history with its stamp.

This is--The Mystic Union,--Of Heaven-and-Nature,--To be One With the Tao. *Not to be Loved*,--Not to bask--In glory,--Not to suffer From loneliness,--Not to be rejected,--To feel no bitterness,--But to have a--Heart-and-Mind Of Calm and Constancy,--With neither Desire nor Aversion.²⁵

Perhaps the strongest of all human desires is to be loved and to love. But that is just what oneness with the Dao forbids. That Daoist statement just given would have shocked the Apostle John, who wrote, "God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him."²⁶

The Dao appeals to those who would rather commune with nature than worship God and to those who would rather ponder a ponderous text than seek a sure word from God. There are rumors of monotheism in the *Daodejing*, but these are muffled by pantheistic allusions. The Dao lies far from Christianity, since Christianity demands worship, obedience, and accountability to revealed truths found in the Bible. Thus, as opposed to the Dao which cannot be spoken, God speaks in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament, and these are "the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

Notes

¹ Until a few decades ago, the preferred spelling was Taoist. More recently Daoist is more common, so it is used.

² "American Daoism in the Twenty-first Century" (Harvard Pluralism Project, 2020), https://hwpi.harvard.edu/files/pluralism/files/american_daoism_in_the_21st_century_1.pdf.

³ <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/taoism.html>.

⁴ This has been translated in several ways. Literally, it reads, "The Dao that can be Dao-ed is not the eternal Dao," thus muddling the waters even more. However, most translations emphasize the ineffability of the Dao, so I used that rendering.

⁵ Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* (Tarcher Cornerstone Editions) (p. 6). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁷ See John M. Koller, *Oriental Philosophies* (Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1970), 238-239.

⁸ Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

⁹ A separate 4-page Profile has been published on this subject:

Jason Barker, "Zen Buddhism," *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2022). A complete collection of Profiles (over 600 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook. This Profile is available at <http://www.watchman.org/profiles/pdf/zenprofile.pdf>

¹⁰ See D. T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (New York: Grove Press, 1994). For a critique of Zen, see Lit-sin Chang, *Zen-Existentialism: The Spiritual Decline of the West* (1969; Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

¹¹ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* (p. xxii). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle

Edition.

¹² Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* (Tarcher Cornerstone Editions) (p. 74). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

¹³ Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁴ Koller, *Oriental Philosophies*, 236.

¹⁵ Koller, *Oriental Philosophies*, 236. He repeats this point several times, giving a Daoist account of the Dao.

¹⁶ Corduan, Winfried. *Neighboring Faiths*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

¹⁷ See Koller, *Oriental Philosophies*, 236.

¹⁸ Alan Watts, with collaboration of Al Chung-Liang Huang, *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975). For a critique of Watt's worldview, see David Clark, *The Pantheism of Alan Watts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977).

¹⁹ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* (p. 28). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

²⁰ Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man* (Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis) (p. 19). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

²¹ Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man* (Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis) (p. 19). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

²² Lewis does not give this critique, but invokes the Tao as a placeholder for objective moral value. He himself believed that a personal God was the source of morality, but did not argue this in *The Abolition of Man*.

²³ Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*, 35.

²⁴ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* (p. 6). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

²⁵ Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* (pp. 204-205). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition; emphasis added.

²⁶ 1 John 4:8-9; see also John 3:16-17



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