

# Taoism college essay



Throughout history, Taoism has been one of the most influential religions of Eastern culture. This is certainly one of the most unique of all religions. Many Taoists, in fact, do not even consider it a religion; and in many ways it is not. Taoists make no claim that the Tao exists. That is what essentially separates Taoism from the rest of the world religions: there is no heated debate or battle over Taoist doctrine; there have been no crusades to spread the religion. The very essence of Taoism is quite the opposite. Taoism's uniqueness and open-endedness have allowed the religion to flourish almost undisturbed and unchanged for over two thousand years.

The founder of Taoism was a man named Lao Tzu, who lived around the year 604 B. C. E. According to Chinese legend, Lao Tzu was an archivist in the imperial library at Lo Yang. He was known for his knowledge, although he never taught. When Lao Tzu left his position at the library, he went to the Chinese province of Chou. At the border, however, he was stopped and forced to write down his teachings. During this time, he wrote the Tao Te Ching, the major scripture of Taoism.

After Lao Tzu's death, a man named Yang Chu (440-366 B. C. E.) took up his teachings. A naturalist and philosopher, Yang Chu believed highly in self-regard and survival as the core of human nature and direction. His ideals were personal integrity and self-protection, and said that he was unwilling to pluck one hair from his head even if all humanity were to benefit from it.

The next influential Taoist philosopher was Chang Tzu, who lived from 350-275 B. C. E. He defined existence using Lao Tzu's teachings. He wrote fifty-two books in response to the Tao Te Ching, thirty-three of which still survive

today. Using exaggeration and fantasy, he illustrated Lao Tzus teachings and how the Tao acted in nature. His theories spoke of a cosmic unity which encompasses all reality and guides it naturally, without force, to its proper end.

The Yin and Yang theory became part of Taoist philosophy around 300 B. C. E. when they were mentioned in the Hsi tzu, an appendix to the I Ching. Yin and Yang are defined as the two forces in nature. They are often called the two breaths or chi. Yin is the feminine principle, representing darkness, coolness, and dampness; Yang is the masculine principle, representing brightness, warmth, and dryness. Neither principle is good or bad; they are not opposites, but each is needed to maintain stability in the universe. This belief holds that everything is defined through opposition; consequently, the virtues of balance and understanding are highly valued.

Taoism became an official religion between 100 and 200 C. E. Due to competition from Buddhism, Taoists adopted many Buddhist beliefs. During this pivotal point in the religions history, searching for self-knowledge and wisdom were replaced by searching for solutions to sorrows and other physical problems. Alchemy and superstition became highly popular during this period of time, as Taoists tried to escape reality rather than to control the artificial and unnatural. Many Taoists used magic and the concept of Tao to try to extend the physical life rather than to focus on the afterlife. Gradually the religion becomes more complicated, with a wide pantheon of gods and a ruling hierarchy.

The leader Chang Ling took the title Heavenly Teacher in 200 C. E. He created a dynasty of high priests who manipulated Taoism to support a superstitious doctrine of magic and mysticism. Seizing higher power as a religious leader, he pioneered a merging of Taoism and Zoroastrianism into a system called Five Bushels of Rice Taoism. Eventually this developed into a society based on Mazdaism, a Zoroastrian sect, where every believer was charged five bushels of rice. Although the believers followed the basic Zoroastrian worship format, they worshipped different gods: the Tao instead of Ahura-Mazda, and the various Chinese folk gods in place of the Persian Angels.

Three hundred years later, the philosopher Honen moved away from Mazdaism and combined Taoism with Buddhism. This simplified religion he created became known as the Pure Land School, or Amidaism. Gradually, however, Taoism again became tied to magic, and it failed as a religion. Today, only its original philosophies survive and there are very few followers of Taoism, mostly found in Taiwan. Although Taoism's religious practices deteriorated with advancing Western influence, its philosophical aspects have outlasted those of Confucianism and Zen Buddhism.

For centuries, Taoism has been known as the Way of Harmony. This is because Taoists believe that the Tao leads all nature toward a natural balance. The Tao, however, is not considered to be a deity or a ruler: it may reign but it does not rule. This is reflected in seven basic statements. The first states that the Tao is nature. This means that the Tao is the way of everything, the movement of everything in nature, and all existence. The second statement is that the Tao is knowledge, meaning that the Tao is the

utmost form of understanding and wisdom and that to understand it means to understand all. The third statement says that the Tao is Goodness. This indicates that the Tao is the path toward virtue, and the highest virtue of these is conforming to the Tao. The fourth statement is that the Tao is imminent. This means that the Tao is the source of all reality and that the Tao is inseparable. The fifth statement tells that the Tao is being, or the process of becoming, which characterizes reality. The sixth holds that the Tao is felt in passiveness, not in activity. The final statement asserts that the Tao is individual and unique for every person. Therefore, no person can truly know the Tao outside themselves. As the Tao Te Ching states: The ways that can be walked are not the eternal way.

The names that can be named are not the eternal name.

The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures.

The named is the mother of the myriad creatures.

Therefore, Always be without desire in order to observe its wondrous subtleties; Always have desire so that you may observe its manifestations.

In essence, the universe is a pattern which cannot exist without any part of it. Therefore, trying to alter the Tao through action is essentially trying to destroy the balance of the universe.

Taoists have a very simple definition of virtue, called Teh. For a Taoist, the only virtue is to find unity with the Tao. This contradicts Western religious thought because Westerners believe in peace and salvation through action. Taoists, however, believe that unity with the Tao requires no effort but rather

passive existence without work; by finding unity with the Tao, one can therefore find heaven. This is explained in Lao Tzus doctrine of the three treasures, those being love, balance, and humility. Love stems from and results in kindness and consideration for others. Balance can be found through self-control and moderation. Humility results from self-esteem and happiness in ones status.

The Taoist path to salvation is called Wu Wei, meaning the principle of non-action." The way to attain unity with the Tao involves no effort, ambition, discipline, or education. Therefore, each person has an equal opportunity to attain balance. It involves a surrender to nature: since every person is by definition part of the Tao, there is no need or reason to seek it elsewhere. Furthermore, everyone has direct access to the Tao because the Tao is connected to reality, and everyone is a part of reality. In summary, there is no need to seek answers outside of oneself. Through non-action the answer is revealed through ones own existence.

Taoism is different from any other Eastern religion. According to Lawrence Durrell, Taoism is such a privileged brand of eastern philosophy that one would be right to regard it as an aesthetic view of the universe rather than a purely institutional one. Thus, as Taoism is a religion of non-action, Lao Tzu and his followers discouraged the practice of rituals. As a result, Taoism has no tangible rituals. Early Taoists, in fact, were far more concerned with everyday life than with celebrations or worship. Taoists prefer to leave the question of God unanswered.

Taoist rituals did flourish, however, around and during the 900s. During this time lavish temples were built, complex rituals were practiced, and colorful festivals were celebrated. The closest lasting action in Taoism to rituals is the idea of wu-hsing. This is the set of notions called the five phases (wu-hsing) or powers (wu-te): water, fire, wood, metal, and earth. This concept helps philosophers build a system of correspondences and participations which link all macrocosmic and microcosmic phenomena. Thus all seasons, colors, directions, musical tones, animals, and other aspects of nature correspond to the five major inner organs of the human body. Because of this, many Taoists believed that the essences relating to their respective phases nourished the organs of the body; this supposedly led to longevity.

Several sects of Taoism emerged during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Among them were: the Tai-i (Supreme Unity) sect, founded by Hsiao Pao-chen in approximately 1140; the Chenta Tao (Perfect and Great Tao) sect, founded by Liu Te-jen in 1142; and the Chan-chen (Perfect Realization) sect, founded in 1163 by Wang Che. The Chan-chen became very popular, and small groups of monks from this sect survived until the twentieth century.

Taoism has been affected largely by Confucianism, and vice versa. The two religions grew up together and compose a Yin-Yang themselves.

Confucianism works for the public welfare, Taoism concerns the individual. Confucianism emphasized sensibility and gentility, while the latter encouraged spontaneity. While the two religions are fundamentally different, they rely upon each other to create a balance of their differences. Because of this, many people believe in and practice both Confucianism and Taoism. Neither probably would have survived if the other had never existed.

Taoism is in itself a very difficult religion to define. Little is known of its founder or its origins, and it has no clear doctrine or method of worship. The whole concept of Tao is extremely abstract and therefore cannot be fully explained, only understood. The religion may hold a completely different meaning for each person—it may be a form of philosophy, religion, or magic. The religion has guided countless individuals through life and toward union with the Tao. As it has influenced the past through its writings, Taoism may influence the world for generations more with its wisdom.