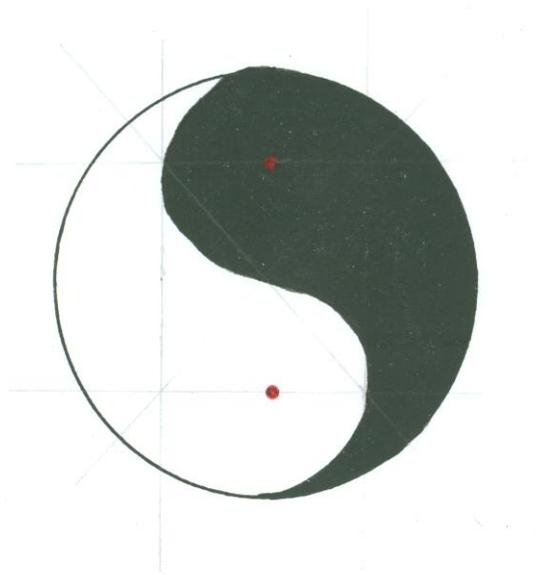


TAO



of Manifestation

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Taoism is the indigenous mystical tradition of China. It is first and foremost a philosophy of Nature, a way of being in the world in complete harmony with the flow of natural events. It is also a religion, one “which considers itself to be the true bond among all beings without any doctrinal creed, profession of faith, or dogmatism.” And even before it was distinctly separate as a religion, it was simply the social body of rural communities and villages, with their observance of the yearly cycle of festivals and ceremonies. Taoism is like a tree of accumulated spiritual tradition with very deep roots and many branches offering a variety of nourishing fruits.

Ancient Chinese shamanism is the substratum of Taoism, stretching back some five-thousand years to the first people who settled along the Yellow and Yang-tze rivers to begin a sedentary, agrarian lifestyle. The tribal leaders of these people were most often also shamans, and were seen as mediators between the people and the mysterious, unseen forces of Nature. Through ritual, divination, and the achievement of altered states of consciousness, these shaman-chiefs sought to make direct personal contact with the forces of Nature. By merit of the strength of their character and their gifted supernatural abilities, they were believed to be capable of appeasing, influencing, or otherwise directing the forces of Nature for the benefit of the people.

Many of the traditions and beliefs of these ancient shamanistic beginnings would be carried forward into the later stages of the evolving Taoism – primarily the notion that a human being, through the accumulation of personal power or virtue (*te*), could synchronize and interact unharmed with the awesome, mysterious forces of Nature. This is an integral belief throughout all branches of Taoism and would evolve into the idealized image of the enlightened sage, who, by aligning personality and will with the primordial source of Nature, could likewise pass through the world unharmed and with great influence.

By about 1100 BC, the traditional wisdom, cosmology, and folk knowledge of ancient China began to be recorded and organized in the form of the *I Ching*, the book of changes. This is a remarkable compendium that is still widely used today. It is essentially a collection of fundamental principles concerning the cyclic nature of the ‘celestial mechanism’ as experienced through the process of change. Through the study of these fundamental principles, one can gain insight into the underlying meaning of a

situation or event in relation to its position as a discrete emergence in the whole cycle. In the *I Ching*, the concept of TAO is first described, and the nature of this TAO would become the central focus and heart of later philosophical Taoism.

By the fifth century BC, purely philosophical Taoism crystallized in the form of the *Tao-te-Ching*, or the Way and its Power. Purportedly written by the legendary sage Lao-tzu, this five-thousand character, eighty-one chapter mystical treatise “outlines natural law, and how to influence the world in accordance with natural law.” In the *Tao-te-Ching*, natural law is none other than the workings of TAO, and Lao-tzu provides an elusive and paradoxical description of the essence of this primordial source of Nature. The *Tao-te-Ching* became the foundational ‘scripture’ for all later forms of Taoism; all the way up to the present, Taoist writers continually refer back to the *Tao-te-Ching* as the source of their philosophy. Commentaries to this seminal work number in the hundreds, and there are over eighty translations of the original book. While Taoism began to take form with the writing of the *Tao-te-Ching*, it was still not as yet considered ‘Taoism,’ a separate noetic entity to be differentiated from other forms of thought; it was simply the metaphysics and ceremonial life of the common people of agrarian China.

Then, in the first century AD, Buddhism began to make its way into China from India. Competition arose between philosophies, so much so that debates were held in royal courts between Taoists and Buddhists. Out of necessity, Taoism had to define itself, and was ordered and arranged into a distinct body of knowledge and beliefs. It was during the next several centuries that Taoism emerged and was organized as a religion, with its own separate liturgy, ever-expanding canon of scripture, and formalized rituals. Still, holding true to the nature of TAO, Taoism was able to readily assimilate all that was useful and avoid the rest – and in the countryside, the common people continued to observe their yearly cycle of festivals and ceremonies, oblivious to the intellectual arguments being waged in the courts.

By the seventh and eighth centuries, Taoism was becoming a highly eclectic and diverse spiritual tradition, fully absorbing the influx of Buddhism. With a substratum of shamanism and roots in the philosophy of Lao-tzu, the spiritual tree of Taoism was now maturing and branching in many directions. There was a “Great Purity” school with elaborate forms of internal visualization, where deities resided in the body. There was a “Heavenly Masters” school that created a complex Pantheon of Gods in nine Heavens, where Lao-tzu himself was deified. One branch of Taoism focused on attaining immortality, and another branch was dabbling in alchemy, mixing and firing metals in an attempt to produce gold, or concocting elixirs for ingesting. There was divinational Taoism, magical Taoism, ceremonial Taoism, and sexual Taoism. Some schools focused on calisthenics and movement exercises, others on breathing techniques, and still

others on diet and herbs. Some schools advocated withdrawal from society while others deemed it necessary to engage in an active, though hidden, relationship with the social world. Fasting, meditation, and prayer all figured in to some degree, and there was even a poetic school who ritualized wine and drunkenness.

The common ground for all these diverse practices was the understanding that TAO was the source of all being; all things were born from TAO and all will return to TAO in endless cycles of transformation. The way to fully realize TAO was to fully realize one's own inner nature, and all these schools of thought were busy doing just that: attempting to fully realize their own inner nature. It was all taken very seriously (for those whose 'inner nature' was predisposed to seriousness, that is!). Most of these schools required tremendous, sustained self-discipline and study, and sometimes up to thirty years of training before one could be considered adept.

The human body figures very prominently throughout all schools of Taoism. As the most immediate and direct experience of Nature a person has, there is much emphasis placed on cleansing and purification of the body, opening channels of vital energy and allowing the free flow of the life force (*ch'i*). There is a school of internal alchemy, for example, whose purpose is to conceive a spiritual embryo in the human body, and then nurture the embryo till it grows, like a child, eventually maturing into a spiritual 'light body' circum-imposed onto the dense physical body. Just to get to the stage of conception of the spiritual embryo takes many years of internal visualization, meditation, and purification. This is no small matter.

Throughout the centuries, many schools have come and gone; others persist even today. Taoism is remarkable in that it absorbs and assimilates its contradictions, forever revolving around its perennial center – TAO. For this reason, Taoism will always be an influence in the world, and the Taoist sages will always be somewhere present, hidden from the scrutiny of ordinary people but still exerting a disproportionate influence on affairs by virtue of their intensely concentrated and focused internal center.

There was even an official purging of Taoism during the cultural revolution of the late 1940s on the pretense that Taoism was steeped in superstition. The majority of community temples were destroyed and the Taoists were forced underground. Still, in the countryside, the common people continued to observe their yearly cycle of festivals and ceremonies, some consciously attempting to attune to TAO, others now completely unaware of the reasons underlying these observances.

The future of Taoism in consumer China is uncertain. The arrival of materialism always heralds the decline of spirituality; but, as Isabelle Robinet notes, "the actual religious genius of Taoism [is that it is] a tradition that often embodies, sometimes as a counterpoint to the official culture of the court, the values and practices of life within

villages and provincial towns.” In that regard, as long as there are villages and provincial towns left in China, there will be fertile ground for the continuation of Taoism.

From another perspective, it seems to be less and less important what actually happens in China. Taoism, like TAO, is universal and can be applied in any cultural context, as long as that culture (or subculture) deems it important to seek alignment with the source of Nature. As the East becomes more occidental, so the West is becoming more oriental. Accompanying the widespread interest in eastern philosophy in general over the past several decades is a recent surge in books about Taoism in particular. Feng Shui, a traditional Taoist divination art, is becoming almost mainstream, and new translations of the *Tao-te-Ching* continue to appear at the rate of one per year. We have *The Tao of Physics*, *The Tao of Pooh*, and the *Te of Piglet*. It seems that Western society, recognizing its amputation from Nature, is now earnestly attempting to renew its bonds; and Taoism, an ancient philosophy of Nature, can become a foundation for re-bridging the gap.

I find the immense value of Taoism to be its intimate understanding of organic order. Everything about Taoism is organic: it is the paragon perception of organic order. Its own history resembles the growth of an organism: birthed at the dawn of agrarian based communities, it steadily grew in the minds of a single culture. Firmly rooted without disruption or displacement, it spontaneously refined itself and increased in complexity and influence till it spread throughout the entire globe. The philosophy was conceived in a pre-civilization environment, so the perceptions of its founders were not yet distorted by abstract distractions and disconfigurations. Thus, the Taoist philosophy and its description of Nature could be considered closer to the Source, more purely genuine, and a more direct reflection of the natural world than any perceptions posited by a modern ‘civilized’ thinker. Taoism is a jewel of pre-disturbed intuitions about organic order and the working of Nature.

No Western philosophy can match its power of place or its continuous and uninterrupted growth from germination to maturation. The Western spiritual tradition of Christianity, for example, was adopted by Europeans less than two-thousand years ago; and they had to abandon their own pagan heritage to do so. A civilization based on co-opting someone else’s spiritual tradition by ruthlessly, almost shamefully, severing its connection with its own roots is, at best, transient. Likewise, the Greek and Roman philosophies were created by displaced peoples using force to spread their influence. By severing the ties with their roots, Western society has succeeded in suicidally severing their connection with Nature herself, the source of Life.

And thus the appeal of Taoism. By realizing and identifying a Source of Life, TAO, and consciously choosing to attune to and harmonize with this Source, Taoists place

themselves firmly within the flow of Life – indeed, even become the flow.¹ No longer is life a struggle or a battle to subdue Nature; no, instead Life becomes an effortless, ever more realistic synchronization with the forces that beget and enhance Life, growing ever closer to the source of Life itself, TAO. If Taoism were adopted on a global scale, an instant and lasting peace would ensue and planet Earth would be restored to a lush and thriving garden.

Taoism may be considered a religion but only loosely so; religious Taoism is an option, not a compulsion. There is no doctrine or creed that one must pledge allegiance to – there is only the objective observation and conviction that there is a source of Life and it is the organic order of this source that conceives and sustains Life. In this sense, Taoism finds firm allies in the scientific community.² Taoism does not pretend to describe one version of God at the exclusion of others – there is no point of contention. God too was birthed from TAO and to TAO God will return when that particular cycle is completed. Taoism does not prescribe a required set of ritual and ceremony; ritual and ceremony may enhance one’s relationship with the Source of Life but that is an individual or community decision. All that is necessary, if Taoism is practiced as a religion, is to consciously and harmoniously attune oneself with the flow of Life and the natural world. Therein lies self-realization, contentment, and even immortality.

Because Taoism is organic of itself – as well as being a spiritual tradition revering and venerating organic order, with voluminous writings describing this organic order – it is well-suited as a fundamental philosophy for anyone attempting to understand, conceptualize, or implement organic models of growth. Ecological designers, permaculturists, village designers, nature writers, and anyone working *with* rather than *against* Nature would benefit immensely from developing a mindset that could be considered Taoist.

After a disciplined and sustained effort at meditation, quiet contemplation, and reading of Taoist literature, the promise is that one will develop a mind like a mirror, accurately reflecting the nature of things and moving ever-closer to the Source of all Life, the essence of Nature herself, TAO.

¹ This would be the goal of the Taoist sage: to sacrifice personal identity so as to become ‘one’ with the flow of Life. This is not a easy task.

² As elaborated in Fritjof Capra’s sensational synthesis *The Tao of Physics*.

*The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao;
The Name that can be named is not the eternal Name.
The Nameless (non-being) is the origin of Heaven and Earth;
The Nameable (being) is the origin of all particular things.*
Tao-te-Ching, Ch. 1

Despite the above warning that the eternal TAO cannot be spoken of, I wish to attempt to speak of and describe TAO; after all, Lao-tzu himself went on to write five-thousand characters after opening the *Tao-te-Ching* with the above cautionary introduction.

TAO is better left unnamed because once named a thing stands distinct, separate; it becomes something particular standing in relief from its background. Yet, as the *Tao-te-Ching* unfolds, one finds that TAO is conceived as the formless state that *pre-*exists the separation into distinguishable forms; it is the absolute primordial void that is the origin of the Universe; it is the infinite and eternal state of swirling chaos that is pure potential; it is non-being from which being arises. Thus to speak of it, to name it, is already to deviate from its essence by limiting the limitless.

This opening entry of the *Tao-te-Ching* already hints at the Taoist distrust of knowledge. Language, as a prescribed linear arrangement of symbols, can only forever approximate the sublime subtlety of an image conceived as the undifferentiated origin of all things particular. An endless stream of words can circumnavigate the named TAO but never actually penetrate its all-encompassing emptiness. TAO is best understood in flashes of intuition after quiet contemplation; rationality has to be left behind. Direct perception and experience of its effects, not conversation, is the most auspicious way to comprehend TAO; but we have to start somewhere...

*There was something formless yet complete
That existed before Heaven and Earth;
Without sound, without substance,
Dependent on nothing, unchanging,
All pervading, unfailing.
It may be the Mother of the Universe.*

Not knowing its name, I call it Tao.

Tao-te-Ching, Ch. 25

In this chapter, Lao-tzu provides adjectives in an intimation of the nature of TAO: silent, all-pervading, unchanging, without substance. It should be noted that translating from Chinese to English is already risky business. Reading Chinese is essentially pattern recognition, and Chinese characters can have many different meanings depending on the context in which they are used – and when attempting to translate Chinese characters that were descriptive in the fifth century BC, much ambiguity can occur. Even the most scholarly of the translations into English vary widely in choices of words used – but we were already warned about trying to speak of TAO! Still, as this is a perennial philosophy, I can see value in studying its foundational writings, even with any ambiguities.

In this chapter, TAO is considered to be the “Mother of the Universe.” TAO is always given feminine qualities; as the formless womb of non-being that gives birth to and is the origin of all forms of being, TAO is the eternal Mother. This stands in complementary contrast to Western forms of theology, where an omnipresent and pre-existing *masculine* image, in an outward movement of creative potency, gives form and breathes life into a Universe of His own design.

The difference is exceedingly significant and goes a long way toward explaining the failure of Western civilization to maintain its connection with its maternal roots – Nature. The question arises: who gave birth to God? Is it not curious that in the holy trinity a feminine image is not even present? By adopting a strictly masculine version of cosmology, and denying, rejecting, and even persecuting its matriarchal, nature-based heritage, Western civilization has become extremely unbalanced. The paradigm that developed clears the way for the subduction of Nature, the subjugation of women in general, and a disregard for the value of feminine qualities. If there were no more women left in the world, humanity would cease to exist. If there were no more men, womanity would find a way to spontaneously (immaculately?) conceive. So, femininity is the root and origin, the gateway of all Life. Masculinity becomes an objective counterpoint.

The early Taoists understood this well. The masculine Taoist sage sought to embody a feminine personality in the world so as to attune to TAO. Ennobling and emulating ‘feminine’ characteristics and traits of yielding, receptivity, seeking the low point, non-action (*wu-wei*),³ compassion, frugality, nurturance of the root, etc., the sage

³ Non-action does not mean simply doing nothing. *Wu-wei* could be considered going with the flow, doing what is appropriate in each moment, expending minimum energy to accomplish a task, activity without effort. This stands in contrast to busy-ness.

consciously placed himself within the spontaneous flow and evolution of Nature, seeking eventually to become this flow and evolution. So called 'masculine' characteristics of aggressiveness, ego exaltation, unrestrained activity, competitiveness, assertiveness, confrontation, and the concentration of arbitrary power were regarded as perturbations and disruptions to the natural flow and harmony of events, and were avoided to the extreme.

This mindset went so far, in some cases, as to prefer diminutive sexual organs and to abstain from sexual activity in general. The dispensation of the seminal seed was seen as a foolish loss of vital, regenerative energy. Instead, sexual energy was focused internally to consummate the internal marriage of feminine and masculine energies inherent in the body, the Yin and Yang, whose harmonious balance could realize the state of equilibrium and oneness with TAO.

*Tao gives birth to One,
One gives birth to Two.
Two gives birth to Three,
Three gives birth to the ten-thousand things.*
Tao-te-Ching, Ch. 42

This chapter gives an explanation of the fundamental metaphysics of the philosophy of Taoism. TAO, as the pure, unconscious, latent potential of non-being gives birth to being in the form of One. Now there is a distinction. Unity is the initial differentiation into distinguishable form, the emergence of pure consciousness. Unity, being, is the objective counterpoint to TAO, non-being, so could be considered masculine. This unity is God, the outward moving creative principle, the essence of creativity. So God was birthed from TAO, the primordial chaos, the feminine underlying ground of Creation, the Mother of the Universe.

One gives birth to Two. God, as the initial spontaneous objective crystallization of consciousness into unity, begins his outward creative movement. This outward movement of pure, unconditioned consciousness, without context, results in self-consciousness. It is an intentional act; it is the willful desire of consciousness to understand itself by providing a mirror, a reflection, a context. This initial outward movement creates the Word, the Logos, the primary pattern of the evolving Universe reflecting the qualities of the initial emergent consciousness, God.

In His desire to understand Himself, God created a mirror and divided unity; He created Two. Two is the emergence of *conditioned* self-consciousness, Yin, providing a context for the expression of *unconditioned* consciousness, Yang. The constant interplay and continuous intercourse of projection/reflection, consciousness/self-consciousness,

Yang/Yin, etc., or expression within materialized context, produces an alternating rhythm, a self-generative power – Three. Three is the objective manifestation of the quality inherent during any particular alignment of varying proportions of Yin and Yang as they vibrate in this alternating rhythm. Three is the Son or Daughter, the beginning of diversity, and the progenitor of the ten-thousand things.

In this brief expose of the metaphysics implied in Taoism, a few points warrant emphasis. First, TAO is the underlying and unconscious *feminine* ground of Creation – and this can be verified empirically. Unity, as the initial counterpoint to formless TAO, is the emergence of consciousness and the beginning of an outward movement of creative expression. The primary consciousness, God, appears as an act of spontaneous *manifestation* and proceeds as an act of intentional, willful *creation*. The spontaneous appearance of consciousness is not a willful act but rather a fertile confluence of all the conditions necessary for it to be so, revealing a hidden potential that was inherent in the formless TAO. The desire of consciousness to realize itself created self-consciousness, the mirror Yin, which is ultimately limited by the inherent qualities of its initial projection, Yang. These fundamental polarities, through their varying proportions of opposition and complementarity, continue to generate the diversity of forms of a dualistic, binary universe.

If we wish to create forms in this Universe, we would do well to emulate the primordial pattern and purify, potentize our initial Yang projection. This means becoming ‘one’ with God and creatively using the limitless ground of TAO.

- 1) *Towards a Planetary Vision* – David Spangler
- 2) *Tao-te-Ching* – Stephen Mitchell translation
- 3) *The Tao of Leadership* – John Heider
- 4) *Taoism: The Parting of the Way* – Holmes Welch
- 5) *Chuang-Tzu* – Yu-lan Fung translation
- 6) *Tao: The Watercourse Way* – Alan Watts
- 7) *The Secret of the Golden Flower* – Richard Wilhelm (introduction by Carl Jung)
- 8) *Taoist Meditation: The Mao Shan Tradition of Great Purity* – Isabelle Robinet
- 9) *The Taoist Body* – Kristofer Schipper
- 10) *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* – Livia Kohn
- 11) *Creativity and Taoism* – Chang Chung-yuan
- 12) *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes* – Helmut Wilhelm
- 13) *Shambhala Guide to Taoism* – Eva Wong
- 14) *A Translation of Lao-tzu's Tao-te-Ching and Wang Pi's Commentary* – Paul J. Lin
- 15) *The Book of Lieh-tzu* – A.C. Graham translation
- 16) *Everyday Miracles: The Inner Art of Manifestation* – David Spangler
- 17) *The Taoist I Ching* – Thomas Cleary translation
- 18) *Synchronicity: The Bridge Between Matter and Mind* – F. David Peat
- 19) *The Way and Its Power* – Arthur Waley translation