

Introduction: This factsheet is not intended to be definitive guide to Taoism. Alternatively, it attempts to provide basic known facts as well as some information that is perhaps less well-known. It is based on information contained in the Taoism Initiation Page website. The producers of the website have kindly given their permission for their website to be used in the production of this factsheet.

Taoism



Yin Yang symbol¹

Taoism (also known as Daoism) is an ancient philosophical and religious tradition with roots in China and in Chinese thought, customs and culture. It dates back some 2,000 years.

Numbers in the UK

According to the 2001 Census there are 3,500 Taoists in England and Wales. It is difficult to estimate the number of followers world-wide as, though traditionally strong in China and amongst Chinese communities, there has been a deliberate policy to downplay and eradicate its practice by the Communist authorities and the effect of that, especially considering the global migration of Chinese people, is hard to gauge.

What is Taoism?

There are several kinds of Taoism. The most known is the religious branch. It has gods and rituals like other religious movements. There are also many mystical schools that follow esoteric disciplines in search of longevity and immortality, most of them dealing with alchemy recipes and philosophy.

There is also a branch called *tao-chia* – the ‘school of tao’ or ‘of unity with the tao’ – which has as its initiators the most famous Taoist masters such as Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu.²

Tao-chia is a way of life. Pointing to this kind of Taoism, Alan Watts, perhaps the most important Western author who has studied Taoism, stated:

“Certain Chinese philosophers...explained ideas and a way of life that have come to be known as ‘Taoism’ – the way of man’s cooperation with the course or trend of the natural world, whose principles we discover in the flow patterns of water, gas and fire, which are subsequently memorialised or sculptured in those of stone and wood, and, later, in many forms of human art.”³

In short, Taoism is a way of life which tries to accommodate the tendencies of nature, but is not restricted to this alone. This approach is not a pure return to Mother Nature as such. Rather it is a life philosophy, with an emphasis on the acquisition of wisdom through the simple observation of the flow of natural events.

The Origins of Taoism

Although elements of what would become Taoism can be found in China from as far back as the 5th Century BCE, its origins as a religion really lie in the 2nd Century CE. Though the BBC Religion and Ethics website states that Taoism has “no founder” as well as “no founding date”, it is clear that the emergence and development of Taoism owes much to a number of celebrated masters and philosophers, and arguably to

¹ Also known as Taijitu (太極圖). Author: Gregory Maxwell. Source: Wikipedia (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Yin_yang.svg). The symbol reflects a dominant theme in Taoism, namely the interdependent duality of all things.

² You may come across different names for Lao-tzu (such as Lao Tan or Lao Zi) and Chuang-tzu (e.g. Chuang chou or Zhuang Zi).

³ See <http://www.taopage.org/taoism.html>.

Lao-tzu in particular. It is with him, and more precisely with his *Tao-te ching*, that we may begin to talk of a Taoist movement.

Though his existence is disputed by some⁴, Lao-tzu is seen as being the author of *Tao-te ching*, and the man who introduced and explained key Taoist concepts such as 'non-doing' and 'emptiness'.



He applied Taoist philosophy to human conduct, influencing the behaviour of political and regal leaders by focusing on conformity with what he saw as the immutable laws of the Universe, or the Tao. Though Taoists would consider the Tao as being beyond conscious perception, Lao-tzu also attempted an explanation as an aid towards understanding.

According to Chinese legends, Lao-tzu (whose name means 'Old Master') left China riding on a water buffalo.⁵

Taoist Beliefs

Essentially Taoism is about the Tao, the central, co-ordinating and creative principle in the Universe to which all things are related and connected. The Tao translates as 'the Way'.⁶ In the *Chuang-tzu*, it is stated:

*"The Way is to man as rivers and lakes are to fish, the natural condition of life."*⁷

The Tao is not, and does not involve, a worshipped God as such, though Taoism includes many worshipped deities, many of whom are gleaned from other cultures. It is important to recognise that in Taoist thought, these deities are themselves subject to the Tao.

The Tao is the model of conduct to be followed by Taoist disciples. According to the BBC Religion and Ethics website⁸, the following are promoted in Taoism:

- The achievement of harmony or unity with nature.
- The pursuit of spiritual immortality.
- Being virtuous.
- Self-development.

Taoists believe that action is determined by the Tao. They will not therefore be active instigators, but will act according to the circumstances and natural flow of events. In doing so, individual compulsions, wishes and desires are subdued and marginalised and do not have a detrimental, interfering effect on the natural state of things.

This fundamental belief is seen by Taoists as compatible with kindly, helpful and complementary behaviour, and becoming a good person, setting an example and being a role model to others.

Taoists believe that their way of life is perfectly applicable to modern society, irrespective of the ancient nature of Taoist sources and texts and the longevity of the religion. They believe that following the Tao enables one to find unity with everything in the Universe, that a practitioner can understand momentary trends as well as the flow of natural events, and that anything can be achieved through use of the mind rather than of force.

⁴ Some perceive Lao-tzu to refer to a group of wise elders and the *Tao-te ching* to be a collection of their thoughts and writings.

⁵ Source: Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Laozi.jpg>)

⁶ Alternatively, the 'road', 'method', 'technique' or 'principle'.

⁷ Quoted in <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/taoism/beliefs/tao.shtml>

⁸ See the BBC website (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/taoism/ata glance/glance.shtml)

Taoist Sources/Texts

A definition and understanding of Taoism and its basic concepts can be derived from its sources and texts, i.e. the ancient works of the Taoist masters such as the:

- *Tao-te ching* (The Book of the Way and its Power)
- *Chuang-tzu* (the name of the book and its author are the same).
- *Lieh-tzu*

In addition, the *I-ching* can be considered as Taoist as well as Confucian.⁹ Known as the 'Book (or 'Scripture') of Changes', I-ching is used for decision-making and as a means of predicting future events. It is essentially an oracle, a source of wisdom enabling practitioners to predict and prophecy.

All these Taoist sources/texts have key features in common, namely that they present a similar wisdom concerning the Tao and concepts such as Yin Yang, emptiness and non-doing.

Yin Yang

In a nutshell, the Taoist principle of 'Yin Yang' views the world in terms of linked opposites and complementary forces – night and day, high and low, right and left, light and dark, masculine and feminine, action and inaction etc.¹⁰ The reduction of yin and yang to the polarity common in Western thought no doubt explains the fact that the terms are probably more well known in the West than any other in the Chinese philosophical tradition.

In the Shambhala Dictionary of Taoism, it is stated that yin and yang are:

“two polar energies that, by their fluctuation and interaction, are the cause of the Universe.”¹¹

Yin and yang are features of everyday things and cosmic phenomena, of people and different kinds of action, of human attitudes or of mere energies. In short, Taoists argue that everything in the Universe can be viewed in terms of yin and yang, and that everything is regulated by their everlasting interaction.

As a further example, in classic Chinese medicine, yin and yang refer to energies and the functioning modes of organs within the body. It is said that a healthy state is achieved through the correct balance of yin and yang. A person must therefore choose the most appropriate food and nurture a physical equilibrium in order to acquire good health and longevity.

Emptiness

The concept of 'emptiness' is related to the Tao, and refers to the state of mind of the disciple following its direction. In this respect, to be empty means to have one's mind empty of all wishes and ideas not in harmony with the movement of the Tao. Chuang-tzu described the empty mind in his monumental work that bears his name, by stating:

“The still mind of the sage is the mirror of heaven and earth, the glass of all things. Vacancy, stillness, placidity, tastelessness, quietude, silence, and non-action – this is the Level of heaven and earth, and the perfection of the Tao and its characteristics.”¹²

Taoists believe that it is perfectly possible to achieve this state of mind in modern society without the need for seclusion. Indeed, they see this 'purity' as a natural antidote to the strains and pressures of modern life and as a way to address them.

⁹ There are numerous sources of information on Confucianism available on the Internet. For example, click on <http://www.religionfacts.com/a-z-religion-index/confucianism.htm> or <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confucianism>.

¹⁰ The Yin Yang symbol exemplifies this duality.

¹¹ Page 216. Quoted in <http://www.taopage.org/yinyang.html>

¹² The Legge Version. Quoted in <http://www.taopage.org/emptiness.html>

Nondoing (wu-wei)

Wu-wei (which translates as nondoing, nonaction or inaction) is one of the most important Taoist concepts. Though it has a heavenly application in its direct link to the Tao, when linked with human behaviour, nondoing refers to non-forced action – what Alan Watts describes as:

“...going with the grain, rolling with the punch.”¹³

Thus, nondoing refers to a specific form of intelligence, and, at the same time, to the inclination to follow the Tao. Taoists believe that the two must be seen in terms of their interdependence. In other words, a person follows the Tao because he/she has the intelligence to do so; and conversely, following the Tao is seen as an aid to increased intelligence.

Practices

Taoists believe that spirituality can be achieved through physical actions. As a consequence, there is a strong emphasis on practices such as meditation, breathing exercises (*Qui Gong*), *Tai Chi*, yoga and martial arts. Through such mechanisms, Taoism has been introduced to a global audience. Other practices include fortune telling, the chanting and reading of scriptures and *feng shui*. The latter means ‘wind and water’ and the practice refers to ways of living in harmony with the environment and thus receiving the benefits of positive energy and a better quality of life.

In following the Tao, Taoists will refrain from certain activities (e.g. killing, stealing), foods (e.g. meat, beans), alcohol and particular character traits (e.g. greed, dishonesty), in order to attain and maintain purity.

Talismans are also important in Taoism as a means of bringing good luck and warding off evil spirits.

Leicestershire Contacts

Taoist temples are largely, if not exclusively, confined to China, Taiwan and surrounding countries in that part of South-East Asia. There are, nevertheless, organisations and groups throughout the world whose purpose is to practice Taoism as well as to increase understanding and awareness of the religion. In the UK, for example, there is the British Taoist Association, whose stated long-term aim is the ‘establishment of a centre for Taoist practice in the UK’.

As far as Leicestershire is concerned, it is probably safe to suppose that there will be Chinese people living in both the City of Leicester and the County who are followers of the Tao. A good local port of call for the Chinese community is the Chinese Community Centre on Belgrave Gate close to Leicester City Centre. The Centre has its own website (<http://leicesterchinesecentre.org/default.aspx>).¹⁴

Credits and Sources of Further Information

A Personal Tao: About the Tao (www.personaltao.com/)

BBC – Religion and Ethics (www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/taoism/)

British Taoist Association (www.taoists.co.uk/index.htm)

The Feng Shui Society (www.fengshuisociety.org.uk/)

Wikipedia

We are particularly grateful to those responsible for the Taoism Initiation Page for allowing us to use information from their excellent website as a basis for this factsheet. We would thoroughly recommend the website (www.taopage.org/) for furthering background knowledge and understanding of Taoism.

¹³ From ‘*Tao: The Watercourse Way*’, Pantheon Books, 1973. Quoted in <http://www.taopage.org/nondoing.html>

¹⁴ This paragraph should not, of course, be taken to mean or imply that all Chinese people are Taoists! Locally – and as an illustration of this – there is, for example, a Chinese Christian Church in Leicester. It is simply a reflection of the fact that some religions are more closely identified with particular countries than others. Other examples would include Shinto with Japan and Candomblé with Brazil.