

# 5 minute guide

to

# TAOISM

Des McCabe

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## Introduction

Taoism is an ancient philosophical tradition, religious belief and a way of life, which originated in China about 2000 years ago. It is ranked as 11<sup>th</sup> in the world's religions with 20 million followers.

Taoism (also pronounced as Daoism) is associated with the philosophical and political text, *Tao Te Ching*, assumed to be written by Lao Tzu. Taoism is about the Tao, which means way, path or principle. The Tao is the source or driving force behind all that exists.

Taoism emphasizes the themes of achieving ecstasy, immortality, exorcism, naturalness, simplicity and detachment from human desires.

## History and Founder

The history of Taoism is closely tied up with the history of China. It can be traced back to the pre-historic religions in China, particularly the shamanism, which was practiced in Southern China. It evolved as a result of the changes and needs of times and dynasties. Its doctrines and practices have also been refined in response to the changing needs of the people. Depending on the dynasty, Taoism has experienced promotion and rejection by the ruling class.

Lao Tzu was believed to be the founder of Taoism. He based his teachings on *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu was also credited as the teacher of Buddha and Confucius, the founders of the other two major religions in China. Taoism has influence in other Asian countries particularly Taiwan.

## The Taoist Deities

Taoism has several deities worshipped by various sects. Each deity represents different attributes and characteristics.

### **Yu-huang or the Jade Emperor**

The Jade Emperor is the High God and is Lord of the living, dead and demons. All other Gods must report to him. His main function is to ensure that justice is distributed.

### **Yuan-shih T'ien-tsun or the First Principal**

The First Principal has no beginning and end. He is self-existing, limitless, changeless, invisible and omnipresent. He is the source of truth.

### **San-ch'ing or Three Pure Ones**

The Three Pure Ones are Yu-ch'ing or Jade Pure, Shang-ch'ing or Upper Pure and T'ai-ch'ing or Great Pure. They are not rulers but are believed to be manifestations of Lao Tzu. They aim to save mankind through teaching and benevolence.

### **San-Kuan or the Three Officials**

The Three Officials rule over all things in the universe and keep records of good and evil deeds. They reward good deeds and punish evil doings. T'ien-kuan is the Ruler of Heaven and gives happiness. Ti-Kuan is the Ruler of Earth and forgives sins. Shui-kuan is the Ruler of Water and avoids all evil. They have limitless compassion for people.

### **T'ien-shih**

This was the title given to Chang Tao-ling who established the Yellow Turban Taoists. It was believed that he received the Ling-pao text from the Gods. He found the elixir for immortality and went to heaven. The title was passed through the family. The current T'ien-shih is in Taiwan and leads the sect of Five Bushels of Rice.

## **Traditions and Beliefs**

### **Tao**

The belief in the Tao is the foundation of Taoism. The Tao is neither a God nor is it worshipped. It is the way to enlightenment or spiritual perfection. It is the ultimate source of creation. Tao Te Ching made clear that the Tao is a concept that cannot be named, defined, expressed or even understood but only experienced.

The Tao can roughly be defined as the flow of the universe or the pattern of the natural world that brings balance and order. To bring some understanding, the Tao has been compared to the elements of nature and very similar to water.

### **Te**

Te is translated as inherent character or integrity. It is also the awareness about the Tao and the capabilities to follow the Tao.

### **Wu Wei**

Wei means intentional or purposive action, while wu is translated as "there is no..." or "without, lacking." Wu Wei is part of the paradoxical concept of wei wu wei, which means "action without action" or "effortless doing."

Wu Wei cannot be actively sought because it is the individual's acceptance of who he is and the relinquishing of control to the Tao. It is the manifestation of living in harmony or as one with the universe.

### **Yin-yang**

The Yin and the Yang are the two opposite principles or forces in nature. The Yin describes the feminine or negative nature of things, while the Yang characterizes the masculine or positive side. The Yin and Yang are in pairs and are complementary. Although they are opposites, they are actually in harmony. Its nature lies in the interplay between the two forces. It is like the sun and the moon, male and female, cold and hot.

## **Ch'i**

Ch'i is the fundamental material of all things that exist. It is the vital energy that links human beings to the universe and allows man to survive. Ch'i is the essence of the human body and its quality affects our health. Good health is not having large amounts of ch'i but in its balance, harmony and moderation.

## **The Five Elements**

The five elements, also known as Wu Hsing, are composed of earth, metal, fire, water and wood. These elements represent constant change and flow. Each element grows and replaces the others, thus always in a moving cycle. Each element coincides with colours, seasons, tastes, directions and parts of the human body.

## **Three Treasures**

Also known as the Three Jewels, these are the basic virtues of Taoism: compassion, moderation and humility. It is also about avoiding wars and capital punishment, simplicity of living and not asserting authority.

## **Naturalness**

Naturalness is creativity and spontaneity. It is allowing things to unfold without any interference. This involves valuing simplicity and freeing oneself from selfishness and desire.

## **Immortality**

This is not a belief of the absence of death of the physical body. As the Taoist draws closer to nature throughout their lifetime, death is simply the last step to achieving the unity or oneness with the universe.

## **Purity**

Taoism teaches the importance of purity of the body. This ensures spiritual health and knowing the Tao. To achieve purity, one must avoid certain foods and activities. Some of the things that should be avoided are greed, dishonesty, pride and lust.

## **Body and Spirit**

Taoism doesn't distinguish between the body and the spirit. That's why physical activities like meditation, martial arts and yoga are recommended for spiritual growth and longer life.

# Practices

The core of Taoist practices is bringing order and harmony to the cosmos, the world and individuals. The rituals include purification, meditation and offerings to Deities. It involves chanting, playing instruments and dancing.

## **Alchemy**

The Taoist alchemy is about the transformation of man to give him a longer life, purity and bring him closer to the Tao. There are two types of alchemy: external and internal. External alchemy involves elixirs or ingesting something to the body. Internal alchemy is about transforming the elements in the body into purer forms without using chemicals.

**Chiao**

This is a ritual or practice in a village and each household brings offerings to the Deities. The Taoist priest dedicates the offerings in the names of the families to restore order. The priest also asks the Deities to bring peace and abundance to the village.

**Meditation**

Meditation is integral in the practice of Taoism. The purpose of meditation is to clear the mind by creating mental stillness and circumspection. The clarity of the mind allows for knowing the Tao directly.

**Breathing Exercises**

Breath is a distinguishable form of ch'i. There are many breathing exercises and these are called Qui Gong. The basic technique of breathing is synchronizing everything inside one's body with the pattern of breathing. This allows the body to relax and concentrate for longer periods. There are many benefits to breathing exercises and among them are the increase of ch'i in the body, improvement in the internal organs' functions and relaxation of the nervous system.

One popular form of Taoist breathing exercise is yoga or inner alchemy. It is the practice of diverting our awareness from an external focus to inner attention. The practice allows for the self to be one with the Tao.

**Acupuncture**

Acupuncture is one of the therapies in Chinese medicine, which involves the use of needles into various points along the energy channels. This practice enhances the flow of energy or ch'i. When ch'i is balanced, the mind and body regain and improve its health. The belief is that the imbalance or blockage of ch'i is the cause of diseases and negative emotional states.

**Martial Arts**

The practice of martial arts is for the development of suppleness and fitness. Martial arts require self-control, rigid discipline and perseverance, so aside from being physical activities, these are also spiritual and mental.

**Recitation**

It has been a religious practice to recite texts from Tao Te Ching. Recitation is a powerful expression of devotion and a means for spiritual growth. Several sects teach that reciting passages have the power to heal sickness and cast out evil spirits. It is also taught that it brings good luck, prolongs life and brings us closer to the Tao.

**Talismans**

Talismans are written by highly qualified Taoists, who have undergone long training and are already in a state of purity. Talismans are written on strips of paper with words of power and religious symbols. These help to purify, cure the sick and banish demons.

## Lifestyle

### Diet

Taoism recommends abstinence from alcohol, acidic foods, meats, beans, artificial food additives, heavily processed foods, and foods that are hard to digest, among others. The diet is based on consumption of organic produce, whole grains, soy products and cooked foods.

### Sexual Energy

Sexual energy is viewed as enhancing life, thus the sexual techniques in classical Taoism were designed to increase and retain it. It is suggested that men should not ejaculate to save sexual energy. It is different for women because some Taoist texts say that female orgasm increases sexual energy for the woman and the man.

## Texts

### Tao Te Ching

Tao Te Ching is the most influential book of Taoism. It means The Way and Its Power and was compiled around 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. The main theme of the book is about the nature of Tao and how to attain it. It is regarded as the guide to living a full spiritual and ethical life.

### Zhuangzi

The Zhuangzi is the second most important text in Taoism. It is named after the author Zhuangzi. It is also known as True Classic of Southern Florescence.

### Daozang

Daozang is the compilation of all of the teachings of Taoism. This was divided into Three Grottoes based on the focus of Taoism in Southern China about 400 BC, which are meditation, ritual and exorcism.

### Taiping Jing

Taiping Jing was compiled around 150 BCE. It is also known as The Scriptures of the Great Peace. It is a guide for the proper processes to achieve the era of Great Peace or Equality. The main concept of the scripture is that the world was in a state of chaos and that there was a loss of cosmic balance causing droughts, floods, and other natural disasters. The scripture deals with topics like heaven and earth, the five elements and the Yin and Yang. People should heal themselves and enhance their inner Dao. Salvation lies in the hands of the Celestial Masters.

### Baopuzi

The Baopuzi or The Master Embracing Simplicity was written by Ge Hong. It has two chapters: the Inner Chapters and the Outer Chapters. The text covers various topics of transcendence and immortality, alchemy, meditation, breathing techniques, use of herbals, exorcism and talismans.

## Celebrations

The main celebrations include:

Ninth day of the first lunar month – birthday of the Jade Emperor.

Fifteenth day of the first lunar month – Festival of the Lantern, the celebration of the first full moon.

Fifteenth day of the second lunar month – birthday of Lao Tzu.

Fourteenth day of the fourth lunar month – birthday of Lu tung-pin, the founder of Internal Alchemy.

Fifth day of fifth lunar month – Dragon Boat Festival.

Third day of the eighth lunar month – celebration for the Kitchen God who also keeps the records of deeds of people inside their homes.

Fourteenth day of the tenth lunar month – celebration for Fu His, the patron of divination.

Eleventh day of the eleventh lunar month – All Souls Festival

Twenty-third day of the twelfth lunar month – the Kitchen God reports the deeds to the Jade Emperor.

## Timeline

c. 550 BCE	Taoism was founded and the Tao Te Ching was written.
c. 350 BCE	Chuang-Tzu, a critic of Confucius, pushed for the development of Taoism.
c. 150 BCE	Taiping Jing was compiled.
142 CE	Zhang Ling established the sect of the Way of Five Bushels of Rice.
155-220 CE	Zhang Lu organized the Way of Five Bushels of Rice into religious communities, also known as Taoism of Heavenly Masters.
226-249	Wang Bi introduced Taoist concepts into Confucian learning.
251-334	Wei Huacun is the first female leader of the Shangqing movement, also known as Supreme or Highest Clarity.
c. 320	Ge Hong wrote <i>The Master Who Has Embraced Simplicity</i> .
365-448	Kou Qianzhi revived the sect of Taoism of Heavenly Masters.
456-536	Tao Hongjing developed the Shangqing movement.
618-626	Emperor Gaozu built a temple in Chu Jen, the birthplace of Lao Tzu.
637	Emperor Taizong issued a ruling that Taoists should take precedence over Buddhists.
691	Empress Wu reversed Taizong's ruling and built Buddhist temples.
712-756	The texts of Taoism became a part of civil service tests.
768-824	Emperor Han Yu opposed Buddhism.
845	Emperor Wu-zong promoted Taoism and persecuted Buddhists and other non-Taoist religions.
960-1279	The Perfect Truth Taoism and Orthodox One Taoism arose. The Daozang or Taoist Canon was edited by Taoist monks to consolidate all Taoist teachings.
16th C.	San yi Jiao (Three-in-One Religion) was developed by Lin Zhaoen as a synthesis of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism.
1584	The Temple of the Three-in-One Religion was built.
1644-1911	During the Manchu Qing dynasty, new movements are founded within Taoism, Buddhism and Christianity in China. The Three-in-One Religion is

	persecuted.
1851	Hong Xiuquan founds the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace movement based on Christian ideas.
1912	China became a republic.
1919	The Fourth of May movement was established to eradicate religion using science.
1920s-30s	National Taoist organizations were established.
1950s	The Chinese government tightly controlled all religions.

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Diversiton  
8 Osborne Promenade  
Warrenpoint  
Co Down BT34 3NQ  
Northern Ireland  
Europe  
Tel: 00 44 28417 54777  
email: [mail@diversiton.com](mailto:mail@diversiton.com)  
web: [www.diversiton.com](http://www.diversiton.com)

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