WHAT IS TAO?

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Introduction

By Mark Watts

The ancient philosophy of the Tao is one of the most intriguing and refreshing ways of liberation to arrive in the West from the Far East in modern times. With over fifty translations of the *Tao Te Ching* into Western languages to date, the classic work of Taoist literature offers its readers great wisdom for living as well as advice on worldly affairs. It is also a fascinating window into the mysterious world of pre-dynastic China.

The very practical nature of Taoist thought is often overlooked by Western readers who are hesitant to embrace a seemingly strange and foreign

way of knowing, but in the philosophy of the Tao one finds a surprisingly contemporary perspective. The word *Tao*, properly pronounced "dow," has lent its name to a way of understanding and living in the world with profound implications for modern societies. Above all else Taoism places great emphasis on the balance between our human awareness and our natural being, as an integral part of the web of life. It embodies our deepest understanding of ecological awareness.

The mystical side of Taoist thought, on the other hand, is highly enigmatic, for here one finds a doorway into the shamanistic world that flourished in China over a span of at least five thousand years, right up to the period in which the Taoist texts were written.

As Alan Watts explains it, the word Tao embodies two broad meanings in our language: it means approximately the Way — in the sense of "the way to go" — and it also refers to nature in the sense of one's own true nature. Everything is said to have its

own Tao, but it is impossible to define it, to put one's finger on it exactly.

As I sat working on this manuscript my eight-year-old son came up to me and asked, "Papa, what are you working on?" I told him it was a book on the Tao, and began to explain a little bit about it, but without a moment's hesitation he said, "Oh, you mean what's behind everything" — and then he headed off. Intuitively and experientially we know what it is, but for most of us the problem arises when we try to explain it.

This enigma reminds me of a story that my father used to tell about a debate years ago in the House of Lords in England concerning a Church-related matter. Apparently one of the representatives had put forth the argument that it was not proper for a governing body with so many atheists to rule on a religious issue. One of the members rose to the occasion, however, and replied, "Rubbish, Sir! I am quite certain that everyone here believes in some sort of something somewhere or other." And by and large we do even if it is no more definite than to sense the Tao.

In classic Chinese literature the Tao is described as following the path of least resistance, occupying the invisible or lowest position, and embracing the goodness of nature without ever attempting to do so. The Tao is passive but not weak, and in his book the legendary sage Lao-tzu describes the paradoxical quality of the Tao by asking one to consider the following:

How do coves and oceans become kings of the hundred rivers?
Because they are good at keeping low —
That is how they are kings of the hundred rivers.
Nothing in the world is weaker than water,
But it has no better in overcoming the hard.

The Origin of the Tao Te Ching

The *Tao Te Ching* has traditionally been attributed to Lao-tzu, the legendary sage and founder of the Taoist school. However, the *Tao Te Ching* was originally called the *Lao-tzu* as well, and this makes it difficult for us to fully understand the origin of the earliest texts describing its origin because in

Chinese it is often impossible to know whether "Lao-tzu" refers to the person or the text. Nevertheless the original work has been tentatively dated to the sixth century B.C.E., the time in which Lao-tzu was supposed to have lived, although it is likely that the collection did not come into circulation until the fourth century B.C.E. This was the period of the golden age of Chinese philosophy that gave rise to tremendous diversity — known as "the hundred schools" of thought — and gave us the other great classic of Chinese literature, the *I Ching*.

It is not until the first century B.C.E., however, that we find a history, the *Shih chi* (or *Records of the Historian*), that contains one of the oldest recorded stories about Lao-tzu. Here we find the story of Confucius visiting Lao-tzu at the Court of Chou where, by this account, Lao-tzu served as the court librarian. In that meeting, Lao-tzu was said to have scolded Confucius for his pompous and self-serving ways, and afterward Confucius is reported to have said to his disciples:

"I know that birds can fly, fish can swim, and animals run. For those that run a net may be set, for

those that swim a line cast, and for those that fly an arrow set free. But a dragon's ascent to heaven walks the wind and swims through clouds, and I know of no way to trap him. Today I have met Lao-tzu, who is both man and dragon."

The reference to the ascension of the dragon to heaven offers a clue to the early origins of Taoist rituals, because it reveals a link to the ancient shamanic ancestry of the region. The dragon, like the Feathered Serpent in South and Central American mythology, combines the scales of the snake with the feathers or wings of the bird. The feathers or wings of the dragon or bird are representative of the shaman's flight, and the scales represent rebirth, for the snake sheds its skin only to find a new one beneath the old.

The combination of these attributes accurately describes dream/death and rebirth rituals of the shamans known to date far back into the Neolithic period. Pottery dating from 5000 B.C.E. discovered in the village of Banpo near Xi'an in the 1950s included a ritualistic vessel showing four views of a shaman in a dreaming or trance state, and a fifth as

a transformed being. This pottery example is fairly typical of representations of the wizards who were said to leave their bodies in flights of vision, and following such a flight the shaman or initiate would be reborn with the sunrise fully transformed.

Although the antiquity of the underpinning is apparent, the actual history of the legendary sage Lao-tzu has proved to be elusive. To further obscure matters, the histories we do have that mention Lao-tzu were not recorded until hundreds of years after the events they detail, and it is possible that some of the facts were adapted to corroborate the legendary accounts of the origin of his works.

One popular legend holds that the *Tao Te Ching* was written in the gatehouse by Lao-tzu as he was about to leave his post in the city to retire and become a hermit in the country. According to this story the gatekeeper is said to have insisted that Lao-tzu record his wisdom before he left. Another more plausible theory is that the philosophy was recorded over a period of time by several anonymous writers to give the benefit of the country

dwellers' wisdom to the rulers of the cities, in the hope they would make life easier for the common people — and the gatehouse story may simply be symbolic of the source of this knowledge originating outside the pale. This theory fits in with the tumultuous climate of the Warring States period, and is supported by the fact that the later chapters of the work carry decidedly political overtones and candidly offer advice to those in positions of authority.

In the first century A.D. the *Lao-tzu* was divided into two works, and so we received the *Tao Ching* and the *Te Ching*. This division reflects the varying emphasis of each section of the book, the first on the Tao and the second on *Te*, which means approximately "virtue," though Alan Watts calls it "skill at living." These sections were then combined to form the book we know today.

Some scholars firmly believe the *Tao Te Ching* is in fact a compilation of writings by various authors who simply attributed their works to the legendary Lao-tzu; however, the consistency of the style and the rhythm of the arguments presented in both

parts of the work suggest otherwise. It seems more likely that this book of sage advice was the work of a single author drawing upon the prevailing folk wisdom of his day, and that perhaps the two books were written during different periods of the author's life, or in response to different issues.

The Philosophy of Nature

Taoism has often been described as the philosophy of nature, and it is in this respect that its wisdom most strongly suggests its origins were in the shamanic world of pre-Dynastic China. Living close to the earth one sees the wisdom of not interfering with the course of life, and of letting things go their way. This is the wisdom that also tells us not to get in our own way, and to paddle with the current, split wood along the grain, and seek to understand the inner workings of our nature instead of trying to change it.

According to the laws of nature every creature finds its own way, and so each of us is known to have our own path or way. In classic Chinese texts

there are references to the Tao of Earth with all its creatures, the Tao of Man, which refers to our awakened path, and to the Tao of Heaven, by which the broad forces of heaven and earth come together in a field of polar energies. Together these forces create the world in which all life plays, and instill in us the instinctive knowledge of the primal forces at work in the human psyche.

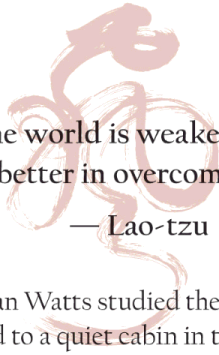
In this book, Alan Watts brings his years of study of the Tao into focus through lively explanations of the essential ideas and terms of Taoist thought. He gives the reader an opportunity to experience the Tao as a personal practice of liberation free from the limitations of the commonly held beliefs within our culture. This book is based on talks given during seminars during the last ten years of his life, and it offers a way of understanding the true value of ourselves as free-willed individuals enfolded within the ever-changing patterns of the natural world.

We explore the wisdom of the way things are of themselves (*tzu-jan*, or "by itself so"), and of letting

life unfold without interference and without forcing matters when the time is not right (*wu wei*, or "not forcing"). In the philosophy of the Tao we soon discover that striving to succeed — in the theory that "you can't get something for nothing" — must be balanced by the realization that "you can't have something without nothing," because something always requires its opposite, a place to be, whether it is a receptive vessel, a clear mind, or an open heart.

PART I

THE WAY OF THE TAO



Nothing in the world is weaker than water,
But it has no better in overcoming the hard.

— Lao-tzu

In his later years, Alan Watts studied the Tao extensively, and in his final years moved to a quiet cabin in the mountains and dedicated himself almost exclusively to meditating and writing on the experience of the essence of Tao.

This book is drawn from his talks on Taoism during this period and from his now famous seminars given at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California, near the end of his life.

What Is Tao? is a culmination of a lifetime of study of Taoist arts, including the poetry, calligraphy, and movement arts that have all found their inspiration in the way of the Tao. This book shows us that an understanding of the ancient wisdom of the Tao can have a great impact on our busy lives today.

If we are not totally blind,
what we are seeking is already here.
This is it.

— Alan Watts

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