

Along with Confucianism, the religious philosophy of Daoism was a product of the chaotic period of the later Zhou dynasty. It also took deep roots in Chinese culture. It, too, probably reflected earlier Chinese beliefs including the references to a balanced Dao, or "Way," to which the religion gave a particular definition. Daoism attracted many in the upper classes, who found its spirituality appealing. Later, particularly as it additionally embraced beliefs in magical healing, it spread widely to the peasantry. After Buddhism began to reach China in the later Han dynasty, Daoists responded by more vigorous proselytizing efforts. Confucian officials recurrently attacked Daoism, but they never tried to proscribe it as they ultimately did with Buddhism, for although Daoism had different goals most Daoist leaders professed obedience to the emperor, which made the religion seem safe. Unlike most major religions, however, and unlike Confucianism itself, Daoism never spread significantly beyond its culture of origins, even to other parts of East Asia.

Daoism was attributed to Laozi, who probably lived in the 5th century B.C.E.—though his actual existence cannot be confirmed. Daoism stressed the divine impulse that directs all life, while urging a set of habits that would bring peace and harmony. The following passage is from the principal Daoist work, the *Dao de jing*, attributed to Laozi but which was probably compiled by Zhuangzi in the 4th or 3rd centuries B.C.E.

Assessing Daoist principles obviously invites comparison both with Confucianism (and Legalism) and with other major religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. How could such a different set of ideas coexist with Chinese political philosophies without creating cultural disruption? How could some individuals be Confucianist and Daoist at the same time?

DAO DE JING

The Dao that can be told
is not the eternal Dao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

Numbers 1–7, 20–25, 30–31, 56–57 from *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu, *A New English Version, with Forward and Notes* by Stephen Mitchell. Translation Copyright © 1988 by Stephen Mitchell. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Inc.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations
arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding.

When people see some things as beautiful,
other things become ugly.
When people see some things as good,
other things become bad.

Being and non-being create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the Master
acts without doing anything
and teaches without saying anything.
Things arise and she lets them come;
things disappear and she lets them go.
She has but doesn't possess,
acts but doesn't expect.
When her work is done, she forgets it.
That is why it lasts forever.

If you overesteem great men,
people become powerless.
If you overvalue possessions,
people begin to steal.

The Master leads
by emptying people's minds
and filling their cores,
by weakening their ambition
and toughening their resolve.
He helps people lose everything
they know, everything they desire,
and creates confusion
in those who think that they know.

Practice not-doing,
and everything will fall into place.

The Dao is like a well:
used but never used up.
It is like the eternal void:

filled with infinite possibilities.

It is hidden but always present.
I don't know who gave birth to it.
It is older than God. . . .

The Dao is called the Great Mother:
empty yet inexhaustible,
it gives birth to infinite worlds.

It is always present within you.
You can use it any way you want.

The Dao is infinite, eternal.

Why is it eternal?

It was never born;

thus it can never die.

Why is it infinite?

It has no desires for itself;

thus it is present for all beings.

The Master stays behind;
that is why she is ahead.

She is detached from all things;

that is why she is one with them.

Because she has let go of herself,

she is perfectly fulfilled. . . .

Stop thinking, and end your problems.

What difference between yes and no?

What difference between success and failure?

Must you value what others value,

avoid what others avoid?

How ridiculous!

Other people are excited,

as though they were at a parade.

I alone don't care,

I alone am expressionless,

like an infant before it can smile. . . .

If you want to accord with the Dao,

just do your job, then let go. . . .

Whoever relies on the Dao in governing men

doesn't try to force issues

or defeat enemies by force of arms.

For every force there is a counterforce.

Violence, even well intentioned,

always rebounds upon oneself.

The Master does his job

and then stops.

He understands that the universe
 is forever out of control,
 and that trying to dominate events
 goes against the current of the Dao.
 Because he believes in himself,
 he doesn't try to convince others.
 Because he is content with himself,
 he doesn't need others' approval.
 Because he accepts himself,
 the whole world accepts him.
 Weapons are the tools of violence;
 all decent men detest them.

Weapons are the tools of fear;
 a decent man will avoid them
 except in the direst necessity
 and, if compelled, will use them
 only with the utmost restraint.
 Peace is his highest value.
 If the peace has been shattered,
 how can he be content?
 His enemies are not demons,
 but human beings like himself.
 [The Master] doesn't wish them personal harm.
 Nor does he rejoice in victory.
 How could he rejoice in victory
 and delight in the slaughter of men?

He enters a battle gravely,
 with sorrow and with great compassion,
 as if he were attending a funeral. . . .

Those who know don't talk.
 Those who talk don't know.

Close your mouth,
 block off your senses,
 blunt your sharpness,
 untie your knots,
 soften your glare,
 settle your dust.
 This is the primal identity.

Be like the Dao.
 It can't be approached or withdrawn from,
 benefited or harmed,
 honored or brought into disgrace.
 It gives itself up continually.
 That is why it endures.
 If you want to be a great leader,

you must learn to follow the Dao.
Stop trying to control.
Let go of fixed plans and concepts,
and the world will govern itself.

The more prohibitions you have,
the less virtuous people will be.
The more weapons you have,
the less secure people will be.
The more subsidies you have,
the less self-reliant people will be.

Therefore the Master says:
I let go of the law,
and people become honest.
I let go of economics,
and people become prosperous.
I let go of religion,
and people become serene.
I let go of all desire for the common good,
and the good becomes common as grass.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How is the Dao defined? How does it compare with a god or gods in other religions?
2. What kind of life should a Daoist lead, and why?
3. What might a Confucianist and a Daoist agree about? Where would they disagree? How would the two belief systems react to military activity?
4. Does the passage help explain why Daoism did not spread widely outside China?
5. How might Daoism affect other aspects of Chinese culture, such as artistic styles? Science and medicine?
6. As a major early religion, how does Daoism compare with Judaism?