

## Dark Illumination of Taoism



*There is something formlessly created  
Born before Heaven and Earth  
So silent! So ethereal!  
Independent and changeless  
Circulating and ceaseless  
It can be regarded as the mother of the world.*

*I do not know its name  
Identifying it, I call it "Tao".*

— Lao Tzu

There is no doubt that Taoism is one of the deepest of human spiritual paths. The two main figures who laid the foundations of Taoist philosophy were Lao Tzu and Chung Tzu. Taoism is popularly known through its seminal work *Tao Te Ching* by Lao Tzu. However, there is speculation that Taoism existed well before this text was written.

There were a few eras during which Taoism rose to prominence and was considered to be the main religion of China, until it finally fell from grace in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Since the time of Lao Tzu, it



has developed in many ways, and not necessarily for the better. The later proponents of Taoism leaned increasingly towards materialism and became apparently fixated on concepts of longevity and the development of special powers. On some level, they were similar to Western alchemists who searched for an elixir of eternal life. Nowadays, that quest for longevity forms the basis of many physical practices which claim roots in Taoist philosophy, such as Tai Chi, Chi Gung, and, of course, acupuncture and Chinese medicine. This direction is, however, against the original spirit of Taoism. In fact, Lao Tzu wrote, "A sage who lives a long time only does so because he does not care to live long."

Before we go deeper into the secrets of the Taoist path, we must understand the flavor of the Chinese mind, which is very different from, say, the Indian mind. The Chinese mind is in essence very practical. When Indian Buddhism migrated to China, they could find no translation in the Chinese language for many of its abstract, philosophical terms. The Indian mind leans towards abstracts, weaving its purely theoretical arguments in a world of idealist-linear logic. The Chinese mind, on the other hand, is naturally more connected to concrete reality. Where in India they spoke about the formless and attributeless 'parabrahman', in China they were content with terms like 'heaven and earth' and all that lies in-between. Chinese spirituality is rooted in matter, even though it is somewhat transcended through the realization of its non-physical essence.

The influence of Taoism can be clearly seen in Zen (in Chinese, 'Chan'). The beauty of Zen is that it represents the meeting between the abstract, Indian mind and Chinese practicality, with its connection to the body and the earth. Abstract thinking is positive as long as it does not lose its touch with the concrete, material reality. So, for instance, when a Buddhist contemplation on the non-existence of self becomes a purely mental speculation, disconnected from our everyday experience, it ceases to be productive; after all, we can all feel – just through common sense – that we have self, no matter what the clever philosopher tell us.

Reading *Tao Te Ching*, it appears on the surface that Lao Tzu also employs too many abstract notions – for instance when he speaks about 'Tao' and about the subtle dimensions of existence. However, his words do not go too far into the intangible spheres of theory; they are still held together with the gravity of the earth. For instance, he says:

*The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth.*

*The named is the mother of myriad things.*



While this may appear abstract, it does not require a high degree of sophistication to understand what it means. ‘The nameless’ is on the one hand the original source, and on the other hand, our experience of life from the place prior to conceptualization. ‘The named’ is on the one hand the manifestation of the phenomenal reality and on the other hand, our recognition of it in conjunction with conceptualization. Some teachers speak of ‘perception without conceptualization’, but the conceptualization they are referring to is secondary – it is the function of labeling things. Primary conceptualization happens before labeling. It is the recognition of anything – a flower, a tree, a bird in flight – which enables us to identify our experience before we are even able to articulate it. This recognition, in fact, involves a very complex series of processes in our brain.

Taoism is a path of ‘nature’, but not in same sense as the Western philosophy of pantheism. Pantheism presupposes that the universe is identical to divinity and that god is immanent in creation. However, in Taoism, it is not posited that divinity lies in nature, but that nature is doorway to divinity. It is a path through nature, beyond nature, and in harmony with nature. When Lao Tzu writes about the space in-between heaven and earth – that ‘heaven’ is far beyond the physical sky – it is the fathomless source of existence. A Taoist is reaching that source not by lifting his head up and praying to an abstract god, but through diving into the secrets of the earth – not the physical earth, but the spirit of Tao that abides in the heart of the natural world. Again, this seeking of divinity through the earth should not be confused with Shamanism, which is in its essence materialistic rather than transcendent. Shamanism wants to control or manipulate the spirit of nature in order to promote survival in the earthly dimension. It is using the spirit world for the sake of this world and, unlike Taoism, is not interested in illuminating the higher consciousness behind all things.

### *Taoism – Path of the Source*

Taoism is a path of meditation, and more accurately, it is the path of being. Lao Tzu himself is often depicted as sitting in deep samadhi, like a heavy log of wood, oblivious to his surroundings. Perhaps the highest contribution of Taoism was to deeply reveal the dimension of being to humanity. Even though the word ‘being’ is frequently used in other spiritual traditions, they are not paths of being. Certainly, for adepts following any tradition that involves long periods of sitting meditation, some energy of being will naturally open up. But it has only been in Taoism, and later on in Zen, that meditators were more or less intentionally evolving into the dimension of being. However, it should be noted that while the Zen Buddhist path can open up the energy of being,



its over-emphasis on observation and mindfulness – which crystallizes energy in the headspace – prevents an adept from reaching significant absorption in the vertical plane.

Most spiritual paths are fundamentally ungrounded because they tend to evolve through the higher centers, such as consciousness or heart, or through unbalanced practices related to the so-called ‘third eye’. In yoga, they even seek to transcend through the crown chakra, and there is no better way than this to become completely ungrounded. This type of spirituality is not only higher dangerous, it lacks even a very basic understanding of the nature of reality. Being is the very ground of existence, and any realization that does not include it does not fully represent the actualization of our pure nature.

### A Man of Tao

*Tao Te Ching* is not merely describing the secrets of Tao. It is also teaching us the art of living in harmony with the spirit of nature. It is a teaching of naturalness, simplicity, spontaneity, inconspicuousness, humility, detachment from desires, and flexibility in all things. Above all, it is a teaching of ‘wu-wei’, which means ‘non-action’, the passive, inert principle of pure isness at the base of our existence:

*The Tao is constant in non-action,  
Yet there is nothing it does not do*

Living in accordance with Tao is not to follow strict rules of conduct, but rather to constantly adapt to the inevitable change in all things and circumstances. An overly rigid tree will break in a strong wind, while a soft, yielding tree will bend; it will adapt to the wind and then return to its natural, erect position. A man of Tao lives in emptiness and non-resistance.

#### *The Empty Boat:*

*Who can free himself of achievement and fame,  
Then descend and be lost  
Amidst the masses of men?  
He will flow like Tao, unseen...  
He will go about like life itself.  
With no name and no home*



*Simple is he, without.  
To all appearances he is a fool.  
His steps leave no trace.  
He has no power.  
He achieves nothing.  
He has no reputation.  
Since he judges no one,  
No one judges him.  
Such is the perfect man.  
His boat is empty.*

— Chung Tzu

Or:

*Hesitant, like crossing a wintry river  
Cautious, like fearing four neighbors  
Solemn, like a guest  
Loose, like ice about to melt  
Genuine, like plain wood  
Open, like a valley  
Opaque, like muddy water*

— Lao Tzu

For a Taoist, Tao is everywhere. It is seen in all things, but it is beyond their visible form. When we look at a house, we see the walls and the architecture, but what makes the house are not the walls but the emptiness they contain. We cannot live in the walls; we occupy the internal space that they define. Similarly, to see reality is to see beyond appearances, which are like the walls of the house that contain the internal space of our pure subjectivity.

A man of Tao lives in a state of intimacy with the silence of being. He is not a recluse; he lives among others while concealing his illumination. He has mastered the art of blending in with other humans while experiencing his life from the depth of the natural state of oneness with the whole



of existence. He knows that his inner truth cannot be shared with humanity because no one will understand him, and there is a sense of loneliness in this understanding, for after all, he is still human.

*So desolate! How limitless it is!  
The people are excited,  
As if enjoying a great feast,  
As if climbing up to the terrace in spring.  
I alone am quiet and uninvolved,  
Like an infant not yet smiling,  
So weary, like having no place to return.  
The people all have surplus,  
While I alone seem lacking.  
I have the heart of a fool indeed – so ignorant!  
Ordinary people are bright.  
I alone am muddled.  
Ordinary people are scrutinizing.  
I alone am obtuse.  
Such tranquility, like the ocean  
Such high wind, as if without limits.  
  
The people all have goals,  
And I alone am stubborn and lowly.  
I alone am different from them  
And value the nourishing mother.*

— Lao Tzu

## Dark Illumination

Taoism is a path of being, but does it also include the awakening of consciousness? There is no clear indication that it does; although in the later Taoist texts, there are various pointers to the work with awareness. However, it is certainly not a path which can lead us toward the embodiment of



universal consciousness. Therefore, it does not seek to integrate the energy of clarity and luminosity with the energy of being. In fact, it seems as if the man of Tao resisted becoming overly conscious in order to disappear even more into the womb of the unmanifested. So when we look at the depictions of Lao Tzu sitting in samadhi, we can deduce that he was probably sitting in a form of trance similar to, for instance, Ramakrishna. However, the experiences of these two sages were also very different. Ramakrishna was not in the absolute state; his being was quite weak, and he was experiencing samadhi only on the level of consciousness. Lao Tzu, on the other hand, was completely rooted in the absolute, like a mountain that cannot be shaken by the winds of the world.<sup>1</sup>

So we have called the Taoist enlightenment a 'dark illumination' because its essence is to reach the absolute but without infusing into it the luminosity of consciousness. Taoists themselves used the word 'dark' to express their unique experience of reality, and also words such as 'lowest', 'feminine', 'soft', and 'yielding':

*The highest goodness resembles water  
Water greatly benefits myriad things without contention  
It stays in places that people dislike  
Therefore it is similar to the Tao*

*The valley spirit, undying  
Is called the Mystic Female.*

*The gate of the Mystic Female  
Is called the root of Heaven and Earth.*

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, Ramakrishna was initiated into samadhi by his Vedanta teacher, Totapuri. Walking a path of extreme devotion, part of him longed to go beyond the duality between himself and the goddess Kali, whom he worshiped. Totapuri was impressed that after a short period of concentration on an object, Ramakrishna was able to go into samadhi for three whole days. But did Ramakrishna really realize the essence of Vedanta? Sitting for days in a trance-samadhi has nothing in common with a true, natural samadhi, which is the real goal of Advaita Vedanta. He was experiencing a laya, a suspension of relative consciousness that cannot be sustained. Ramakrishna continued to live a double life, moving back and forth between the highly dual devotion to Kali that he experienced within his regular consciousness, and his non-dual, unconscious samadhi he experienced during meditative absorption. He did not manage to integrate these two modes of his existence.



*It flows continuously, barely perceptible  
Utilize it; it is never exhausted.*

— Lao Tzu

### *Anti-Idealism of Taoist Philosophy*

Interestingly, Taoism is realistic and even anti-idealistic. Common spirituality tends to fall easily into idealism, and spiritual teachings tend to have idealistic perceptions of things, such as the 'grace' of god, the 'wisdom' of creation, or the 'miracle' of life. But the fact is the world we live in is far from ideal. Buddha actually had a distinctly pessimistic and depressing view of reality, particularly the plane of manifestation. He saw it as a disease and created a philosophy which spoke negatively of the world as a dimension of suffering and ignorance. And Taoism is also somewhat at odds with the overly positive vision of the world propagated in the collective spiritual mind, mostly because of its inherent pragmatism.

As such, rather than isolating himself from the world to pursue otherworldly ideals, a Taoist sage was taught to develop the skill of living among unconscious people in a way that he could both blend in and yet be free. Chuang Tzu, in particular, was fond of writing stories about the ideal of being 'useless' in society. In our modern world, everybody wants to be useful, to matter, and to have a meaningful life for their spouse, children, country, or even for humanity as a whole. People go to great lengths to volunteer, serve their community, promote a worthy cause, and so forth. But why? There is an unquenchable need among humans to be good and useful. But according to Taoist wisdom, a sage need not care about being good or useful because he is already complete inside; he does not need to compensate for a feeling of meaninglessness. He is happy to be useless, and in fact, the more useless the better.

A Taoist story that illustrates this principle reads as follows:





### *The Useless Tree*

*Hui Tzu said to Chuang Tzu, "All you teach is centered on what has no use...I have a big tree, the kind they call a 'stinktree'. The trunk is so distorted, so full of knots, no one can get a straight plank out of it. The branches are so crooked you cannot cut them up in any way that makes sense."*

*"There it stands beside the road. No carpenter will even look at it. Such is your teaching – big and useless."*

*Chuang Tzu replied, "Have you ever watched the wildcat crouching, watching his prey? The prey leaps this way and that way, high and low, and at last lands in the trap. And have you seen the Yak? Great as a thundercloud, he stands in his might. Big? Sure, but he can't catch mice!"*

*"So for your big tree, no use? Then plant it in the wasteland, in emptiness. Walk idly around it, rest under its shadow. No axe or bill prepares its end. No one will ever cut it down."*

This story expresses the Taoist perspective on the place of a sage in human society – he is useless, just like this tree. He cannot be used for anything by anybody. It is for the very reason that society has no use for him that he can live a long time; nobody will bother him. And yet, all people can rest in his shadow. He is a refuge for those who seek true peace. Uselessness is seen as the essence of the ultimate reality. A similar impartial wisdom is shown in the Taoist attitude to human suffering and the way in which the sage views it:



*Heaven and Earth are impartial (ruthless).*

*They regard myriad things as straw dogs.*

*The sages are impartial (ruthless).*

*They regard people as straw dogs<sup>2</sup>.*

— Lao Tzu

This world is indeed full of suffering. In fact, if anyone had eyes to see the immeasurable pain and tragedy of human life, he would surely die from sorrow. But because nature does not want us to die, it has developed a great variety of tricks to keep us alive. There are so many buffers in place within our mind that enable us to cope with extreme emotions and trauma. Some of them we have created ourselves as ways of rationalizing the hurtful events that we cannot explain. For instance, if a child dies, we might say that it was his karma or that his soul needed to have this experience. But we don't really know, and in truth we can't really justify such a tragedy through any explanations or rationalizations. The question is: Can we find the courage not to rationalize our tragedies, but to exonerate them instead? Can we find the courage to experience compassion instead of looking for excuses and justifications?

Taoist masters observed that heaven does not really show mercy to those who suffer on earth. This they discerned from a clear observation of the natural world. Then, challenging the spiritual ideal of a saintly life, they asked: and why should a sage be 'more good' than the natural laws of Tao? Why shouldn't he also treat people 'like straw dogs'? The question that the great Taoist masters sought to discover and embody was: How is our existence viewed from the standpoint of the absolute principle? Things have their reasons, and most of them we simply cannot know or understand. For a Taoist sage, the Tao is his teacher; he shapes his being to be a reflection of that ultimate principle. When relating to others, he is not falling into the pitfall of the sentimentalism of superficial compassion. He is as impartial as Tao, and has both the ruthlessness (or lack of pity) and honesty needed to see the world as it is. Because it is just as it is. This impartiality should not be confused with lack of compassion: it is beyond compassion and lack of compassion. It is to relate to life from another depth, a depth incomprehensible to the human mind. In fact, compassion is one of the so-called three treasures of Taoism, the other two being moderation and humility.

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<sup>2</sup> straw dogs used to be burned at festivals



## Limitations of the Taoist Path

Taoism is certainly not a path to wholeness. However, its contribution to human spirituality has been enormously significant. In a similar way to other far-eastern traditions, it leans towards a realization of the impersonal nature of reality, but without losing touch with practical aspects of human existence. It is actually utilizing the principle of Tao not so much to transcend the human dimension, but rather to master the art of living here from the place of unity with the nature of existence. The energy of Taoism is not very expansive; rather, it brings stillness and calls for retreat within. As we said, it is a path of pure being and absorption in the absolute. A Taoist sage is like a still mountain on the horizon that draws its impressive shape upon the last rays of the sun.

It is clear that those on the Taoist path had no interest in realizing our higher individuality or awakening the essence of me. They were simply not endowed with these concepts, and therefore wished only to merge with the source and master the art of living in harmony with nature. The other easily identifiable element that is missing is the awakening of the heart. Taoism does have the concept of compassion, but it was never a path that included evolution into the heart. The compassion of the Taoist adept was more ethical in nature; it was the natural expression of their goodness rather than a true opening of the heart. Taoism was neither a path of the heart, nor a path of devotion, nor a path to the soul – it was the path of the source. Many traditions claim to point to the source, but without using the term in its proper meaning. However, the great path of Taoism pointed as straight as an arrow to the innermost womb of the unmanifested: Tao.

*Without going out the door, know the world.*

*Without peering out the window, see the Heavenly Tao.*

*The further one goes*

*The less one knows.*

*Therefore the sage*

*Knows without going,*

*Names without seeing,*

*Achieves without striving.*



*Those who pursue the knowledge, increase every day.*

*Those who pursue Tao, decrease every day.*

— Lao Tzu

Blessings,

Anadi

*For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website [www.anaditeaching.com/glossary](http://www.anaditeaching.com/glossary)*