



The Taoist Yin Yang symbol:

Overview:

Taoism is an Eastern religion/philosophy with perhaps 225 million followers. Although it is more accurately referred to as a philosophy, books on world religions inevitably include it with other religions from Buddhism to Zoroastrianism.

The exact number of followers is impossible to estimate because many of its followers also identify with other religions -- often Buddhism and Confucianism -- and because it is impossible to obtain reliable polling information from individuals in China.

Taoists were heavily persecuted in China for years after the Communist victory in 1949, and during the cultural revolution from 1966 to 1976. Some religious tolerance and freedom has been restored over the last three decades.

Quotations:

- "Be still like a mountain and flow like a great river." Lao Tse.
- "Without going out of your door, You can know the ways of the world. Without peeping through your window, you can see the Way of Heaven. The farther you go, The less you know. Thus, the Sage knows without traveling, Sees without looking, And achieves without struggle." Lao Tse.
- "Different Chinese philosophers, writing probably in 5-4 centuries B.C., presented some major ideas and a way of life that are nowadays known under the name of Taoism, the way of correspondence between man and the tendency or the course of natural world." Alan Watts, from his book: "Tao: The Watercourse Way."
- "We believe in the formless and eternal Tao, and we recognize all personified deities as being mere human constructs. We reject hatred, intolerance, and unnecessary violence, and embrace harmony, love and learning, as we are taught by Nature. We place our trust and our lives in the Tao, that we may live in peace and balance with the Universe, both in this mortal life and beyond." Creed of the *Reform Taoist Congregation* 1

● "For more than two thousand years, Daoism has evolved in close interaction with the other major traditions of China--Confucianism, Buddhism, ethnic creeds, and popular religion--and adapted many of their features. To the present day, Daoism consists of a multiplicity of beliefs and practices, and continues to develop, as it has for the past millennia, through the interaction between differentiation and integration--the move to change in accordance with political, cultural, and economic developments versus the urge to create stability through belief systems, lineage lines, rituals, and myths." [From the Amazon.com review of the book "Daoist Identity: History, lineage and ritual."](#)

History of Taoism:

Tao (pronounced "Dow") can be roughly translated into English as *path*, or *the way*. It is basically indefinable. It has to be experienced. It "*refers to a power which envelops, surrounds and flows through all things, living and non-living. The Tao regulates natural processes and nourishes balance in the Universe. It embodies the harmony of opposites (i.e. there would be no love without hate, no light without dark, no male without female.)*" 2

The founder of Taoism is believed by a few religious historians to be Lao-Tse (604-531 [BCE](#)), whose life overlapped that of Confucius (551-479 BCE). (Alternative spellings: Lao Tze, Lao Tsu, Lao Tzu, Laozi, Laotze, etc.). However most historians suggest that he is a synthesis of a number of historical figures. or that he is a mythical figure. Still others suggest that he lived in the 4th century BCE.

He was searching for a way that would avoid the constant feudal warfare and other conflicts that disrupted society during his lifetime. The result was his book: *Tao-te-Ching* (a.k.a. *Daodejing*). Others believe that he is a mythical character.

Taoism started as a combination of psychology and philosophy but evolved into a religious faith in 440 CE when it was adopted as a state religion. At that time Lao-Tse became popularly venerated as a deity. Taoism, along with Buddhism and Confucianism, became one of the three great religions of China.

"Alyosha77" wrote on the "*Zen and Taoism: A connection*" thread on Beliefnet's *Taoism Community*:

"Daoism and [Buddhism](#) in China were influenced by each other as they developed. Buddhism was in fact mistaken by some early Daoists as a new form of Daoism. Some early translations of Buddhist texts used Daoist terms to interpret Buddhist concepts, so the Chinese probably first understood Buddhism in a very Daoist way. During the 3rd and 4th century [CE], there was a Neo-Daoist movement called Xuan Xue, and many Buddhists entered into Xuan Xue discourses, and it was by way of Xuan Xue discourses that Buddhism became integrated into the intellectual mainstream of Chinese thought. On the more popular level, the turbulent times from the beginning of 3rd to the beginning of the 7th century in China caused many to look for hope in immortality and salvation, so Daoism and Buddhism both became increasingly influential on the popular level. Throughout Chinese history, there had been some hostilities between them, but I believe their mutual influence and in mutual inclusivity are more significant. 3

With the end of the Ch'ing Dynasty in 1911, state support for Taoism ended. Much of the Taoist heritage was destroyed during the next period of warlordism. After the Communist victory in 1949, religious freedom was severely restricted. *"The new government put monks to manual labor, confiscated temples, and plundered treasures. Several million monks were reduced to fewer than 50,000 by 1960."* ⁴ During the cultural revolution in China from 1966 to 1976, much of the remaining Taoist heritage was destroyed. Some religious tolerance has been restored under Deng Xiao-ping from 1982 to the present time.

The number of followers of Taoism is impossible to estimate with any accuracy. There are about 225 million followers of Chinese traditional religions of which Taoism appears to be the main influence. About 20 million followers live in Taiwan, about 30,000 in North America and 1,720 in Canada. (Canadian data from the 1991 census; this is the most recent census to include religious data). Taoism has had a significant impact on North American culture in areas of *"acupuncture, herbalism, holistic medicine, meditation and martial arts..."* ⁴

Taoist concepts, beliefs and practices:

- Tao is the first-cause of the universe. It is a force that flows through all life.
- *"The Tao surrounds everyone and therefore everyone must listen to find enlightenment."* ¹
- A believer's goal is to harmonize themselves with the Tao.
- Taoism has provided an alternative to the Confucian tradition in China. The two traditions have coexisted in the country, region, and often within the same individual.
- The priesthood views the many gods as manifestations of the one Dao, *"which could not be represented as an image or a particular thing."* The concept of a personified deity is foreign to them, as is the concept of the creation of the universe. Thus, they do not pray as Christians do; there is no God to hear the prayers or to act upon them. They seek answers to life's problems through inner meditation and outer observation.
- In contrast with the beliefs and practices of the priesthood, most of the laity have *"believed that spirits pervaded nature...The gods in heaven acted like and were treated like the officials in the world of men; worshipping the gods was a kind of rehearsal of attitudes toward secular authorities. On the other hand, the demons and ghosts of hell acted like and were treated like the bullies, outlaws, and threatening strangers in the real world; they were bribed by the people and were ritually arrested by the martial forces of the spirit officials."* ²
- Time is cyclical, not linear as in Western thinking.
- Taoists strongly promote health and vitality.
- Five main organs and orifices of the body correspond to the five parts of the sky: water, fire, wood, metal and earth.

- Each person must nurture the *Ch'i* (air, breath) that has been given to them.
 - Development of virtue is one's chief task. The *Three Jewels* to be sought are compassion, moderation and humility.
 - Taoists follow the art of "*wu wei*," which is to let nature take its course. For example, one should allow a river to flow towards the sea unimpeded; do not erect a dam which would interfere with its natural flow.
 - One should plan in advance and consider carefully each action before making it.
 - A Taoist is kind to other individuals, in part because such an action tends to be reciprocated.
 - Taoists believe that "*people are compassionate by nature...left to their own devices [they] will show this compassion without expecting a reward.*" ³
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The Yin Yang symbol:

This is a well known Taoist symbol. *"It represents the balance of opposites in the universe. When they are equally present, all is calm. When one is outweighed by the other, there is confusion and disarray."* ¹One source explains that it was derived from astronomical observations which recorded the shadow of the sun throughout a full year. ³ The two swirling shapes inside the symbol give the impression of **change** -- the only constant factor in the universe. One tradition states that Yin (the dark side) represents the breath that formed the earth. Yang (the light side) symbolizes the breath that formed the heavens.

One source states: *"The most traditional view is that 'yin' represents aspects of the feminine: being soft, cool, calm, introspective, and healing... and 'yang' the masculine: being hard, hot, energetic, moving, and sometimes aggressive. Another view has the 'yin' representing night and 'yang' day."* ³

Another source offers a different definition: A common misconception in the west is that *"...yin is soft and passive and yang is hard and energetic. Really it is yang that is soft and yin that is hard, this is because yang is energetic and yin is passive. Yin is like a rock and yang is like water or air, rock is heavy and hard and air is soft and energetic."* ⁴

Allan Watts, describes the yin and yang as negative and positive energy poles: *"The ideograms indicate the sunny and shady sides of a hill....They are associated with the masculine and the feminine, the firm and the yielding, the strong and the weak, the light and the dark, the rising and the falling, heaven and earth, and they are even recognized in such everyday matters as cooking as the spicy and the bland."* ^{5,6}

However, since nothing in nature is purely black or purely white, the symbol includes a small black spot in the white swirl, and a corresponding white spot in the black swirl.

Ultimately, the 'yin' and 'yang' can symbolize any two polarized forces in nature. Taoists believe that humans often intervene in nature and upset the balance of Yin and Yang.

About the alternative names: Taoism or Daoism:

There are two commonly used systems for translating the Mandarin Chinese language into Roman letters:

- Wade-Giles: This system is commonly used in Taiwan and the U.S. The Chinese character for "Way" becomes "Tao," which leads to the English word "Taoism."
- Hanyu pinyin or Pinyin: This system was developed by the Chinese people and is now finding increased use worldwide. The "Way" becomes "Dao," which leads to the English word "Daoism." The "Dao" is pronounced like the "Dow" in "Dow-Jones Index."

We have chosen to emphasize the "Taoism" spelling. A Google search for "Taoism" returned 245,000 hits, whereas a search for "Daoism" returned only 35,000.

Tai Chi:

There is a long history of involvement by Taoists in various exercise and movement techniques. 7 Tai chi in particular works on all parts of the body. It *"stimulates the central nervous system, lowers blood pressure, relieves stress and gently tones muscles without strain. It also enhances digestion, elimination of wastes and the circulation of blood. Moreover, tai chi's rhythmic movements massage the internal organs and improve their functionality."* Traditional Chinese medicine teaches that illness is caused by blockages or lack of balance in the body's "chi" (intrinsic energy). Tai Chi is believed to balance this energy flow.