**Introduction to Daoism**

The Chinese word dao means a way or a path. Confucians used the term dao to speak of the way human beings ought to behave in society. In other words, dao, for them, was an ethical or moral way. From the point of view of Daoism, however, the Confucian concept of dao was too limited. Daoists preferred to understand the dao as the Way of Nature as a whole. They believed that Confucians, by insisting on a purely human Way, exaggerated the importance of man and failed to pay attention to the lessons which Nature has to offer about time and change, gain and loss, the useful and the useless.

The basic idea of the Daoists was to enable people to realize that, since human life is really only a small part of a larger process of nature, the only human actions which ultimately make sense are those which are in accord with the flow of Nature — the Dao or the Way. Their sensitivity to the way of Nature prompted them to reject human ideas or standards which might lead to an overly assertive mode of behavior or too strong a commitment to the achievement of worldly goals. For Daoists, such unnatural assertiveness was the root cause of violence and aggression. While Confucians found moral reasons to counsel against violence and to urge rulers to govern by virtue rather than by force, many Daoists went even further and denounced violence as reflecting the ultimate ignorance of the Way of Nature.

Their solution to the problem of how human beings should behave is expressed in the typically Daoist doctrine of wu-wei or non-action. This did not mean doing absolutely nothing but doing nothing unnatural, nothing that was out of keeping with the Dao. Related to the doctrine of non-action was the idea of no desires, which meant that no one should have excessive desires because such desires are bound to cause injury both to oneself and to others.

As believers in the way of the natural, the Daoists characteristically favored the spontaneous and the simple. One of their favorite images was that of the uncarved block. Suggesting a block of wood which is uncut and uncrafted, the uncarved block is associated with an original simplicity and wholeness which is purely natural. From a Daoist point of view, Confucian concern with civilization, culture and moral cultivation reflected a bias toward artificiality and toward unnecessary and arbitrary distinctions. Since morality came into being only after distinctions began to be made by human beings, and among them, it is far inferior to spontaneous conformity to the Dao.

What Confucians regarded as essential to being human — the practice of ritual — the Daoists saw as just so much contrivance and arrogant insistence on the man-made as opposed to the natural. They advocated that, rather than dwelling on the practice of ritual, each individual should cultivate his own te, the virtue or power that is received from the Dao.

In addition to being unsympathetic to the Confucian idea of ritual, the Daoists tended also to be mistrustful of that other great human invention, language. This was perhaps because they realized that all those who speak are locked in time and confined to a particular human identity. What was needed, from their point of view, was not logical argument or the arts of persuasion, but quiet attunement to the rhythms and cycles of nature and to the process of change.

One of the most important figures in the shaping of classical Daoism is that of Laozi, which simply means "the elder" or "the old man." Nothing certain is known of him. Some accounts of Laozi suggest that he lived in the sixth century B.C. and that Confucius actually visited him in search of philosophical advice. However, there is no real evidence to support this view, and recent historians have tended to believe that most of the stories surrounding him are purely legendary. One legend about Laozi has it that toward the end of his life he left China for the West. As he was passing through the gates at the border, the gatekeeper begged him to write something to leave behind. Complying with this request, Laozi is supposed to have written the eighty-one chapters of a book called the *Daodejing*, one translation of which is *The Way and Its Power*.

Whether this book was actually written by Laozi or, as many have argued, by several different authors, is not known. More important is the fact that it has fascinated, mystified, and inspired people in China and more recently in the West, over the course of many centuries.

The same sort of mystery surrounds the work of Zhuangzi, the other great contributor to early Daoism. Zhuangzi was in all likelihood an historical figure who lived in the third century B.C. While he cannot have written the entire book which bears his name, he is credited with at least seven of its thirty-three chapters. It is by almost anyone's standards one of the greatest works of world literature. In the Zhuangzi, wit, humor and playfulness combine with a spirituality which is at once earthy and sublime.

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