

An Outline Review

of

Huston Smith's

The World's Religions

(Our Great Wisdom Traditions)

Chapter V. Taoism

No civilization is monochrome. In China the classical tones of Confucianism have been balanced by the spiritual shades of Buddhism but also by the romantic hues of Taoism

Part One: The Old Master. - Lao Tzu

Taoism, according to tradition originated with a man named Lao Tzu.

A shadowy figure, born about 604 B. C.

Before his retirement from society, he left a slim volume of five thousand characters titled *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Way and Its Power*.

A testament to humanity's at home-ness in the universe, it can be read in half an hour or a lifetime, and remains to this day the basic text of Taoist thought.

He didn't preach he didn't organize or promote, he wrote a few pages on request, rode off on a water buffalo, and that was it as far

as he was concerned.

Part Two: The Religion He Founded - Taoism

A. The Three Meanings of *Tao*. - Literally, this word means path or way.

1. The *way of ultimate reality* - This *Tao* cannot be perceived or even clearly conceived, for it is too vast for human rationality to fathom.

2. It is also immanent. - In this secondary sense it is the *way of the universe*, the norm, the rhythm, the driving power in all nature, the ordering principle behind all life.

3. In its third sense *Tao* refers to the *way of human life* when it meshes with the *Tao* of the universe as just described. Most of what follows in this chapter will detail what the Taoists propose that this way of life should be.

First, however, it is necessary to point out that there have been in China not one but three Taoisms.

B. Three Approaches to Power and the *Taoisms* That Follow. - *Tao Te Ching*, the title of Taoism's basic text, has been translated The **Way** and its **Power**. Just as the first term **Way** can be taken in three senses, so can the second term **Power**.

Corresponding to the three ways *Te* or power and be approached, there have arisen in China three species of Taoism so dissimilar that initially they seem to have no more in common than homonyms like blew/blue or sun/son, that sound alike but have different meanings. We shall find that this is not the case.

All were engaged in vitalizing programs that were intended to

facilitate Tao's power, its *te*, as it flows through human beings.

1. Efficient Power: Philosophical Taoism.

Philosophical Taoists try to conserve their *te* by expanding it efficiently, whereas the other two "vitality" Taoists work to increase its supply.

It is essentially an attitude toward life, it is the most "exportable" Taoism of the three, the one that has the most to say to the world at large.

2. Augmented Power: Taoist Hygiene and Yoga.

These Taoists want to go beyond conserving to increasing the quota of the Tao they had to work with.

They worked with three things: matter, movement, and their minds.

They tried eating virtually everything to see if *ch'i* could be augmented nutritionally.

They sought to draw *ch'i* from the atmosphere by breathing exercises.

They used programs of bodily movement such as *t'ai chi chuan*, which gathers calisthenics, dance, meditation, *yin/yang* philosophy, martial arts, and acupuncture into synthesis that was designed to draw *ch'i* from the cosmos and dislodge blocks to its internal flow.

Taoist meditation, (the physical postures and concentration techniques are reminiscent of Indian *reja yoga*), was designed to reach realization with which comes truth, joy, and power.

The Taoist yogis recognized that they could not hope for much understanding from the masses, and they made no attempt to publicize their position.

3. Vicarious Power: Religious Taoism.

Reflection and health programs take time, and the average Chinese lacked that commodity. Yet they too needed help.

Taoists responded to such problems. Using the unchanging landscape of Chinese folk religion, Religious Taoism institutionalized such activities.

Popular, Religious Taoism is a murky affair. Much of it looks - from the outside, we must always keep in mind - like crude superstition; but we must remember that we have little idea what energy is, how it proceeds, or the means by which (and extent to which) it can be augmented.

It was under the rubric of magic as traditionally conceived that the Taoist church - dividing the territory with freelance wizards, exorcists, and shamans - devised way to harness higher powers for humane ends.

C. The Mingling of the Powers.

In the interest of clarity, the lines between the above three divisions have been drawn too sharply. No solid walls separate them; the three are better regarded as currents in a common river.

Where these three things come together there is a "school", and in China the school this chapter describes is Taoism.

D. Creative Quietude. - The object of Philosophical Taoism

The object of Philosophical Taoism is to align one's daily life to the *Tao*, to ride its boundless tide and delight in its flow.

The basic way to do this is to perfect a life of *wu wei*.

Creative quietude combines within a single individual two seemingly incompatible conditions - supreme activity and supreme relaxation. This happens when our private egos and conscious efforts yield to a power not their own.

Effectiveness of this order obviously requires an extraordinary skill.

Clarity can come to the inner eye only insofar as life attains a quiet that equals that of a deep and silent pool.

E. Other Taoist Values.

The Taoists rejected all forms of self-assertiveness and competition.

People should avoid being strident and aggressive not only toward other people but also toward nature.

This Taoist approach to nature deeply affected Chinese art.

Pomp and extravagance were regarded as silly.

It was this preference for naturalness and simplicity that most separated the Taoist from the Confucian.

All formalism, show and ceremony left them cold. What could be hoped for from punctiliousness or the meticulous observance of propriety?

Another feature of Taoism is its notion of the relativity of all values and, as its correlative, the identity of opposites. Here Taoism tied in with the traditional Chinese *yin/yang* symbol.

This polarity sums up all life's basic oppositions: good/evil, active/passive, positive/negative/negative, light/dark, summer/winter, male/female. But though the halves are in tension, they are not flatly opposed; they complement and balance each other. Each invades the other's hemisphere and takes up its abode in the deepest recess of its partner's domain. In the end both find themselves resolved by the circle that surrounds them.

In the Taoist perspective even good and evil are not head-on opposites.

If this all sounds very much like Zen, it should; for Buddhism processed through Taoism became Zen.

That in China the scholar ranked at the top of the social scale may have been Confucius' doing, but Taoism is fully as responsible for placing the soldier at the bottom. "The way for a vital person to go is not the way of a soldier."

Part Three - Conclusion.

Circling around each other like yin and yang themselves, Taoism and Confucianism represent the two indigenous poles of the Chinese character. Confucius represents the classical, Lao Tzu the romantic. Confucius stresses social responsibility, Lao Tzu praises spontaneity and naturalness. Confucius' focus is on the human, Lao Tzu's on what transcends the human.

Confucius roams within society, Lao Tzu wanders beyond. Something in life reaches out in each of these directions, and

Chinese civilization would certainly have been poorer if either had not appeared.
