

## The Three Teachings of Ancient China



### Taoism

Laozi (*Lao-tzu*) wandered out to the western border of his state, riding his water buffalo. When he was eighty years old he set out for the western border of China, toward what is now Tibet, saddened and disillusioned that men were unwilling to follow the path to natural goodness. He searched for a place to live a simple life, close to nature and without trouble. With him, he carried his ideas. Before he could cross the boarder, officials made him write down his ideas: “Live a simple life, be free, be yourself, and be close to nature. Do these things and you will be happy.” These words have been kept in a little book called *Tao Te Ching*, the “Writing of God’s Way for a Good Life.”

Like Confucius, Laozi had been troubled by the violence of his times. He thought it was a mistake to try to change people. He believed that people were naturally good. Man didn’t have to be “controlled.” Too much control was spoiling man. He saw that men were trying to live by “man-made” laws, customs, and traditions. They couldn’t do this and were unhappy. If men follow the ways of Tao, they will lead a good life. He really told each man to “do your own thing” – be yourself.

Laozi wanted people to be closer to nature. He wanted to get away from the rules made by the government or society. To him, the government was selfish and power-hungry. In his world, he would have no rules. He would have people live simple and peaceful lives. “They would find that their plain food is sweet, and that their simple clothes fancy. They would have their war horses become plow horses.” And their homes would then be happy places.

Tao (also written as Dao) means The Way (to happiness). Taoism is not a religion. It’s a philosophy, a way of looking at life and a way of thinking about things. Taoists believe that if you look at life and think about things in the right way, you’ll be much happier. Daoism, which emerged at about the same time as Confucianism, tended to appeal to the underprivileged.

Taoists believe it’s very important to understand The Way Things Are. This does not mean that there are not things we need to change about ourselves, but it’s important to recognize and trust our own Inner Nature, and discover who we are. In the story of “The Ugly Duckling”, when does the duckling stop feeling ugly? When he discovers he’s a Swan. When he recognizes who he really is, a beautiful swan, he finds his Way to happiness.

The followers of Taoism aim to achieve harmony with the principle of the way by stilling and emptying the mind.

Tao (literal: Path or Way) is what Taoism is all about. Following Tao is following the way of Taoism. This “way” is discussed in the *Tao Te Ching*, which elaborates on Yin and Yang, Wu Wei, Governing, the Three Jewels, and others.

In Taoism, Yin and Yang are negative and positive principles of the universe. One cannot exist without the other, and they often represent opposites in relations to each other. As you have more and more Yang, eventually, Yin will appear and replace this increase. Similarly in the opposite direction, Yang will appear to replace the increase in Yin.

The Yin Yang symbol (circle with black and white sections) depicts this clearly. As you travel around

the circle, white or black will increase, until the opposite color is almost gone, but never totally gone. The cycle then repeats for the opposite color.

What seems like Yin is often supported by Yang, and vice-versa. As an example, to truly know good, you must know what evil is, and without good as a comparison, nothing is evil. Thus, while keeping to one end, do not shun the opposite end, but embrace both as they are. Allowing Yin to flourish, you welcome Yang. By letting go of Yin, you are waiting for its return. As an example, before you can possess something, you must be willing to let it go.

Yin and Yang often represent the following opposites...



### Yin

Negative  
Female  
Dark  
Evil  
Earth

### Yang

Positive  
Male  
Light  
Good  
Heaven

## **Buddhism**

Siddhartha Gautama was a prince who lived in the kingdom of Sakyas, near the present day border of India and Nepal, more than 2500 years ago. The young prince was raised in great luxury, but he was not happy. He wanted to understand what caused human suffering. He did not understand why some people were rich and others were poor. Why some people were healthy and others sickly.

Siddhartha left his palace and lived as an ascetic. An ascetic is a person who has few material possessions and has given up all pleasures and comforts. He prayed and fasted. To fast is to eat little or no food. Siddhartha fasted so strictly that he nearly died, but he was still not satisfied. Finally, Siddhartha sat down under a bodhi tree and determined to understand why he had failed to find a satisfying way of life. Late that night Siddhartha Gautama became enlightened.



Siddhartha told other people of his enlightenment. He became well known for his teaching. Siddhartha's students called him "the Buddha," which means "the Enlightened One," and the followers of Siddhartha's teachings are called Buddhists.

The Buddha taught his followers to seek balance in their lives. The path to happiness is neither through indulgence nor denial, but a "middle way." Siddhartha taught that by putting aside your ego, you can escape the cycle of death and rebirth to reach Nirvana.

The Buddha was an oral teacher; he left no written body of thought. His beliefs were codified by later followers.

At the core of the Buddha's enlightenment was the realization of the Four Noble Truths:

(1) Life is suffering. This is more than a mere recognition of the presence of suffering in existence. It is a statement that, in its very nature, human existence is essentially painful from the moment of birth to the moment of death. Even death brings no relief, for the Buddha accepted the Hindu idea of life as cyclical, with death leading to further rebirth.

(2) All suffering is caused by ignorance of the nature of reality and the craving, attachment, and grasping that result from such ignorance.

(3) Suffering can be ended by overcoming ignorance and attachment.

(4) The path to the suppression of suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path, which consists of right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right-mindedness, and right contemplation.

These eight are usually divided into three categories that form the cornerstone of Buddhist faith: morality, wisdom, and concentration.

The Chinese people loved life. They thought that it was worth living. Why were the ideas of Buddha, who wanted to get away from life, so interesting to the Chinese?

When Buddhism came to China around 100 AD, there were many civil wars and much violence. The ideas of Confucius were becoming old. Confucianism was not really a religion. It told people how to act in society. But it did not tell people too much about themselves or their gods. Buddhism gave people a feeling that peace was possible. And it called for an end to all violence, all selfishness, and all wars.

Millions of Chinese turned to Buddhism. They were good people who hoped to avoid being born again into a life with worries and miseries. Buddhism teaches that souls are reborn until they become perfect. Buddhism became part of the daily life of many Chinese people. It became part of their religious ceremonies, their buildings, and their arts. More than anything else, it became part of their attitudes.



## **Confucianism**

Confucius was born around 551 BC in Zhou times. His parents were nobility, but had become poor when the empire disintegrated into feudal states. When he was about 15 years old, he became quite interested in learning. In those days, only the nobility and royalty were allowed education. All the teachers were government officials. It was hard for him to find a way to learn. To solve this, he went to work for a nobleman. This gave him the opportunity to travel to the imperial capital.

Confucius studied and learned until he probably was the most learned man of his day. People heard of his knowledge and sent their sons to study with him. He was the first private teacher in China. Confucius taught anyone who was eager to learn. His ideas, called Confucianism, stress the need to develop responsibility and moral character through rigid rules of behavior.

Confucianism is not, properly speaking, a religion; it's a way of behaving, so you'll do the right things.

Confucianism, in T'ang times, was a social code of behavior, a very set and rigid code of behavior, that honored ancestors and ancient rituals. Everything had to be done a certain way. One of his rules, for example, was that gentlemen could only display their skill as archers on three hunts a year, in the spring, autumn, and winter. Today, the Chinese celebrate Confucius Birthday (Teacher's Day), in honor of their ancestor, the teacher, Confucius.

Confucianism, the major system of thought in China, developed from the teachings of Confucius and his disciples, and is concerned with the principles of good conduct, practical wisdom, and proper social relationships. Confucianism has influenced the Chinese attitude toward life, set the patterns of living and standards of social value, and provided the background for Chinese political theories and institutions. It has spread from China to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam and has aroused interest among Western scholars.

Although Confucianism became the official ideology of the Chinese state, it has never existed as an established religion with a church and priesthood. Chinese scholars honored Confucius as a great teacher and sage but did not worship him as a personal god. Nor did Confucius himself ever claim divinity. Unlike Christian churches, the temples built to Confucius were not places in which organized community groups gathered to worship, but public edifices designed for annual ceremonies, especially on the philosopher's birthday.

The principles of Confucianism are contained in the nine ancient Chinese works handed down by Confucius and his followers, who lived in an age of great philosophic activity. These writings can be divided into two groups: the Five Classics and the Four Books.

Confucius believed that people were happier when they were following the rules of good behavior. There must be rules to follow so that people will trust each other – ruler and citizen, father and son, husband and wife, brother and brother, friend and friend. This brought forth the Golden Rule, “what you do not like done to you, do not do to others.”

Confucius said, “The best kind of government for this great man was one in which rulers were wise and honest. A government should set a good example for its people. A good government makes its people happy.” And so, the government began to store grain. In bad harvest years the people would have enough to eat and prices would not be too high. Many of the smartest and best officials were given the task of checking on the behavior of all government officials. These officials had to be honest and hard working. They also listened carefully to the complaints of the people. And they reported to the rulers what the people wanted. The ‘checking officials’ were given the right to correct any other official, no matter how high his rank. They didn’t have to worry about revenge.

In order for this government to work well, the rulers had to be highly educated men. Confucius said, “The ruler who is well educated learns to love the people he rules. And the average people, when educated well, learn to love their government.” To Confucius, good education helped keep people together. When people are educated, the differences between them disappear.

In later years, even though most people could not go to school, people everywhere understood the importance of education. Men of learning were greatly respected. Very often, people in a small village would notice a child who was especially smart, and even though they were poor, they would help raise enough money to send him to school. They were proud of him, and he brought great honor to them. After a while, all government officials were chosen by their education.

## Thinking About the Three Teachings of Ancient China



1. Who was Laozi and what was the idea that Laozi said as he crossed the border?
2. Why do you think he said this?
3. What does Tao mean?
4. True or False, Taoism is a religion.
5. What was it that Laozi wanted people to do?
6. Would Laozi like the way that you live your life? Explain why or why not
7. According to Taoism, \_\_\_\_\_ are the principle of the universe. One \_\_\_\_\_ exist without \_\_\_\_\_.



8. Who was the founder of Buddhism?
9. What was it that he did not understand?
  - 1.
  - 2.
10. What is an ascetic?
11. Could you live your life as an ascetic? Explain why or why not
12. What did Buddha teach his followers?
13. True or False, Buddha wrote down all of his information for future generations.

14. What are the Four Noble Truths?

15. Around \_\_\_\_\_ Buddhism came to China.

16. Why did so many people in China like the ideas associated with Buddhism?

17. What do you think about the ideas of Buddhism? Explain your answer



18. Confucius was born around \_\_\_\_\_ in Zhou times.

19. Confucianism is not, properly speaking, a \_\_\_\_\_; it's a way of \_\_\_\_\_, so you'll do \_\_\_\_\_.

20. What was the social code of behavior of Confucianism during T'ang times?

21. According to Confucius, when were people happier?

22. Do you agree with him? Explain your answer

23. What did Confucius mean with his trust relationships? (ruler – citizen, father – son, husband – wife, brother – brother, friend – friend)

24. To Confucius, education was very important. How do you think Confucius would feel about the middle school? Please explain your response.