

The Way

Tao is a Chinese term which translates literally as the “way”. The first written text to describe the Tao is the Tao-Te Ching, written by Lao-Tzu (The old master). The Tao-Te Ching is a series of poems that can be considered to be a work of philosophy, a treatise on how to run a government, a how-to book for achieving a balanced life, or a sage’s reflection of humanity and the universe. It is known to have been written over 2400 years ago but not much else is retained about the origins. Many fun stories abound about these origins; however, these are just that, stories¹. What is important is that the Tao-Te Ching and its poetry survive, having had an impact on the course of human events over the past 2400 years. It’s an interesting book, worth skimming. I say “skim” because it is written in a light-hearted manner. If a reader stares too hard or takes the Tao-Te Ching too literally, the multiple intentions within the poetry will be lost.

Most interestingly, a person who never reads the Tao-Te Ching may be closer to the Tao than a person who reads the Tao-Te Ching a thousand times. The Tao is a personal truth unique to everyone. Personal truth is not found in another person’s writing: it’s found within us. Taoist sages and the Tao-Te Ching will only act as a guide; the actual discovery of truth is always performed through our own actions.

This creates an interesting problem: How to explain something which is unique to each person? A tack often taken is to use metaphors or similes such as:

Discovering the Tao is swimming in the deepest of rivers, where the more one examines the Tao, the deeper it becomes. A person starts off swimming with simple movement; this is the Tao. Our choices made in exploring the river means everyone meanders thru an entire *personal* universe, yet the entire *outer* universe has its own currents which buffet and influence each one of us - **completely**- back. This is the Tao. Finally, enlightenment occurs when a person awakens upon the other shore of the river, where both the river and their clothes are gone, leaving one naked in the sand. This is also the Tao.

Metaphors / similes, while powerful, often leave people thinking: “**Huh?**” as they fail to provide a direct answer. The point is to invoke a person’s consideration of their own experiences. This process of self reflection is the tool used to describe the Tao. However, this approach often has the problem of being confusing or even useless as we all have very different experiences.

The other common Taoist tact is to only use indirect references and “not’ logic” to define the Tao. “Not” logic works since the Tao seems in large part outside of our overall experience. It’s a similar concept to infinity. Just when you have a number big enough to describe infinity, you add one, and the identity of infinity expands out yet again, to become different yet the same. The Tao represents the other side of infinity as the fundamental absolute.

1) Some of these stories could be true, and some could be fables. As a Taoist, the point is to learn from the mixing of our reactions to the tales. Veracity is best left to history; time will change “truth” for each generation.

Using these basics, anyone can seemingly become a Taoist master and easily assemble standard mystical answers about the Tao. For example:

Knowing of the Tao should not change anything. But it does, just as knowing yourself really shouldn't change who you are, but does. It's the difference between being material or the reflection in the mirror. When the answer is we are both, more and less..... The Tao is every contradiction, every truth and each of the standard circular Yoda Yoga style answers... leaving us trying to hold flowing water in a single *hand*. Try to grasp it, and it's gone, yet our *hands* are wet. Accept the fact that we are each a contradiction. This is the truth being described when answers are bantered about: using one impossible statement to prove another impossible statement...

Forget these endless answers. *Instead Relax*

A reality is: the Tao's definition always changes. The nature of change is illustrated from one simple question: how constant is your definition of self? If you were a rock, you would pretty much know what you were, over time getting eroded into sand then to become dust. But humans lead interestingly convoluted transformative lives before becoming dust! The beauty and complexity of the Tao comes from the constant changing in the way we live and in turn the attempt to describe our own path.

The Tao is a crux and a puzzle which becomes the lever to help one lead a more balanced life. The reason is simple: humans have limits, yet our aspirations are limitless. The goal is to touch and embrace these limitless possibilities. Within these aspirations one can find the Tao waiting for them as a reward. The reward we seek isn't the destination, but the path itself. This means finding the Tao is attainable within ourselves simply by living. Hence we always have access to our Personal Tao.

