



*Chi Nan Temple, Muzha, Taiwan. A temple may be dedicated to one god, in this case Lü Dongbin, one of the Eight Immortals, but also include figures of the Yellow Emperor, Confucius, Buddha, and Lao Tzu, as well as others.*

*Courtesy of Kasuga Huang.*

## CHAPTER 8

# TAOISM

*Taoism has in its philosophical form profound similarities with the Spirit-guided life which Latter-day Saints seek to live.*

**T**aoism (Daoism) comes in two basic forms—philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism. We will treat both but will begin with philosophical. The kind of Taoism practiced in the world today is religious Taoism, a form closely allied with ancient Chinese religious life and somewhat foreign to Latter-day Saint experience. Philosophical Taoism, on the other hand, has several aspects which will feel familiar to members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

### — ORIGINS —

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#### FOUNDER

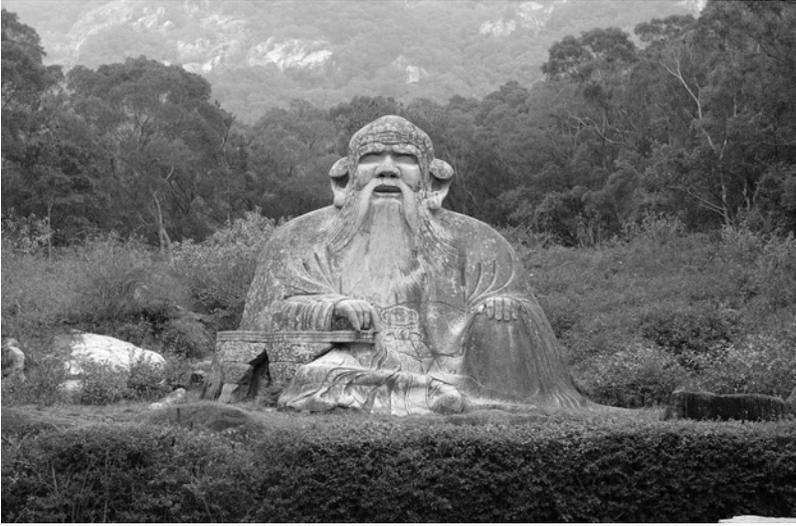
Among scholars there is debate about the founder of philosophical Taoism to the extent that some question whether Lao Tzu, the traditional founding figure, even existed. Interestingly, modern scholars of religion have become more and more skeptical about knowing anything about the religious figures of the past. This is true

even of Jesus, many scholars claiming that the Gospels contain no historically accurate information about him. It is the sense of the current author that this “doubting Thomas” attitude has gone too far. Thus for the purposes of this chapter, we will accept Lao Tzu as the founder of the philosophical Taoist school, and we will accept him as the author of the foundational text, the *Tao Te Ching* (or *Dao de Jing*).

According to tradition, Lao Tzu was born in 604 BCE. It seems that Lao Tzu held a government position, perhaps keeper of the royal archives. However, he became discouraged with society and decided to leave. As we have seen with Confucius, who was a slightly younger contemporary of Lao Tzu, China in the sixth century BCE stood on the verge of the Period of the Warring States. Thus, China was bordering on anarchy, and it seems to be this state of affairs with which Lao Tzu became disenchanted. Tradition holds that Lao Tzu mounted his black ox and left the city. As he arrived at the western pass, the gatekeeper stopped him, and when he discovered that Lao Tzu was leaving, he asked him to write down his thoughts. In five thousand Chinese characters and eighty-one chapters, Lao Tzu wrote the *Tao Te Ching*, climbed back on his black ox, and disappeared into the sunset, never to be heard from again. Thus, there is no death date for him.

Lao Tzu had a disciple who lived about three hundred years after him by the name of Chuang Tzu (died 275 BCE). Chuang Tzu, who wrote the *Chuang Tzu*, is usually credited with being the best interpreter of the *Tao Te Ching*. In this chapter, we will use parts of the *Tao Te Ching* as well as parts of the *Chuang Tzu* to come to an understanding of philosophical Taoism. One of the reasons to treat Taoism after Confucianism is that Chuang Tzu liked to poke fun at the Confucianists, and if we reversed the order, we would miss some of his jokes.

As we will see, the *Tao Te Ching* is not always easy to understand, but in a very real sense it is not to be “understood,” at least with the mind. As we have already noted, Eastern religions do not see reality as something that can be comprehended intellectually. Ultimate reality is to be experienced, not thought about in the abstract. We will also discover that some of the *Tao Te Ching* may seem contradictory to Western ears. In reality, it is not contradictory at all but rather *complementary*.



*Lao Tzu, who was disenchanted with society, wrote the Tao Te Ching and departed, never to be heard of again. Courtesy of Tommy Wong.*

If we remember that yin and yang are complementary opposites and that everything contains within itself its opposite, then we will understand the *Tao Te Ching*. Some literary statements contain within themselves these opposites, and they have a name—“reversions.” Thus, if the Taoist statements seem confusing, we should relax, not worry if we do not understand every word, and let the essence of philosophical Taoism seep into our hearts. With philosophical Taoism, as with Zen Buddhism, we need to be prepared for a new experience.

## — PRINCIPLES OF PHILOSOPHICAL TAOISM —

### *THE TAO*

Not too surprisingly, the Tao is the center of Taoism, but as we shall see, it is indefinable. We get a sense of this from the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*.

Tao called Tao is not Tao.

Names can name no lasting name.

Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth.

Naming: the mother of ten thousand things.

## LIGHT & TRUTH

Empty of desire, perceive mystery.

Filled with desire, perceive manifestations.

These have the same source, but different names.

Call them both deep—

Deep and again deep:

The gateway to all mystery.<sup>1</sup>

The above is, of course, crystal clear, but in the off chance that something has been missed, we will look at Chuang Tzu's commentary on the passage. As will be noted, Chuang Tzu often comments in story form.

Ether asked Infinite, "Do you know Tao?"

"I don't know," replied Infinite.

He asked No-action the same question and No-action replied, "I know Tao."

"So you know Tao. Can you specify?"

"Certainly. I know that Tao can be high, can be low, can be centered and can be dispersed. These are some of the specifications that I know."

Ether told No-beginning of No-action's words and asked, "Thus Infinite says he does not know and No-action says he knows. Who is right?"

"The one who thinks he does not know is profound, and the one who thinks he knows is shallow. The former deals with the inner reality, the latter with appearance."

Ether raised his head and sighed: "Then one who does not know really knows, and one who knows really does not know. Who knows this knowledge without knowing?"<sup>2</sup>

Once again, in the event that something has been lost in translation, we will turn to another source for clarity. This is something even I can understand, because it gets down to the level where I live. The commentator in this case is Winnie the Pooh.

"We've come to wish you a Very Happy Thursday," said Pooh, when he had gone in and out once or twice just to make sure that he *could* get out again.

“Why, what’s going to happen on Thursday?” asked Rabbit, and when Pooh had explained, and Rabbit, whose life was made up of Important Things, said, “Oh, I thought you’d really come about something,” they sat down for a little, . . . and by-and-by Pooh and Piglet went on again. The wind was behind them now, so they didn’t have to shout.

“Rabbit’s clever,” said Pooh thoughtfully.

“Yes,” said Piglet, “Rabbit’s clever.”

“And he has Brain.”

“Yes,” said Piglet, “Rabbit has Brain.”

There was a long silence.

“I suppose,” said Pooh, “that that’s why he never understands anything.”<sup>3</sup>

From the above, several things should be clear. From the first passage, we should be able to see that names cannot capture the Tao. It is in and behind all things but is indefinable. When we do try to put names to it, all we do is name phenomena that arise from it. The Tao is a mystery. From the *Chuang Tzu* passage and from Winnie the Pooh, we learn that reality is not captured by the intellect. Tao is something that transcends all definitions. Rabbit never understands anything because he is trying to capture it with “Brain.” So, likewise, we need to experience reality rather than trying to think about it. A further passage gives a bit more insight into the Tao.

Tao is empty—

Its use never exhausted.

Bottomless—

The origin of all things.

It blunts sharp edges,

Unties knots,

Softens glare,

Becomes one with the dusty world.

Deeply subsistent—

I don’t know whose child it is.

It is older than the Ancestor.<sup>4</sup>

## LIGHT & TRUTH

Here I would suggest as the meaning of this passage that we learn that all things arise from the Tao but that it is not sharp, complicated, or brilliant. It is close to us where we live. It has no origin of its own. It is self-subsistent. Lin Yutang says this about the Tao:

The Tao of the Taoist is the divine intelligence of the universe, the source of things, the life-giving principle; it informs and transforms all things; it is impersonal, impartial, and has little regard for individuals. . . . Above all, the one important message of Taoism is the oneness and spirituality of the material universe.<sup>5</sup>

### WU-WEI

A central concept in philosophical Taoism is that of *wu-wei*, a term which means “inaction” or “nonaction.” It is not, however, what it seems at first blush. A working definition might be as follows (and notice this is a reversion): *wu-wei* means inaction or nonaction, which is the Taoist action by which all things are accomplished and the world is conquered. We can learn more about *wu-wei* from chapter 22 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Crippled becomes whole,  
Crooked becomes straight,  
Hollow becomes full,  
Worn becomes new,  
Little becomes more,  
Much becomes delusion.

Therefore Sages cling to the One  
And take care of this world;  
Do not display themselves  
And therefore shine.  
Do not assert themselves  
And therefore stand out.  
Do not praise themselves  
And therefore succeed.  
Are not complacent  
And therefore endure;

Do not contend  
 And therefore no one under heaven  
 Can contend with them.<sup>6</sup>

As we seek to understand wu-wei, we will begin with the portion which recommends noncontention. As we do, we should ask the question “How many people does it take to make a fight?” Obviously, it takes two, and if we will not participate in fights, there can be none.

During a father-son overnight outing, I was not paying too much attention to what was going on with the boys. Suddenly, I realized that people were flying off the top of a nearby dirt pile. I looked and discovered that the boys were playing King of the Mountain with my son on top, and the rest of the boys were trying to get him off. My son today is a fifth-degree black belt in Kenpo Karate, and at that point he was pretty well advanced. As I watched, all he was doing was using his hands to pass the force of the other boys’ rushes on by him so that he just helped them go where their momentum would naturally take them—flying off the top of the hill. This was wu-wei—not meeting force with force but rather letting things take their natural course, which was clearly to his advantage.

Another question we might ask is “How many great people do we know who have to tell us they are great?” True greatness just naturally shows. Sages “do not praise themselves and therefore succeed.” A Hindu Guru naturally draws people to him because they see qualities of spirituality that they want for themselves. He never has to hang out a sign. So it is with the holy men and women of virtually any faith. Greatness is evident. This is wu-wei.

One final example of wu-wei in the above passage is found in the words “crooked becomes straight.” Anyone who has ever traveled in the Far East knows that scaffolding is usually made from bamboo and not from steel or aluminum. Why? Because bamboo bends. In a typhoon, bamboo bends before the wind but does not break, whereas steel or aluminum would bend permanently and henceforth be useless. But as the natural force of the wind subsides, the bamboo straightens and is once more useful. This is wu-wei.

We see the power of wu-wei in the following passage on world peace.

## LIGHT & TRUTH

Tao endures without a name,  
Yet nothing is left undone.  
If kings and lords could possess it,  
All beings would transform themselves.

Transformed, they desire to create;  
I quiet them through nameless simplicity.  
Then there is no desire.

No desire is serenity,  
And the world settles of itself.<sup>7</sup>

Imagine that you are standing by a stream and someone drops a huge boulder into it. What does the water do? It simply flows around the boulder. But what happens when someone drops a boulder into our stream? We are Westerners. We have to make deserts blossom like a rose, so we haul out the dynamite, the pickax, and the shovel and go to work on it. Yet we cannot move it. It is too big and permanent. So are many things that are in our lives. No matter how badly we want them to go away—the divorce of our parents, the death of a friend or sibling, the failed class, the child that has gone astray—they are just simply there. We can either bang our heads against the problem until we have a headache, or we can be like the water, finding a creative way to flow around the problem. That is wu-wei.

Another passage from the *Tao Te Ching* teaches us that everything can be accomplished through wu-wei.

Pursue knowledge, gain daily.  
Pursue Tao, lose daily.  
Lose and again lose,  
Arrive at non-doing.  
Non-doing—and nothing not done.  
Take the entire world as nothing.  
Make the least effort,  
And the world escapes you.<sup>8</sup>

This time, let us imagine a wide river. On one side of me is a Confucianist and on the other is a philosophical Taoist. Both want to get to the other side of the river; notice that for the Taoist, *wu-wei* does not mean that he or she does not have desires. In this case, the person just wants to get to the other side of a rather large river. So, how is the Confucianist going to swim this river? For a Confucianist, everything has to be done according to *Li* in the proper way. On top of this, he is a good Euclidian, and, remembering the first theorem he learned on the first day of geometry, he knows that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Thus, he dives in and swims straight across the river and flops on the opposite bank utterly exhausted from the effort.

How will the Taoist swim the river? By *wu-wei*, of course. She will wander into the river, letting the current catch her. She will paddle a bit with her hands and feet but not exert herself. In a little while she ends up two miles downstream, and she gets out, goes on her way refreshed, while the Confucianist is still lying on the bank upstream recovering. Remember that *wu-wei* may mean inaction or nonaction, but it is the Taoist *action*. Taoist action is nonegoistic and in natural harmony with the Tao. Nothing is ever forced, for force defeats itself. There is a natural flow and harmony to all things, and to be out of harmony with that flow is harmful. In true harmony with the flow, everything is possible.

We will end this section with a passage from *Chuang Tzu*.

[Says Chuang Tzu] By a man without passions I mean one who does not permit likes and dislikes to disturb his internal economy, but rather falls in line with nature and does not try to improve upon [the materials of] living.<sup>9</sup>

Once again, to our Western ears this sounds almost blasphemous! Not try to improve on the materials of life? What about the Protestant work ethic? Remember that the desert was supposed to blossom? But I wonder if these attitudes really capture the essence of life. I wonder if we in the West truly understand what happiness is. I hear students all the time making statements like the following: "I will be happy when I finish this rotten religion class." "I will be happy when I graduate."

“I will be happy when I get my first job.” “I will be happy when I get married.” If we live like this, we will never be happy because we are depending on things outside ourselves to make us happy. Happiness is something which we find within ourselves and which we carry with us. I pity the person who must be married to be happy, because the marriage likely will not last. The partners will always disappoint one another in some way. If persons want a successful marriage, they need to be happy single, and then there is a real possibility for being happy plural because they have found their own happiness inwardly.

Mistakenly, we tend to live as if we will live forever. We live as if we have forever to find happiness. We live in the search but rarely in the moment. It is to live in the moment that philosophical Taoism teaches us. The past is over. The future is not yet here. We can worry about neither, because they have little relevance to the contemporary moment. In reality, all we have is this little slice of the present moment. Are we present in it or lost somewhere wallowing in the past or hunkered down, scared to death of the future? Philosophical Taoism tells us that neither is helpful or real. We should open our eyes and travel with the natural harmony of the universe, for when we do, there is no fear in the moment. Perhaps Muhammad said it best: “Live in this life as if you live forever; live in this life as if you die tomorrow. The balance between the two is Islam.”<sup>10</sup> So it is for all of us.

From a Latter-day Saint perspective, to comment on the Tao and wu-wei requires us to deal with the two terms together. As we have seen, the Tao is impersonal, yet people have a mystical relationship with it which ensures that life will flow properly. But suppose we were to personalize the Tao. Would it be like anything in Latter-day Saint thought? Yes—it would be very much like the Holy Ghost. Latter-day Saints talk a great deal about living by the Spirit, something that we all know is not easy. The basic idea, however, is that our goal should be to live so closely to the Spirit that we have the mind of God. We should be like Nephi in the book of Helaman, to whom God says, “I will make thee mighty in word and in deed, in faith and in works; yea, even that all things shall be done unto thee according to thy word, for thou shalt not ask that which is contrary to my will” (Helaman 10:5).

Think how closely one would have to walk with the Spirit to never ask amiss of the Lord. Nephi accomplished that. He had reached the goal that Jeremiah stated when he said:

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.  
(Jeremiah 31:33–34)

Why will they no longer have to teach each other? Because they all possess the mind of God by walking with the Spirit! Is this not very similar to walking in harmony with the Tao? When persons do so, nothing can go wrong, for they are in harmony with the universe. This humble walk is *wu-wei* and is similar to what is required of the Latter-day Saints if they are to have the Spirit with them always. We cannot force that Spirit. Rather, we must be like little children in our humbleness and obedience if we are to be in harmony with that Spirit. *Wu-wei* in Latter-day Saint terms is to live by the Spirit.

#### GOVERNMENT

Lao Tzu was a slightly earlier contemporary of Confucius. Confucius's ultimate goal was to bring about a harmonious society because he was living on the eve of the Warring States Period. Similarly, people misread Lao Tzu if they believe him to be concerned solely with the individual's harmony with the Tao, because the last third of the *Tao Te Ching* is concerned with proper government. Lao Tzu sought the very same thing that Confucius sought, but they approached the problem with different tools. Confucius came at the problem with values like *Li*, *Jen*, and *Hsiao*, while the Taoists see these as artificial and attempting to force the Tao. Government should flow naturally and harmoniously and should not be bound by human principles, no matter how lofty they may appear. Thus, Lao Tzu says:

## *LIGHT & TRUTH*

Use the expected to govern the country,  
Use surprise to wage war,  
Use non-action to win the world.  
How do I know?

Like this!

The more prohibitions and rules,  
    The poorer people become.  
The sharper people's weapons,  
    The more they riot.  
The more skilled their techniques,  
    The more grotesque their works.  
The more elaborate the laws,  
    The more they commit crimes.

Therefore the Sage says:  
    I do nothing  
And people transform themselves.  
    I enjoy serenity  
And people govern themselves.  
    I cultivate emptiness  
And people become prosperous.  
    I have no desires  
And people simplify themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the above seems impossible, but I wonder. First, "I enjoy serenity and people govern themselves" sounds very much like Joseph Smith's "I teach them correct principles, and they govern themselves."<sup>12</sup> We are free to choose our path. In addition, and this author's commentary is a bit tongue-in-cheek, there is a little here for everyone of whatever political persuasion. For example, many people hold that government interference in small businesses makes it difficult for people to earn a living because of the "prohibitions and rules." For others, Lao Tzu acknowledges that weapons cause problems in society and that maybe there should be gun controls. However, we have seen that Taoists would not pass an ordinance, but rather they would model by their lives, harmony with the Tao. Some persons would undoubtedly agree that greater skill in art or music does create grotesque things (i.e., some modern art

and contemporary music). Finally, I wonder if we have ever thought about all the laws that are passed and the consequences of doing so. Lao Tzu suggests that the more laws there are, the more there are to break, and thus we are automatically creating criminals. In other words, the more we force and legislate, the more trouble we create.

The last portion of the section quoted above seems to Western ears utterly irrelevant to contemporary life. However, from my personal experience, lack of force can provide positive results. In one of my previous “incarnations,” I served as the administrative vice president of a small, church-related private college. My predecessor believed that it was his job to control every nickel that the institution spent, and thus he felt it was his job to determine how many fetal pigs the biology department needed, how much paint the art department could use, and how many test tubes the chemistry department should have. Needless to say, he was not loved by faculty, and when they had the opportunity to spend money, they did not always spend it wisely, in order to spite this person.

I came into the position from the faculty, so I had some of the feelings that my colleagues had. I was also convinced that the iron fist approach would not work. Thus, I told the faculty that it was not my call on the number of fetal pigs or test tubes, and I certainly had no idea of the amount of paint the art department needed. What I could tell them was how much money they had, and I could tell them when it was gone. It was, however, up to them how it was spent. In essence, I gave them both responsibility and authority. I enjoyed “serenity,” and the faculty “governed themselves.” At the end of the year, we had funds left over. This style of management has become more common in certain segments of the business world. Many years ago, Texas Instruments began “quality circles” in which management and labor were brought together to work out problems, thereby creating a more productive working environment. That is the *wu-wei* mode of governance. It brings people together to solve problems rather than imposing solutions from above.

Advice on how to solve problems is also given in the *Tao Te Ching*. We read:

The most difficult things in the world  
Must be accomplished through the easiest.

## LIGHT & TRUTH

The greatest things in the world  
Must be accomplished through the smallest.  
Therefore the Sage  
Never attempts great things  
And so accomplishes them.<sup>13</sup>

The point here is that if we never let problems get large, we have accomplished greatness. Imagine a world that had the wisdom to deal with nuclear proliferation in 1946. Today, the problem is so awful and looming that it may never be solvable. Consider marriage. Having done a good deal of marriage counseling, I know that people store up their hurts and woes until they finally just explode from some trifling stimulus. The sack into which they have been stuffing all their unspoken hurts and slights finally can hold no more. Suppose, however, that these couples dealt daily with the small bumps of life, lovingly saying what they felt and asking for equally loving responses. They would be great because they would never have to deal with great problems. In marriage, daily work conversations can be immensely helpful in preventing any problem from getting out of hand.

So what would the ideal philosophical Taoist society look like? Clearly, the ideal ruler over that society would be one who led by example and did not force ideas or legislation on the people. The next-to-last chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* gives us insight into this society:

Small country, few people—  
Hundreds of devices,  
But none are used.

People ponder on death  
And don't travel far.  
They have carriages and boats,  
But no one goes on board;  
Weapons and armor,  
But no one brandishes them.  
They use knotted cords for counting.

Sweet their food,  
 Beautiful their clothes,  
 Peaceful their homes,  
 Delightful their customs.

Neighboring countries are so close  
 You can hear their chickens and dogs.  
 But people grow old and die  
 Without needing to come and go.<sup>14</sup>

It would seem that this is a peaceful, prosperous people with all they could possibly need. It sounds much like we who live in the West, but somehow the peaceful part has escaped us, perhaps because we are never satisfied, no matter how much we have. We are constantly looking to see what is in other people's driveways. We covet their houses and playthings, be they big or small. Yet in the Taoist society, there is a quiet simplicity. They are not like the bear that has to go over the mountain merely to see what is on the other side. They determine time (sort of) by tying cords. They enjoy their food, clothing, homes, and customs, and they live in close harmony with their neighbors. They enjoy life and let it be natural. They are happy where they are planted. Who could ask for more?

Both Confucianism and Taoism were concerned with government and the stability of society. Confucianism was concerned that government be moral, which would be congruent with Latter-day Saint desires. We are often counseled to vote for those who best reflect the values we hold. Morality in government would certainly be one of those values. Confucianism, however, also wants to force life into little boxes, whereas Taoism seeks to find a government that will follow the Tao without force. Once again, this brings us back to living by the Spirit, which is the ultimate goal of the Latter-day Saint when he or she envisions the ideal government. This government will appear in the Millennium with the Savior at the head and with people living by the Spirit. Unfortunately, it is difficult to have a great deal of optimism about the nature of secular government, for the concepts of "moral" government or "living by the Spirit" are simply not part of the modern world.

## LIGHT & TRUTH

### HUMILITY

After wu-wei, humility is probably the most important virtue, and water is the principal symbol of humility. The *Tao Te Ching* states:

Best to be like water,  
Which benefits the ten thousand things  
And does not contend.  
It pools where humans disdain to dwell,  
Close to the Tao.<sup>15</sup>

In essence, water flows to the lowest places, which are antithetical to normal human inclinations. We want to reside on mountaintops, not in the lowest places, but it is in those low places that one is closest to the Tao through humility. We also read:

Nothing in the world is soft and weak as water.  
But when attacking the hard and strong  
Nothing can conquer so easily.

Weak overcomes strong,  
Soft overcomes hard.

Everyone knows this,  
No one attains it.

Therefore the Sage says:  
Accept a country's filth  
And become master of its sacred soil.  
Accept country's ill fortune  
And become king under heaven.

True words resemble their opposites.<sup>16</sup>

Arrogance and force accomplish little. The ability of water to flow around obstacles and to reach the low places gives it power. To be in harmony with the Tao, we must have the humility to live where we are placed. From there, through humility and wu-wei, the world will be conquered. Finally, ultimate humility is to have no egotistical interest in how things go, as the seventh chapter of the *Tao Te Ching* tells us:

Heaven is long, Earth enduring.

Long and enduring  
Because they do not exist for themselves.

Therefore the Sage  
Steps back, but is always in front,  
Stays outside, but is always within.

No self-interest?  
Self is fulfilled.<sup>17</sup>

The passage on humility in the *Tao Te Ching* sounds almost like Philippians 2:5–9:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name.

In this passage, Heavenly Father shows us the way to gain the celestial kingdom. We simply have to forget about it and give ourselves away in the service of others with no thought for ourselves, in precisely the same way Jesus did. He was God, yet he gave up all his glory to live a human life; to suffer our trials, temptations, and pains; and to suffer for our sins. For Latter-day Saint Christians, service and self-sacrifice with no thought for themselves are the path to the celestial kingdom, just as humility in harmony with the Tao is a product of “No self-interest? Self is fulfilled” in the *Tao Te Ching*.

— PRINCIPLES OF RELIGIOUS TAOISM —

One does not find philosophical Taoism practiced in China today. Certainly the Chinese have embodied some of its quiescence and peacefulness, but the form of Taoism that is practiced in

Taiwan and mainland China is religious Taoism. Religious Taoism has in a way always been in China, for it encompasses all the elements of the ancient Chinese religion that were treated earlier. It is here that we still have the multiplicity of gods, reverence for ancestors, and divination.

*THE DIVINE HIERARCHY*

The heavenly courts resemble that of the emperor on earth. There is a hierarchy, at the head of which stand the Three Pure Ones. The first of these is “the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning.” He is as close to the idea of God as one might find in the East, for he seems to have created everything out of primordial energy. The second is “the Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure” and is the source of scripture and knowledge. The third is “the Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Power,” who is identified as the deified Lao Tzu, who authored the *Tao Te Ching* and participated in the development of China.<sup>18</sup> These three deities seem rather distant, but under them are a myriad of other gods, many of whom are humans elevated to godhood. These other gods, however, are not supreme, for tricks can be played on them, they sometimes need rescuing, and they can be mocked.

At the top of this lower hierarchy stands the Jade Emperor, who controls the natural elements but is one deity that is sometimes mocked. In conjunction with him are Tao Chun, the ruler of yin and yang, and Lao Tzu again. Notice that Lao Tzu may be located in many places in the Taoist chart of divinities. Under these last three may be Huang Ti (the Yellow Emperor), who is considered to be the father of human knowledge and the ancestor of all peoples. With him is Kwan Yin, who actually is a figure from Buddhism—the bodhisattva of compassion in feminine form—and is probably the most popular of all divine figures in China. She is the goddess who rescues people in need; she even rescued the Jade Emperor on one occasion. The third person of this triangle is once again Lao Tzu, the wise guide, but he like others may be subject to ridicule. So, these are not gods that are all-powerful or all-knowing. They have their foibles and follies. The most senior god on earth is the Grand Emperor of the Eastern Peak, who resides on Mount Tai, or Tai Shan, which is the easternmost of

the five sacred mountains. Under the earth are ten levels of hell, presided over by various deities.

The most popular figures at the lay level are the Eight Immortals. These are figures that seem to have one foot in the immortal world and one in the mortal. They assist some people and play tricks on others. Their stories are enjoyable to read and bring laughter to religion. All have been humans before becoming immortals.

#### *SPIRIT AND ANCESTOR WORSHIP*

As we have already seen, there are multiple spirits to worship in Chinese mythology. There are the gods of the earth or the village gods. There are also the family gods of the doors, wells, wealth, hearths, and kitchens. These can all be benevolent if treated properly with appropriate sacrificial offerings. As the emperor has official



*Kwan Yin, the most popular member of the divine hierarchy.*

*Courtesy of Farm.*

## *LIGHT & TRUTH*

duties to his ancestors, so the average person has responsibility to his or her ancestors. While the emperor makes offerings at official shrines, the people may have ancestral temples or home altars where offerings may be made to ancestors. At the popular level, little has changed in three millennia.

### *SACRED MOUNTAINS*

In China there are five sacred mountains, which are believed to hold up the dome of sky. On each mountain are various deities, immortals, and spirits. The most sacred of these is Mount Tai in the east, and emperors for centuries have climbed the mountain to offer sacrifices to the gods, since the mountaintop was as close to the heavenly realm as they could get. The other mountains are Mount Hua (west), Mount Heng (south), Mount Heng (north), and Mount Hsung (middle).<sup>19</sup>

### *TEMPLES*

Religious Taoist temples can be very confusing because at first visitors are not sure whether they are in a Confucian, Buddhist, or Taoist temple. The answer is yes—you are in all three, for religious Taoism is very inclusive in its relationship to the other two religions. A temple may be dedicated to one god, like the god of war, who was a very successful general in life. But in that same temple, there may be figures of the Yellow Emperor, Confucius, Buddha, and Lao Tzu, as well as other less-known figures. Thus, if the temple seems inclusive, it is almost certainly a religious Taoist temple.

### *PRACTICES*

The purpose of religious Taoism is the same as that of philosophical Taoism (i.e., harmony with the Tao). However, the methodologies to attain this harmony and its end result differ significantly. Philosophical Taoism focused primarily on the here and now, living life in harmony with the Tao through wu-wei. There is no forcing of the Tao, as we have seen. Religious Taoism, however, is concerned with health and longevity in this life, as well as with immortality in the next. It was believed that in the eastern sea there was an island called P'eng-lai where immortals dwelt and that there one could find



*Mount Tai is the most sacred of the five sacred mountains.*

the elixir of immortality produced from a sacred mushroom. Several expeditions were dispatched to find this island, but they were either lost at sea or returned without having found it.<sup>20</sup>

The principal difference between philosophical and religious Taoism is that religious Taoism tries through various practices to force harmony, and thus immortality, with the Tao. There were those who sought immortality through elixirs derived from various combinations of the five elements. Some used gymnastics to bring the body into harmony with the Tao, while others used breath control to quiet the body and bring themselves to the state of embryonic respiration (i.e., respiration like that of a baby within the womb). Still others followed hygiene practices under the belief that meat, wine, and the five grains caused the body to decay. Thus, these foods were avoided and replaced with fruits, berries, and roots and tubers.<sup>21</sup> Some practiced sexual exercises in which they sought to withhold

semen at the moment of ejaculation so that the semen combined with breath would cleanse the brain or repair it.<sup>22</sup> Thus, religious Taoism is quite a different world from philosophical Taoism.

— WOMEN —

Theoretically, a woman would be equal and complementary to a man in philosophical Taoism in the same way that yin and yang are complementary opposites. However, it is religious Taoism that predominates in the Chinese world. This tradition is predominantly patriarchal in nature and inculcates the values of Confucianism along with it. Thus a woman's position is below that of a man, as it would be in Confucianism.

— CONCLUSION —

I like philosophical Taoism because it leads us to think about what it really means to live in harmony with the organizing principle of the universe. The concepts of Tao and wu-wei lead me to a deeper understanding of what it means to live by the Spirit. Religious Taoism, on the other hand, is further from my own religious experiences and has less to attract me as a Latter-day Saint.

After reading this last sentence, my colleague Dr. Alonzo Gaskill rightly pointed out that *on the surface*, there seem to be more connections between religious Taoism and Christianity than between philosophical Taoism and Christianity. To make his point, he provided the following chart:

— RELIGIOUS TAOISM —	— PHILOSOPHICAL TAOISM —
Belief in gods	Wu-wei and no gods
Dietary restrictions	No dietary restrictions
Divination or revelation	No revelation
Priests	No priests
Temples	No temples

It is worth examining these similarities because it provides an opportunity to talk about what is a similarity and what is a real parallel. It is true that there are “gods” in religious Taoism, but what

does this mean? They are imperfect, capricious, and in need of help themselves, which is a far cry from what Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are with all their perfections. There are also dietary restrictions, but these are to starve the worms (and thus the person) that live in various centers of the body in order to gain immortality. Latter-day Saint dietary laws are for our physical and spiritual health, not immortality, and they are certainly not designed to starve the body. Further, divination is not revelation and is profoundly condemned in Christian and Jewish scriptures. “A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them” (Leviticus 20:27). Revelation comes directly from God, not through an unauthorized medium who examines the entrails of animals or throws dice or sticks.

The fact that there are priests is a more legitimate parallel, for the priests do rituals similar to ordinances performed by priesthood authority in the Latter-day Saint community. For both traditions, the priesthood plays an essential role. For religious Taoists, temples are usually places of personal worship of one or more deities. There priests may perform rituals for the dead, such as the burning of paper funeral money or paper replicas of items believed to be needed in the afterlife. These same things can also be done in a home, so they are not limited to temples. Thus, there are a few points of legitimate contact between the Latter-day Saint faith and religious Taoism, especially when considering the priesthood. But all are done in the context of a very different understanding of the universe and the gods that inhabit it.

Philosophical Taoism, however, is in my view closer to the *goal* toward which Latter-day Saints should be moving. Granted, there are no gods, priests, or temples; but as we said earlier, if the Tao were personalized, it would be comparable to the Holy Ghost or to Heavenly Father. It is that which gives order to the universe and from which all things arise. If we are in harmony with it, we can never go wrong. I believe the day will come when all the external rules we currently live by will become obsolete because they will be written on our hearts. We will know what to do because we will walk with God and have his will within us. We will not try to bribe him with our good works;

rather, we will simply do them without thinking about them. All will flow smoothly and harmoniously because of our perfect harmony with the will of the Father through the Holy Ghost. It is of this kind of effortless harmony that philosophical Taoism speaks, so I return to my initial statement that more of the goal of my religious life is reflected in philosophical Taoism than in religious Taoism.

Taoism is interesting because it is so diverse. It does, however, have in its philosophical form profound similarities with the Spirit-guided life which Latter-day Saints should live. People live in harmony with the organizing principle of the universe, which for the philosophical Taoist is the Tao and for Latter-day Saints is the Holy Ghost. Religious Taoism is the form of Taoism one would encounter today in Taiwan and mainland China. It is distant from philosophical Taoism in that it depends on “methods” to bring persons into harmony with the Tao rather than relying on humility and “nonaction.”

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— NOTES —

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4. Lao, *Tao Te Ching*, 4.
5. Lin, *Wisdom*, 15.
6. Lao, *Tao Te Ching*, 22.
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14. Lao, *Tao Te Ching*, 80.
15. Lao, *Tao Te Ching*, 8.
16. Lao, *Tao Te Ching*, 78.
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22. Noss and Noss, *History*, 302.