The Tao and the Ying-Yang

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Over the past few learning units we have been introduced to the Eastern tradition of religions, beginning with those religions which started in India (Hinduism and Buddhism). In this Learning Unit, we are looking at two religions which started in China: Taoism (or Daoism) and Confucianism. Both Taoism and Confucianism are essential elements in the great make-up of Chinese cultural and religious history. Lao-Tzu (Lao-Tse), considered to be the founder of Taoism, lived somewhere between 600-500 B.C.; however, the Tao and the symbol of the Yin-Yang go back centuries, perhaps to around the year 1000 B.C. Since the life of Confucius (Kon-futs-e), who died in 479 B.C., Confucianism has also provided the rules of behavior governing Chinese families and society.

However, Taoism and Confucianism may also occasionally come into conflict, particularly in their response to societal breakdown and fragmentation. Confucius stressed the rules of behavior adopted by the “Superior Man” in striving for peace in society and in one’s inner self. Lao-Tzu, on the other hand, taught the concept of “non-action”; that is, that inner and societal peace do not flow out of ethical prescriptions, but rather out of following one’s inner nature. In this lecture, we will examine more closely the fundamental beliefs of Taoism and the even more ancient concept of the Yin-Yang.

The Yin-Yang represents the balance and equilibrium of the universe; it is the unity of necessary opposites, the complementary union of opposing cosmic forces. This union shows up in many dualities, such as good/bad, hot/cold, masculine/feminine, dry/wet, outer/inner, active/passive, light/dark, etc. In each of these dualities listed, the Yang is the first (light, hot, outer, active, good, and so on), while the Yin is the second (dark, cold, inner, passive, bad, and so on). This symbol shows forth the harmony and balance of nature and of the balanced human being within nature. The symbol of the Yin-Yang was readily incorporated into the teachings of Lao-Tzu and the religion of Taoism. Lao-Tzu is also traditionally credited with the writing of the Tao Te Ching, the most important of Taoist scriptures.

Taoism numbers many millions of followers and has been an important cultural influence within Chinese history. Tao means “the way” or “the way of the gods”; it is the cosmic force and balance behind everything that exists. It is non-moral, purposeless, and impersonal; since nothing can be positively predicated of the Tao, it is usually discussed by means of its Five Aspects. The Five Aspects of the Tao are (1) Non-Action (Wu Wei); (2) Relativism; (3) the Identity of Opposites; (4) the law of Return; and (5) the law of Transformation. We will discuss these one at a time.

First: Non-Action or Wu Wei. This does not mean that Taoists are to be lazy or never do anything or never exert themselves. Rather, it means we are to follow the “natural course” of events, not fighting for or against them, like water following its natural course down the side of a mountain. We move into the events of our lives by being our natural selves; everything then occurs to us “naturally.”

Second: Relativism. Taoism teaches that nothing has intrinsic value or worth or purpose; everything’s value or worth or purpose is determined by standards that are relative to what is needed at the time.
Third: the Identity of Opposites. All dualities, such as good/evil, beginning/end, love/hate, and so on, are not really opposites but are identical aspects of the same reality—like two sides of the same coin. For example, the characteristics of an emotional obsession with someone are often identical whether that person is loved or hated. For another example, when we lose something, we in reality gain something else: “That which subtracts from me adds to me.” The gain and loss are identical opposites.

The fourth and fifth aspects of the Tao should really be considered together: They are the Law of Return and the Law of Transformation. We might state it this way: “All things return to their original condition after having gone through many transformations.” For example, the condition of a newborn baby and an old person close to death are very similar in many ways; they are both helpless, they both need to be fed and cleaned, they both sleep a lot, and so on. The older person has “returned” to the original condition of the baby after having undergone many “transformations” throughout life.

To follow these Five Aspects of the Tao makes one’s life a natural process. Taoists believe that this type of life results in peace and identity with the Tao of the universe itself.

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