

## 26 Taoism

### PART 1: Introduction

#### Way.

Taoism is Chinese. In Chinese, “Tao” is pronounced “Dow” as in “wow” or “Dow Jones”. “Tao” means “way”. Boy Scouts is a “way” in this sense. “Do” (“doe”) is the Japanese pronunciation of “Tao”. Judo (“Ju Do”), Karate Do, and Jeet Kune Do are “ways”. Generically, “tao-ism” is “way-ism”. The ways of Legalists, Mo-ists, and Confucians are particular ways. Besides particular ways, Chinese also believed in one Way that was best, went with Heaven, underlay all things, and solved all natural problems. All specific ways are from the one Way. Even so, the one Way is simple and a unity. All Chinese schools saw themselves as best representing the one Way; Confucians and Mo-ists saw their ideas as best representing the one Way. Eventually, what is now called “Taoism” won as the accepted expression of the one Way. At the time of the founding Taoist writers, about 300 to 200 BCE, there was no school of Taoism; the founders did not think in terms of a school of Taoism; and they did not wish to be in a school of anything.

Chinese think the one Way solves all problems much as: Americans say “where there’s a will there’s a way”; engineers think there is a tinker to solve every problem; physicists intend to bring everything together under one mathematical umbrella; Muslims pray to Allah to show them a way to deal with their problems; scientists in particular fields, such as evolution, think there is a model that explains everything important, such as multi-level selection; and some anthropologists see culture as the one-best-and-only explanation for all behavior and social life.

Taoism always has come in three aspects: (1) political; (2) philosophical and religious; and (3) popular or “magical”. This chapter explains only political and religious Taoism. There were no divisions in Taoism until Confucianism won as the dominant political outlook after about 200 CE, then political Taoism was no longer relevant, and the strains split. Religious Taoism came to America after 1950. Americans largely ignore political Taoism. After about 1975, some Americans wanted to use “chi” for healing, sex, long life, beauty, acuity, and martial skill as in “Qi Gong”. All are magical Taoism. For many people, especially in China, magical Taoism is Taoism, and other aspects are sidelines. I know little about magical Taoism, and so ignore it here. See the Bibliography.

In a nutshell, Taoism says we can be alright with heaven and the Way, and cure all problems of the state, if we act naturally and spontaneously without dogma, guile, or pretense. If we do that, we are in accord with the Tao, and all that we need follows. Anything else, even if it sounds good, such as the Golden Rule, is a pretense, and harmful. This Taoist stance is false. People are not this good, and the world does not work like this. We have to use principles, laws, and everything else that I listed in Chapters One and Two.

Heaven and the Way have a close relation but I don't know what exactly. The Way might have made Heaven, Heaven made the Way, they created each other, or they are the same, but humans wrongly see them as distinct. One cannot "be around" without the other in the background. In the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition, God and his Spirit are both one and distinct. You cannot know of God without seeing that he set out a way for this world and for good living, and to seek his way. His way works. Other ways do not work. His way is goodness and virtue. If we follow the way of God, then eventually we will be right with God and know God. To submit to God is to follow his way; and to follow his way is to submit to him. I think the relation of Heaven and the Way is similar.

The Way, power, and virtue have a close relation too but I don't know it exactly either. People who know the Way are virtuous and have a kind of power, but not the virtue of Confucius or the power of soldiers. Some people who know the Way have power over nature, power to help other people, and martial power but that power belongs more to magical Taoism, so I do not dwell on it here. People who know the Way can get things done but not grand political things. Mostly they manage to get along with nature, get along with neighbors, make a living, find food, find wine, paint, write poetry, sing, have a good time, and make this life worthwhile.

In the chapter on Confucius, I pointed out the importance of discipline in Chinese thought. With its stress on spontaneity and freedom, Taoism can seem like the deliberate opposite of the Chinese idea in general and to Confucianism in particular. Confucians and Legalists certainly took it that way. Typical of Taoists, they did not. Discipline in the sense of Confucius or Legalism is beside the point and unreal, so there can be no opposite to Confucian discipline; all simple opposites are misleading, including discipline versus spontaneity; so Taoism does not oppose discipline. It transcends discipline. To people who are already in the Tao, discipline is irrelevant; and people already in the Tao can show all the moxie and character that Confucians wrongly think can come only from discipline. For people not already in the Tao, it takes discipline to get out of bad habits and to find the Tao; only then do we see them as free and spontaneous. Taoist martial arts, including "soft" arts such as Tai Chi Chuan and "hard" arts such as Karate, stress the need for discipline first, with the final goal of no technique and spontaneous action. Magical Taoism is full of strenuous discipline lasting decades. Taoists mocked external discipline, such as from Confucius. To mock external discipline, they talked as if discipline was irrelevant, and they were totally undisciplined. Too often, people who call themselves Taoists but are not really Taoists did flaunt supposed freedom as anti-discipline, but I think they are a side issue and not relevant to the main issues of discipline in Chinese thought and the Taoist attitude and freedom. As you read this chapter, see what you can make of these issues for yourself.

Basic Taoism is encoded in only three small texts: the "Tao Te Ching" ("Dow Deh Jhing") by Lao Tzu (now spelled "Laozi"; no dates); the works of Chuang Tzu (Juang Dze or Zhuangzi; about 369 to 286 BCE); and the works of Lieh Tzu (Lieh Dze or Liehzi; about 250 BCE). The first two are most important. "Lao Tzu" means "old master". Lao Tzu might not have been real. If he lived, his family name might have been "Li" while his personal names might have been "Erh" or "Tan". "The Chuang Tzu" refers to the work of the real person "Chuang Tzu" or "master Chuang". The Chuang Tzu consists of stories. It comes in two pieces, the "inner chapters" and "outer chapters". Only the inner chapters definitely are from Chuang Tzu. The Chuang Tzu is among the most fun pieces ever written in any culture on any topic. "The Lieh Tzu" refers to work attributed to "Lieh Tzu", also stories. They do not reach the depths of the Chuang Tzu but they are still fun and amazing, and the easiest way to learn Taoism. Traditionally, the Tao Te Ching

came first. More likely: stories were in the air before any documents were written; the Chuang Tzu came first; then the Tao Te Ching and the Lieh Tzu were assembled sometime after 250 BCE. The Tao Te Ching is one of the most amazing works in any literature. It consists of eighty-one small units that are like poems (or are). Like the Book of Isaiah in the Tanakh (Old Testament), the Tao Te Ching was written by more than one person but not many, perhaps two or three. "Ching" is "important book"; "Tao" is "Way"; and "Te" is "virtue that gets things done properly". So "Tao Te Ching" is usually translated "(Book about) The Way and Its Virtue" or "(Book about) The Way and Its Power-Ability-Efficacy". I do not justify points with citations from translations of any Taoist works because of copyright issues.

### **Not Bad Mysticism.**

Taoism includes some ideas that are typically mystical, such as that all things arise from the Tao, subsist only through the Tao, and return to the Tao. Multiple is single; the single is multiple; and the single gives rise to the multiple without splitting. Death is an illusion or nothing to worry about. Boundaries are fuzzy. We are only "bits" of Tao and only appear separate from it. We are dreams within dreams. Morality and truth are relative. The Tao is a Force that runs through everything and gives Abundant Life. If you seek the Tao, you will find it, or, rather, it will find you, and everything will be fine after that.

Sometimes mystical ideas dominate. Sometimes mystical ideas "corrupt" Taoism in the same way that mysticism, metaphysics, and glamour corrupt Buddhism and Christianity. Mysticism is not essential to Taoism, and the best Taoism is done almost ignoring mysticism. So I avoid nearly all the mysticism to focus on what is relevant here.

I avoid the issue of whether Taoist mysticism is the same as other mysticism. It does differ in one way. In some mysticism, the obvious world is an illusion, and we wake up to something other than the obvious world and more real than the obvious world. In Taoism, the obvious world is the real world. The mystic world and the real world do not differ but most people do not feel their unity. Taoists wake up to: the grace, beauty, wonder, and fun of the real world; the connections between things in the real world; the fact that the real world is not full of distinct enduring things but is a series of transformations; and the weakness of the distinctions (discriminations, dogma, categories) that we take for granted. The world is as it is, and not otherwise. We wake up to better appreciate the real ordinary world and our small place in it. A person need not understand anything beyond the ordinary real full world to live correctly, and trying to do so is misleading. After Buddhism came to China, the Taoist idea that the obvious world is the real world mixed easily with the Mahayana idea that the world before awakening is the same as the world after awakening; together they helped make Zen.

Taoism cultivates an unusual attitude, and it is easy to misjudge the attitude as mystical. Taoism urges people to change their old attitude, and this change can be mistaken as a mystic conversion. Yet to see Taoism as "merely" mysticism stresses the bad parts in Taoism and overlooks the good parts of Taoism. It is better to think of Taoism as like the attitude that people have when they first realize global climate change is real, romance is real, or that sports, science, and art are fun.

### **Basic Taoist Stance.**

As with Mahayanists about the same time in India, the Tao Te Ching in China begins by saying any way about which we can talk, even to name it, is not the one true Way. The one true Way cannot be named or described. Then the Tao Te Ching goes on talking about the one true Way. In the 1920s, in Austria and England, Ludwig Wittgenstein said deep truth could not be explained, only pointed at. His friend, Bertrand Russell, noted that Wittgenstein wrote a lot about what couldn't be written about. The "California Taoists" centered on Alan Watts in the 1950s and 1960s. They told people to get direct experience of Life rather than second-hand ideas - a 1950s American version of "Say 'Yes' to Life"; and extolled the drug LSD for giving direct access to Life beyond mere words. Then they took LSD, sat around the house, and chattered like squirrels about abstractions. Chinese religious-philosophical-political-literary Taoists were not verbose but they did write a fair amount about the Way despite their own warning not to; used wine instead of LSD; and were not as bad as Mahayanists or California Taoists.

Legalists said laws can tame human nature; Mo-ists said mutual regard can do the trick, especially if the state promotes mutual regard; and Confucius said ritual can teach leaders virtue, then leaders can guide followers. Laws, love, virtue, discipline, and ritual all give their own kind of power. Taoists had none of this. It is all wrong. Jews say "get right with God" through proper observance; Christians require you to believe in Jesus as God; Muslims require you to submit to God and accept Mohammad as the last and greatest of prophets; I say to follow Jesus' message mixed with practicality and Western values; middle class Americans "say 'Yes' to Life"; Buddhists disdain ordinary painful life; Mahayanists give up ordinary happiness to feel the joy of a bigger-than-me system; Hindus participate in the ecstasy of a multi-life system governed by social-duty-as-Dharma. Taoists would have none of this either, not for governing or for personal action. All schemes are artificial impositions. None work. All are contrived, odd, unnatural, factually wrong, personally hurtful, and socially hurtful. All cause more harm than good. All use power when power is not warranted. All impose an inferior human construct on what is already present in nature and already superior to anything contrivable by humans.

From the start, Taoists mixed ideas about how to govern, how to get along in life, what life is all about, how life works, how the world works, and where it all came from. What we now call (1) political and (2) religious-and-philosophical Taoism were not distinct, and an early Taoist would not understand why we separate them. This chapter presents political and philosophical Taoism mostly together. Despite the modern American tendency to dwell on philosophical and mystical Taoism apart from politics, you can't know Taoism without learning about its ideas of (not) governing and the (non) state.

The best way to govern is not to govern at all. Get out of the way, and let people act naturally. The best way to act is by not deliberately acting at all. Just act without ideologies. An apt slogan in the Western literature on Taoism is "do without ado". The Chinese slogan for this idea is "wei wu wei" or "wu wei": "act not act", "act empty act", or "act by not acting". Bruce Lee used the idea in the movie "Enter the Dragon" by saying he "fights by not fighting"; that was how he tricked a nasty bad guy into getting stuck on a little boat behind the main boat.

Yet if you make even that much of a doctrine of this idea, if you declare for the doctrine of no doctrines, the dogma of no dogmas, then you have killed the idea already. You have to drop all doctrines entirely, including the doctrine of getting rid of doctrines.

Taoists avoid power, especially political power. They do not want power over other people. They do not want other people to have power over them. To have power is a burden and a curse. Taoists are adept at avoiding power. Taoists do not dwell on power one way or another; they do not obsess over avoiding it because that is the same as to obsess over having it; they simply avoid power when it gets in the way of the Way. The attitude that I learned toward institutions and power when I was young in Oregon is similar to the Taoist attitude. "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely." Chuang Tzu was offered the office of prime minister in one of the most powerful states in China, and turned it down. It would be better to be a long-lived turtle dragging its tail in the mud than to carry the burden of power and the state, and, besides, the state would be better off without any leader anyway.

Stop supporting all the institutions of the state, and so let them die on their own. We need no king, prime minister, president, congress, road building, dam building, taxes, military, courts, trials, police, policies, theories, civic centers, civic orchestras, state schools, stadiums, examinations, welfare, teachers, priests, lawyers, laws, religions, dogmas, etc. If you leave people alone to follow the Tao, they will work this out on their own, and do it better than any governor could do it for them.

Taoism seems like anti-legalism, rebellion, Romanticism, and anarchism, but it is not. Taoism is "apart from" legalism and anti-legalism or other such categories or dichotomies. It is "don't bother to think that way at all". It is not rebellious, romantic, above the law (antinomian), disorderly, or indecent. It is like the advice that I gave in trying to overcome Romanticism in the chapter on Romanticism. The best way is not to worry about thinking in particular terms or not thinking in particular terms but to think in your own terms and to simply let it happen.

Farmers go to market to exchange ducklings, piglets, onions, millet, and chestnuts. Who can tell them what to do? Why should anyone tell them? Let them do as they do. Economic analysis is dogma rooted in distinctions. Suppose an economist could give an accurate detailed analysis of their actions, showing that farmers efficiently use resources, and skillfully exchange, so as to maximize profit-and-satisfaction. So what? The reasons in the analysis are not necessarily why the farmers do what they do, even if their actions fit the economic analysis perfectly. Even if the reasons used in the analysis are, in fact, why the farmers do as they do, why should we have a state policy about what they do? Why should we let formal economic ideas of determine state policy? Maybe next time the farmers will act for different reasons. Let the farmers do as they do. Whether the end result turns out well or not well by some economic standard of general welfare is not relevant compared to their freedom to do as they will.

A man lives by a marshland where he makes a living by fishing and by gathering bird feathers from which he makes sculptures to sell. His work is beautiful. A passing government official feels sorry for him, sees the beauty of his work, and offers the man a pension if he will make art for the king. The man refuses. He prefers to live with birds and fishes. By what standards can we call him mistaken? Even if we could devise standards, why do our standards, or any standards, apply to him? Let him do as he does. It is better if the beauty of the work simply is there, for the man and his neighbors to enjoy, without attracting any attention.

The wind blows cold from the north today. Some people lack firewood while other people use the cold to preserve beets. Who is to say the wind is good or bad, or the state should have a wind policy? Trees grow without help from the state; a "tree policy" would not make them grow better unless a previous tree

policy had already screwed up the forest. Jesus said God knows about all individual birds and flowers, and we mere humans cannot make the birds and flowers better by worrying. We cannot make ourselves taller, make our hair grow, or changes its natural color, by worrying or by enacting a state policy. Taoists would appreciate William Blake's poem "Tiger, Tiger" ("Tyger, Tyger").

After he-she has learns the trade, a computer programmer, grocery store manager, or farmer, still thinks but does not think too much. He-she does what he-she has learned. A sheep dog does not herd sheep following a mathematical program even if a mathematician can devise a program that describes what the sheep dog does. Once children learn to play baseball, they just play. Most kids never see the rulebook. Most adept golfers tell you never to read a book. If you can't teach yourself, learn from a teacher. Fourth rate artists try to make art and think it is good – nearly all hip-hop, rock, pop, and country performers are like this. Third rate artists make art, know they make art, and don't care how good it is. Second rate artists suspect they make art but don't care that it is art or how good it is. I am not qualified to talk about first rate artists. Just by giving you this explanation, I have falsified what really goes on in art, and ruined art for you. In the movie "A Beautiful Mind", a sign that John Nash might go insane came when he followed pigeons around trying to devise an algorithm (formula) for their movements. Every once in a while, the rules for "Parliamentary Procedure" actually help a meeting but the vast majority of meeting time is carried on without a thought for the formal rules.

With discrimination, with too much thought, people interfere in nature, these people here interfere with those people there, and inevitably things get "screwed up". Neither Taoists nor I define "screwed up". We don't have to. "Screwed up" is easy to see; thousands of cases appear every day in all social groups and all countries; and you know it when you see it. If you don't want things to get screwed up, then don't interfere, don't follow dogma. Use your good natural sense and follow the Tao instead.

### **Another Way to Think About It: Simple Integrity.**

I am not sure self-avowed modern Taoists would agree with this picture.

All people have contradictions, it is not possible to get rid of contradictions, and contradictions are not a big problem if we don't make them so. Contradictions can give us character. Contradictions need not cripple us. We can still be natural, open, lively, and spontaneous with some contradictions. Yin and Yang are contradictory but get along well.

Now imagine that, despite modest contradictions, you speak openly straight from the heart all the time. You never lie. You never have to lie. You never have to cover up. You never have to evade or allude. You never have to elaborate. You can get your point across directly. You are what you are. You are not ashamed of what you are. What you are is good enough. You have integrity. You are not pretentious or self-conscious about speaking plainly; you just do it. You are not preachy and do not make other people uneasy with your honesty. You are not aware that you do it and so could not possibly think it makes you better than anyone else.

In speaking honestly like this, you connect with nature and with other people who speak honestly. You find a community in nature and with other similar people. The lack of additional knots in your stomach and in your head sets free your abilities. You do not become superhuman but you do get a lot done and

become a useful person. You appreciate others, nature, yourself, and life more. You might appreciate booze and art more. You also avoid bad people and lying more.

You do not look down on normal people and make them uneasy. You are not a New Age role model or a tough guy Romantic rebel anti-hero. You enjoy shows about normal guys with flaws such as “Magnum P.I.”, “Friends”, and “Seinfeld”. You can enjoy real normal flawed people too.

Jesus was like this. Jesus had something like this in mind when he said “the truth will set you free” and when he advised people to speak simply and honestly so their speech was simple “yes” and “no”. Jesus’ idea of the Kingdom of God was like the community of such people and with nature. Some Christians are like this but most are not.

This sounds like 1960s psycho-babble but is not. Before the psycho-babble there were real ideas based on sound feelings. The psycho-babble is a mere echo of better ideas and feelings. We cannot dismiss this vision because it reminds us of twaddle.

Not many real humans can be like this. Contrary to misconceptions of people who want to be like this but are not, nature is not like this, as we will see below.

But that does not mean direct simple unguarded honesty is not a useful ideal and it does not mean that some people, in the right times and places, can be nearly like this. To act like this sometimes is a great relief. We should respect this as a good way to be human. This is one view of Taoism.

### **No Dogma.**

This section is abstruse but not hard if you don’t come down solidly on one side of the issues. The ideas here are about as close to a philosophical debate as ran through Taoism and the ideas here were a central feature of Taoism.

Taoism shares the outlook described in this section with other “nice” mysticism such as Sufis, Mahayana, and Hinduism. In Mahayana, the issue of “no dogma no distinctions” is the core of several Buddhist aids; if you get the idea of “no dogma no distinctions” then you are enlightened; and you are not enlightened unless you get the idea. The idea of “no distinctions” can be misleading in Taoism as in Buddhism but does not seem to have been as much a diversion in Taoism as in Mahayana. I take up the topic of Taoist aids at the end of this chapter.

Power requires discriminating between “this versus that”, usually as “us versus them”. Discriminating between this and that is necessarily incorrect, misleading, and leads to abuse. There is no absolutely accurate absolutely reliable distinction. Thus power is rooted in necessarily misleading discrimination. Misleading discrimination between this and that is the root source of power and abuse. All discrimination between more powerful people and less powerful people requires discrimination between this person and that person, this privilege and that privilege, this wealth and that wealth, this right and that right, this duty and that duty, getting now for sure versus maybe getting later, and so on.

Laws are not possible without discrimination between acts, people, and situations, and without power. Because all power is abuse, all laws necessarily entail abuse, even when they mean to minimize abuse and discrimination.

Words require that we discriminate between this and that, and words often entail value judgments. We say “our town” meaning “OUR PLACE” and everything it does in the play “Our Town” rather than merely “the place in which we happen to live”. We say “the football game” meaning “THE important event of this week” rather than merely “a sporting event this weekend among other sporting and non-sporting events”. We do not say merely “we haven’t had pizza for dinner for a while” but say “let’s have PIZZA for dinner tonight”. We say “I am a follower of the Tao” with pride. Even if some discriminations are not harmful, and even if some are fun, still many discriminations are harmful. That is why Taoists are wary of words, and prefer direct intuition and direct action.

All discrimination between this and that entails a misuse of power even when the discrimination is not done directly as part of government, as, for example, when one person says that raising rice is better than raising millet, going to the beach is better than going to the desert, or we should go to this restaurant rather than that restaurant. All discrimination between this and that is an abuse of power even in regular life. Taoists did see the simple difference between an apple and a pear, between up and down, but were suspicious of going much farther than this, much farther than what is naturally obvious.

For convenience, I subsume all discrimination under the terms “dogma”, “doctrine”, or “ideology”. Power, abuse, and discrimination are nearly indistinguishable, one entails the others, and one cannot be found without the others. Every time I write “dogma”, “doctrine”, “ideology”, “power”, “rule”, or “law”, I imply a misleading discrimination although usually I don’t point out the discrimination. Taoists avoided dogma as they avoided power. This is one reason why the Tao Te Ching said what could be named was not the real name. This is why a doctrine of not having doctrines is a mistake, and why hating power is as much a trap as loving it. Do not dwell on dogma-discrimination. Do not fall into the trap to begin with.

To decide what is good or bad is to create dogma-discrimination and to abuse power. Taoists were leery of ideas of good and bad. Vexing as it can be not to promote good, and to put up with bad, if we promote good, or suppress bad, then eventually we fail at what we wish and we make things even worse. To stop making things worse, we have to stop thinking in terms of good and bad even when we retain some vestigial shadows of good and bad in our minds.

The idea of not deciding between good and bad is so annoying that most people reject it out of hand, and so reject Taoism. Taoists do not make it easier because they write flippantly, peevishly, and mockingly. Also, Taoists said people who live according to the Tao live better than others; and said a state that ran according to the Tao (that is, without any government) was better than states that ran according to other ideas; so it does seem as if Taoists had an idea of good a bad, better life and worse life, in mind. Rather than take a lot of space here to explain, I get back to these ideas later.

To think we differ from the Tao, and thus differ from other people, from birds, trees, mountains, or clouds, is another misleading necessarily false distinction. At most, we only temporarily differ from other things because the Tao that flows through us and them makes it seem that way now. The same Tao that makes us distinct flows through them too. The same Tao makes us both different and similar. We could not be



what we are without others of all kinds, and they could not be what they are without us. Some people can specialize in selling cars because others specialize in selling furniture; yet they are all in the market. In baseball, one person can play shortstop because another plays third base and another plays second; yet they are all on the same team and all in the same game. At the end of a football or baseball game in the US when I was young, children used to chant “Who Do We Appreciate?” showing how our team needs them and they need us to have any game at all. “Us and them” is a big misleading distinction. We can’t be as distinct as we might think we are if we all come from the Tao and seek it. To invoke Dylan Thomas again: “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower, drives me.”

When we try to increase our family, security, wealth, position, power, or goodness, or decrease badness, we increase the necessarily artificial false wrong distinction between us and the Tao, us and others. We make things worse, eventually even for ourselves.

The distinctions between good and bad, and between self and Tao, are the two root distinctions that lead to all other distinctions, and thus to dogma, power, abuse, and deterioration. The distinction between self and Tao includes the distinction between self and other. We can only get things right with the Tao if we stop discriminating between self and Tao, and between good and bad.

Some Taoist stories and essays seem to say we should make no discriminations at all, as if we should live in a big ball of pudding. This is a mistake. The stories only seem to make that point to correct for the common error of too much dogma. Even after we merge with the Tao, we see differences between an apple and a peach, Bob and Jill, and me and Harry. The trick is to rest in useful distinctions suggested by the Tao, and no more. To think much about “right” and “wrong” is to make a wrong distinction. You have to let it happen. How we get to there, I do not explain.

Other stances and religions warn against making a distinction between the self versus other, self versus world, and good versus bad. These warnings are common in mystic traditions. Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism stress the warnings. How the warnings are developed characterizes particular stances-and-religions. There is no value here in trying to clarify the various warnings and traditions. I point this topic out for people who go on to further reading.

To notice we discriminate is to discriminate. To disapprove of discriminating, or praise not discriminating, is to salt the wound. Taoism has to overcome this problem, which it does fairly well but not perfectly. Rather than try to explain how Taoism does this, and so add even more discriminations, I simply go on to describe Taoism.

The idea of “dogma” strongly implies “system”. When I write “dogma”, think also “system”. I don’t use the term “system” because Taoists did not systematically attack systems, they unsystematically attacked the silly dogmas and bad outcomes to which systematic dogmatic thinking leads. The version of Taoism that I give here does not imply any system. Taoists feel free to make assertions because they do not thereby fall into the trap of rabid anti-dogmatism; but that does not mean they imply a system. Other religions do imply a system when they make assertions. Magical Taoism indulged as much in system making as any other religion but that is not what I describe here. You have to read Taoist literature and then decide for yourself if Taoism did have dogma and did develop a system. Non-Taoists certainly look for dogma and

system when they read Taoist literature. These comments apply also to Zen except Zen had to struggle with the system that it inherited from Mahayana.

### **Sticky Useful Logical Point.**

The issue here shows up in various versions in various places, and can be sticky, so it is best to state the issue clearly here even at the risk of interrupting the flow. This issue has a version at the level of thought, stated here, and versions for society, morality, and nature, stated later. Objections to the Taoist view can be made in terms of logic or fact.

On the one hand, to insist on no dogma is itself a dogma. Usually people don't realize when they lapse into this form of dogma. Taoists don't seem to realize when they have fallen into this dogma. This form of dogma can be as hurtful as obvious dogmas such as religious prejudice.

On the other hand, not to be strict about "no dogma" allows people to indulge in dogma. It gives license to offer prejudices as facts about human nature or the world. It permits schemes about how to govern, about society, and how to live.

You cannot insist it is better to avoid distinctions of better and worse. That is a contradiction because it depends on ideas of better and worse: "it is best to avoid 'best'". If you insist your ideas are the best for all time everywhere, then you are wrong, and very likely you use your ideas to gain power.

In these dilemmas, people usually seek a middle area, wider than a line, where sometimes they fall toward one side and sometimes they fall toward the other, and where different people are not always alike in where they fall.

When openly fighting rivals, Taoists clearly insisted on no dogma. They pushed the dogma of no dogma. They saw the damage done by alternatives such as lust for power, wealth, and order, and doctrines such as Legalism, Confucianism, and Mo-ism. They were determined to stop bad dogma and bad government even at the cost of lapsing into a dogmatic contradiction themselves. They will not allow even the tiniest crack for Confucians, Legalists, and Mo-ists.

In contrast, when telling stories, Taoists seem more often to go along with common sense, and to offer people the middle ground of mixing principles, practicality, and individual variation. The stories vary, and sometimes they also support the dogma of no dogma.

Offering the dogma of no dogma is a contradiction. From contradictions, we can assert any nonsense. You have to judge for yourself if Taoists do that. Non-Taoists also sense this contradiction, and use it to assert their dogmas, such as religious and political schemers; they also often offer nonsense. You have to be sensitive to that anti-Taoist abuse as well. You have to decide which abuse is worse.

The Thai have a saying that applies here, literally: "don't think (too) much" ("yaa khit maak [koen]"). This saying can be an excuse for "don't think at all, just indulge"; but it was not originally meant that way. It means what it says. Americans say, "don't over think". The trick is how much to think. For that there is no formula. The fact that there is no formula is the real message of Taoism on this issue, rather than

“don’t think at all”. “Don’t think at all” is dogmatic abuse of “don’t think too much”, of “no dogma”. We can think about the right amount if we practice and try, and even if we make mistakes.

Taoists happily distinguish between, and prefer one of: no dogma versus dogma; no distinction versus distinction; Tao and not-Tao; following the Tao and not following the Tao; the beauty of the Tao and the ugliness of the not-Tao; the beauty of nature and ugliness of not-nature; better society that follows the Tao versus worse society that follows dogma; good conditions that arise spontaneously versus contrived (social) relations that are bad; good that arises spontaneously versus conventional morality; and simple spontaneous versus action done according to some dogma. You should consider why these distinctions persist, if that is a problem, and if there is any hypocrisy.

Throughout the book I have said that simple acts of goodness and decency are better than acts done in the service of a system, and I have shown dislike of systems, especially metaphysics and theology. Taoism and I seem to agree on this. I also said we need principles, and here Taoism and I seem to part. While Taoism says we need no principles, in fact Taoists do act according to principles, and the principles seem similar to mine. Taoism and I differ in that I accept the need for principles while Taoism uses them but denies it does. To assess how much this difference matters would require going into Taoism more than I want to do here. I hope you get enough of an idea. I think the ledger is still in favor of Taoism despite this little fault.

These issues about dogma-and-no-dogma etc. are typical of relativism such as in Theravada, Mahayana, Hinduism, and most mysticism. I pick on Taoism to “go after” these issues because they show up clearly in Taoism, Taoism fusses over them (discriminates between discrimination and non-discrimination), and because I like Taoism and so want it to be as clear and effective as possible. Taoism has value because of the contradictions and despite them. I do not point out where these issues show up in other places, but, if you can see that for yourself, it is useful.

### **Conforming and Yielding.**

Taoists do not try to change their setting forcibly. If they live in a bad place, they leave. If they live in a good place, or in the usual mixed place, they conform. By conforming, they get along, and they induce other people to get along too.

To shock people out of the mistakes of Legalists, Confucians, and Mo-ists - that we need to manipulate our world, and might use force - Taoist stories present extreme cases of conforming. I don’t repeat any here. As a result, people misunderstand Taoists as spineless, without character, cowards, and wimps. This is false. Taoists are not assertive, and they would make bad CEOs if they were forced to be CEOs, but they are not putty. Taoist conforming is more like what a biologist calls “adaptation” or the saying “when in Rome, do as the Romans do”. When it is warm, take off your clothes. When it is cold, put on clothes and build a fire. When all you have to eat are apples and nuts, eat apples and nuts. If you can get rice wine, then drink it; otherwise, drink water. In a famous Zen saying, “eat when hungry and sleep when sleepy”. Taoists conform to the needs of their own bodies and minds as well as their natural and social environments. Taoists do not look to assert their character or their “true you” onto the world, so it is not a hardship if they cannot. Yet individual Taoists do have a character that shows through. Taoists

lead by following. Taoists do not conform to bad ideas or to bad dogma. You have to read Taoism for yourself to decide for yourself about Taoist conforming.

One of the most important techniques for adaptation is yielding. Unless you have to, don't swim against the current. Try to arrange travel so that, when you are in the river, you go downstream. When you have to go upstream, try to walk on land. Sail a boat with the wind. Don't try to argue people out of stupid set opinions. Instead, calmly act in accord with the Tao, or leave. If you stay, bear what has to be borne until people see their error. Let people decide for themselves what they like. You do not make distinctions; you yield to the changes and categories that nature presents. Yielding is a way of getting over the idea that you need dogma. Unless you yield to nature first, you can't know what to use in place of bad dogma. Some stories show yielding as an indirect skilled cunning assertion, somewhat like passive aggression; but we should not see it that way. Yielding shows up in yin and yang (see below) and the martial arts. If somebody big and strong wants to hit you, don't try to stop his-her fist with force. Instead, get out of the way, or redirect his-her force with a small nudge from the side. Roll around a blow. Run away before a fight. Of course, if you yield all the time, you lose your character entirely. If you yield all the time, then you don't run away when that is best. You may not yield to bad dogma. In the long run, yielding always defeats assertion, just as water always wears down a rock. This point is so strong in Taoism that it is best to read about it directly in stories.

The Taoist sense of yielding and conforming is like the feeling in the old Quaker (Friends) song "Simple Gifts", quoted below. The "gift" is something given by the Tao. We can give it to ourselves or to other people when we act as agents of the Tao. The feeling is not exactly the same in Taoism as in the song but is close enough. Aaron Copland did a great version of the music.

In an interview, purposely using Taoist imagery, Bruce Lee said succeeding in martial arts is like being water. Although water is soft most of the time, it can push very hard, as in a flood; and the steady flow of water wears down continents. You conform to your opponent, yield when appropriate, and so win. When water is in a bottle, it looks like the bottle. When it is in a glass, it looks like the glass. When it is steam, it rises. When it is in a river, it flows. You do the same, and so overcome. You do not really win because nobody really wins a fight but at least you continue on.

As with yin and yang, yielding and conforming are linked to ideas about female and male, moon and sun, shade and light, and valley and mountain. Yielding is usually seen as feminine; conforming can be seen as feminine; notice the "valley" in the song "Simple Gifts". Traditionally, women certainly had the idea that yielding was typically feminine and always victorious. Yet neither tactic is necessarily feminine; to forcibly categorize is bad dogma. It depends on conditions and appropriate response. Gender identification, and parallels between aspects, I do not discuss. These aspects of Taoism draw starry-eyed magical mystics but they don't have to. Seeing by means of these aspects is one way of looking at how the world works, it need not be completely correct, but still it can be useful.

#### Simple Gifts

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free  
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right

'Twill be in the valley of love and delight  
When true simplicity is gained  
To bow and to bend we will not be ashamed  
To turn, to turn, will be our delight  
And by turning, turning we come 'round right

### **Acting in Accord with the Tao, One.**

When people act in accord with the Tao, they can know they do so or not know; it makes little difference. People who do not know are not necessarily better than people who do know; this would be a misleading distinction leading to bad dogma. In some cases, for a sage, it is useful not only to act in accord with the Tao but also to know you do, mostly so you can “tone down” a bit and make the Tao intelligible to other people. Trying, at the same time, to act in accord with the Tao and also to know you act in accord with the Tao, is dangerous because you act according to dogma. So, to learn to act in accord with the Tao, you likely have to turn off your usually obvious intellect for a long time. Then later it is up to you whether you know or not.

Here is my version of a story from the Lieh Tzu: One day, a group of rich, powerful, spoiled people were driving around looking for fun – maybe snobs and maybe “gangstas”. They saw a poor old man walking on the side of the road, and decided to tease him. They got him into the car and got him drunk. Then they said: if he jumped out of the car while it was going 60 miles per hour, they would give him enough money so he could pay the rent for a year. He did jump out, but miraculously, he landed easily on his feet and was unhurt. The rich people said he only survived because he was drunk and relaxed. So, they picked him up and tried again. They took him to the edge of a cliff, and said they would give him enough money to buy food and medical insurance if he would jump off. He did, floated down gently, and landed unhurt. They were astounded. They took him to a pier at the edge of a deep lake, told him there was a great pearl at the bottom, and he could have the pearl if he could dive down and get it. The old man did just that, and came up with a great pearl. Now the rich people knew the poor old man was really a Taoist adept, and they asked him how he did it. The old man replied, “Did what? I did nothing special. You asked me to get out from the car to walk, and I did. You asked me to take a long step down, and I did. You asked me to hold my breath for a while to seek a pearl, and I did.” The old man had no idea he did anything odd. That was why he could do it. The pearl that he found was the Tao, which, of course, was always with him anyway. From then on, the spoiled rich people respected their elders.

Most Taoists are not like this. Most know they are not common. Most seek the Tao, and they only find and follow the Tao after great conscious effort, which effort likely includes a long time avoiding pitfalls of the conscious mind. From now on, I assume most Taoists know they follow the Tao, they know the Tao is not the same as any other dogma, and they assert it is not a dogma.

Seeking and following the Tao is like seeking and becoming adept at any skill that requires performance such as archery, karate, dance, music, or hacking computers. It is like studying math hard and then acing test after test. It is like acting morally although you know you can't be perfect and you know God judges you when you die. When you do it, you are not fully aware you do it. If you try to be aware as you do it, likely you will screw up. You can be aware in hindsight. You do not need praise from others because you feel the intrinsic value of what you do. You like to share with other like-minded people when you can.

You cannot always explain it to other people or teach it. But you can do it, and some people can explain and teach it too.

### **Acting in Accord with the Tao, Two.**

When people act in accord with the Tao, things turn out well. When people act in accord with the Tao, they also act in accord with Heaven. They make Heaven on Earth. This Heaven is not a dogmatic paradise as in Christianity, Islam, and some Buddhism and Hinduism; it is “merely” a Heavenly way to live, die, and carry on.

People who act in accord with the Tao feel they act freely and spontaneously; by all human standards, they do. As just explained, people who act in accord with the Tao are not always conscious that they do so. The standard image is a fish that is not aware of the water in which it swims.

People who act in accord with the Tao do not act in accord with any particular dogma. There is no dogma that can capture the Tao or explain the Tao. The dogma of goodness is not the same as the Tao. Every particular dogma betrays the Tao. Even the dogma of no dogma is an error.

It is not clear if animals can act not-in-accord-with-the-Tao unless they have been corrupted by people. People definitely can act not-in-accord-with-the-Tao. Why people have the ability to “screw up” is not clear. It is enough to know that we can act in accord or not in accord, and that we are much better off if we act in accord. There are no criteria for acting in accord with the Tao although there are some pretty good signs that we act out of accord with the Tao, such as following a dogma or causing strife.

When people act in accord with the Tao, they feel as if they act on their own but they also feel that the Tao cares about them, looks out for them, helps them do the right thing, helps them avoid badness, and helps them be themselves. The Tao does not solve all our problems for us. The Tao gives the ability to deal with most issues, but not all. The Tao provides opportunities for us if we look out for them.

This Taoist idea differs from the Buddhist idea that we have to work out our salvation on our own, and differs from another Buddhist idea that Buddhists can rely on the Buddha, Dharma, and community of Buddhists (“Sangha” or monks). This Taoist idea differs from the Mahayana and Hindu idea that we are part of a joyous system of many lives in which hardship is an illusion. This Taoist idea differs from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim doctrine that God helps out a lot, especially in time of need, and that God punishes transgressions harshly. The Taoist idea is similar to the Christian idea of “seek and you will find, knock and the door will open for you”; if you open yourself up to God, God and his world will make sure that you find a way and get what you need to walk the path. This Taoist idea is similar to “God helps those who help themselves”. This Taoist idea is similar to my idea about relations with God and Jesus. God through evolution gave us nearly all the abilities that we need to get by, and God planned the world with many opportunities. This Taoist idea is similar to “we have a friend in Jesus”. When a few followers of Jesus come together, Jesus is among them. Followers of Jesus are in a community if they wish. God does not interfere much to help us but might interfere a little bit to nudge us along. None of these ideas is clearly correct to the exclusion of the others. All the ideas suffer from contradictions, all are somewhat compatible, and yet none are fully compatible. I cannot sort it out. I am happy with the possibility that my

idea and the Taoist idea might be close. In a later chapter, we will see that Taoist ideas and Zen ideas about self and world also are similar.

There are no firm criteria for acting in accord with the Tao because there can be no firm criteria. To have any criteria would be to get stuck in discrimination and to lose mental freedom. To offer criteria for acting in accord with the Tao is a sure sign that you are not fully in accord with the Tao; you are trying to make a school of the Tao like the school of Confucianism – a serious error.

### **The Sufficient Person; and the World Is as It Is.**

Taoist “greats”, such as Chuang Tzu, were unusual rare people. It might seem that Taoism can only be understood by really smart semi-mystical people. Yet the Taoists greats themselves argue that this is not so. Anyone can feel and follow the Tao. Taoists stories are full of ordinary people, even stupid people, who feel and follow the Tao, and thus are successful in their own ways. Other schools made a point of how smart their leaders and followers were, therefore all-the-better to advise the kings and run the state. Since Taoism did not offer policies and advice, and did not offer to help the rulers run the state, Taoism did not have to show how smart its leaders and followers were. The more that common people could feel and follow the Tao, the better were the arguments of Taoism.

I agree with Taoism. You don't have to be smart to get the idea of the Tao as long as you do not also expect the results to be as perfect as Taoists make out. It is not hard to get the idea that people do well when left alone as long as they don't have to deal with horrible situations. It is not hard to see that states make their own problems most of the time, dogmas often make problems worse, and we could get out of a lot of problems with enlightened educated common sense.

Of course, it takes a different person, and different work, to be a Taoist great. But that is another issue from following the Tao. It takes a great person such as Jesus to put together his ideas but it does not take a great person to understand them and to follow them in most situations. The Tao does not expect everybody to be like Chuang Tzu. You don't have to be like that to succeed fully in Taoism or following the teachings of Jesus.

A normal person could only follow the Tao if the world was not bizarre. The Taoist world is the world as it is of ordinary life combined with healthy imagination. Taoists did love imagination and fantasy, and they did see a lot of magic in the world, but their world was not the strange bizarre world of mysticism, of some Hinduism, and some Mahayana. It was the ordinary world in which people allowed their imaginations free rein and were not afraid. Taoists stories feature butchers, bakers, wood cutters, horse raisers, and other common people dealing with the normal world.

The Taoist view of the sufficient person and the normal world is much like Jesus' idea that we can all get the ideals of the Kingdom of God and can work toward them in this world. If there are demons, we don't have to fear them as long as we keep God in mind. I repeat his advice: “seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you”. Theravada, the better versions of Mahayana, and Zen, all share this point of view too.

### **Taoist Nature.**

Taoists largely identify the Tao with what Western people call “nature”, so acting in accord with the Tao is acting naturally. Nature does not have dogmas unless we consider errant humans with their dogmas as part of nature, and most Taoists did not think so. Animals act spontaneously in accord with their nature unless they are perverted by people. People could do so too if we would not pervert ourselves. Taoists really want to get along with nature. They want never to hurt nature. They want to be adopted by nature. In the Taoist view, and in the urban romanticized view, nature never screws up. If we follow nature, then we can never screw up either. Nature never poisons. Nature always offers a cure for any harm in it and for any poison that people concoct. Nature cures diseases and hearts. Nature is beautiful beyond any human art and beyond the ability of humans to imagine beauty until they see it in nature. Nature does not work by straight lines and consistent angles but indirectly through curves, cascades, and mists. Nature appears and disappears.

Taoist nature comes directly from Heaven. Nature always works well. The way nature works is the Tao, the Way. If we could get in touch with nature, and work with nature, then we would work well in accord with the Tao. Working well does not mean standard success in family, business, and politics. It means working by the standards of original nature. It means being reasonably healthy, prosperous, and happy. It does not mean being rich or powerful. Only in magical Taoism does it mean being immortal and sexually prodigious. We have to adopt the standards of original nature when we get in touch with nature and the Tao. We have to abandon human standards of success and failure. We have to submit to nature and the Tao.

It is not clear how nature can work so well so easily. It is not clear how nature gets us to work well too once we have given ourselves up to nature. That is part of the point. We should not seek to understand intellectually. We should simply act naturally and become natural. In this respect nature is the Tao and the Tao is nature.

### **Taoist Morality.**

It is a little simplistic, but not too much, to say Taoists were staunch (dogmatic) moral relativists. It is more accurate to say they were staunch (dogmatic) moral non-discriminators. They did not condemn simple naïve common moral ideas such as friendship and “be kind and good to each other” as long as people did not make dogmas of the ideas. Lapsing into moral dogma is worse than not having explicit moral principles. Because people almost always did make dogmas of moral ideas, Taoists rejected all obvious moral principles as a way to defend against the worse evil of moral dogmas.

Taoists saw that most morality was mere convention, and never tired of skewering convention. They saw that other schools promoted morality as a tool to control people, often for the benefit of the people who declared morality. In China, families had to mourn long and hard when a member died, using standard ways of mourning for standard periods for particular relations. Anybody who did not was seen as like an animal. Taoists praise fathers who did not mourn for sons. Chuang Tzu did not mourn for his wife when she died even though he had made clear that he loved her a lot. The father did not mourn because he cherished the time he had with his son. Before he had a son, he did not mourn. Now that his son was gone, he reverted back to then. Chuang Tzu felt the same way about his wife. If anything, she was more with the Tao now, and better off than him, so why should he indulge in public display?



Moral rules arise because of needless distinctions. Other schools set up needless distinctions so they can evoke their morality as the cure for the problems caused by the needless distinction. If we erase the distinctions, we don't need the rules. Because we have property, we have to have rules against stealing, and have to enforce them, thus leading to badness. If people did not claim this and that, then we would have no stealing, no moral rules, and no need for punishment. Even if we only had less stuff, we would be better off.

It sounds appealing to say we should all strive for good. But we don't know what good is unless we have bad to contrast with the good. Once we have the idea of "good", then we necessarily also have the idea of "bad", then people will do bad, and people are more likely to do harm with bad than benefit with good. We are better off having neither good nor bad, and letting things turn out as they will. Don't strive to do good or to avoid bad. Simply take care of your own business and things will turn out well enough.

Maybe you should tell a man who has been stung by a scorpion of a doctor who can save his life; but maybe you should not tell a man who has been bitten by a big cobra that no doctor can save his life and that he has only six hours to live. There are no moral absolutes. Taoists used moral relativity to pick apart but they were not moral relativists either because that too is mere dogma.

Taoists tell stories in which the leader of a rival school is a character, and the Taoist hero easily defeats the rival leader. Usually the rival comes off like a fool. In one story, a local Taoist gets tired of Confucius teaching about Heaven, his version of the Tao, goodness, ritual, virtue, and order. So the Taoist takes Confucius to meet the leader of the worst bandit gang in China. The bandit leader is a ferocious giant man. When Confucius meets him, the bandit leader is eating a plate of human livers. The bandit leader laughs at Confucius. He tells Confucius he doesn't give a damn about virtue, goodness, ritual, or order; and that he does what he wants. If Confucius doesn't like it, the bandit leader will soon add Confucius' liver to the plate. Confucius runs like a goat. What the bandit leader does is what he does. As such, it is better than the virtue that Confucius preaches because it does less harm.

Taoist ideal behavior and ideal persons are like the decency that I described in the chapter on decency. Taoist morality is like the simple decent person who acts from the heart or does the decent thing because it is the decent thing without worrying too much.

The Taoist rejection of mere morality sounds like modern Western moral relativism but it is not. It is more like what I said in the chapter on Romanticism using Reason versus Passion as an example. We should not stress one much more than the other (for praise or blame), see them as simple complete opposites, try to merge them, and see them as superficially different aspects of one underlying greater whole. Take them as they are without thinking of either as absolute. Then you can be good without trying to be good and can avoid bad without trying to avoid bad. When you don't obsess over good and bad, they take care of themselves. Since Taoism has grown in the West, Western moral relativists have taken up the Taoist view to bolster their own position, but, again, we should not be confused. I think some Chinese also used the Taoist view to advance their own version of moral relativism and so advance their own selves, but I do not know enough to say more here. I don't know if Taoists did this on purpose.

Zen came after Taoism and borrowed from Taoism much of Zen's moral neutrality, tacit morality, ideas of decency, and ideal people. Think about these topics for further discussion toward the end of the chapter and keep them in mind for the chapter on Zen.

Sadly, in stressing moral non-discrimination, Taoists over-played their hand. They seemed to undercut all morality, even simply doing good. They made a dogma of (the anti-dogma of) no morality. They made a virtue of not being virtuous. They deliberately overlooked simple natural morality. They did advance as a dogma what we now call "moral relativism".

Because Taoist moral non-discrimination is like ideas about moral non-discrimination in other mysticism, including Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu, the topic is important, and I return to it below.

### **Taoist Social Life.**

The comments about politics apply also to social life. Social life can get screwed up in the same way as politics, and is cured in the same way. When social life is held together by conventions and morality, it is screwed up. When social life arises out of spontaneous interactions without thought for conventions or morality, it is like nature and the Tao. It is natural human life. It is not screwed up, and so beneficial. There is no crime, and no need for policies, ideologies, creeds, laws, codes, police, other officers, taxes, courts, soldiers, pensions, welfare, dams, forest management, and all the bad burdens of corrupt civilized life. When left alone, farmers get along. When left alone, particular professions, such as carpenters, lawyers, plumbers, surveyors, etc. know how to organize themselves and get along. Villagers get along. There is no need for state oversight or oversight by moral authorities such as preachers, priests, and the church. There is no need for politics. This stance put Taoism on the "idea map" in China. This is the stance for which, and out of which, Taoism originally developed.

### **Now That You Know the Tao.**

Taoism is not primarily therapy. You can get the Tao, and get acting in accord with the Tao, fairly quickly, and then you just do it to the extent that you are able and that circumstances permit. When you do it, you live as the Tao intends you to live. You become a human person, maybe for the first time. You see the world, yourself, and other people clearly enough. You see that the world is as it is. What you do depends on you and the Tao. Very likely, you will give up almost all your previous useless hurtful strivings for silly goals. Unless your situation is odd and bad, you will enjoy your life, maybe for the first time. If you have problems, the Tao will help you deal with them. You might not be able to deal with everything but you can deal with most things. If you are miserable by nature or situation, and nothing else changes, then you will remain externally miserable despite following the Tao; see the chapters on Theravada and Zen.

## **PART 2: Taoist Ways of Life**

### **Taoism, Dogma, and a System that Eats the World.**

Most dogma implies a system that eats the world. Taoism denies all dogma. Taoism does recognize "the Tao" and Taoists do seek "the Tao". Taoists seek to act in accord with the Tao. All this comes close to dogma and a system that eats the world. You have to decide if Taoists are hypocritical. Magical Taoists

did seek to build a system that eats the world. Most Taoists used no dogma, non-discrimination, no good and bad, the I Ching, yin and yang, chi, and other aids described below. The best Taoists, and the Zen masters that followed, did not indulge in dogma, did not build much of a system, and did not build a system that eats the world. They escaped pitfalls because they understood that hating dogma is a kind of dogma too, humans need some dogma and system to live, and we can use a little dogma and system without building a system that eats the world.

Modern Western Taoists are caught on the horns of this dilemma. On the one hand, they know Taoist rejection of dogma and Taoist love of freedom. On the other hand, modern Western Taoists ceaselessly chase yin, yang, chi, and "The Tao", and they certainly yearn for a system that eats the world. They are the bane of martial arts classes. A bolstered metaphysical version of "The Tao" is the hole of the center of their wannabe system that eats the world. Modern Western Taoists are not far removed from magical Taoists although they know well enough to be intellectual, refined, and mystical about it. It makes sense to say you "seek the Tao" and to see the Tao in nature. It does not make sense to construct a mystical metaphysical system out of that. You have to find your own way out of this dilemma.

### **Taoist Appreciation for Life and People.**

This aspect of Taoism is one of its best features. Two poor men sat drinking wine. It was impossible to tell how old they were because they were unkempt, smelly, and gnarled by life. Yet they were happy, and enjoyed what they had. One saw a twisted old bush by the side of the porch, and asked his friend what he would do if he were like that bush. The friend replied that he might be like that now, but did not know. If his arm was twisted, he would learn how to use that arm as it was; he might use it as a hook to catch rats. If his leg was twisted, he would learn to walk at an angle by the side of the road. A duck is not a robin, yet both use what they have to go along with the Tao. A tree at the beach is blown into fantastic shapes by the constant wind and so is not like a tree in a sheltered valley, yet both use what they have to go along with the Tao. However the poor old man was, that was how the Tao had made him, and it would be satisfying enough to go along with it.

Taoists love life. Life is worthwhile. They value life not only in the Confucian or Western senses. Life is. While alive, enjoy it. Whatever life brings can be enjoyable. If it is not enjoyable now, it might be so later. In the meantime, we have many aspects to our life that are worth living. You can sing even if you are not drunk. You can help the neighbor even if your apples have worms. This idea is not the same as "Say 'Yes' to Life". That is a misleading doctrine. This attitude is simply living. Note that this view of life is at odds with Buddhism.

Taoists value life, human life, individual people, and particular things. The Tao is in all. The Tao shapes all particular rivers, trees, mountains, turtles, and people differently. Each is unique. Each is valuable in its own way. This is not the value that a Confucian might find in a virtuous person or a Westerner finds in the individual. It is just that each of us is a manifestation of the Tao, has his-her time here, and has the potential joy of acting in accord with the Tao while here. We might as well do that. This is not the same as saying that each of us is a bit in the many-lives big-system Dharma, and we each should do our part in letting the Dharma feel joy through us. This is not the same as saying our social duty is our Dharma, as with Krishna and Arjuna. I am not sure of relations between Western ideas of individual value and Taoist ideas of individuals in the Tao.

### **Taoism and Usefulness.**

People tend to think a long life, as a big animal, with lots of energy, strength, and power, is better than a short life as a small powerless animal. It is better to be a tiger than a squirrel. That is not necessarily true. It takes a lot of work and food to keep up a big animal. Hunters are always after big animals. Big animals cannot catch small animals. Small animals are not very valuable. If they avoid snares, they can live out their lives in fair comfort and fair joy. Small animals have many abilities too; they just don't have the same abilities that large animals have. To a bird, a cricket is small and a cat is big; but, to a cat, a bird is small and a dog is big. The cat chases the bird but the dog chases the cat; then a human chases the dog and the tiger chases the human. It is hard to say which life is better overall. If it is hard to say, then don't bother trying to say. Simply live out the life you have with the length of life, size, abilities, and strength that you have. This was a message of the classic movie "Blade Runner".

In previous chapters, I said people should make themselves useful. Usefulness and goodness go along together. Taoists would call my advice a doctrine, and take it with a lump of salt. We like usefulness but we should not confuse any particular characteristics with usefulness. We should not turn usefulness into a religious doctrine. We should recognize usefulness as it is and enjoy it as it is.

On the one hand, deliberate usefulness is to be avoided as a doctrine. A tree that is obviously useful is the first cut down. Trees with beautiful large long straight trunks are valuable to make chairs, tables, and houses, so woodcutters go after them first. Useful trees and useful people get used up by society. They do not live long. They do not beget other useful trees or people. It is better to have crooked, gnarled, knotty wood, to appear useless, to be spared by the woodcutter, and so to live a long time, give many blossoms, and advance the Tao.

On the other hand, useless trees get cut down early to make way for useful trees. Useful trees are loved and taken care of. A woodcutter first does not first go after big beautiful straight trees because those are valuable, and continue to grow in value. Those receive care until the right time to harvest them. People nurture an apple tree until it no longer bears fruit. The woodcutter goes after the twisted, gnarled, knotty trees for firewood first because they have no other purpose, and they will not be missed. A useless tree takes up space. Even if it has no use in itself, it is keeping away a useful tree, and so must be cut down.

Taoists took both these positions depending on what point they wished to make. Mostly they argued for uselessness because that went against dogma and went against conventional Chinese ideas. Chinese usually rigorously pursue utility.

### **More on Taoist Waking Up.**

See above where Taoist waking up does not involve seeing that this world is an illusion and seeing that there is a better realer world apart from, and above, this world. Taoists wake up to the fact that this world and the Tao are the same. Taoists wake up to the confusion, interest, transformations, hardship, good and bad mixed together, and fun of this world. This world is as it is.

Waking up in Taoism is almost “just wake up” (see chapters on Issues and on Buddhism). You wake up to mental freedom, the Tao, and your relation to the Tao. The only official preconception is the Tao, and that is left so undefined that it is not much of an issue. There are few “Taoist aids” to get in the way as in most Buddhism and Hinduism, and no real Taoist system to get in the way as in Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism. The Tao is easy enough to “get” although not easy to live in consistently.

Waking up in Taoism is not exactly “just wake up” because Taoists do have some preconceived ideas of what morality, nature, human nature, good behavior, good society, and good results are like. You cannot wake up, do whatever you want, and be whatever you want, in whatever kind of world you make up to suit yourself. Taoists hide these preconceptions so it might seem as if you are quite free and you “just wake up” but that is not true. Still, the constraints of Taoism are so small, so in accord with decent human nature and with much of nature, that the constraints are not much of a burden, and you do come close to “just wake up”.

### **The Taoist Ideal Person.**

Each religion uses its founder as the ideal person. It is easy to do this in Taoism because the founder, Lao Tzu, is basically mythical. If we knew more about him, I think Chuang Tzu would serve well as the Taoist ideal person.

Taoists adepts were women. I describe Taoist ideal people here mostly as men because they are what usually appear in the literature, but not always. I have not counted but I think women appear more often as adepts in Taoism than any other religion. Among its charms, Taoism has a low degree of sexism.

Taoism had five kinds of ideal person besides high-level adepts and magical adepts. None of the ideals saw him-herself as a Taoist, saw Taoism as a school, or saw Taoism as distinct from life. They simply acted true to character, and their character went with the Tao. Of Western literary characters, maybe Tom Bombadil from “Lord of the Rings” comes closest to a Taoist ideal. Bombadil married Goldberry, the River’s daughter. Power had no appeal to Bombadil, and power had no power over him. Bombadil could not undo all harm from badness but could undo some of the harm. Bombadil had power over the Ring in the sense that it had no power over him, he could see through it and its tricks, and could undo some of its harm. But he did not have power in the sense of the Ring, to impose his will, make others work for him, or make them into his image. Sadly, Bombadil was not in the movie versions. In LOTR, before Middle Earth was debased, among the good friends of Bombadil were the Ents, the tree herders. If Taoists had a society, it might be like Ents before Sauron (power, dogma, progress, stuff, agriculture, shopping malls) seduced and destroyed the Ent wives and so doomed the Ent way and Ent species. Taoists could be like pixies, sprites, fairies, or like Harvey the big rabbit Pookah (“Puck”) in the classic movie “Harvey”. Taoists were not always benign, friendly, or happy. They could be irascible, naughty, mischievous, or grumpy old people. If we allow that, another Tolkien character who could be a Taoist was Beorn the Skin Changer from “The Hobbit”.

The first Taoist ideal person was the perfect sage, for which Lao Tzu is the model. I say little about the sage because it is not useful here. You can read about him or her in Taoist literature. Enjoy the fantasy but don’t hold the sage as a model. Don’t try to be like a Taoist sage at first. I am not a sage, and I have never met anybody who is. People who say they are aren’t.

The second Taoist ideal person was the hermit in the wild, usually a man living as a recluse by a swamp or in the mountains. The hermit did not always live alone. Sometimes the hermit had friends, less often a wife, and sometimes even children. The Taoist hermit lived by fishing, gathering nuts, gathering firewood to sell, raising animals, crafts, and other non-destructive ways. Sometimes he-she just “lived of the land”. The hermits were not always sweet but they were never malicious. Sometimes a hermit developed his-her martial arts skills so as to repel bandits and to repel annoying representatives of other schools. Likely there really were such people in the wilds of China, and likely some of their martial arts skills are still seen today in the techniques of existing martial arts schools; Pa Kua (Bagua) might be a case.

The third Taoist person is a favorite of Western students: the poor drunken poet-painter-scholar. These artists often did see Taoism as a school, knew its ideas, and thought of themselves as Taoists. In China, most poets were painters, and vice versa. Poets tended to come from the failed literati and failed civil servants. Failure forced them to examine what is important about life and society. Failure forced them to live on the edge of nature where they could appreciate nature and see how human society was less than nature. Much of romantic Taoist ideas of nature come from them. Sometimes they did mistake political tenure or academic tenure for Taoist freedom. They are the source of some of China’s greatest poetry and painting. The real extent of their drinking is a subject of debate among critics and historians. I am pretty sure you can act like a Taoist poet-painter without becoming an alcoholic or without even drinking. Likely you will have to put up with poverty.

The fourth Taoist person lives in society, usually in a village, often on the edge of nature, usually as a quiet person pursuing a modest occupation such as a farmer, fisher, potter, smith, weaver, or painter. Everybody knows him-her and likes him-her. He-she rarely has anything to say at meetings or in the local pub. He-she does not push any doctrine or political position. Yet everyone can sense that what he-she follows is the correct path, that is, the Tao; and everybody goes along with his-her ideas even if, at the start of an issue, they advocate other positions. This person gets things done without getting things done. He-she asserts by allusion. Even Confucius would approve. When other people go along with the Tao as suggested by this person, they think it is their own idea, and do not remember where they got the idea. That does not matter because this person does not seek credit, wants not to get credit, and is fine when another person takes credit. Many cultures have a version of this person. This person is like the simple decent people that I admire. Sometimes in Western literature, this person is the quiet modest village priest. A good version is in the novel “The Warden” by Anthony Trollope; another more distant version is Father Brown, the small quiet detective of G.K. (Gilbert Keith) Chesterton. Taoists would take the fact that this person can be found in many cultures as evidence for the universal presence of the Tao and the universal validity of Taoism.

The fifth Taoist person is a craftsperson who is extremely adept without making a point (or even knowing) that he-she is adept and who loves his-her craft without making a point (or even knowing) that he-she loves the craft. This person is like the hermit or the village sage but usually lives in a town or at court. Even so, he-she is not of the town or court. He-she and the craft are one. He-she acts the craft naturally without thinking much. One of my favorite versions is the butcher (yes, Taoists did eat meat) who has not sharpened his knife in decades because he-she never hacks, saws, or chops the meat. He-she glides the knife through the natural joints and soft places while avoiding hard places, and so isolates the best meat. This way to act merges with ideas of yin and yang; see below. The third Taoist people, drunken

artists and writers, aspired to this grace but were rarely able to achieve it because they self-consciously tried. This fifth person is the ancestor of Chinese and Japanese warriors who are at one with their sword, spear, or bow, such as Zen archers. This fifth person is the ancestor of the character in the movie "The Seven Samurai" who was the best with weapons, and the basis for the James Coburn character "Fred" in the movie "The Magnificent Seven". This person is the basis for pilots who are at one with their planes but are not simply machines: Anikin Skywalker and Luke Skywalker.

I doubt you can be like this fifth person at every job. Jobs that inherently aggravate you and "suck your soul" cannot be turned to the Tao just because you are adept at them and get lost in them. "Mad Men", stock brokers, and serial killers don't follow the Tao.

The point of this fifth ideal is not to encourage losing yourself in a craft but to feel what it would be like to live your whole life this way, including morality. Rather than work at life, find out what makes life work, and then do that gracefully. Rather than work at moral decisions, find out how to help people get along and how to be useful. Then do so gracefully. Serve your apprenticeship at life and morality, and then serve life without thinking of life or morality.

Chinese people still recognize these personality types and value them, even if they don't know that the literary description of the types comes from Taoist artistes. Too often, Chinese know the types only as distorted stereotypes (dogma). They mix them with Confucian stereotypes, often in fun ways. Chinese people try to be like the stereotypes, against their own character. They adopt diffidence as the mark of a superior person and disdain openness as the mark of an inferior person even when they don't know why diffidence is supposedly the mark of a superior person and even when they really want to yell commands. It is funny to watch a Chinese boss who wants to yell at employees but instead tries to direct indirectly by hints because to yell is a mark of a spiritually low person. Eventually the boss breaks down, and then he-she screams louder than if he-she had just barked commands at first. Employees strain to pick up hints or wait resignedly for the storm to break. Sometimes it is fun to watch Asian students maneuver around a teacher so the teacher can seem to promulgate ideas by osmosis. Overt assertion of ideas by the students implies the teacher is not adept enough as an example and implies the students are not adept enough at sensing and imitating virtue. Sometimes the whole game is just sad. Husbands and wives go nearly crazy out-hinting each other without actually saying it; whoever says it out loud first is spiritually inferior and thus inferior in marriage. Watching all this, you begin to see how inferior Taoism and inferior Confucianism can merge, and how inferior Confucianism takes over.

### **Some Early Succinct Assessment.**

At the start of this book, I said we should act well gracefully, like athletes or dancers after long training, for the sake of goodness itself, and without thinking that God will assess us. This idea is like the Taoist fifth ideal person, the spontaneous butcher, and this idea reflects ideas from the other ideal persons too. Act in accord with God but don't worry much about acting in accord with God. Don't let the idea that you must face God after death paralyze you in life. Make yourself useful without worrying about credit. Enjoy life. Don't get caught up in dogma and the crap of life. You can only act like this with some mental clarity, and acting like this helps you to find mental clarity. It takes practice.

There are some differences between me and Taoist ideals. I think nature, morality, and meekness do not fully coincide as they seem to do in Taoism. We need principles and practicality. Taoists have principles but they avoid stating them because of the dogma of no dogma. They allow ideals to emerge from stories where the ideals do not seem like ideals but seem entirely natural. Each Taoist ideal person is a bundle of implicit principles.

Sometimes we have to overcome nature with principles and sometimes we have to let practicality lead principles. Following the Tao does not automatically resolve these issues. Nature and the Tao are not exactly the same. The Golden Rule arose naturally in us through evolution but we do not follow it fully, and follow it alone, when we act naturally. We also act naturally when we are selfish. Stealing is natural but wrong; absolute honesty is morally correct but, if we did it, society would collapse. Explicit principles are necessary, in the same way that a bow and arrows are necessary to an archer, a knife to a butcher, or a stalking strategy to a wolf. Taoists think we achieve the implicit principles inherent in stories and ideal people while simply acting naturally while I think we have to work at principles. We have to work first to learn them, and then throughout life to sustain them. Principles do not always lead us to act meekly. We can't always merely hint; sometimes we have to say it straight out. Not saying it straight out is not a sign of a superior person; and saying it straight out is not a sign of an inferior person. Openly offering a plan to the village is not the same as perverting the world by imposing dogma. When Taoists act like an ideal person, they feel they have succeeded totally. I understand but disagree. Neither Taoist ideals nor mine always succeed in practical life, for example, the ideal that you should seek no credit. Normal natural people do not feel that Taoist success is enough even when they are not greedy or misled by dogma. Not everyone wants to be a hermit or a drunken poet-painter. I like to mix more practicality and practical success into my idea of success than does a Taoist. I wish I could make money writing, and I wish I could contribute as a scientist.

I am more like a Taoist than the average American and I am not much like a career-oriented academic, business person, professional, politician, networker, or firm employee. I am more like a Taoist who says "nature is enough" than a moralist who says "you all will go to hell unless you follow all my rules strictly with fear in your heart". When nature, morality, meekness, principles, practicality, and success do not all coincide, it is better to be openly honest about the situation and to work it out in that spirit. I return to the issues below. You have to decide for yourself what works and why.

It is easy to make fun of a stance that says we can get everything that we want, including a great society, and that we can all get along, by acting naturally and forgetting about dogma. To act naturally, be useful, and find a good society are not stupid wishes. Even if Taoism cannot work to cure all ills, and even if it does not work for everyone, it is still a reasonable stance for people who do not fit into conniving natural human life and who see the glory of nature and want to save some. That is part of its appeal. See what you can get out of Taoism to make your life, and all life, better.

### **Taoism and Mental Freedom.**

Taoists sought what I call intellectual freedom, mental freedom, freedom to think as you will, freedom of the imagination, and mental clarity. I use "mental freedom" as a catch-all term. "Mental freedom" is the single most useful and important idea of Taoism for me. It figures again in the chapter on Zen.



Mental freedom does not mean freedom to do entirely as you wish. Nobody can do that. To think that way is to indulge in dogma about self, freedom, and will. Taoists can seem self-indulgent but really they are not. Mental freedom means not being bound by any dogmas so you are free to respond to situations as appropriate to the situation, appropriate to your own nature, and in accord with the Tao. Taoists varied on what they considered appropriate. Generally any theory about what is appropriate is automatically wrong even if superficially correct.

Mental freedom is far more important than any security. Life has little value apart from mental freedom. Only with full mental freedom can a person seek the Tao, find the Tao, and follow it. Mental freedom and the Tao are nearly the same. Only with mental freedom can one explore the riches within the Tao, such as yin and yang, nature, and Tai Chi Chuan. It is better to be a sick old hermit living by a swamp and free in the mind than to be the most powerful politician who cannot think straight. At best, political freedom is a means to mental freedom. Political freedom is valuable not so much in itself but as a means to mental freedom. Political tyranny is bad because it stops freedom of thought.

The Taoist idea of mental freedom is not the same as the Western idea, which is framed in political terms. The Taoist idea is more like freedom of imagination. Tyranny can kill true freedom but mental freedom does not result in democracy or any form of government. Political freedom does not guarantee mental freedom. It is unlikely that we need freedom in the Taoist sense to achieve a free democratic state. A Taoist would be deeply sad that Americans need a Bill of Rights to protect their freedoms. A Taoist would be deeply sad at using guns to protect freedom. A Taoist would be shocked by academic tenure, and would consider it a betrayal of freedom by a dogma about freedom.

Taoist ideas about nature, human nature, and goodness are too ideal to be put into social practice but Taoist ideas about individual freedom are not too ideal, at least for some people. A few gifted people can and should seek true Taoist mental freedom. Some few people can live free in that way – at least until society crushes them. If you think you are one of these people, likely you are not. The few people who can find true mental freedom should seek it despite their political and cultural milieu. They already seek it automatically, as part of their nature, as a calling from the Tao.

Political oppression can kill the possibility of any mental freedom. In the past, it was always possible to run away to the forest or swamp, and some Western Americans still try. That is not possible anymore. Freedom has to be found in at least some social context. Where there is society, in modern life there is politics. Where there is politics, it can be abused to kill all freedom. It would be nearly impossible to be a Taoist in a repressive regime, and perhaps in the modern politically correct world. One good reason to fight for political freedom is so that some people can still seek Taoist freedom.

Taoist mental freedom can be killed by mistakes about what is in accord with the Tao. Despite ample evidence to the contrary in the Chuang Tzu, Tao Te Ching, and Lieh Tzu, Chinese tend to think the best response to any situation, the response most in line with the Tao, is quiet superiority, aloof withdrawal, passive aggression, and manipulation by guilt and duty. I think this view is a Confucian misinterpretation. Taoists were not pushy but that is not the same as adopting a posture of non-pushy diffident superiority and passive aggression.

I almost used “mental clarity” instead of “mental freedom”. As a human being, you can only deal with the world, and find the Tao, if you can think clearly. To think clearly is not necessarily to think as a logician, mathematician, or good speaker. If you think clearly, and the Tao is true, then clear thinking should lead you to the Tao. However, I think Taoism is incorrect in some small ways, and so I decided not to use “mental clarity”. If Taoism is incorrect, and we think clearly, then we will not be lead inexorably to the Tao and only the Tao, although we should see the Tao along our journey. I still think mental clarity and Taoist mental freedom are very close.

The close relation of Taoist mental freedom with mental clarity points out the nearness of Taoism to other traditions that value mental freedom and mental clarity, including Buddhism, Zen, and Western ideas that stem from Socrates, Aristotle, Jesus, and Cynicism. Taoism is not far from the attitude of some scientists although the Tao is not the secret at the heart of the world for which science seeks. Taoism is not far from Jesus’ ideas of “simple ‘yes’ and simple ‘no’” with no dogmatic frills. Here I do not compare Taoist ideas of mental freedom with those other ideas. I invite you to do that.

### **PART 3: Agreeing and Disagreeing.**

In this part, I both describe Taoism more and state how I disagree with Taoism. The point is to show that we need principles even at the risk of some dogma. Especially we need principles on which to base good institutions. That I do not fully agree with Taoism does not mean I disagree much. I am hard on Taoism because I love the Taoist outlook, Taoist heroes, and Taoist ideas such as yin and yang and chi. Taoism is worth learning and worth shaping to our lives.

Think about why Taoists dislike dogma. I revisited this chapter in October 2013 just after the American government shutdown, while the Obama-care website was a morass, and we were learning the extent to which our government had spied both on world leaders and its people. For many years, Americans have been afflicted with dogma rather than good government: Left, Right, no center (“the center will not hold”), bad laws, lawyers, stupid opinions on TV and radio, the American legal system, TV ads from lawyers, the Tea Party, Republican hypocrisy, PACs, interest groups, and political correctness. Common Americans are screaming for Congress to quit “standing on stupid principles” and, instead, just do its job. Taoists faced a similar political disaster, and reacted the same way. Just do your job. I revised this chapter in August 2014 as ISIS (ISIL) was killing everybody not like them in Syria and Iraq, to force people into their wrong perverted dogma about surrender to God (Islam).

#### **Good Intuition.**

The letter of the law is dogma, often good dogma, but sometimes bad dogma. The spirit of the law is hard to write down, rarely is bad dogma, and often is the only way to act well. When I advise that we mix the teachings of Jesus, that is principles, with practicality, I say that the letter of the law is not enough and that we need to use judgment. Judgment is not something that we can write down. It requires intuition. Even in Islam, the written Word of God cannot cover all cases, and people need guidance in particular cases to find the right path. Martial artists train hard and long in particular techniques. Yet, in a fight, martial artists often act in ways that are only barely based on techniques. They improvise. The highest art is effective improvisation. Western martial artists say we must learn techniques but then overcome

them. Eastern teachers say the same but I don't like to refer to Eastern teachers here because they have a long Taoist tradition.

How is it different to say that (1) ultimately we have to rely on judgment that can't be written down versus to say (2) we have to act simply and spontaneously, and, in so doing, follow the Tao? How is it not following the Tao when a good Christian person sets aside the law to get to the heart of a situation and so to guide wounded people toward healing?

People who want to fuse East and West say it is not different. That root of intuition and good judgment is the same in both. If we rely on that, then we don't have to worry much about dogma.

Why not just rely on intuition, assume intuition plugs us directly into the Tao, and go from there? Why not reduce all religions and dogmas to the intuition that brings us to the Tao and that comes from the Tao? I offer some cautions.

I happily admit that we have to get beyond rules and dogma to judgment and intuition. I like living in the realm of intuition. But the importance of intuition is not the crux of the issue. My admitting that intuition can trump rules does not invalidate the need for principles, nearly all the time.

We can't simply discard dogma (Law, techniques, training). We have to go through them. We have to have a background for our judgment. If we have never trained in martial arts, we cannot get into a match with an advanced black belt and expect to win by inspiration alone. We can't strap on a set of skates and win Olympic gold. We can't judge a landlord-tenant dispute without some ideas and practice. We have to have a set of principles. This is what Confucians understood and what Taoists refused to see because this simple truth upset the Taoist applecart.

Nature likely did give us all we need to learn to be good useful spontaneous intuitive people most of the time. But nature did not give us all that we need to succeed without learning. Nature gave us what we need to learn, not what we need to succeed without learning. Learning requires ideas and practice.

Even if nature did give us all that we need to learn, still nature did not give us all that we need to learn to succeed all the time in every case. Even with all that nature gave us, we fail sometimes. We do not have an infallible font of intuition in our hearts. There is no magic to plug into to make sure we succeed all the time easily and gracefully. Our failures are one way to learn; but sometimes we just fail whether we learn or not; and sometimes we fail and don't learn. To say the Tao guarantees success, even within its limited arena, only adds a layer of crippling dogma. The original Taoists saw fact this but modern students of the Tao do not always see it.

Intuition alone can lead to really bad results. People have done really bad things because they felt the Tao in their hearts or felt God in there. "Feeling from the heart" and inspiration do not guarantee truth, goodness, beauty, correctness, naturalness, or helpfulness.

It matters what principles we rely on, use as our background, and fall back on. To be extreme, it makes a difference if we fall back on Satan or Jesus, Fascism or Democracy, Marx or Smith, Lenin or Jefferson, Stalin or Washington. What we learn when we start, and learn along the way, make a difference in our

final judgment. We must base our initial training on the best principles we can find. If principles-along-the-way didn't matter, then there would not be hundreds of schools of martial arts, each claiming to be the best; and there would not be various interesting cultures.

Depending both on the principles and on judgment, the end result differs, and difference matters. Not all martial arts eventually look the same, even if they do look a lot alike at the end. Not all national styles of dancing look and feel the same even if they all are dancing. Not all religions are the same at the end. Not all mysticism is the same. If things don't turn out the same at the end, and where you start makes a difference, then we have to pay attention to the differences at the beginning and end.

We can appreciate the good results of other kinds of thinking, other religions, other principles, but, in the end, we see them in terms of our best principles. If that is where we will end up, we might as well begin there too.

It is fine to dismiss silly rules, rules for the sake of rules, arbitrary conventions, letter of the law over spirit of the law, and merely mechanical technique. It is fine to extol good judgment as inspiration. But it is not enough. When I said we have to mix Jesus, practicality, and Western values, I meant really mix them. They all have to be there to get mixed. If ideas are not there, we can't mix them with intuition. We can't just glance at Jesus, practicality, and Western values, discard them, and rely on our inner light from then on. Mixing them is hard work but it is needed work. Experience matters. This is what martial artists have to go through to get where they rise above mere techniques, what skaters go through to skate well, what good politicians go through, what good pastors go through, and what we all have to go through to rely on sound judgment and on inspiration.

### **Tao and Nature.**

It is easy to see in Taoism "nature love" or even "nature worship" as among some Europeans, Americans, Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans. Taoists write that way and West Coast Americans take it that way. On the whole this view of Taoism is correct but to see Taoism as simple nature worship is a mistake. First, both Taoist and Western romantic versions of nature are wrong. Second, although similar, Taoists ideas and modern Western ideas of nature are not the same. American nature lovers who look to Taoism for support are wrong. Here I can show how both Taoist and modern ideas of nature are wrong but I don't have the space to explain how Taoist and modern ideas of nature differ.

People read into texts what they want to justify. We cannot read into Taoism current Western ideas about nature. Both Taoist and modern ideas about nature are inaccurate because they come from urban elites who do not live in nature. Farmers and hunters who make their living near nature don't think about nature the way Taoists and modern nature lovers think who make their living apart from nature. Nobody thinks about nature the way nature works itself, not even farmers and hunters. Biologists come closer than most Taoists or nature lovers but even they are guided by ideology. Everybody has "tainted" ideas of nature. That is not necessarily wrong. It is part of being human. We go on having imperfect ideas about nature, correcting them as we can, and acting as best we can. Still, we should not let any obviously inaccurate ideas serve as the basis for policy; people who cut up the forests of Colorado to make big houses should expect mud slides and forest fires. In effect, Taoists made their own romanticized ideas about nature into their own kind of dogma and policy just as modern nature lovers do.

I disagree with the Taoist and romantic view of nature. As a matter of obvious fact, nature does not work the way Taoists think it does or as modern nature lovers think it does. Nature does not work so well so easily. Nature does not take care of all its creatures. Nature does not always work for the best, and the results of nature are not always for the best. Sometimes nature “screws up”. Nature has useless pain, anguish, worry. Innocent creatures die. Ugly parasites and diseases live on. Not everything in nature is part of a great system; even where there is a system, not everything in nature is a useful part of a bigger good system; and even where we might call the system as a whole “good”, not everything in it is good. Not everything in nature is graceful and beautiful. Not everything in nature that appears ugly is really graceful or beautiful in its own way. Some things are just ugly. Taoists and modern nature lovers can have distorted ideas about nature only because they do not live in nature but they fantasize about it from cities, from working farms, from “genteel” farms such as on the old TV show “Green Acres”, or from a canoe while they float down an exciting but safe river.

When Taoism and nature are not the same, we have to figure out which is which, which we want to follow when, and why. We have to figure out why they differ, and what that means. The fact that Taoism is not simply nature means that Taoism has to rest on some human ideas, that is, principles. This situation is not bad as long as we accept it and get on with the tasks. All religions and philosophies are both natural in that they arise out of human proclivities and are non-natural in that they urge us to avoid some natural bad acts such as stealing and urge us to do some non-natural good acts such as give to the poor.

Taoism likely is on the right track when it tells us not to force nature much, to relax and go along with the sensibility that three billion years of evolution gave us. Taoism is more correct than dogmas that teach us to abandon ourselves to the “dark side” of greed and domination, try to impose rigid moral ideas, and try to totally conquer and subdue nature. Taoism only needs to be honest about its relation to nature and to human nature.

Just because Taoists and “tree huggers” wrongly romanticize nature does not mean they are all wrong; does not mean the state, big business, crass consumerism, and industrial farmers are all right; so we should demolish nature in our search for more junk and bigger houses. Nature might not be all-good but we can still abuse it, we need it, and we still undermine our future when we abuse it. If we do not take care of nature, nature will hurt us. We desperately need natural diversity and some balance of nature. If we abuse nature, we too will hurt in the long run. Global climate change is teaching us this lesson. Fires, floods, and mudslides are the icing on the cake. If we do take care of nature, nature might not take care of us like a loving abundant all-powerful mother, but we stand a better chance.

Despite distortion, Taoists saw nature more clearly than did officials, farmers, and hunters, who wanted only to chew up nature and get stuff. Taoists saw more clearly than business people and officials do now. Even with distortion, Taoist visions are among the most beautiful ever, and deserve appreciation. Nearly all Chinese and Japanese outdoor paintings are Taoist in spirit even if there is no official Taoist school of art. A great deal of Chinese poetry is Taoist.

Taoist admiration was part of Taoist desire to be part of a great whole in which everything is automatically all right all the time. We are all certainly part of nature because we are part of God’s creation but nature is not what Taoists make it out to be. That does not mean nature is really bad instead. Nature is what it

is. Usually we screw it up worse than it screws itself up. You can participate in God's creation but you don't necessarily do that by participating in a dogmatic Taoist view of nature. You do that by finding how you can help the most, in accord with your own nature, and then doing it. If you can participate in God's creation by joining nature and helping nature to the extent that you understand nature, I think that is great. Not everybody participates in that way.

### **Dogma and Human Nature.**

In Taoism, we are supposed to act according to our nature. Our nature comes from the Tao. Nature is natural. Yet part of natural human nature is ideas. Ideas lead quickly to dogma. Ideas about right and wrong, distribution of wealth, dignity, freedom, rules, love, friendship, etc. are all natural to human nature. I don't deny that society plays a large role; I only say society could not play its role unless we came with a predisposition to ideas. It is not clear if ideas and dogma are part of the Tao. If you deny a natural ability to produce ideas and natural tendency to live by them, you seem to deny the Tao.

We do not only have a predisposition to good ideas. We also accept, and insist on, bad ideas. We do not have a predisposition to bad ideas. We have a predisposition to ideas, and some of those ideas turn out bad. We probably have a predisposition to sort out good from bad, but the line between good and bad is not always clear, and we are not very adept at sorting out good from bad. So we can accept bad dogma, get attached to it, promote it, and force it onto other people. That is part of our natural nature, also supposedly from the Tao.

Good ideas often turn out well. That is one reason we call them good. But good ideas can turn out badly too. Since the 1950s, Americans have insisted on rights, and much good has been gained this way. But Americans have insisted on rights without usually accepting the responsibilities that go along, and so the good idea of rights also has led to some very bad dogma. Bad ideas usually lead to bad results, but do sometimes lead to good results. I don't give examples because I don't want to help out people who insist on bad moral relativity. We are not good at sorting out good results from bad results, as in the growth of dependence on the state. None of this is unnatural. All is natural. All is part of our Tao as humans.

The trick is to sort out good ideas and good results from bad ideas and bad results, and the desire to do so is likely part of our natural (Tao) human nature. Taoism sometimes helps and sometimes does not.

When Taoism insists on no discriminations, it undercuts the natural needful useful desire to sort out good ideas and good results from bad. In those cases, Taoism is bad dogma.

Taoism originally offered its critiques of dogma to counteract good ideas that had gone awry, and against bad ideas too. That is a good use of the idea of "no dogma". But Taoism went beyond that to its own bad dogma. It got caught in the trap of its own bad dogma.

Just because Taoism made some mistakes does not mean it is all wrong, not useful, or more wrong than the alternatives. It does not mean we should have a huge dogmatic nasty state. Taoism was correct in its critique of dogmas and a big state. Taoism is essential. We need to keep its criticisms in mind when we flounder off into plausible but bad dogmas about human nature and the state. We need to use its central vision to find our mental freedom.

### **Acting Bad Naturally.**

Taoists say people who act freely, without any dogma, act in accord with the Tao, and people who act in accord with the Tao act freely without any dogma. I think people who act freely do not necessarily act in accord with the Tao. They do not necessarily act badly or well, but they do not necessarily act in ways that Taoists would call in accord with the Tao. People who act freely and naturally can act badly in ways that a Taoist would have to say are not in accord with the Tao.

As an anthropologist, I researched firsthand the history of people colonizing new land along the coast of Thailand. When people colonize new land, they have many children, and their children have children. At first they get along with nature, then they use nature, and then they destroy it. In another instance of the natural abuse of nature, when boys walk among fruit trees, they use branches to pummel trees and fruit. They knock down fruit for no reason. People like to drink alcohol. When people drink, they act foolishly. People love to eat. Modern people routinely over eat. None of this behavior is unnatural, all of it is free, and none of it is necessarily immoral. I am sure it is not what a Taoist would call in accord with the Tao.

Even when people act in accord with the Tao, and do not act immorally, things do not always turn out as what a Taoist would call "in accord with the Tao". Interactions have a way of going oddly. Taoists often used woodcutting as an example of a typical Taoist way to make a living. Yet when enough people glean gently from the woods, they still destroy the woods. When only a few cars existed in the world, to tend a car skillfully and make it run well seems to me to act in accord with the Tao. Yet when many cars exist in the world, the same behavior results in a situation wildly out of accord with the Tao.

Now it gets worse. People act badly not because they have been corrupted by dogma or by other bad people but because all people have at least a little streak of badness and some people have a big streak. Some badness is natural and comes freely. Taoists prefer that people do not steal but people do steal, and stealing can make a difference in how we get along and in what we have to do to protect ourselves. The same is true of lying, aggression, and sexual aggression. Date rape is likely partly natural but that does not make it good or in accord with the Tao. Most people are not very bad. Most people are more good than bad. People don't have to be monsters from "slasher movies", or hungry zombies, for things to turn out worse than we can stand. People only have to be naturally bad and let nature take its course.

Taoists do not take into account natural free bad behavior and its results. Taoists have in mind natural free behavior that is also good and that leads to good results. Only this behavior would be "in accord with the Tao" although Taoists would not like to admit that.

### **Taoism and Society.**

In Taoist society, when everybody acts freely and naturally, things turn out wonderfully. There is no crime and no need for officials. Rural romantics in all cultures believed this heaven would happen where people had not been corrupted by modern capitalist industrial Western life. People still lived like angels in Tahiti, the French countryside, or American backwoods. Native Americans were saints. This view of "natural society" in the West is like the view of "natural society" in Taoism, and both views are wrong and hurtful. When I first went to Thailand in 1981, I met a young Thai sociology professor, recently back from a major

American university. He declared categorically that there had never been any crime in all the thousands of villages over all Thai history before evil corrupt selfish Westerners intruded and brought crime: no stealing, lying, rape, seduction, murder, forgery of land documents, drugs, laziness, or anything bad. My mouth literally hung open speechless.

This Taoist Heaven-on-Earth does not happen for the reasons given above: people do not act in accord with the Tao; even if people do act in accord with the Tao, the end result is not necessarily what we want; and free natural behavior can be bad behavior that is not seem in accord with the Tao.

Human society turns out badly because free natural people are bad enough to make society bad. It only takes a few bad acts, or a few bad people, and there are always enough. People are naturally greedy, selfish, and want power, riches, and sex. Human society can turn out badly because following dogma is a part of natural human nature. Human society can turn out badly because people naturally follow good dogmas or people naturally follow bad dogmas. Human society does not turn out badly only because people are perverted by bad dogmas or by any dogmas-as-such. Society can turn out badly because the raw material, people, is not in accord with the Tao. Society can also turn out badly when people do act in accord with the Tao. Taoists wish we would act kindly when we act freely and naturally so that things will work out in society when we act in accord with the Tao. Taoists would like us to act badly when we act in accord with dogma so things always turn out badly when we do not act freely naturally in accord with the Tao.

In reality, people only get along well when they act freely and naturally in some conditions: they know each other, nobody has uncontrollable bad natural inclinations such as killing or raping, people can be held accountable, people exchange social services and goods, people do better when they exchange, people depend on each other to some extent, and people likely will depend on each other in the future. Usually you find these conditions in old rural villages and small towns and in old urban neighborhoods where people have similar incomes and where everybody makes enough to get along fairly well. These conditions are also found in idealized TV shows such as "Little House on the Prairie", "Friends", and "How I Met Your Mother".

Taoists wrongly thought these conditions would arise whenever people acted in accord with the Tao and did not have to endure the evils of civilization. Taoists thought these conditions prevailed automatically in the countryside among farmers, gatherers, and craftspeople. Ironically, Taoists could only have these wrong ideas about rural life because they came from cities and they had not really lived in the countryside except as exiles, usually drunken exiles. As anybody can tell you who has lived in the countryside as a resident, these conditions do not usually prevail. Even if, on the surface, conditions similar to these do prevail, country people are so bored that they gladly go to the excitement of the corrupt and evil city so as to be entertained.

These conditions usually only arise and persist when experienced people make good principles, make good institutions on the basis of those principles, and then get other people to live according to the good principles and institutions. It takes a lot of luck and a long history too. Hopefully the good principles and institutions are in accord with the natural tendency of people to make and follow dogma. When Taoists try to get rid of all dogma, but they smuggle in their ideas of good social life, they prevent good people from making the necessary principles and institutions.



Taoists are not entirely wrong. They can be deeply right. When conditions are right and the “live and let live” way works, and when the living situation is also interesting, it can be a good life. Civilization has its badness, and piling laws and officials on top of laws and officials does not usually make it all better. But we can’t get there by letting people do what they want. What have to think about what we want whether that is “in accord with the Tao” or not. We have to think about how to make the conditions so that people can mostly get along by doing what they want, and so people will perpetuate the conditions that let them get along by doing what they want while they get along by doing what they want.

### **More Taoist Social Dreams.**

I have lived for long periods in a dozen places. In each place, people assured me that, there, everybody was free to live as he-she wished as long as he-she didn’t hurt anybody. People were free to “do their own thing”. Nowhere was this really true. People everywhere want you to act like them or to act as they wish you to act. They set up their way as the secret standard for the best way. If new people are serious about living there, becoming one with the place, and one with them, then new people should soon live like the long-term residents. If new people have to differ, but can live without harm, that is tolerable, but still not OK. That is better than living badly but it is still not up to the secret standard. Libertarians, hippies, Californians, Midwesterners, Easterners, Southerners, Thai, New Agers, PCers, Leftist radicals, feminists, gay activists, Buddhists, Taoists, and even old Oregonians, are all like this.

Taoist stories make it seem as if people are free to live as they wish but that is not true. Taoists have, in the back of their heads, an idea of a good life. Basically, the Taoist idea of the good social life is like a comfortable middle class American suburb, or neighborhood of old American self-sufficient working class, with a lot of nature nearby. Some societies work in accord with the Tao and some do not. Taoists would disapprove of an Amish county, or a religious commune with a lot of rules, even if the people were happy and everything worked out well for generations.

You have to judge whether this secret judgment makes Taoists hypocrites, and how much it undermines Taoism as a whole. I don’t think it undermines Taoism as a whole. I do think it makes Taoists as much human as all of us, including the tendency to make ourselves the universal standard and to use dogmas. I am also like this but I try to be honest about it.

I don’t think it is possible to run a society without dogmas, standards, and institutions. If so, then we have to think about what dogmas, standards, and institutions we want. We have to think how our ideas support our preferred way of life but give latitude to other people who are not like us as long as those others are not dangerous or immoral. Taoists have to think how to run Taoist society so as to preserve basic ideas of the Tao but still let other people live. These are old issues for free plural democracies, and the reader has heard them before. That doesn’t make them any less real even for Taoists.

### **Tacit Taoist Morality.**

To completely shut down the mistakes of the Confucians, Legalists, Mo-ists, heavy-handed rulers of their times, and stultifying moral conventions, Taoists came down on the side of moral relativity or moral non-discrimination. In doing so, they again made the mistake of the dogma of no dogma. In fact, Taoists did

have a clear moral code, which they tacitly asserted. I like their tacit moral code but not their dogmatic anti-morality.

You cannot say “It is better not to judge better and worse”. That is a contradiction. You can say it is better to be flexible about better and worse.

When first meeting Taoism, Westerners sometimes think Taoists have no morality at all – an impression that might please Taoists. Taoists “picked apart” all codified dogmatic conventional morality and morality that came from ideologies. They showed how all usual morality was “bolstered” (“reified”) as part of bad system.

In fact, though, Taoists are neither amoral nor immoral. I have never read about or met a Taoist who did really act like the giant bandit in the story above. Taoists value mental freedom. They want to do as they wish and they are willing to allow other people to do as others wish. They do not “put their ideas on to” other people and they do not allow other people to impose ideas. They wish other people would follow the Tao (do well in life) and they hope other people wish them the same. In their own way, Taoists follow the Golden Rule. The difference is that Taoists are not proactive and they do not think they are obliged to make the world better or to “pay it forward”. Likely, in real practice, they would help people quite a bit and would “pay it forward”, but they also avoid any dogma that tells them they have to do so and tells them they are categorically better when they do it. You just do it.

If you pay attention to all of a Taoist story rather than only to the punch line that deflates moralist dogma, it is clear that Taoists have a morality much like the “good people” morality of all other religions. Despite tales of vicious bandits, Taoists are decent guys. They encourage each other, console each other, and help each other with wine if nothing else. Taoist ideas of acting in accord with the Tao, accord between heaven and the Tao, and realizing Heaven by acting in accord with the Tao, are all versions of goodness even if Taoists don’t want to call it that and they refuse to measure it in any way. So Taoists do have a morality even if it is hard to pin down. Just because Taoists see that most morality is bolstered as part of a system, and moral dogma often leads to badness, does not mean Taoists don’t have a moral vision of their own. Their morality goes along with the Golden Rule and their morality leads to something like the Kingdom of Heaven. This is why Taoism is secretly so appealing; people can be moral but claim they are above morality. It allows Westerners to be moral while espousing moral relativism. We should see Taoist apparent “anti-morality” in light of this real background morality.

Mystic strains in other religions also stress moral non-discrimination, the conventional nature of morality, and the harm done by adhering to convention and dogma. As with Taoists, I think most mystics are nice guys, wouldn’t harm a fly, and would help other people. Mystics in all religions were well-known for giving themselves up to harm instead of harming another being or allowing another being to come to harm, and for actively helping other beings. Even the Buddha felt compassion and taught. The idea here is not to do away with all discriminations and so to dwell in a land without any morality at all. The idea is to trust your instincts (Luke’s “feelings”) and your training to do the right thing without too much anguish when the time comes. Trust yourself not to fall prey to dogmas, even moral dogmas. We are easily misled by moral sounding arguments and by high-sounding principles. We need to be able to back off those so as to see clearly and then do the right thing as we see it in those circumstances. Practice stepping back and keeping an open mind. Practice seeing all sides of the question. Practice putting on the shoes of other

people, even people you don't like. Practice finding your basic principles and applying them correctly in various situations.

If you stress no-dogma and non-discrimination in morality to the point that you are amoral or immoral, then you have gone too far. You have created your own dogma and convention, based on morality, as anti-morality, as surely as any conniving preacher or politician.

There are no hard-and-fast rules for how to find the right middle path between moral dogma versus anti-dogma. The fact that there are no hard-and-fast rules but we can often find our way with practice, is likely the real meaning behind the slogans of "no moral discrimination" and "moral relativity". In other chapters, when I write about moral relativity and non-discrimination in other religions, keep in mind these comments based on Taoism. To borrow and paraphrase from Donovan Leitch and Zen:

First there is a mountain  
Then there is no mountain  
Then there is

First there is a kindness  
Then there is no kindness  
Then there is

### **Contradiction Inherent in "No Dogma", Again.**

On the one hand, to argue against other schools, Taoists insist that the person who acts in accord with the Tao is happiest, most successful in his-her own way, and creates the best society. Taoist society is best. Taoist society is best by any reasonable standards that can be suggested by rival schools.

On the other hand, Taoists insist no measurable standards, and no other formal standards, can be used to assess personal behavior or society. There can be no measure of personal success, personal best behavior, or best society. People act according to the Tao. Automatically what results is best in its own way; but we can't compare it with other results, we can't measure it, and we shouldn't have to measure it. If we try to measure it, we impose dogma and ruin it. If we say the wealthiest society is best, that clearly is not true, and we corrupt any society that we try to make wealthy to make best. If we say the most powerful society is best, that clearly is not true, and we corrupt any society in which we create a large army so as to make it powerful. America and China are learning that lesson now. This situation is like the difference between quality and quantity. We are after quality. We can feel quality. We can feel when we act according to quality. To impose quantity, or to impose any standards so as to capture quality, inevitably corrupts and destroys quality. In Hinduism and Buddhism, to impose quantity in a mistaken effort to capture quality is to follow maya-samsara (delimited seductive illusory channeling world) instead of seeking the direct success and satisfaction of enlightenment.

You can't have it both ways – no dogmas yet best by standards - and Taoists struggled with the problem. Not only to defeat rivals but to appeal to lay people, Taoists did say that following the Tao led to the best society by implied shared standards such as secure, happy, and moderately wealthy. Yet when rivals used the same standards to show Taoism could not succeed, Taoists instead insisted that no standards

could apply and that Taoism was the way of no standards. This Taoist stance is like Bruce Lee's "fighting without fighting" or "acting without acting".

From a contradiction, you can argue for any nonsense. Taoism can only overlook that its view of human action and society is unrealistic and unrealizable because it rests on this contradiction between success-according-to-standards versus no dogmas. This contradiction allows people to read into Taoism any silly notions of what a spiritually successful person is like and what a good society is like. It allows modern Taoists to think they can forge a spiritually successful mini-society in any urban Taoist center.

For me, the main poison fruit of this contradiction is that it blinds Taoism to the fact that it uses principles of morality. Taoism must use principles of morality. Taoism can pretend that it does not need principles of morality when it does need them and does use them. Taoism would be better off accepting this fact and coming to grips with what principles are in accord with its idea of the Tao, good human action, and a good society. Taoism would perform a great service if it could show us how to use principles of morality without also falling into bad dogmas.

### **Taoism and Libertarianism.**

In this section, these ideas from the chapter on atheism are useful:

-Anything that we make very important, above most of the world, we really make super natural, even if it is also in this world. Not only God is super natural. People who believe deeply in morality, love, wealth, power, souls, democracy, or free will really make those things super natural.

-Whenever we make something super natural, we imply metaphysics to go along with it even if we don't elaborate the metaphysics. If we think souls are really important, we have to explain the place of souls in the world, the relation of souls to each other, the relation of souls to choice, and their relation to aspects of the world such as power.

-To allow any super natural and metaphysics at all is to allow a lot. If you say you can hold something special, then other people have the right to hold things special too. Then we have to decide between different sets of super-natural-with-metaphysics. If a person says souls, love, free will, and morality are special then another person can say power and wealth are special, and we have to decide.

According to Taoism, we should act freely and naturally in accord with the Tao both because that is what we should do and because, by acting that way, we lead to the best society. Yet people acting freely and naturally do not necessarily act in accord with the Tao and do not necessarily achieve the best society. Making dogmas is part of human nature yet making dogmas is acting not in accord with the Tao. Normal natural people want credit for ideas and work. Acting freely in accord with the Tao can achieve social goodness. Yet even people acting freely in accord with the Tao do not necessarily achieve good society. No fulfilling society is made entirely of irascible hermits, drunken poets, and unerring butchers. When faced with bad neighbors or with a bad state, it is better to move away, keep mental freedom, and find the Tao elsewhere than to stay, practice what little of the Tao that you can, assume your good example will change society, and so eventually to lose the Tao and lose yourself. So, is Taoism about persons acting freely in accord with the Tao regardless of results for society (religious Taoism), about acting freely

regardless of the Tao (political freedom), or about finding the best society (political Taoism)? It can help to see these issues in a modern arena.

In Oregon where I grew up, people felt strongly we should let people do as people wished as long as they did not hurt other people, society, or nature. When I learned of Libertarianism, it reminded me of Oregon, but not quite. When I tried to explain Taoism to Libertarians, they thought they saw early Libertarians, early kindred spirits. Taoism and Libertarianism both promote free individual action and oppose dogmas of control but they are not the same. To show how they differ helps to explain both.

I do not describe Libertarians other than that they are strong advocates of individual free action, the free market, and private enterprise, and they are strong critics of the state. Like Taoists, they want to reduce the state to nothing. They want private free enterprise to build roads, build dams, run the police, fight fires, and take care of national defense. They want no public oversight of food safety, the environment, or anything. They see all policy as dogma; and all dogma is bad.

Libertarians give two justifications. The two justifications are not fully compatible but most Libertarians don't see the conflicts. They mix up the ideas. Both justifications involve hidden reliance on something above nature, that is, on the super natural. In relying on the super natural, the justifications necessarily imply metaphysics. Libertarians usually take the justifications so much for granted that they don't see these implications.

The first justification is like political Taoism. To achieve the greatest public good and best society, rely on private enterprise and free capitalist market and rely on them only. Private enterprise in a free capitalist market always leads to the greatest general good. Only private enterprise in a free capitalist market leads to the greatest general good. Private enterprise in a capitalist market always does better than any alternative, especially better than state action. The free capitalist market is THE institution that always allows the action of private people to outdo the state and to find the greatest good, and is the only such institution. The free market is the Libertarian institutional equivalent to Taoist non-institutional Virtue that leads to good society. How Libertarians define "better", "best", and "greatest good" does not matter here. I do not explain how Libertarians support their conclusions but they do give some good arguments.

The second justification is like religious Taoism. Libertarians assert the absolute value of autonomous free individuals, and Libertarians deny any standards higher than autonomous free individuals. The free individual is the highest entity in the world and ultimate standard for everything in the world. Everything is compared to the free autonomous individual to assess the value of that thing. Free individuals make their own goodness in the world. Anything that undermines the freedom of free individuals is bad. People are autonomous adults who always know their own minds and always can decide what is best. The world might be hard but it is not so hard that the average person can't handle it. Consenting adults should be free to do as they want regardless of results for the social whole. Contending adults can "work it out" or fight it out if they have to. Regardless of outcome, free people should act freely. If the outcome is the best in general (greatest general good), then so much the better. But even if the outcome is not the best that can be imagined, or the best that might practically be achieved by other means, still free people should act freely. If somehow the capitalist market did not serve as the vehicle for free people to act freely, then free people should rise above even the market to act freely.

The state should never be above the free individual. Because the state almost necessarily seeks to be above the free individual, free people almost always need to avoid the state. The average person does not need a state bureaucrat to hold his-her hand. Any aid from the state demeans people. State aid causes more damage through demeaning free people than state aid leads to any gain through wealth, security, or power. No gain from the state, however large, is worth any loss of freedom, however small. Not even the welfare of your family is worth state intervention.

If the free actions of free individuals, that is, private enterprise, on the free capitalist market, ever did not lead to the greatest social good, then the two justifications would conflict, and Libertarians would have to choose. Libertarians insist the two principles never conflict and always support each other. Libertarians never have to choose. Libertarians can have their cake and eat it too.

Here we have to dip our toes into the real world. As a matter of empirical fact, the real capitalist market does not automatically magically produce a great world. I don't go through its faults. Some Libertarians know this, and so they argue instead that the market is the best realistic alternative, better than state plans and business mercantilism. On the whole, they are right, but not entirely right. It is not worth assessing the arguments from various sides in detail. What matters: First, regardless of how well the market works, making the market that important makes it super natural. Arguments about how well it works are not directly relevant to its status as super natural. Second, Libertarians make autonomous free individuals so important as to be super natural. Third, the super naturalism gets stronger when you put together ideas about the market and individuals. Fourth, the market still has some faults, and some of the faults undercut links between the market and the importance of autonomous free individuals. Fifth, some faults erode the value of individuals and the status of people as autonomous always-competent almost-angel super natural agents; they hurt the human soul.

To prepare for the idea that the market and humans in Libertarianism are super natural, and how they are bound together in the super natural, it helps to look closer at how Libertarians see them. Libertarians find in the free market the compromise institution – between bad chaos and hyper-order - that allows them to achieve individual free action and the greater good at the same time. Free people working through the market act more in accord with human nature and the human soul than when they give up any freedom to let the state help them. The free market always allows people to act freely in accord with their nature as important souls. The free market is the only way in which people can be free and assert individuality. When individuals are free and assert their true nature, they naturally automatically build a free market. Free individuals use the market that they have built to achieve all their material, personal, institutional, and social goals, and to guard their status as free souls. The free market that free people build to serve them always leads to the greatest overall welfare. The free market that free people build to serve them always achieves goals better than the state ever could. The free market that free people build always guards free people better than the state ever could. The free market is the one and only institution of and for autonomous free people.

(Economics has a long tradition about relations between individual action and the greater social good. Libertarians know of this tradition and are a part of it. I have to ignore the tradition here.)

The market to a Libertarian is like the God-given Church to Christians, Law to the religions of Yahweh-Allah, Democracy to Americans, and laws to Chinese Legalists. It plays this role as an institution. As a

way apart from an institution, the market is like morality to moral atheists, “regard” to Mo-ists, and, as just stated, like free action in accord with the Tao to Taoists. The market is so important that it is not only natural but super natural too. Critics of Libertarianism say Libertarians worship the market, not a real market but an unrealizable idealized market. Even if the market often does work well, the idea that it always works best is not an empirical scientific idea but a super natural dogma, and this dogma, like all dogmas, comes with metaphysics. The market “comes off” not as a merely human institution but as the one God-given best institution of the world, a super natural institution that serves to protect super natural freedom and to give the greatest manna to people. Arguments over how the market out-does rivals are not so much science-based-on-facts as rationalizations for ideas that Libertarians hold for other reasons. In fairness, I stress that everybody offers rationalizations for ideas held for other reasons.

Likewise, the Libertarian idea of a person cannot be based on any scientific experiment but must rest on an ideal autonomous sufficient free-willed agent. In essence, people are souls and souls are the most important thing in the world, above the rest of the world. This view is a dogma. It makes persons super natural. The idea that people are free autonomous agents and the most important thing in the world is a metaphysical ideal. Libertarians don’t see this. A Libertarian might like the view of a person as an ultimate autonomous free agent, as the most important thing in the world; that view might be preferable to alternative dogmas such as “make the individual serve the good of the whole” and “we want the state to watch over us”; and non-Libertarians might go along; but the idea is still a dogma about the super natural and it still entails metaphysics. Most people who value the individual, Libertarians or otherwise, don’t see that their opinion entails the super natural and metaphysics. They take this stance so much for granted that they see it as entirely natural.

When mixed, the two justifications reinforce each other and bolster worship of the market. The market is the one institution that best serves super natural souls. As such, it too is super natural. The market is the best balance of life-giving chaos versus death-dealing hyper-order. The state is the enemy of souls; the state is Satan. The market is the champion of souls against the state as Satan. The market is the institutionalized good order that results after God defeats bad chaos and institutes his order; the market is the good order that remains on the free chaotic side of the hyper-order of the Golden Calf, Egypt, Syria, or Babylon; the market is the chaos that God tamed and made creative; and it is the natural spontaneous compromise institution that continues God’s work in previously subduing bad chaos. It is very hard to assess this view in any scientific terms, and almost impossible to go against it with other ideas. Once inside, the Libertarian view is a system that eats the world. When Libertarians, and other social critics, argue, they argue not so much about facts but assert super natural metaphysical systems.

The Libertarian claim might sound silly when I put it like this, but, still, it is a worthwhile claim. The free market often works well. Not only Libertarians see people as priceless souls and see the market as a great institution that serves freedom, happiness, and prosperity. The Libertarian view deserves respect. Libertarians only need to be honest about the issues.

Because the Libertarian view of the market and of persons is super natural, the Libertarian view opens the door to the super natural and metaphysics in general, such as, ironically, glorification of the state and of religions. Libertarianism arose in the 1920s, about the same time that strong fascism arose, another dogma with metaphysics. They arose together as opposing mirrors images. When I knew Libertarians, I was surprised by how many were staunchly religious church members. Deep respect for the soul, and

concern about how individuals and society fit, leads naturally to religion. If you can see the market as the institution between bad chaos and the bad nanny state, the one institution that channels good chaos and preserves souls, then you can see the Church that way too – in fact, likely the Church came first as a model and set the stage for the market much later.

Now empirical facts are relevant again. In some ways, the market does not serve free souls, such as in promoting debt slavery and stratification. Free action by autonomous important souls on a free market does not always lead to the best imaginable social result, does not always lead to the best practical social result, and undercuts free souls. If the market leads to debt slavery and stratification, and debt slavery and stratification undermine what it means to be a soul, and what it means to be a soul in a good society, then the first justification and the second justification don't go together. In that case, Libertarians have to choose. Too often, they choose the market and continue to pretend that the two justifications still do go together because they, personally, are well off. Most wealthy people do likewise. Unlike Libertarians, some Christian churches chose souls and a good society, and have urged that the market be regulated so that it does really serve souls and a good society.

The fact that the super natural market and the super natural soul do not always go together, and that we must choose between them sometimes, shows that sometimes we have to choose between sets of ideas about the super natural (metaphysics). It is possible to defend one set of super-natural-and-metaphysical views against another set, and I try to do this balancing act with my ideas in this book, but Libertarians do not. In contrast, like most dogmatists, Libertarians simply insist their super natural and their metaphysics are correct while others are wrong. If the Libertarian view were nonsense, this issue would not matter. But their view does make sense, and so it deserves to be argued, and defended, at a depth that accepts the super natural basis. What are the real relations between evolved souls, souls, the free capitalist market, the greater good, nature, and the state? What does it really mean to say that the free market fails sometimes? What does it really mean to say that the free market is the best alternative even if it is not perfect?

(Ludwig von Mises understood both justifications clearly but mixed them up anyway. I am not sure which he thought most important. Because he so often began with free individuals, I think they were more basic to him. I am not sure if he fully saw the implications of either point or of mixing them up. He saw some implications of seeing people as “free souls”. I think he saw that the ideas were super natural and that they implied metaphysics but he remained quiet. Other Libertarians, such as Hayek, also understood the ideas but were less clear than von Mises. Many Libertarians don't see these ideas at all and-or don't see the implications. I don't know about Murray Rothbard.)

Taoism also wants to have its cake and eat it too. Taoism wants both good society and free people following the Tao, and wants them tied together. This does not always work. To see how this plays out in Taoism, and how Taoism implies the super natural, it is useful to imagine what a Taoist might say about Libertarianism.

To a Taoist, the market is an unwarranted bad imposition between Taoist individuals, the Tao, and good society. Taoists want a direct link between free individuals following the Tao and good society, a direct link between the Tao and good society. Taoists do not share the Western view, and of other Chinese,



that needs institutions, such as ritual or the market, to make a good society. Their view is like people who believe in God and Jesus but are really uneasy about any formal church.

To a Taoist, the market is like a state policy no matter how free it is. The market is an obvious dogma with bad implications. Think back to the example above of farmers going to market to exchange piglets and ducklings. The free market is as bad as Confucian ritual, Confucian goodness, Mo-ist regard, or Legalist laws. It doesn't matter if the market delivers good better than the state or alternatives. "Better" is not relevant. If the free market does give more general welfare than alternatives such as state programs, then fine, but this result is not worth worrying about, and not worth making a theory to convince people. There is no point making standards of comparison, or arguments, to prove the free market serves the greater good better than Legalism, Confucianism, Socialism, Fascism, or the Business Mercantilism of the American Republican Party.

A Taoist would disagree with Libertarians in trusting the market, private enterprise, and business firms. The market is not the only way by which people can act freely, and it is hardly the best way. A Taoist would disagree with trusting wealth even if that wealth was made solely through private action. Ultimately you can trust only the Tao. Wealth, market, business firms, and private enterprise capitalism are artificial constructs as much as the state. They have dogmas, metaphysics, and officials. Libertarians worship them just as bureaucrats, dependent minorities, dependent business firms, and Confucians, worship the state. Free exchange is fine, but that is not the ultimate means or ultimate goal, and that is not what we have in real capitalism anyway. If Libertarianism means effectively worshipping capitalism, then no Taoist could go along. Relying on the market instead of the Tao is wrong and dangerous even if the market works well, perhaps especially if it works well.

Although Taoists "eliminate the middleman (person)" by getting rid of institutions such as the free market, that position still does not settle the choice between better society (political Taoism) and free individuals following the Tao (religious Taoism). To get at that issue, it helps to see how Taoists would respond to the Libertarian view of individuals.

Taoists value free people following the Tao but do so in Taoist terms rather than Western or Chinese political-economic terms. What matters is a person following the Tao. Nothing can be more important than that. Nothing can get in the way of that. Everything has to be subordinate to that. Everything has to follow from that.

Unlike Libertarians, Taoists would reject the second justification, the idea of a free person, if it rested on an idea of people as politically or morally free, or rested on any idea of people as metaphysical agents. People need freedom but the kind of freedom we need is freedom to go along with the Tao. This freedom is not metaphysical, political, economic, social, or moral. Taoists know that bad politics, bad economics, and bad metaphysics can destroy the practical freedom that people need to follow the Tao but that does not mean good politics, good economics, or any politics or economics, is the same as Taoist freedom. To think of the situation in any terms other than going along with the Tao turns the situation into dogma and destroys all freedom.

Taoists would reject the idea of people as ultimately free moral agents and as the most important thing in the world. That is not how Taoists think of souls. People are bits of the Tao. The Tao is most important.

We are important because we are part of the Tao. We are free to the extent that we follow the Tao. It is misleading vain dogma to make ourselves too important. State dogma is less important than individuals seeking the Tao but that fact still does not make human individuals ultimate.

Taoists would accept the importance of persons if it means merely that acting freely in accord with your own nature is acting in accord with the Tao, and acting in accord with the Tao always is best. We cannot measure “best” or impose any standards on “best”. People are important because, unlike most things in the world, they can act in accord with the Tao through body, art, craft, and intellect. People are important because it is a great tragedy for anything not to act in accord with the Tao and a great tragedy for people not to act in accord with the Tao; yet people are strangely prone not to act in accord with the Tao; and so people especially have to seek the Tao. People are important because it is wonderful when any creature of the Tao returns to the Tao after having been lost; “I once was lost but now am found”; and people are one of the few creatures that can get lost and then find itself again.

None of this makes people super natural in the sense of Libertarian or Christian souls. Whether it makes people super natural in other ways, I briefly touch on below, and you should think about throughout the chapter.

I don't know how much Taoists would agree with the Libertarian version of the person in contrast to other versions such as from Jefferson or radical feminism. Taoism sees that state intervention must demean a person and so thwart the ultimate energy of the world, the Tao. Any gain from state intervention is less than the loss from not following the Tao – even though we don't try to measure the gains and losses or try to impose any dogma-standards.

Does the Taoist view of persons and of the Tao settle all conflict between good society and free persons pursuing the Tao? I think it doesn't. Again, facts have to intrude. Although no real society ever ran on Taoist terms, to a Taoist, it is obvious that all alternatives to Taoism are worse than following the Way only, and obvious that, if people did follow the Way only, they would have a good society. It is a historical accident that we live in bad times in which no society is based only on following the Tao. If we lived in the great times of the mythical past, we could simply see the Tao at work in good society. The link of good society with the Tao is an obvious fact, as, to Libertarians the link of the market to free people and good society is an obvious fact; but with the Tao it is true while with the market it is not; so there can be no conflict between good society and free persons following the Tao as there is between a real capitalist market and free souls.

To me, all this is simply not true. It is like saying society would be great if it ran on Christian principles. No real society can run on simple Christian principles or simply according to the Tao. As a matter of fact, there is no necessary coincidence between good society and individual free people seeking the Tao. I think Taoists knew this in their hearts too. As with Libertarians, if Taoist society is not perfect, the next step would be to argue whether the Tao is better than alternatives such as Confucianism, Legalism, or the free market. Taoists certainly did argue that issue, but I don't need to review it here, and we already know they concluded Taoism is best.

If free people following the Tao, and good society, are not always the same, which is most important? Like Libertarians, Taoists would hate to make this choice, but, like Libertarians, if I did force them, they

would say that free people following the Tao are basic. If Taoist good society is ever realized, it will come from them, they will not come from it. Because Taoists are not committed to the market, wealth, power, ritual, or any institution, unlike Libertarians, Taoists can bring individually free people following the Tao directly to the fore. Taoist stories are full of Taoists living just fine on the edges of society or apart from society. Individual Taoists even live apart when in the middle of society, like Western philosophers and rebel rockers. The idea of uniting society and the Tao remains a dream-like ideal but the individual free Taoist living according to the Tao was a life that real people felt they could really live.

Does the Taoist idea of a person require the super natural and some metaphysics? It does, at least in that it also requires the Tao, Heaven, Virtue, mental clarity, free action in accord with the Tao, and the idea of a best society. I argue in this chapter that Taoists have ideas of morality, persons, and politics that Taoists teach through stories and ideal persons. As far as I am concerned, that amounts to holding the super natural, offering metaphysics, and building a system that eats the world. As with Libertarians, the value of individual free people seeking the Tao cannot be stressed enough. This ideal cannot be a simple natural idea, like the idea of a tree or a thunderstorm, any more than can Plato's ideal of the Good. Although Taoists refused to describe in detail a society living according to the Tao, it is clear that they saw it as a heaven-like society, very important, and so, according to my view, super natural. Society was as super natural to them as the market is to Libertarians although in different ways.

What does the fact that Taoists raise individuals, the Tao, and Taoist society, to the super natural say about their metaphysics? That question is too much to go into here and I don't have to go into it much. Taoists denied they had metaphysics; "the way that can be named is not the One Way"; metaphysics is too much like bad dogma; so for me to be clear on the topic would require me to go through Taoist texts and argue with them about points. I don't want to do that. Take this chapter as a whole as a critique of Taoist metaphysics.

If we accept that Taoists, like Libertarians, had ideas of the super natural and had metaphysics, then the question is whether Taoist super natural and Taoist metaphysics are better or worse than other versions. I don't go into this question directly here. As practice in making these assessments, I ask you to make up your own mind whether Libertarianism or Taoism is better, and why. In answer to the question of overall best, I merely assert that my ideas about the issues (Jesus, practicality, Western values) are better than either the Libertarian or Taoist versions, and I offer this whole book as my argument.

### **State Policies Again; No More Running Away Again.**

States can't run on the basis of Taoism. People are good but not good enough. States have no choice but to develop policies. Policies have to be based on principles. Principles have to be based on ideas about good, bad, nature, human nature, and society. Whatever states do on the basis of policies and principles, they cause some damage. We hope the harm is much less than the benefit. We need ways to measure the benefit and harm. Taoism can serve as a good needed warning about plausible do-gooder schemes, but it can't do much more than that in a real government.

Taoists readily accepted that you cannot live according to the Tao anywhere. If you live in a corrupt state, society, or natural environment, it is hard. So Taoists seek situations where they can be free. The Taoist response to nearly all government, and to any society gone wrong, was to run away. Taoists moved.

They moved to another village, moved farms away from a village, or moved to swamps, forests, and mountains. As my wife often reminds me, Lao Tzu's mother told him repeatedly to move away from bad neighbors. Finally, Lao Tzu left China for the barbarian Western deserts because China was too corrupt. People in the West where I grew up dreamed of doing the same.

Running away might have worked when the world was sparsely populated and humanity was only a bad cold in nature's nose but now the world is overrun. We have infected the whole body. There is no place to go. We can't run away anymore. Oregon, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona are filled up. Either we accept the horrible effects of too many people seeking too much stuff or we make a stand. Taoism does not prepare us for either alternative, and so Taoism does not prepare us for the modern world. I do not know what Taoists would make of this situation.

### **What Made Sense Once Now No Longer Makes Sense; Taoism and Modern Democracy.**

Taoists knew the difference between good government and bad, otherwise they would not have offered the idea (dogma) that the best government is that which governs least or governs not at all.

Taoist attitudes made sense a long time ago when the world did not change much and when government was not democratic. They do not make sense now. Taoism never had to encounter continuous change, progress, and modern democracy.

For thousands of years, for the average Joe or Jane in a state - farmers just getting by - there was no difference between one lord and another, one king and another, one regime and another, one dynasty and another, or the old regime here versus a new conqueror from there. You paid taxes to all of them, served in their armies, did your forced labor, and got little in return except maybe management of the irrigation system and somebody to carry out the ceremonies on time. Sometimes government was good and sometimes bad, but you couldn't do much about it, and you had to endure either way. Government was something some powerful person somewhere else did to you; it was not "of the people, by the people, for the people". For decades, centuries, and even millennia, nothing changed. Sometimes there were more people, sometimes less. One town rose while another fell. You got married, your children got married, and their children got married. Slowly people ate nature. Sometimes there was a drought, flood, blight, fire, plague, war, or even a good harvest. Nearly all the time, there were just as many people as the land could possibly support. Farmers worked to make the land and the crops yield more. But, every time they did, people had more babies, and things ended up just as they were before. Once in a while somebody introduced an innovation such as a new plow (curved plow in Europe) or a new crop (rice for millet in China). But, every time they did, people had more babies, and things ended up just as before. Nothing really changed. Nothing really got better.

In this context, it made sense not to worry about government, not to care about power, and to run away if things go badly. There was no feeling that "government is us" and we have a responsibility to make sure things turn out well. Although nature was slowly disappearing, there was still enough wildness left to run away into. It made sense to be a Taoist "little guy" or a Taoist recluse.

The modern world differs. The modern world changes radically within decades. We need to deal with change. Sometimes modern life even gets better. There is a difference between governments. The

United States was not the Soviet Union or Fascist Germany. Capitalism is not the same as socialism. Democracy is not either Fascism or “the dictatorship of the proletariat”. India, China, Brazil, the United States, and France are not the same. Too little nature is left to run away into. Most countries now are democracies in which the people are responsible for what happens. You are the government. What each average Joe or Jane does makes a difference. You as a citizen are personally responsible. You can’t run away from yourself. Now, it does not make sense to run away, and you can’t run away anyhow, not only because you can’t run away from yourself but because there is nowhere to go anymore. Now it makes sense to consider power, who has it, and what they do with it. Now it makes sense to work and to serve. “Stand in the place where you are”. In this context, it is not clear what a good Taoist should do, and I get no clear message from modern Taoists. Because Taoists know the difference between good government versus bad, it seems, in a democracy, they should be willing to speak up and help. I choose to found the state on good principles and to work for the best.

“Hipsters” who live in the city rather than the country, get a job that doesn’t “mess with their heads”, do what they can, enjoy life, enjoy art, and romanticize nature, seem a bit like Taoists. They “run away” by being a small part of a big city and by cultivating relations with other like-minded people. In the 1950s and 1960s, some of them thought of themselves as Taoists or like Taoists, especially White people who listened to the blues and progressive rock-and-roll. This type seems to live on in the Pacific Northwest and Northern California, and might be coming back in other large metropolitan areas. The TV comedy “Two Broke Girls” depends on hipsters. I don’t mind these people too much but I don’t think they are the modern equivalent of a Taoist. I am not sure how a person could be a traditional Taoist in a modern city or even the modern countryside. I leave them to sort it out for themselves.

From a bigger longer perspective, we might someday go back onto a stage on which Taoism makes sense. In the long run, current technological change, progress, and democracy might not make much difference. In 10,000 years, maybe what we think of as “the modern world” will appear as a mere blip. In that case, Taoist running away and Taoist refusal to serve in government might make sense. But I do not have the luxury of that perspective, and I don’t think modern Taoists do either. In 10,000 years, if people are still people, the current world was just a blip, and personal involvement makes no sense, then Taoism can rise again to counsel detachment, if that is still possible then – unlikely. Until then, modern people, even modern people with Taoist feelings, need something besides running away.

### **Another Annoying Allusion to Modern Epics.**

At Rivendell, after the danger of the Ring was clear but before the Fellowship, Frodo asked Gandalf why they couldn’t just give the Ring to Tom Bombadil to guard because Bombadil seemed to have power over the Ring. Gandalf explained that Bombadil didn’t really have power over the Ring; Bombadil did not care about power; so the Ring had no power over him. Not caring about power, Bombadil would not see why anyone would want the Ring, and so would not guard it anymore than he guarded anything else. Most likely, Bombadil would simply forget the Ring somewhere because he would have no reason to keep track of it. Besides, Bombadil could keep some evil at bay for a while but not all evil forever. Evil would find where the Ring was, and take the Ring even against Bombadil. The world cannot run by Taoist charm. Like it or not, real normal people have to deal with temptation, power, and force. They have to meet force with force without succumbing to the temptation of power. They have to face all evil outside and inside.

They have to create and sustain a social order that is as just as they can manage. They cannot rely on wishful magic no matter how charming or how effective in the short range.

### **Tao and Not Tao.**

Even in Taoism, we can bump into traditional “heavy” questions. Heaven and the Tao created everything, including people. How did things get screwed up? Where did bad ideas come from? How did people go wrong? In Western terms, where did evil come from? Is not having dogmas and having dogmas both of the Tao? Do both equally follow the Tao? If both not having bad dogmas and having bad dogmas are of the Tao, then what is there to get back to, and why should we try getting back to it?

Taoism does not answer these questions. It does not seem to recognize them. To dwell on these issues is to dwell on bad dogma. These are “questions not conducive to awakening” that the Buddha refused to answer. Simply accept life, and then respond by getting back to the Tao. “Get back to where you once belonged”. “Stand in the place where you live”.

These same questions appeared in Mahayana. A Mahayana solution might focus on the non-difference between awakened versus asleep. If there is no difference, then why bother to “get back” to something that is no different than where you are now? The similarity in these issues is one reason why Taoism and Mahayana could merge to form Zen.

## **PART 4: More Assessment**

### **Christian Charity and Good Institutions.**

Taoists would not necessarily object to “Christian charity” as long as a person did it because a person did it, because it was in the nature of that person to do it, that person did not do it primarily because it was an external preached virtue, and the charity did not enable bad behavior. This Taoist stance runs into some problems. Still, Taoists are on the right track with getting people to act well. I don’t like the hypocrisy that often hides in Christianity, and I think it would be better for people with impure motives just to be selfish rather than to use charity as the means for self-gratification. Yet it is impossible to reach purity of motive, and impossible to separate preached virtue from the virtue we come to see for ourselves. Sometimes we have to settle for a mixture of motives, and a dollop of dogma and hypocrisy. Let people do goodness as they will and don’t worry about it.

As a result of their attitude about goodness and good acts, Taoism can’t develop ideas from the teachings of Jesus and the West such as “do unto others”, “applies equally”, work hard for a better world, “pay it forward”, the rule of Law, and the Kingdom of God. A Taoist might act in accord with those ways because he-she personally acts in accord with those ways, or because he-she tacitly holds those principles; but that personal bent is not the basis for good general social relations. Taoism can’t develop the basis for Western institutions such as charities, schools, hospitals, democracy, and rule of law. Taoists mostly are easy enough to get along with but that congeniality is not the basis for good citizenship. Taoism can’t serve as the rationale for adopting and keeping up such large institutions if they develop elsewhere, such as from Christianity. Because I love both Taoism and good institutions, this conclusion makes me sad, but it is unavoidable. Western Taoists overlook this implication. Individually, Western Taoists seem to be

about as good citizens as everybody else, perhaps contradicting what they should know of Chuang Tzu and Lao Tzu. I don't know if Taoism can be interpreted to support good ideas and institutions if those are already in place, as, for example, if Taoists somehow took over the United States.

### **More on Taoism and Evolved Human Nature.**

Unlike Buddhists and Zen followers, Taoists do not have to avoid normal life. As long as life is not too far corrupted from the Tao, Taoists can be normal people. Taoists marry, have children, and sometimes live in villages. Taoists do not need to repress human feelings to achieve freedom. Ideally, Taoist freedom is compatible with natural human nature, which means evolved human nature. In practice, it is not clear that the Taoist life is compatible with all of evolved human nature. Taoist freedom is not compatible with the bad part of human nature.

Not many people can be Taoists. Not many people can be free as Taoists need. So Taoism has to be a religion of the spiritual elite. In Buddhism and Hinduism, you can find a rationale for the fact that only a majority of the people can awaken at any one time, but not in Taoism.

I am not sure if a religion of the spiritual elite is compatible with the ideas that the Tao made the world and that nature, with all its flaws, is one with the Tao.

Ideally, Taoist freedom is compatible with the fact that humans see the world not as it simply is but see the world through natural evolved biases such as thinking we are more beautiful and more important than we really are. Ideally, Taoists can accept "flaws" such as physical deformity. But I am not sure they would be happy that they can't see the natural world exactly as it is. Taoists think they are more in touch with nature than anybody else. Taoists think they are so in touch with the Tao that they are at one with the Tao, that is, with nature. Being at one with the Tao hardly goes along with the fact that we don't see nature accurately and we fool ourselves. Taoists might accept that they can see clearly enough to follow the Tao even if Taoists do not mirror nature or the Tao exactly.

Evolution produces recurrent types including sweethearts, bullies, "Boy Scouts", con artists, compulsive liars, compulsive truth tellers, habitual thieves, and artists. Apparently evolution produced a recurrent Taoist type among other human types. A Taoist personality likely is natural for some people but not all people. Not all people can be Taoists. To me, Taoists resemble hunter-gatherers (foragers) that are still living now, and might resemble our evolutionary ancestors. Yet the Taoist type has been in the minority, at least for the last few thousand years, and probably always. I am not sure what it implies for human nature and natural nature that some people have the temperament to be Taoists but most people do not. These facts do not mean the Taoist type is unnatural, necessarily better, or necessarily worse. It does mean we should not see all Taoists as purely natural, as the embodiment of the purely natural, or as the ideal of natural nature and human nature. These facts imply that other human types might be as natural and "real" as the Taoist type. Other human types might also successfully follow the Tao, even without knowing it and without following any Taoist stereotype (dogma).

### **Non-Discrimination Again.**

Taoists might have been idealistic dreamers but they were not idiots. They could tell a duck from a robin and an apple from a poison berry. They whined when all they had to eat was rice. They ate well when they could. They could tell sober from drunk, and got drunk because they liked it. Non-discrimination cannot mean one big ball of pudding with all the tastes mixed up.

We use distinctions and categories to live. We avoid tigers and eat rabbits. Life could not happen, and the Tao could not flow, without distinctions. The co-existence, and mutual dependence, of being and emptiness means the co-existence and mutual dependence of distinctions.

When we are in a dilemma in which both horns (no discrimination versus dogma) are not acceptable, most people naturally seek a reasonable fuzzy middle. Most people do pretty well there. They are happy to let other people do well there too even if other people are not in the same exact point of the broad middle, that is, if other people take slightly different attitudes toward non-discrimination and dogma. Some people spank their children and some people use only “time outs”; some people smoke marijuana and some don’t. In practice, that is what normal Taoists do. In ideology, that option is not open. Taoists are caught in the dogma of no dogma. This might be one reason why Taoists give up on the dogma of no dogma.

It is useful to guess what might have happened in our evolutionary past. In the past, evolution decided where the range fell between rigid rules versus no rules. Evolution allowed variation between people; in fact, evolution likely produced recurrent variation and so encouraged variation. Evolution gave us tools for drawing lines between rules versus no-rules in particular cases, and for moving the lines when the situation changed. Both poles were likely unsuccessful except in limited circumstances, and so not very common. This view goes along with reasonable Taoism. Taoists have to decide if it is compatible with dogmatic Taoism that denies all distinctions.

If we have to live with some distinctions, then it is more honest and better to admit it. I know why Taoists condemn dogma but I cannot live without distinctions. If we have to have distinctions, then it is better to be honest about it and to seek the best among the distinctions. If Taoists prefer one morality to another, and one society to another, then it is best to say so and say why. If Taoists prefer less dogma to more dogma, it is better to say so, say why, and explain which dogma is better and which worse.

**“All you gotta do is act naturally”.**

The idea that people only need to act naturally to act in accord with the Tao is much like the idea that we can act in accord with the Tao without also considering goodness and principles, and is wrong for the same reasons. It seems we don’t need to dwell on the argument over acting naturally. Still, these days, people are more likely to argue the issue in terms of acting naturally than acting in accord with principles of goodness – romantic ideas of nature and of acting naturally are in vogue – so I want to go through the issue again briefly.

It makes sense to say there is a natural way for a bear to behave, true to its nature, true to its “true self”, and to see that some ways in which people make bears act are not natural. Many ways in which people lead bears to act not naturally are immoral on the part of people. A bear in a “dog and bear” fight is not acting naturally, and the people who stage all animal fights commit serious immorality. A bear dancing for



peanuts is not natural, and the people who make it do so act immorally. A bear in a zoo is not natural but living in a zoo might be better than going extinct, and so people who keep a bear in a zoo might be acting morally; many zoos are well run and many zoos are the last hope of endangered species on Earth.

Some of the same can be said for people but the question is not so easy. People have a natural nature but our natural nature is much harder to pin down than that of a bear. Part of our natural nature is that it alters to suit situations and to express our imaginations. Imitating other people usually is natural. Some things we do are natural without being good or bad such as taking a walk in the woods. Some things are unnatural without necessarily being good or bad such as working on computers. Some things are bad without being unnatural, some things are both unnatural and bad, some things are natural and good, and some things are unnatural and good. It is natural for people to eat but not natural to eat fried salted meat at every meal. It is natural for people to go barefoot. It is also natural for people to wear some shoes, especially in cold climates, but not natural to wear six-inch high heels. It is natural for people to wear clothes, even sexy clothes, but not natural to wear heavy gold chains and skin-tight fake-leather skirts. You can decide which of these acts is also bad. It is natural for people to connive but hurtful gossip is bad. Some acts that do not often occur in nature can be useful and moral such as: teaching a child to read, and curing pneumonia.

Some human activities that Taoists look down on are both not natural and bad. Courtly intrigue usually is both unnatural and bad – I wrote this section during the shutdown of the U.S. government in fall of 2013. Spawning hundreds of appealing but misleading dogmas from politics and religion is not natural and it is usually bad. Wearing elaborate clothing is not natural. Being carried in sedan chairs is not natural. Taxes are not natural, and, in the United States as I wrote, the tax system was quite bad, although some kind of giving to the group in general and to our superiors might be natural.

Taoists adepts are not natural in a stereotyped Western sense, and not even in their own idealized sense. It is not natural to live alone in a hut by a swamp, even if all particular activities that you do there are fully natural such as fishing and weaving baskets. People were bred to be in company, as vexing as that often is. Rice wine and rice whisky are not natural. Writing poetry that depends on decades of training and on one thousand years of history for allusions is not natural. Writing itself is not natural. Writing gives us an “external memory” that directly facilitates the creation and promulgation of dogmas. Despite Chinese and Western romanticizing farmers, growing rice is not natural but is the end product of thousands of years of distorting nature and human nature. In fact, Taoists preferred millet and they feared rice cultivation for its baleful effects on human nature and the Tao, but not even millet growing is entirely natural. You have to decide if these acts are good despite being unnatural, or at least are better than the common alternatives.

It is worth thinking about what is natural for humans, what is not natural, what is good, and what is bad; but relying on Taoist mental freedom and relying on any ideology, including Taoist ideology, to settle the question, is bad. I like mint chocolate chip ice cream, and doctors can be useful. It is silly when people criticize either as not natural. I dislike people who make themselves sick from bad food and no exercise, and it is perfectly correct to criticize them as not natural and bad because, by nature, people should get the exercise equivalent of about five miles of walking per day. Kitchen gardens are not unnatural but they are almost natural and they are usually good. The modern method of raising animals densely packed in cages or ponds is not natural. If it is immoral, it is also bad. It leads to meat that does not taste as good. If it gives meat that is not good for us, it is bad. If it does not lead to distress for animals, leads to more

meat for more people, leads to meat that is not unhealthy and does not taste bad, and does not distort the ecology to provide animal feed, then it is good. I dislike most political and religious dogma, even beautiful examples such as Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism; and it is correct to criticize such dogma as not natural and bad although politics and religion are natural human activities. I really dislike people who walk around “plugged in” all the time but cell phones can be handy. Rice wine and rice whisky are a toss-up. Millet tastes much better than rice, and, I think, is better for you, but you can’t feed many people with millet. With nearly seven billion people, the world cannot return to what is natural even if we could agree on it. We likely can’t even return to what is entirely good even if we could agree. Even if we can’t settle all these cases, we can see that distinct ideas of good and natural are relevant, we can see the principles, and we can argue usefully.

In thinking about nature and human life, Taoists were on a better track than most people in Chinese, or any civilized, society of their time. I agree with striving to “act more naturally”. We can learn much from Taoist criticism of non-natural life and non-natural human life, and their criticism of bad non-natural human social life. But we can’t take them as simple correct good moral natural in-accord-with-the-Tao never-dogmatic role models. The Taoists did not have a lock on acting naturally or even on acting in accord with the Tao. We have to consider what is good in their message and then work out our own version for ourselves in our time.

### **Ideas, Principles, Clear Thinking, and Taoism.**

Having ideas is usually good. Being able to think well and to evaluate ideas is even better, and is almost always good. Lapsing into dogma, living by dogma, and forcing other people into your dogma world, is almost always bad. People evolved not only to have ideas but to live in their dogma worlds and to force other people to live there too. We did not evolve to be able to think through ideas and to evaluate them well. I don’t know why. I was born in 1949. Except for some brief graceful periods in which moderation and good thinking prevailed, the United States has been driven by bad dogma my entire life. I take that as evidence enough.

Taoism can help us undo dogma and return to thinking well and assessing ideas. Taoism alone can’t do this, but it is a powerful tool, and it can work with other tools. Taoism is clear, simple, not usually harmful, values mental freedom, fights bad ideas, values nature, wants to get along with nature, wants people to get along, and is not crazier than most ideological and religious alternatives. What is wrong with that? As long as we see that Taoism is not the one-and-only-whole answer, it deserves serious study.

### **Chuang Tzu and Achilles.**

Chuang Tzu urged acting simply out of your nature, in accord with the Tao, without regard to dogma. Achilles acted simply out of his nature, in accord with a common decency that seems to pervade the world, when he let Priam bury the body of Priam’s dead son Hector. Is Achilles a Taoist? I think not. Anybody can see the similarities but a big difference remains. Ironically, Chuang Tzu was driven by the dogma of no dogma, and by the dogma of acting in accord with the Tao, so Chuang Tzu did not act simply out of his nature in accord with the Tao. As far as I can tell, no Taoist succeeds at simply acting out of his-her nature, in accord with the Tao, as long as he-she tries to do that – not even warriors who think they have achieved perfect spontaneity, perfect “baby mind”. Think about the needs for dogma and

for no dogma. We need ideas, some ideas. We do not need rigid dogma and ideological blinders. We need modest guidance through which we can work. We do not always succeed but we can try. Chuang Tzu offered those but he had to hide the offer. You cannot succeed if you have to hide it. I openly offer old standards: the ideals of Jesus mixed with rationality, practicality, and some Western values. Those ideas are not far from the simple insight on which Achilles acted. They can be guidelines and need not be prisons.

**You are Not a Taoist Adept Just Because.**

Taoism went through a fad in the 1960s and 1970s, and apparently the fad lives on in places like Seattle and Oregon. I like that. Taoism is charming. However, current fascination with “chi” and “yin and yang” results in simplistic bad mistakes about Taoism; and current mistaken fascination supports misleading magical Taoism in a modern guise. The current practice of Tai Chi in America is seriously distorted by misunderstanding of “chi” and of “yin and yang”. New Age looks for validation to overly simplistic semi-magical Taoism. Not everybody is a Taoist adept just because he-she has the following traits. There is nothing wrong with these traits, and I admire many, but valuing them is not the same as being a Taoist adept. You have to decide for yourself what it takes to really find the Tao and to live in accord with the Tao. You have to decide if the Tao is “all natural”, and if “all natural” is the Tao.

- Have read a few books about Taoism
- Have read a few books about China
- Have read a few books about Zen
- Have read a lot of books on any topic
- Love nature
- Work to conserve nature
- Dislike authority, especially formal authority
- Want to be your own boss
- Willing to walk away from a job to show your independence
- Disdain formal institutions
- Disdain markers of success such as awards, ceremonies, and prizes
- Lack ambition
- Lack ambition through formal institutions
- Have a pet or have multiple pets
- Study a Taoist martial art such as Tai Chi Chuan, Pa Kua, or Hsing I
- Study any martial art
- Study Taoist meditation or any meditation
- Eat whole foods, natural foods, organic foods, vegetarian, or vegan
- Eat a “cave man” diet
- Live on the fringes of society
- Live in the woods
- Worship nature
- Ride a bicycle and-or walk
- Drive a motorcycle
- Drive an “alternative” vehicle such as an electric car
- Listen to the blues

- Listen to alternative rock
- Listen to “New Age” music such as “The Tao of the Glockenspiel”
- Are a “cool” person in an otherwise un-cool institution

## **PART 5: Some Other Taoist Ideas**

Just because a religion is not completely correct does not mean it does not have much to offer. Just because an idea is not completely correct does not mean it is not useful. An imperfect idea can be very useful when applied properly – ask any good scientist, mathematician, or engineer. We just have to avoid making ideas into metaphysics. The ideas below are useful and are integral to Taoism. Unfortunately, they are most common in magical Taoism, as in fads that have to do with “channeling” chi. I mentioned yielding and conforming above so I do not repeat them here. I mentioned “no dogma no distinctions” too but I have to add some comments here.

### **Yin and Yang.**

The idea of yin and yang is like the common idea that forces turn into their opposites. Too much love is like hate; too much genius is like madness; etc. Briefly, yin and yang represent yielding and assertion, female and male, shadow and light, valley and mountain, center and periphery, falling and rising, rain and mist, and the waning and waxing of the moon. In the I Ching, broken lines represent yin while solid lines represent yang. I don’t describe here how these ideas all fit together. For example, when a person is most assertive (yang), his-her forcefulness usually means he-she has issues behind the scenes, and is vulnerable (yin). Only strong people can afford to be gentle and conciliatory. In battle, a careless charge usually results in disaster, and too much defense leads to never-ending problems and eventual defeat. In martial arts, an aggressive move such as a punch always leaves you “open” in some way, and can lead to over-commitment. To defeat an opponent, it often helps to gently stick to him-her, give way to his-her movements, and wait for his-her assertiveness to leave an opening.

Yin and yang do not simply represent good and bad, or bad and good. Too much, or too little, of either, can be harmful but that is not necessarily the same as moral badness. Too much, or too little, of either, can lead to moral bad but need not. Moral bad does not come only from an excess or deficit. I think the Chinese think that moral bad is not likely to arise if people are practically satisfied. A balance of yin and yang usually leads to practical satisfaction, and so can head off moral problems. A balance is practically good, and is morally good as just described, but is not necessarily inherently morally good.

Yin and yang gain the benefits, and suffer from the faults, of any binary oppositional way to look at the world even when the idea of yin and yang allows that one turns into the other, and so escape somewhat from the faults of a strict “black and white” view. Much as a Taoist would dislike the idea, yin and yang are like light and dark, and good and evil, from Manichaeism. Not everything can be expressed in terms of yin and yang, or a mixture. What is the difference in yin and yang that distinguishes an oak leaf from an elm leaf, or an oak from a pine? What is the difference in yin and yang that distinguishes men from women, or male from female? The ideas of yin and yang can be useful in martial arts, but, if any martial artist works only with those and nothing else, he-she will face defeat soon. Things do not always turn into their opposites. After the explosion of a fusion (hydrogen nuclear) bomb, presumably massively yang, what remains is ruin and sadness; hopefully those are not massively yin. Not all yin passivity,

yielding, and help turn into passive aggression and so turn into yang. Love and hate, and good and evil, are not simple opposites that turn into each other. What all has to be mixed with yin and yang, and how to mix, is a subject beyond the topic of this section.

### **The I Ching.**

In Chinese thought, creation from nothing was not very interesting because, if it happened, it happened a long time ago and is not relevant now. More important are the changes (transformations) that happen to stuff after it is created, as part of the real lived world now.

The I Ching (“ee jing”, “ee ching”, “ee qing”, or “yee etc.”) is the “Book of Changes”. Imagine that a line symbol can be divided into two alternatives such as whole or broken, dashed or dotted, or red or green. Imagine a sequence that can be formed from three lines: “trigrams”. Order makes a difference. The lines arranged in a particular order in a trigram are not the same as the lines arranged in a different order: trigram red-blue-red is not the same as trigram red-red-blue. Imagine two trigrams in a set, to make a total of six lines: “hexagrams”. The trigrams are arranged in a particular order in a hexagram, and the order matters (a hexagram composed of trigrams AB is not the same as one composed of trigrams BA). Sixty-four hexagrams can be made this way. The I Ching uses whole lines (dashes) or broken lines (dots) to make the figures instead of colors but the result is the same. It is like Morse code or any binary coding of signs. In the I Ching, the figures are made by horizontally stacking the lines on each other in a particular order. Usually the hexagrams are vertical but a horizontal example might be “:I I:I”.

The I Ching uses both relations within figures and relations between figures to explain change, situations, events, and almost anything. A change in the real world can be seen in the pattern in each figure and in the relation between figures. The figures represent principles of stasis and change that can apply to many situations rather than explanations for specific circumstances such as birth, war, or rice growing. The same figure might represent the dynamics of a war or of a birthday party. The relation between two figures might represent the same kind of change that occurs when rain falls hard and in a housing bust. The figures are somewhat like Tarot cards in this respect. The changes are linked to changes in yin and yang. Some conditions represent balanced yin and yang, some represent unbalanced yin and yang, and some show yin and yang in transition.

The I Ching represents one of the oldest of Chinese ideas, and the text of the I Ching is one of the oldest of Chinese texts. The basis for it is at least 3500 years old (some passages of the Tanakh might be 3000 years old; some Egyptian and Sumerian documents are over 4500 years old; and some writing from India is at least 3200 years old). All schools of thought in China claim a relation to the I Ching. Martial arts claim it as their original textbook.

Both being useful and being useless can lead to success and failure. A useless tree is not cut down to use as timber but it is cut down to make room for useful trees such as apples. Individual apple trees are only nurtured as long as they bear as much fruit as another individual tree that might be planted in their stead. What matters is not intrinsic useful or useless but useful and useless in context. Contexts differ. That differing is a kind of change. Taoism wants us to look at context so it also wants us to look at change. The I Ching prepared Chinese thinkers for Taoists ideas of relativism and context. Taoist ideas of relativism and context gave a way to interpret the I Ching's old traditional focus on change. A lot of rain

is just a lot of rain. A lot of rain after a drought is something else. This relation between the I Ching and Taoism helps both. This idea is my way of looking at one relation between Taoism and the I Ching. I did not originate this idea. I don't know how well established this idea is in scholarship on China.

### **Chi or "Ch'i".**

"Chi" (sometimes written "ch'i", now officially written "qi") is like the Force from the "Star Wars" movies. Chinese "chi" is the same as Japanese "ki". The version of chi in "Star Wars", the Force, was modeled on Japanese ideas of Chinese ideas. The original idea for chi likely was "breath", but not like the common breath of ordinary hurried confused life. Chi is similar to the Indian-Hindu "prana"; Jewish "spirit"; Roman and Western "pneuma", thus "spirit"; and Thai "khwan". Sometimes in Chinese thought, the Earth was a giant bellows between Heaven and something else; and, I think, sometimes heaven was a giant bellows; and Chi was the breath that went through the bellows to infuse all life. Yang was (led to) thickened chi while yin was (led to) rarefied chi. Rarefied chi is still effective.

Chi flows and transforms. In Western terms, it is like "energy". Chi is energy that can be used for many purposes. Chi moves through the human body, through natural bodies such as lakes and mountains, through places such as canyons, and events such as storms. Chi can be stored, briefly, in the body. It might tend to collect naturally in some bodies, places in the human body, places, or events. Generally, the more chi, the better, which, usually means healthier, longer-lived, more efficacious, more successful, usually sexier, and less vulnerable to attack and decline. You can have too much chi, either in particular organs or generally. A state (nation) can have chi through its leaders. It is not clear if a state can have chi on its own apart from its leaders at any given time. Now, most people know of chi through martial arts. Martial artists are said to "project" their chi in their blows and blocks. In the movie "Karate Kid" ("Kung Fu Kid") with Jackie Chan (Chun Lom), the boy apprentice learns to project chi so as to be able to push a grown man across a room and over backwards.

Unlike the Force in the Star Wars movies, there is no inherent light side and dark side to chi. Usually chi is beneficial. Chi can be used for bad ends but that practice is not common and it is not generally feared. Accumulations and deficits of chi can result in bad outcomes but this is not the same as the good and bad sides of chi. In this respect, chi is like yin and yang.

Chi can be "out of balance" like yin and yang can be out of balance. There can be too much chi or too little chi in a particular place in the body, such as the heart, kidneys, or brain. In that case, a person feels ill and might act badly. The person would have to consult a specialist to make sure the right amount of chi is in the right place, restore chi balance, and restore proper flow of chi. For a long time in China, the idea of chi has been the basis for much of magical Taoism, including idea systems that are widespread, such as "Chi Gong" (Qi Gong) and perhaps modern Fulang Gong.

### **Explain Everything.**

Changes, yin and yang, chi, yielding, and conforming, are the basis for a set of ideas that can explain nearly anything. It is one of the most comprehensive, beautiful, and effective of such "explain everything" idea systems, probably second only to the Indian system of karma, reincarnation, dharma, etc. I have already said I am uneasy around such systems, and try to avoid them when I can. Although I appreciate

its beauty, I feel the same way with the Chinese system of ideas. I have found the ideas of yin and yang useful in the martial arts, and found the idea of chi is a bit useful in them even if likely not true. We can use ideas that we know are not fully true, and that are even dangerous, as long as we keep in mind the risks that we take, and we “back off” and evaluate often.

### **Taoist Ideas as Taoist Aids.**

Buddhism has aids that are supposed to help you awaken. If you master “Buddha Mind”, “conditioned origination”, or “non self”, then you are supposed to be fully awakened. You can only fully awaken if you master “Buddha Mind” etc. I believe these aids mislead.

The Taoist ideas presented here can be like the misleading Buddhist aids but shouldn't be. For example, some people I have met think, if they master yin and yang, they have found the Way, and they can only find the Way if they master yin and yang; if they haven't mastered yin and yang, they haven't found the Way. This kind of thinking is a mistake similar to what some Buddhists do.

Not too many traditional Taoists abuse Taoist ideas this way except with the idea of non-discrimination. In the Chuang Tzu and the Lieh Tzu are several stories that say “If you want to master the Way, you have to float in a soup of non-discrimination; and, if you don't float in a soup of non-discrimination, you cannot find the Way”. I can't quote or paraphrase the stories here. If you think you have mastered “no dogma” because you think you are floating in soup, and you think you have found the Tao because you think you have mastered “no dogma”, then you have abused the Taoist ideas and made the same mistake as some Buddhists. Modern people that I have met, and who know a little Taoism, have only vague notions of “no dogma” that usually amount to “If you believe in something that I don't like, then you are practicing bad discrimination, and I can tell you to stop. When you stop, you have to believe what I say. Your morality is discriminatory dogma while my morality is the natural Tao, so I am right and you are wrong.” They don't seem adept on the subject of “no dogma non-discrimination”. Regardless of what modern people do, in the traditional Taoist literature, the idea of non-discrimination seems to be a misused aid. If so, that is an error, and people who are interested in Taoism should avoid it. Find your own happy medium solution to this issue.

Yin and yang, changes, chi, yielding, conforming, and non-discrimination are tools that help you get along. Usually they are more helpful than hurtful but are hurtful if misused. They need not be entirely true to be useful. They need not apply fully in all cases and might not apply at all in some. Sometimes other ideas are more useful and truer. I could not explain quantum mechanics or Relativity by using yin and yang while ignoring the ideas of Einstein. In martial arts, not every fighting situation can be best analyzed using yin and yang, although many can be seen that way. If you find these ideas useful, then use them. If you find other ideas more useful, use those. Yield, conform, adapt, play with categories, and thrive. I don't know if this tactic brings you to the Way, and that possibility is not very important to me.