

This is a read-only draft of a chapter in a forthcoming book: *Lao Tzu's Court: Exploring Taoist Practices in a Western Culture*. Please do not save or make copies. The finalized version will be available at [SimplyTao.com](http://SimplyTao.com). Thank you!

## 2: Taoism: An Overview

***The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.  
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.***

- Lao Tzu

These first four sentences of the Tao Te Ching described what Tao is not. Sometimes it is easier to approach the meaning, essence and identity of something by first noticing what it is not. At some point, what it is may become clearer.

The essence of Taoism is that there is an unsayable, unnamable natural way to each and every thing. The philosophy of Taoism is about exploring and learning how to follow rather than resist, counter or conflict with that natural way. The assumption is that following the natural way of something leads to harmony with that thing, balance and understanding. This is the Taoist philosophy.

Taoism proposes that this natural way is intrinsic to who we are, but it can also be cultivated through a diverse range of Taoist meditation techniques and practices. Intentional cultivation may be helpful to connect/reconnect with that intrinsic natural internal essence because, as humans, we forget, we get distracted, we become conditioned and habitual. This creates obstructing layers that limit and access to intrinsic natural qualities within each of us.

There is a Taoist religion that, in addition to this philosophy, also includes a folk tradition of deities, rituals, supernatural powers and priests. Although there is some overlap, this book is primarily about the philosophy, way of life or spiritual aspects of Taoism, not the religion.

The Taoist philosophy, exploring the natural way, may be applied to anything. Nature provides abundant examples. There is a natural way to how trees grow, rivers flow and horses run. We can explore the natural ways of humans in general, as well as the natural way of an individual

human. Chinese medicine is strongly influenced by this Taoist approach, exploring the natural processes of body, mind, energy, health and disease. But and that doesn't mean Western medicine is not exploring the natural way of humans, focusing more on the natural way of cells, chemicals, bacteria and viruses. This innately natural approach may be used to explore everything from the smallest particles, like DNA, to the largest systems, like universes. It may be considered the pure essence of science, not necessarily the technical science we think of today.

Skills are required in order to explore these natural ways. Many Taoist practices are focused on cultivating skills of observation, awareness and presence. To learn about the natural way of a specific tree, most Westerners turn to reference books and read whatever they can find, thinking they then know this tree. A Taoist approach may include reading, but would put much more emphasis on observing the tree. What is this tree like during each of the seasons? How does it respond to extreme conditions and weather? What happens if it is pruned or not pruned? Does it break or bend under high winds? How does it sound when the wind blows through the branches and leaves? What does it smell like after an intense rainstorm? How does it feel when you run your hand across the bark, leaves or flowers? Season after season, year after year we gradually come to know the natural way of this particular tree. While exploring we are also developing skills of observation and awareness about the natural way that may then be applied to many things: other trees, plants, animals, humans, planets, stars.

It is tempting and seductive to start with assumptions about the natural way of humans. Human nature is naturally...good...evil...kind...aware...curious...loving, etc. Sometimes we might need a few assumptions like this in order to get started or to contradict a previously held assumption. However, at some point, usually spontaneously, we can learn to let go of even positive assumptions about our true nature and just...explore. Explore, inquire and wonder at our nature - What is it? We can explore without ego, without self, without any filters or assumptions.

This is the heart of Taoism. There are many schools, systems, teachers, techniques and practices that may help in this process. But they are only instructional aids, training wheels. They are useful to get started, but

ultimately they must be set aside in order to explore the natural way unencumbered.

It is easy to conceptualize Taoism as a single, monolithic approach. Nothing could be further from the truth. The roots of Taoism extend thousands of years before Lao Tzu wrote the Tao Te Ching in the fourth century B.C.E. Over this expanse of time numerous schools, approaches and styles have evolved. One gifted Taoist teacher may have focused practice in a certain way, say through physical movement, and others followed over time developing a tradition. Another teacher, equally gifted, may have focused on cultivating stillness through sitting, with a following and tradition extending over time. At the surface these may seem like contradictory practices: movement as opposed to stillness. By exploring deeper we find these seeming opposites both arrive at the same place: learning about the natural way. The development and evolution of the Taoist philosophy is a great example of the natural way of things.

Western students exploring Taoism frequently become confused when they encounter this vast diversity within Taoism. We are used to a much shorter historical time span and to labels of things that imply much more homogeneity. Taoism has a long, colorful and incredible history, which provides many different routes to explore. Confusion arises only if we try to pin it down, restrict it to being only a certain way, the right way. That reflects another Western approach to ideas - there is only one right way. Once we relax a little on looking for and holding on to the need for one right way, it is much easier to understand, appreciate and ultimately learn from this Taoist diversity. Movement and sitting practices do not have to be contradictory opposites or mutually exclusive. Ultimately, we find they are interdependent and mutually supportive.

The diversity within Taoism reflects a multitude of paths to explore the same thing: the natural way of things. The Chinese phrase ten thousand things symbolically describes all things. The natural way of those ten thousand things produces a lot of diversity, which are united by a common thread: following their own natural way. We can focus on differences of detail, or we can focus on similarities of root.

***Every holy person seems to have a different doctrine***

***and practice, but there's really only one work.*** - Maulana Jalal al-Din Rumi

An overview of Taoism allows perspective and context, recognizing its thousands of years of historical time span, depth and diversity. As we start on our individual journey, this helps us to navigate the many teachers, books, videos, classes and practices that may seemingly offer very different approaches, all called Taoist.

