

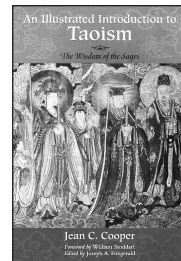
# An Illustrated Introduction to Taoism: The Wisdom of the Sages

*By Jean C. Cooper, Edited by Joseph A. Fitzgerald,  
Foreword by William Stoddart  
Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2010*

*Reviewed by Samuel Bendeck Sotillos*

“Tao is primordial; it is Absolute. In its descent it begets one. When one is begotten, Tao becomes relative and two comes into existence. When two things are compared there is their opposite and three is begotten.”<sup>1</sup>

*Yen Fu*



**O**f all of the world’s religions, or more specifically the three religions of the Chinese civilization, Taoism is least known. While Buddhism and Confucianism are commonly known, why is it that Taoism, one of the great religious and philosophical movements in Chinese thought, remains relatively unknown? One clue might be that Taoism belongs to pure metaphysics as Chuang Tzu alludes to in the following, “It cannot be conveyed either by words or by silence. In that state which is neither speech nor silence its transcendental nature may be apprehended.” (p. 5) While each religion has an outer (exoteric or formal) and inner (esoteric or mystical) dimension, it is said that “Taoism is a purely metaphysical and mystical religion. Other religions have their mystical aspects; Taoism *is* mysticism.” (p. 5) Even though this work articulates the spiritual landscape of Taoism, its author also makes “points of contact

<sup>1</sup> Yen Fu, quoted in J.C. Cooper, *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press, 1981), p. 71.

with the perennial philosophy in other major religions...illustrating how, in many essential ways, they speak with one voice.”<sup>2</sup>

The author of this book, Jean Campbell Cooper (1905-1999), was born in Chefoo, in Northern China where she spent her formative years in the Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian cultures of China. Cooper wrote and lectured extensively on themes of philosophy, comparative religion, and symbolism. She was a regular contributor to the journal *Studies in Comparative Religion*. The contents of the book under review incorporate sections from three of J.C. Cooper's works which continue to be among the most reliable introductions to Taoism. The three works are: *Taoism: The Way of the Mystic* (1972); *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (1981); and *Chinese Alchemy: The Taoist Quest for Immortality* (1984). This edited edition of selected chapters from Cooper's writings on Taoism contains 118 stunning color illustrations and includes an index. Cooper recalls her upbringing within Taoist, Buddhist and Confucian culture of China:

I was born in China and spent my early formative years there, my father having been in the consular service and later a director of one of the missions then operating in the county, so I was brought up by Christian parents and Taoist-Buddhist amahs [nurses], seeing more of the latter than the former. Thus, if one follows the Jesuit adage “give me a child for the first seven years”, it is easy to see why those years were more influenced by Eastern than Western thought and attitudes. I also grew up with the vivid contrasts between the imported Western opulence and the squalor of the city back streets, and, against these, the breathtaking and magical beauty of the mountain county where I was sent to boarding school at an early age. Overall, too, I learned the charm of the Chinese character, with its balance between Confucian social decorum and Taoist gamin individuality as well as the beauty of the arts and crafts with which one was surrounded. (p. vii)

Whereas Buddhism originated in India, both Taoism and Confucianism, derive from the primordial hyperborean shamanism attributed to the legendary first Chinese emperor Fu-Hsi (2852-2738). It was Fu-Hsi who authored the *I Ching* or “Book of Changes”. Lao Tzu and Confucius were in fact contemporaries. When the two masters met, Confucius is

<sup>2</sup> J.C. Cooper, “Introduction,” to *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* (Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press, 1981), p. 11. “There are basic similarities in the perennial philosophy of all religions and, of necessity, they interact with one another, but similarities are not to be confused with identity; outwardly they are not one, they are many; it is the Power within them that is One.” (J.C. Cooper, “Taoism and Hinduism,” in *Yin & Yang: The Taoist Harmony of Opposites* [Wellingborough, UK: Aquarian Press, 1981], p. 90).

reported to have said to Lao Tzu: “The highest rung on my ladder corresponds to the lowest rung on your ladder.” (p. x), thus highlighting that Confucianism is the exoteric or outer dimension and Taoism is the esoteric or inner dimension. The two founders of these doctrines have been recorded to have had the following encounter:

‘Hast thou discovered Tao?’ asked Lao Tzu. ‘I have sought it twenty-seven years,’ replied [Confucius] ‘and I have not yet found it.’ Whereupon Lao Tzu gave his visitor these few precepts. ‘The sage loves obscurity; he does not throw himself at every comer; he studies times and circumstances. If the moment is propitious, he speaks; otherwise, he keeps silent. Whoever possesses a treasure does not display it before the whole world; in the same way, one who is truly a sage does not unveil his wisdom to the whole world. That is all I have to say to you; make what profit you can out of it!’ On returning from this interview [Confucius] said, ‘I have seen Lao Tzu; he is like the dragon. As for the dragon, I know not how it can be borne by winds and clouds and raise itself to Heaven.’<sup>3</sup>

The world *Tao* is often translated as “Way” and, as a doctrine, existed prior to Lao Tzu, the reputed founder of Taoism. For Lao Tzu the Tao or “Way” was associated with pure metaphysics:

[T]he transcendental First Cause, the Primordial Unity, the ineffable, the timeless, all-pervading principle of the universe, giving rise to it yet undiminished by it; supporting and controlling it; that which preceded the creation of Heaven and Earth. It is called the Absolute, the Ultimate Reality, the Nameless, the Portal of all Mystery, the Cosmic Order. Some liken it to the *Atman* of Hinduism, the “Suchness” of Buddhism, the Ain Suph of Qabbalism, or the Monad of the Greeks, that which has neither qualities nor attributes. (p. 6)

Any concept attributed to the Tao is ultimately misleading, as famously stated in the *Tao Te Ching*: “The Tao that can be expressed is not the eternal Tao, the Name that can be defined is not the unchanging Name” (p. 6). We find an almost parallel assertion in the Christian tradition by Meister Eckhart: “God is nameless, because no one can say anything or understand anything about him.”<sup>4</sup> Chuang Tzu too affirmed: “Only the limited can be understood and be expressed.”<sup>5</sup> (p. 7)

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in René Guénon, “Taoism and Confucianism,” in *Insights into Islamic Esotericism and Taoism*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Meister Eckhart, “German Works,” in *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and Bernard McGinn (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in René Guénon, “The Celestial Ray and its Plane of Reflection,” in *The Symbolism of the Cross*, trans. Angus Macnab (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 120.

Consequently, as the *Tao Te Ching* states, there is no Creator in Taoism, all forms being latent in the Tao or “Way”:

There was something formless yet complete,  
That existed before Heaven and Earth;  
Without sound, without substance.  
Dependent on nothing, unchanging,  
All-pervading, unfailing. (p. 9)

As Chuang Tzu affirms, “Tao is without beginning, without end.” (p. 9) Sin, as is conceived in the Abrahamic monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, is understood in Taoism, in non-theistic terms such as lack of “harmony” or “balance”. “Taoism has no doctrine of sin. Ethics should be incidental to spiritual values, and, indeed, there is no ideograph in Chinese which conveys the Western conception of sin and a sense of guilt.” (p. 14) Instead, “Sin is, for the Taoist, rather a violation of the harmony of the universe than any personal infringement of a divine command and as such it creates disharmony and, therefore, disquiet in the individual and particular and thence in society in general.” (p. 14) It is due to the human individual’s deluded mind in failing to perceive the nature of reality clearly for what it is, and it is ignorance therefore that causes disharmony. “Ignorance is at the root of man’s moral malaise; it is his lack of knowledge and understanding of his true nature and its identity with the Tao.” (p. 16) To live in accordance with the *Tao* or “Way” is to be aligned with the harmony of the universe, and thereby beyond good and evil. So Chuang Tzu has noted, “The Sage has no deficiency in his character and therefore needs no morality.” (p. 13) The Sage possess an intrinsic morality based on attunement to the *Tao* or “Way”: “He who knows the Tao is sure to understand how to regulate his conduct in all varying circumstances.” (p. 13)

The two complementary poles of manifestation are known in Taoism as *yin-yang*:

The *yin-yang* diagram shows the two great forces of the universe, the dark and light, negative and positive, female and male, to be held in complete balance and equality of power; together they control everything in the realm of manifestation. There is a point, or embryo, of black in the white and white in the black. This is not fortuitous, but essential to the symbolism, since there is no being which does not contain within itself the germ of its opposite. There

is no male wholly without feminine characteristics and no female without its masculine attributes, otherwise the dualities would forever remain in watertight compartments and the whole power of interaction be lost. (p. 19)

The primordial unity precedes the dualism of the phenomenal world and not the other way around: “[E]very manifested being participates in the two principles [and this is expressed by the presence of the two terms *yang* and *yin*], but in different proportions and always with one or the other predominating; the perfectly balanced union of the two terms can be realized only in the ‘primordial state’.”<sup>6</sup> (pp. 25-26) When balance is disrupted physically, mentally or spiritually the human being suffers as Chuang Tzu writes: “If the equilibrium of the positive and negative is disturbed...man himself suffers physically thereby.” (p. 31)

The *yin-yang* are also expressed by two lines, *yin* depicted as a broken line and *yang* depicted as an unbroken line, which produce the Four Designs and ultimately give rise to the Eight Trigrams or the *Pa Kua*. It is through the One that the many arise and through the One that they return. In the *yin-yang* interaction the manifest world appears. Chuang Tzu expands upon this:

In the light of the Tao the affirmative and negative are one; the objective becomes one with the subjective.... When subjective and objective are both without their correlates, that is the very axis of Tao, and when the axis passes through the center at which all infinities converge, positive and negative alike blend into an infinite One. (p. 37)

Our attention to the underlying unity within the visible forms is taught by Lao Tzu: “To see all things in the yet undifferentiated, primordial unity” (p. 37).

*Wu wei* or “non-action” is not the end of all action, but rather the cessation of activity driven by the empirical ego. This is to say, “It is rather the end of action induced by desires and attachment to the realm of the illusions of the senses.” (p. 53) Chuang Tzu elaborates on the principle of *wu wei* or “non-action”:

The sovereigns of old, abstaining from any action of their own, allowed Heaven to govern through them.... At the summit of the universe the Principle exerts its influence over Heaven and Earth, which transmit that influence to all beings

<sup>6</sup> René Guénon, “The Great Triad,” in *The Symbolism of the Cross*, trans. Angus Macnab (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p. 137.

and, having become in the world of men good government, it causes talents and abilities to flourish. Inversely, all prosperity comes from good government whose efficacy derives from the Principle through the intermediary of Heaven and Earth. This is why, the sovereigns of old desiring nothing, the world was filled with abundance; they did not act, and all things changed according to the norm; they remained sunk in their meditation, and the people behaved with the most perfect order. This is what the ancient saying sums up thus: For him who unites himself to Unity, all things prosper; to him who has no desire of his own, even the genii are obedient.<sup>7</sup>

Expounding on this theme, Kuo Hsiang writes: “Non-action does not mean doing nothing. Let everything do what it really does, and then its nature will be satisfied.” (p. 53) Within Hinduism, the *Bhagavad-Gita* declares a similar teaching: “Let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be any attachment to inaction.” (p. 53)

Taoism teaches that our true nature or primordial state is always present and that we are never without it. Wang Pi writes, “Everything has its own nature. It can be developed according to its nature, but not shaped or forced against it.” (p. 57) From another perspective, Chuang Tzu avows, “Identify yourself with the Infinite. Make excursion into the Void. Exercise fully what you have received from nature, but gain nothing besides. In one word, be empty.” (p. 80)

What in Taoism is called the Great Triad consists of Heaven-Man-Earth. “Heaven represents the Spirit or Essence, Earth the Substance and Man the synthesis of both and mediator between them, himself partaking of the dual nature of Heaven and Earth.” (p. 67) The Perfect Man is thus the fulfillment of human nature as reflected in all of the *yin-yang* possibilities. *The Chung Yung*, from *The Book of Rites* comments, “Heaven, Earth and Man are the basis of all creation. Heaven produces them, Earth nourishes them and Man completes them.” (p. 67)

Chuang Tzu reminds inhabitants of the phenomenal world of its illusory and dream like quality in his famous allegory: “Once upon a time Chuang Tzu dreamed that he was a butterfly, a butterfly flying about and enjoying itself. It did not know it was Chuang Tzu. Suddenly he awoke and veritably was Chuang Tzu again. We do not know whether it was Chuang Tzu dreaming that he was a butterfly, or whether it was a butterfly dreaming it was Chuang Tzu.” (p. 113) Due to this predica-

<sup>7</sup> Chuang Tzu, quoted in René Guénon, *The Great Triad*, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 116.

ment, one needs to observe with all clarity the fleeting appearances of the phenomenal world in order to see the One underlying them: "The mind of the perfect man is like a mirror. It does not move with things, nor does it anticipate them. It responds to things, but does not retain them. Therefore the Sage is able to deal successfully with things, but is not affected." (p. 119)

The spiritual crisis confronting the contemporary West became clearly manifest in the 20th century, especially during the post-World War II era and the counter-culture of the 1960s, when the West's spiritual heritage was being ignored, if not discarded, by the ascendancy of a materialistic ethos. It was in this social ambiance that the traditions of the East—Hinduism, Taoism and Buddhism—were introduced to the West. One of the central shortcomings of the West's encounter with the East was the lack of accurate and reliable information on the Eastern teachings. It is in this context that J.C. Cooper's work is significant for it provides a dependable introduction to Taoism, one of the three great religions of China. In a world where so much disharmony and disequilibrium dominate, there is much need for the return to the primordial unity where harmony and equilibrium can be found as "the Sages of the old" have instructed and demonstrated. We conclude with the words of Chuang Tzu: "Knowledge of the Great Unity—this alone is perfection." (p. 61)