

THE THREE VINEGAR TASTERS: THREE EAST ASIAN RELIGIONS

Three ancient Asian philosophies—Confucianism, Taoism (or Daoism), and Buddhism—have shaped the culture and views of the people of East Asia for centuries. These philosophies, or teachings, share some common beliefs and several important differences.

Confucianism

Origins

Confucianism is a system of thought begun by the Chinese teacher and philosopher Confucius. Some scholars say Confucianism is a religion because it holds beliefs about the afterlife, while other scholars instead view Confucianism as a set of moral teachings by which to live one's life. Confucius lived from 551 to 479 BCE in ancient China. He established a school at the age of 22. During that time, he created a moral code of conduct based on the principles of mutual respect, good conduct, following the social order or status to which you were born, and developing close family ties. After the death of Confucius, his followers compiled his teachings in *The Analects of Confucius*—we know much about Confucius' teachings from this work and other writings. Many of Confucius's sayings are still repeated today as proverbs.

"Everything has beauty, but not everyone sees it." –The Analects of Confucius

Beliefs

Confucianism rests upon the belief that all human beings are fundamentally good and can improve their behavior by improving their personal lives, families, and communities. Confucianism's goals include educating people to be more self-motivated and self-controlled to, in turn, create a more harmonious and well-organized society and government. Followers of Confucianism focus on developing virtues that contribute to making society, and the world, more morally honorable. Confucius encouraged people to accept their station in life and not rebel against the social order. Many Confucian practices include performing acts of compassion and kindness.

Confucianism is polytheistic (that is, it involves many gods). Although Confucius was more concerned with the behavior of people on Earth, he believed that heaven was the supreme source of all goodness. Confucian belief holds that there are many minor gods, heroes, and spiritual ancestors who form a heavenly community, an "upper world," while humanity lives in a "middle world," and a third, "lower world," is populated by demons and ghosts. According to ancient Chinese historians, this heavenly community gave each ancient royal dynasty the right to rule China—this right being called the Mandate of Heaven—if the ruling emperor was kind and just.

Followers and Impact

The popularity of Confucianism spread to other Asian countries like Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. It is difficult today to determine an accurate number of Confucian followers, however, because Confucianism is often mixed with other religions or beliefs. There is little doubt that elements of Confucianism are evident in the culture and viewpoints of many people throughout East Asian countries. Confucianism helped to create an ordered

society with specific moral and spiritual rules of conduct. Asian culture also honors the family traditions and upholds a hierarchy of respect for older family members. These cultural norms are rooted in Confucianism.

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Taoism

Origins

Taoism, pronounced and often spelled as Daoism, represents a philosophy and religion that developed in ancient China over a period of 300 years, beginning around 142 C.E. (Common Era). Of the three East Asian philosophies, this is the youngest philosophy by many centuries. Lao Zi (pronounced *low-zuh*) is the philosopher thought to have first taught Taoism in ancient China. An ancient Chinese legend states that Lao-Tzu quit his job and began traveling the countryside, teaching his beliefs. One day, one of his listeners asked him to write down his beliefs. Those writings became the sacred Taoist book called the *Tao Te Ching* (pronounced *dow duh jing*), or *The Book of the Way*. The Chinese word “tao” means “the way,” and implies this “way” of living as a more balanced, harmonious life.

Beliefs

People who follow Taoism believe that acting as a good person and making good choices is important for the well-being of the body and the soul. To follow the way—Tao—one must be in harmony with nature and the cosmos. This is different from Confucianism. While Confucians follow good conduct to create a better society for all, Taoists are concerned with the harmony of the entire universe.

Furthermore, though Confucian beliefs traditionally hold that women are inferior to men because women were born to a lower station in life, Taoism holds women as respected members of society. Taoists aspire to respect their elders, resist breaking any rules of conduct, and practice kindness for the sake of their souls and physical bodies. Taoists observe nature and have developed a philosophy from the nature of yin and yang. Nature, Taoists believe, constantly creates balance through opposing forces. For example, as there is daytime in nature, there is also night. As there is a hot summertime, there is also a cold winter. Humans, it is believed, must achieve this same balance in their own life. A similar belief holds that the Tao is the supreme source of all life and flows through the universe. In addition to this supreme Tao, Taoists have developed a belief in minor gods over time. In this way, as with Confucianism, followers of Taoism may worship many gods.

Followers and Impact

There are currently about 12 million followers of Taoism worldwide, with the philosophy’s influences felt in countries like China, Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam. Taoists follow dietary guidelines of fasting and vegetarianism, healthy physical exercise like Tai Chi, and accept whatever life—the Tao—brings. A Taoist’s motto might be “go with the flow.” Taoism has also contributed to modern Chinese society in many other ways. For example, the continued use of herbal medicines for healing can be credited to ancient Taoist beliefs, and many of these natural remedies have found their ways into modern medicine.

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Buddhism

Origins

Unlike Confucianism and Taoism, which both began in China, Buddhism originated in India. Buddhism developed around the same time as Confucianism—around the 6th century BCE. According to legend, Buddhism originated with a young prince, Siddhartha Gautama, who lived from 563 BCE to 483 BCE. Siddhartha came to be known by his followers as the Buddha, or the Enlightened One. Siddhartha set out as a young man to discover why humans suffer, and why happiness is fleeting. He searched for six years and studied other religions and religious leaders. Ultimately, however, he came to understand that the mysteries of human suffering could be answered only by meditating and looking inward.

Beliefs

Through meditation, seeking answers through self-reflection, and observance of human suffering, the Buddha created The Four Noble Truths. These core beliefs are: 1) human life involves suffering, 2) the cause of suffering is greed or excess, 3) there is an end to suffering through eliminating this greed and excess, and 4) and the way to end this greed and excess is to follow the Middle Path. The Middle Path is a guide for people wishing to seek nirvana (happiness) in this life. Followers of the Middle Path—Buddhists—practice telling the truth, living life humbly, helping others, respecting all living things, and caring for the environment. Buddhists are mindful of their actions and speech toward others. They practice keeping their minds and thoughts calm and centered through meditation. They also practice non-violence. Buddhists do not consider Buddhism a religion. Instead, it is seen as a spiritual practice and a path to a better Earthly life. Many, however, do believe in reincarnation as the Buddha did.

Followers and Impact

Over the centuries, Buddhism has branched off into several sects, just as other religions have developed into many different forms (for example, Catholicism and Protestantism in Christianity). It is estimated that there are approximately 500 million practicing Buddhists worldwide. The influence of Buddhism has spread from India throughout East Asia to China, Thailand, Tibet, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolia, and Laos. Its influence continues to spread beyond Asia to the Western hemisphere as well. The practice of meditation to relieve stress, curb impulses, exercise self-reflection, and improve creativity has been adopted in many cultures worldwide.

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