

The Dao or Tao

The Dao or “The Way” is one of China’s major religions. The main belief is to follow “the way”. It traces its roots back to the sixth century BC. A Chinese philosopher called Laozi wrote a famous book (“Tao te Ching”).

After Laozi, came the philosopher Zhuang Zi. He wrote in the Zhuang Zi of “The Butterfly Dream”. In this he describes how he dreamt he was a butterfly but when he work up he asked himself:

“Was it the butterfly dreaming he was the Tuan Zhuangzi?”

The person who is a believer in “The Way” (the Dao) is called a daoist. The daoist believes that life is generally happy but that it should be lived with balance and virtue (“being good”). During the Tan Dynasty (618-906 AD), Daoism became the official religion but in later dynasties it was overtaken by Buddhism.

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976 many Daoist temples were destroyed. Following the economic reforms in the 1980s, many have been restored and the number of Daoists has grown. There are currently 25,000 Daoist priests and nuns in China.

Quanzhen School of Daoism

This is a “school of thought”. It consisted of meditation and breathing exercises to help people live longer. Many are also vegetarian.

Daoists do not believe in extremes. There is nothing totally good or totally evil. The symbol which shows this clearly is the black and white Ying and Yang.

Ying – black: negative, feminine. A symbol of dark, cold, moon, emptiness, weakness.

Yang – white: positive, masculine .A symbol of strength and activity, light, warmth, sun, full.

All nature is a balance of these two.

Interesting facts!

In early Daoist practices, priests experimented with minerals to find a “medicine” (elixir) for immortality. This was the beginning of ancient Chinese chemistry. One of these inventions was gunpowder!

Daoism has influenced Chinese culture for over 2,000 years. Its practices have given birth to martial arts such as Tai Chi. Healthy eating and exercises such as eye exercises have become part of a Chinese way of life and the ideas on morality (what is good or bad) and how we ought to behave have also had a big influence on the Chinese way of life.

Buddhism

Buddhism is a religion and philosophy which contains a variety of traditions, beliefs and practices. It is mostly based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama who is usually known as the Buddha (“the awakened one”).

The Buddha lived and taught in the eastern part of India some time between the 6th and 4th centuries BC. He was wise and helped others understand why behaving badly can only bring suffering. The cycle of suffering and rebirth is central to what Buddhists believe.

There are two major branches of Buddhism:

“Theravada” and Mahayana”. Tibetan Buddhism belongs to the “Mahayana” branch of Buddhism; although some people say it is really a third branch of Buddhism called “Vajrayana”.

The main Buddhist tradition talks about the Three Jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma (teachings) and the Sangha (community).

Buddhism is 2,500 years old and there are currently about 151,816 Buddhists in Britain. There is no belief in a personal God (as there is in Christianity.). Buddhists can worship both at home or at a temple. They believe that the path to Enlightenment (becoming a better person) is through morality (avoiding doing bad things), meditation and wisdom.

The essence of the Buddha's teachings are the Four Noble Truths. In the first two Truths the Buddha is like a doctor – he diagnoses the problem (the suffering) and what is causing it (the origin). The third Noble Truth is finding the cure. The fourth Noble Truth is the “prescription” – what you have to do, in order to be released from suffering. The prescription is the “Eightfold Path”. It is also called “the Middle Way”. It is a way of life which avoids extremes.

The symbol of the Eightfold Path or Middle Way is the wheel of Dharma.

The Buddha described the Eightfold Path as like a raft for crossing a river. Once you reach the other side, you no longer need the raft and you can leave it behind.