

TAOISM: THE SPACE BETWEEN
Rev. Steven Wilson
Pacific Unitarian Universalist Church
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First off, you need to know that it's sometimes pronounced with a D, but not always. With that behind us come for a lesson in how not to make the same pronunciation mistakes you made when talking about Goethe. We certainly do not want a repeat of that again. Seriously folks. Come for a primer in the most enigmatic of all Asian religions.

“The goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe,
to match your nature with Nature.”

~Joseph Campbell

“Each day of human life contains joy and anger, pain and pleasure, darkness and light, growth and decay. Each moment is etched with nature's grand design - do not try to deny or oppose the cosmic order of things.

~Morihei Ueshiba

Chalice Lighting

We light this chalice for just about an hour. Because in a tradition that has walked away from so many of the rituals many of us grew up with, it seemed innocuous enough a thing to do to light a big candle to get us started.

We light this big candle of ours partially of course just to bother Noel, who wants to replace it with a giant LED light, or a pile of stones.

We light this chalice as a reminder to Mary Ann Stein that we have begun the hour each week where she is nearly guaranteed to be both inspired and pissed off.

We light this chalice because it is the first image people who visit our website will see, and Tara is trying to get us to have a more unified public image.

We light it simply because Vivian is afraid to, and we want to rub it in.

And as a reminder that for an hour each week, you are invited to come and just be.

Let's begin the hour where you are invited to put away the *to do* list, and participate in the just being a human being thing.

When you enter a UU congregation there is an assumption. You have to put aside your expectations that being a member of this institution, and coming regularly in some cosmic way, punches your card to a better afterlife.

I wish it were so, but it is not.

When you step in here, you passively agree to give up the wish that this church or pastor knows something special, is something special that you don't have access too.

UU churches are neither brave enough, or frankly delusional enough to believe that we know something unique you don't or can't. But, what is kinda special about a UU church is that it knows and admits all to well what it doesn't know and can't provide.

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But if we are doing this UU thing correctly, one of the things you do get in return is the dignity of having your curiosity and intellect honored enough to be challenged. You don't, at least very often, get to walk out of here with a great scripture verse on your tongue that buys you any cosmic cred. You have to put aside that wish for curiosity, wonder, moral challenge, and ideally having learned something.

Today is about Taoism, just one of the multiplicities of idea systems we humans have come up with since we started painting on the inside of caves.

There is no burning need to talk about our topic for the day, Taoism. It doesn't make the cut of what qualifies for a world religion. It is not in the neighboring faith's curricula our pre-teens are using. It might not warrant a Sunday.

But—

If our Voyager kids have just marched their way through another year of World Religions, I figured I could punish you with a couple good obscure ones.

Our first reading this morning is titled, *The Space Within*. It was written by the ancient Chinese sage, Lao Tsu:

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the center hole that makes it useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room; (show a model house)
It is the holes that make it useful.
Therefore profit comes from what is there;
Usefulness from what is not there.

Central to Taoism is the idea of Wu – Emptiness. The ancient symbol for “Wu” is the dancing shaman. The spinning shaman was the conduit between earth and sky, heaven and earth. The spinning created a vortex, a channel, if you will, of emptiness.

The value of emptiness becomes apparent when you think of the bowl, the emptiness makes it useful. The window's use is by its emptiness. A wheel hub must be empty for the axle; so the wheel gains purpose by the emptiness.

“We join spokes together in a wheel,
but it is the center hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.
We hammer wood for a house,
but it is the emptiness inside
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
but non-being is what we use.”

This is a very adult concept, but when you get into your car, remember that without the empty space there would be nowhere to sit. Stillness, sleep, the nothing things matter too.

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The following poem by Danna Faulds speaks to so much of the spiritual wisdom Taoism offers the world.

Let go of the ways you thought life would unfold;
the holding of plans or dreams or expectations –
Let it all go.

Save your strength to swim with the tide.

The choice to fight what is here before you now will only result in struggle, fear, and desperate attempts to flee
from the very energy you long for.

Let go.

Let it all go and flow with the grace that washes through your days
Whether you receive it gently or with all your quills raised to defend against invaders.

Take this on faith;

the mind may never find the explanations that it seeks,
but you will move forward, nonetheless.

Let go, and the wave's crest will carry you to unknown shores,
beyond your wildest dreams or destinations.

Let it all go and find the place of rest and peace,
and certain transformation.

Our reading today is the legendary account of the two great figures in early Chinese philosophy Confucius and Lao Tzu. It speaks to their different agendas which we will talk about. (This account comes from Rev. Douglas Taylor's sermon Titled the Tao of Doubt)

One mythic day Confucius asked Lao Tzu to instruct him in the rites. Lao Tzu replied, "... When a gentleman lives in favorable times, he hastens to court in a carriage; but when he lives in unfavorable times, he drifts with the wind. I have heard it said that a good merchant hides his wealth and gives the appearance of want; if endowed with a rich supply of inward virtue, the superior man has the outward appearance of a fool. Get rid of that arrogance of yours, all those desires, that self-sufficient air, that overweening zeal; all that is of no use to your true person. That is all I have to say to you."

Confucius withdrew and told his disciples, "I know a bird can fly; I know a fish can swim; I know animals can run. Creatures that run can be caught in nets; those that swim can be caught in wicker traps; those that fly can be hit by arrows. But the dragon is beyond my knowledge; it ascends into heaven on the clouds and the wind. Today I have seen Lao Tzu and he is like the dragon!" (*Lao Tzu and Taoism*, by M. Kaltenmark)

Using the pathetic excuses that we have just finished a World Religions seminar that never hosted a Taoist speaker, and that last year our Voyager kids engaged in their own survey of religions, I chose to dedicate a Sunday to Taoism. But really if being honest, I just wanted to revisit an old flame.

As a young graduate school student first encountering Asian philosophy, I immediately took a liking to Taoism. Having mostly swum around in an academic sea of Christian theology, I found its anti-establishment instincts refreshing. I remember Lao-Tzu having a freer spirit than his more acceptable and famous brother Confucius, and for a moment I fell prey to his, liberated "Not All who Wander are not lost," religious spirit.

I mean what 23-year old theology graduate student doesn't want to show off a little to a world that doesn't know who Lao-Tzu is, that they know all too well who Lao-Tzu is. Right.

Sadly, thinking maybe I could be a Taoist was a short-lived romance. We were too culturally and generationally different for it ever to work out long term. We very quickly started drifting apart. Still, there is a love.

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I suspect that with the exception of a few of you, you know probably very little about Taoism. Truth is, I had forgotten almost everything I learned.

You probably know, or could guess, that it is a religion or philosophy from somewhere in Asia. Maybe you didn't even know that.

Of course, why would anyone who never had a fling as a Taoist ever would know more? Or want to. It doesn't have a cause or champions like Tibetan Buddhism, has. No Hollywood stars I am aware of are Taoists.

Rarely, if ever, will Taoism come up, and given that our time is all very valuable, I get you not caring. If learning about some obscure Asian tradition isn't your thing, you are invited to check out. I'm not kidding. I won't mind, not every sermon is for everyone. I'm going to turn away for a moment.

If anyone would rather go check your phone, grab a second cup of coffee, or just enjoy this day out on our patio, I won't mind. Sure, this is a fun gimmick, from your cheeky minister, but seriously, you can spend the next nineteen minutes of your life how you like, or you can join me in a walk-through Chinese religious history. I'm turning back around in five seconds to start.

Okay, guided by the pretty safe presumption that you know very little about Taoism, I will start with another presumption. That presumption being that the first thing I, and thus you, want to know about something like this is how not to sound like an idiot when you are talking about it. So, in that spirit, the first thing I suspect you might want to know about Taoism—if you already don't—is why you hear a D, but see a T.

No, your eyes and ears are not failing you. Well, ...maybe they are, but that is not the problem here.

This simple but confusing T to D transition occurred when the funky icons that make up Mandarin Chinese characters got translated into the Roman alphabet, and then the Roman alphabet changed. Simply, see, a T say a D.

This Daoist phrasing is one of those little things that can trip you up. A lot, like the way any date being in the seventeen hundreds, makes it part of the eighteenth century. Anyway, everything else you might say about Taoism is blurry enough to fake your way thru in a conversation.

Here is the second layer of information any sermon on Taoism should deliver. "Taoism is an ancient Chinese religion that stakes the claim that getting your life in alignment with nature's underlying energy, called 'the Tao', is the religious goal of life and the path to well-being and happiness."

That's pretty good. "Taoism is an ancient Chinese religion that proposes getting your life in alignment with nature's underlying way—its Tao is the path to well-being and happiness." Got it? Good. Maybe that is all you need.

No?

You're not running for the door. Okay, I'll keep going. In some quarters they call this attentiveness your showing me enabling, you know.

This "Tao" is typically translated as "the way," or more literally as "a person running along a path." This means that the Tao is more a motion or an energy pattern within the universe than it is a thing. The Tao is more a verb than a noun.

This idea of the Tao or "the way" echoes the way we speak of being on a spiritual journey.

That makes how Taoists see the divine, as something more like a spiritual version of the way physics speaks of rhythm and strings as being at the very base of what the universe really is. More a holy pattern and energy than a thing or a personality.

Got it? Fret not, nobody, including me, who is not a physicist or Shaman gets it more than that. Just nod.

The existence of this “Tao” was not something Taoists believed they invented. It had already been a part of Chinese cosmology and philosophy. Think about all the presumptions about the nature of things Christianity silently picked up from its Jewish context. What the Taoists did was pick up and run with this idea that not only was the Tao the underlying energy or fabric of the universe, but that matching one’s actions and intentions with it was important; our religious calling, and source of peace.

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Joseph Campbell describes Taoism goal to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature. I like to think of Taoism as a ceremoniously dressed Chinese life coach encouraging us to do a trust fall away from conventional thinking and into the laws of nature. Does that help?

This whole Taoist thing begins when Lao Tzu,

Lao Tzu, a name also seen spelled and pronounced “Laozi”, made it into the annals of Chinese religious history when he decided to leave behind troubled times brought by the decline of a dynasty in the Fourth Century BCE, to retreat west beyond the edge of China. It was an act akin to leaving civilization itself behind. He often is seen depicted riding on an ox, off into the wilds to be a hermit.

However, fortunately for us, he didn’t walk away before his insight and wisdom got handed down. See, while on his way west Lao Tzu was stopped by a frontier boarder guard and was forbidden to take anything from China with him. Apparently, this was a time when China actually valued intellectual property rights, and although I don’t believe there was a tariff involved, Lao Tzu was not permitted to leave without even leaving behind all his possessions and his wisdom.

Although Lao Tzu didn’t believe words were very good for conveying what was deeply true or important, before he walked off into obscurity he did sit down and write down what Taoists have taken as the ultimate commentary on the nature of our existence. The teaching he left with the guard has been passed down through the centuries as the most holy of Taoist text.

Nearly certainly this is mostly a story from the pages of myth. The *Tao Te Ching* was compiled and edited over time, but for just a moment, Unitarians, for just a moment, let’s not let the truth get in the way of a good story.

This little book the *Tao te Ching*, a title not so humbly translatable as “The Great Way,” or “the canon of the way and virtue” contains only eighty-one little poem length verses, only five thousand of those funky Chinese characters. The *Tao Te Ching’s* verses offer both practical and spiritual advice about how to live in accordance with life’s alternating cycles of nature. The Bible is the only book that has been translated into more languages than the Tao Te Ching has.

For historical context, this magical moment, when Lao Tzu was stopped at the guard station to put his wisdom to ink, was historically about the time Aristotle and Plato were doing their own high-falutin’ speculating. This was around the time Alexander the Great was exporting the Greek ideas far and wide. They never crossed paths. Helenism, never fully made it as China Lao Tzu predates Buddha by about one hundred years, and his contemporary Confucius by about half a century. All pretty close though.

Lao Tzu opens the closest thing Taoists have to the Bible, their sacred scripture the Tao Te Ching, by saying that “the Tao that can be spoken of is not the real Tao.” And with those words, Taoism was born. That is really the heart of it. In this way it is like quantum physics speaks of itself. If you think you’ve got it, you just lost it. In addition to being a risky opening statement for a book designed to advertise the ultimate importance of the Tao, he was right. This statement seems to say to me that if I think I know the power that creates, sustains, and transforms my life, I’m probably wrong.

My contrarian egg-headed self loves it. It tells me and everyone who thinks they have grasped a corner of the deepest truth, that they are most assuredly mistaken. If you are a regular, or member, of this church, that kind of skepticism probably feels familiar and accurate.

Accompanying Lao Tzu's famous tiny book in the annals of Taoist history is a far larger, and perhaps more widely read book titled the Zhuangzi. This book written largely but not exclusively by a very skilled and imaginary writer named Master Zhuang.

Less direct than the Tao Te Ching, but more playful and accessible the Zhuangzi contains fables we might think of as an adult version of bible stories or nursery rhymes. Like Lao Tzu, Master Zhuang, who was most likely not familiar with the Tao Te Ching, don't fit into an existing Taoist tradition with the attempt to illustrate the

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falseness of human distinctions between good and bad, large and small, life and death, and human and nature. They create it.

Let's review our Adult World Religion lesson for an imaginary test. Taoism is an ancient Chinese religion built originally upon the wisdom of a tiny text called the Tao Te Ching. The Tao Te Ching is attributed to a mystical sage named Lao Tzu. In spirit, this tradition has an instinct to give up the rules and roles of civilization for the peace, tranquility, and wisdom hidden in the wordless wisdom of nature, and the energy that brought the world into being. Taoism urges its followers to achieve "perfection" by becoming one with the unplanned rhythms of the universe they call "the way" or the "Tao." Most importantly, when you see the name Taoism, you see a T, but say a D. See! We're making progress. We're almost ready to take sound like an arrogant scholar at an egghead cocktail party. My basic goal for all knowledge.

The most important set of values the Taoist tradition is committed to try to cultivate what is known as *wu wei*. Wu wei involves "naturalness", simplicity, and spontaneity.

And along with cultivating those values, high on the list of what one should try to be is called the "Three Treasures." The three values or dispositions are "compassion," "moderation or frugality," and "humility."

This disciplined passivity is for Taoists frequently expressed in water.

Water, Taoists have noticed and never stop talking about, is all at once the softest, weakest, most reactive, spontaneous, patient, and yet persistent substance on earth.

Taoists want to testify, there is nothing better for attacking what is hard and strong than the *peaceful, placid, and persistent way* moving water cleans and carves. Taoists got a thing for water, and I obviously got a thing for consonance.

These very passive values provide us an excellent segue into Taoism's most popular idea, the yin and yang of things



The yin yang symbol is, as you probably know, both about balance and the paradox that what we often think of as opposites are *bound* together and share portions of one another. Yin is the receptive and Yang the active principle. We in the West are generally familiar with this concept of how everything is interconnected and always, as evident in the symbol, possessing a bit of its opposite.

The seasons and our two different genders are classic examples of the yin and yang of things. Even the back and forth of social order and disorder are explained via this well-worn theory of balanced tension. There is something of Hegel's dialectic in this moving tension, if that is a meaningful reference.

The Chinese see the yin and yang of things in basically everything. It is actually out of the energy created by the balance and tension of these apparent opposites that everything in the world is created. Yin and yang are cosmic, elements that precede and drive creation into being. Us included.

However, after the predictable response of "Oh cool, a religion that tells me to be balanced, and to spend time by the river absorbing the wisdom and patience of water," the obvious question that arises is, "What else besides maybe getting that tattoo am I called to do?"

For example, what exactly does one do with a philosophy that tells us to act in accordance with the unplanned natural rhythms of the universe? And, how hard can we “try to act without intention” before finding ourselves, ...well...acting with intention?

Or, even simpler, “How do I practice this religion?”

To which I would say, “Good questions, Grasshopper”

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Which would be a great distraction, and oddly the truth is, in this case, the right answer.

See, for all of the energy Taoism employs in suggesting how hard it is to grasp “the truth” of what is real, and how the universe works—despite its stark Zen—like start about what is not the Tao, what historically has been allowed to be dubbed “Taoist” feels unfiltered.

The religion that soberly asks us to follow Nature’s simple path actually gets expressed in an infinite number of actions, rituals, beliefs, and magic. It’s odd. The religion that begins with a hermit jotting down all his wisdom about how much folly there is in the world ends up expressing itself in ways that appear, to this modern skeptic, quite comfortable with, of folly.

Falling under the category of Taoism is astrology, shamanism, several martial arts traditions, some forms of Chinese medicine, Feng Shui, Tai Chi, Chinese astrology and some versions of Qigong. All of the above can be dubbed Taoist. Or at least Taoist-ish.

A good line to impress others with is to say, “Taoism is a blurry watercolor of Chinese culture, superstition, and philosophy.” Let’s practice saying that to our neighbors with a know it all air. Go ahead. “Taoism is a blurry watercolor of Chinese culture, superstition, and philosophy.”

Taoism has under its broad umbrella a commitment to magic, and medicinal arts to increase longevity, acts of divination one might compare to Chinese Tarot cards, Shamanic activity, and ecstatic wanderings, even exorcisms. You have to remember that Taoism is the closest legacy of some of the prehistoric folk religions in China.

In particular to a group called the School of Naturalists. Don’t try to work all that into your look at how smart I am rap. Set realistic expectations when showing off. More simply...

The answer of how one behaves like a Taoist is really, most of anything, found in the melting pot of Chinese philosophy, folk beliefs, rituals, or religion. Religiously at least China is, as the western stereotype suggests, inscrutable to us. Say something like that. Taoism is inscrutable to the modern mind.

It is probably helpful to know that Eastern religions don’t compete nearly as much as they share. Asia is more a true melting pot of ideas that simmer together than the varied but separate buffet of offerings we get in the West.

It is worth knowing that in Chinese history, the three religions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism all stand on their own, and yet are involved in a process of attempting to find harmonization and convergence among themselves in a way we politically mostly wish Judaism, Christianity and Islam would. There is in fact a word for the unity of China’s three primary religious teachings, Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, called Sanjiao.

The more important relationship Taoism has is with its fellow Chinese religions is with Confucianism. Confucianism is its great other. There is no more perfect example of the yin and yang of things the way the strict societal norms of Confucianism meet the organic “go with the flow” style of Taoism. They are perfectly balanced by one another.

Confucianism is the truth of well-conceived civilization, and the clarity of identity and purpose that strong roles, and rituals can provide.

Whereas Taoism harbors the wisdom of spontaneity, independence, being in the moment, and an overall non-plussed-ness.

Confucianism is expressed in the structure, order, and role division of a beehive. Taoism in the freedom of a babbling brook.

You can't really separate the two. To me, the passive relaxed yin of Taoism needs the stiff, staid, rule-bound yang of Confucianism. And Taoism is, in a way, Confucianism's liberated soul. It's kind of the way Gaby and I work in the office.

However, as much as Taoism and Confucius differ in their prescription, they were both born of the same disease. Both religions were responses to the unraveling of an established social/political order way back in the day.

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Confucius became interested in social order because he came of age during the same erosion of the old order Lao Tzu ran away from. The difference between them is in how they responded to this same cultural crisis. See, Confucius believed that society needed to learn—even impose—strict patterns of social living and rituals on ourselves. Confucius believed that our original nature doesn't come with the pattern needed for harmonious living, and that our original nature is an unreliable mass of contradictory impulses. Essentially Confucius had something like our concept of original sin that begged for order.

However, to Lao Tzu the demands, the norms, the arts of civilization were themselves as much a problem as the solution. Society, to Lao Tzu, was as much the problem as the solution, and the effort to build up social structures to manage humanity a distraction to who we really are to be happy.

It is probably important to say that Taoism has never been a unified religion, and could be categorized as a system of practical wisdom and philosophy. In fact, the very idea that someone would "be" a lay member or believer of Taoism is a modern invention that goes back to the introduction of the Western category of what "organized religion" in China is. They don't think about it the way we do. Taoism for most of the Chinese continues to be an "order" of the larger body of Chinese religion.

I do think it is worth mentioning that historically Taoism is not a thing one goes to church to practice, and it was most associated with people we would most think of as hermits.

Across the years the influence and reputation of Taoism has ebbed and flowed. Over the last 2500 years, at times it has been the state religion of China. At times, emperors claimed to be relatives of Lao Tzu as efforts to legitimate themselves, and at times Taoist literature was banned from public libraries.

Today, Taoism is one of five officially recognized faiths by the People's Republic of China. Commonly, it is grouped into a category of organically Chinese folk traditions that include Taoism's great opposite, Confucianism, a very Chinese form of Buddhism, a category loosely called folk religions, and ancestor worship.

Although China is officially a secular state, in a 2014 survey, seventy-five percent of the population of China either grouped themselves, or were grouped into, one of these mostly home-spun traditions.

Although Taoism does not have a significant institutional presence outside China, its influence does spread beyond the borders a little. Taiwan, which is still kinda-sorta China, has millions who identify with it, and in Singapore it has adherents too. Even in the West states we feel it's touch a little. Lefty religious types like me have always leaned in towards its anti-establishment message. And, people increasingly add "the Tao" to things they want to promote the wisdom of.

This all means that when you hear a reference to "the Tao," one has a quick job to do. One has to discern as to whether the reference is to the underlying principle or verb that underlies reality, "the way" things are, or if the way "Tao" is being referred to is the wisdom inherent in something. Which when you think about it are not that different, but different.

Moreover, when we in the West want to express appreciation for the paradoxical wisdom that everything and every position is balanced by a bit of its opposite, more and more we turn to the concept of yin and yang. And likewise, when young Westerners want to piss off their faithful Christian parents, more and more they get yin-yang tattoos.

Regardless of what you learn about Taoism, let's take a second to load that in as a thought for later.

"I'm going to challenge my culturally pre-dispositioned response to first think of what is most special in the universe as being thought of as a personality. God!"

“I am going to remember, as much as I can, that words disappoint as the primary tools we have in describing the deepest, hardest ideas and concerns we have.”

In the good irreverent spirit of the Taoists’ please repeat after me, “Words disappoint as tools for theology.”

It’s true. Life, and behind it the nature of the universe, is an alive and dynamic process I am going to do my best not to swim against the tide of. I hear you in your complaint that words are inadequate, but dear people, they remain the best tools we got.

Lao Tzu was clearly onto something eternally true. We are inclined to confuse the symbol for the thing or the subject, the finger pointing to the sky for the moon it is pointing at. However, for all its deconstructive wisdom and capacity to see the futility in struggling to be happy, it has a premise that may not be true.

Taoism presumes that if we could unlearn all our years of cultural conditioning, and recapture some innate wisdom of the universe, we would be healed. Moreover, it is a bit comical to the modern discerning ear to think that there are actions, habits, and disciplines that move us toward achieving “perfection” by becoming one with the unplanned rhythms of the universe called that “the way” or the “Tao.”

There is almost a comedy to the challenge of how Taoism might, in a more skeptical context than the one it developed in, become a religion—especially when the way it gets expressed is so chaotic and human.

Taoism like all religions always has to balance between philosophical truth and giving us something to do. They do not always do this well. But together, with each of us as the editor, these old religions can be guides.

So, when you are ready to critique any particular religion for whatever hypocrisy you can see, throw it a little forgiveness, and figure out what truth it has for you.

Weird conclusion to a sermon on Taoism, but that’s what you got today.

As we head into a full “Building Your Own Theology” program that will run from November to January, I want us to begin to sort and compile just what it is we need to learn to be the people WE, here now, want to be. Not who some hermit, 2500 hundred years ago wants us to be. You’re a UU, and the individual responsible search for truth and meaning is your job.

AMEN

Collection Humor

Today, now at the time of the collection, we have explored how little can be said about the Tao. We learned that the Tao has no expectations. The Tao demands nothing of others. The Tao does not speak. The Tao does not blame. The Tao does not take sides. And for all that cannot be said about the Tao, we can say that the Tao is not a Jewish grandmother. Give generously.