

Exploring the Daoist worldview

Purpose: The purpose of this lesson is to introduce students to Daoist thought, **as illustrated in quotes from Daoist teachings**, and to ask them to consider

- its implications for the status and relative importance of different ways of knowing.
- ways in which it compares with a Western view of the world.

The lesson is intended for use in an 11th/12th grade IB Theory of Knowledge class.

Materials/ Resources:

Biddle, Arthur, ed. Contemporary Literature of Asia. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1996

Freke, Timothy. Taoist Wisdom. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 1999.

Hartz, Paula R. Taoism: World Religions. New York: Facts on File, 1993.

Lopez, Donald S., Jr., ed. Religions of China in Practice. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Watts, Alan. The Philosophies of Asia: the Edited Transcripts. Boston: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995.

Watts, Alan. What is Tao? Novato, CA: New World Library, 2000.

Background: To prepare for the lesson and give it some context, some prior activities could include the following:

- a quick briefing on the spelling and pronunciation of Chinese words and names (current Pinyin system vs. the previously used Wade-Giles) would help to clear up confusion that is bound to arise over Dao and Tao, Laozi and LaoTzu, etc. The Hartz book has sufficient basic info organized in a convenient way on p. 12 and 40.
- a short lesson on Confucius (Kong Fuzi) and the tenets of his teachings, and the tension and relationship between Confucianism and Daoism in Chinese thought. The Freke book p. 8, and better yet the Biddle book p.249 and 250, are helpful on this subject.
- **some explanation of the way the “the three teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, along with popular religious beliefs and practices such as those associated with veneration of ancestors and traditional funeral rituals, interact as elements of a whole to make the complete picture of the Chinese worldview. The compatibility of the separate pieces in Chinese culture is very different from the typical exclusive practice of the Western monotheistic religions; indeed the idea is so foreign that it can easily be missed if not pointed out. The introduction of the Lopez book, titled “The Spirits of Chinese Religion” by Stephen F. Teiser discusses this concept in a very straightforward way in its beginning section and also in a section subtitled “The Problem of Popular Religion.”**

Activities: Students could begin with an hour of class assignment that would study of the accompanying quotes from the Dao dejing, the Zhuangzi and other Daoist writings, noticing in particular

1. implications for knowledge issues and ways of knowing,
2. ideas that seem contrary to those common to Western tradition and popular culture, and also
3. things that seem comfortably familiar.

In consideration of the first point above, along with point 2 and/or point 3, they should spend at least 30 minutes writing in response to one or more of the quotes in preparation for later sharing in class discussion. The writing should be prepared not only as a basis for sharing but also to be

submitted for teacher comment. Students should be encouraged to illustrate their thoughts with examples which could include references to other writings and texts and to cultural practice.

Assessment: The impact of the lesson would be assessed through individual student writing responses and the through whole group discussion which follows.

Grade Adaptation: The lesson should be suitable for older high school students at any level who are studying China, philosophy and/or religion.

Extension: For any students who may want to look further into the nature of Eastern thought and its contrast to Western philosophy, the eight talks transcribed in the Watts book The Philosophies of Asia: the Edited Transcripts are an excellent springboard and include discussion Buddhism and Hinduism as well as Daoism and Confucianism.

Some teachings from the Daoist sages....

Dao is like the ocean. All rivers run to the ocean without filling it up. All water comes from it without ever emptying it.

Zhun Mang

Words are limited, like the beings that use them, and can only express the affairs of this limited world. They can not be used to describe the eternal, limitless Dao.

Tai Gong Diao

If you think you can speak about Dao, it is clear you don't know what you're talking about.

Laozi

People mistakenly seek for the truth in books, which necessarily only contain false ideas.

Zhuangzi

The relationship between Yin and Yang produces a circular evolution in which every end is a beginning.

Tai Gong Diao

Something can be beautiful if something else is ugly. Someone can be good if someone else is bad. Presence and absence. Short and long. High and low. Before and after. Gibberish and meaning. They can only exist together!

Laozi

Some things are called beautiful and others ugly, but this is an abuse of words. Everything is impermanent. Something that is now beautiful will metamorphose into something ugly, and that which is ugly will become beautiful.

The Yellow
Emperor

Everything has its "that," everything has its "this." From the point of view of "that" you cannot see it, but through understanding you can know it..."that" comes out of "this" and "this" depends on "that"---which is to say that "this" and "that" give birth to each other...

Zhuangzi

When things fully flourish they begin to decline. At midday the sun starts to set. When the moon is done waxing it starts to wane. When happiness ends, sadness begins.

Laozi

Dao is the being that resides in all beings.

Tai Gong Diao

Dao expresses itself as the multiplicity of beings.

Zhuangzi

There are no real individuals as such. Only different expressions of Dao.

Zhuangzi

Nature and destiny can not be altered. Time cannot be stopped. Evolution can not be obstructed. You don't make anything happen. Events happen by themselves.

Laozi

At the foundation of everything is nature. To live well we need only follow our natural instincts.

Zhuangzi

There is no absolute right and wrong. People judge as right what they personally consider pleasant, and judge as wrong what they personally consider unpleasant. Convincing others of what is right cannot be equated with teaching the Truth. It is just teaching others to agree with you. It is not about putting an end to error, but putting an end to opinions contrary to your own preconceptions.

Laozi

Those who understand the spirit of a law adapt it to the changing times. Those who do not understand this continue to follow it even when to do so has become harmful.

Laozi

It is healthy to know nothing. Pretending to know is a kind of sickness.

Laozi

Nothing is gained by thinking about Dao. Dao is only known through silent contemplation. To truly understand this is the beginning of enlightenment.

Laozi

Someone seeking learning knows more and more. Someone seeking Dao knows less and less—until things are just what they are.

Laozi

Let everything go where it naturally wants to go and you will always be successful. Try to force things to do the way they don't want to go and you will have nothing but failure.

Laozi

If you want to be free, forget about being comfortable. If you want life, avoid prestige. If you want union with Dao, let go of all your attachments.

Zhuangzi

The essential nature of water is clear, but mud pollutes it. The essential nature of a human being is peaceful, but desire pollutes it.

Laozi

Happiness has nothing to do with wealth and prestige, but is a result of harmony.

Laozi

If you stick rigidly to one spiritual discipline, even if you become master of it, it is the same as blocking the flow of Dao by clinging to small aspect of it.

Laozi

Flow around obstacles, don't confront them.

Laozi

