



Background Information on Daoism

Directions: The following information will help your group create a character collage on Daoism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Daoism (pronounced *DOW-ism*) is a belief system based largely on the *Daodejing*, or “The Way and Its Power,” a sacred text that many believe was written by Laozi (pronounced *LAU-zzz*), a legendary sage (wise person). Laozi, whose Chinese name translates to “wise, old master,” is believed to have lived from 606 to 530 B.C. and to have been the first Daoist philosopher. Laozi lived during troubled times in China. The Zhou empire was weakening and could not assure security for the Chinese people. Laozi concluded that people should be able to find happiness and peace within themselves, rather than depending on success and wealth. He wrote the *Daodejing* to guide people on how to live and find happiness.

Laozi thought the goal of life was to achieve oneness with the Dao (the Way), a universal force connected to nature that cannot be defined, only experienced and felt. Daoism teaches that humans should see themselves as part of nature. The only true rules and laws, according to Laozi, are the rules and laws of nature, or Dao. To discover how to behave, Daoists believe people should observe nature and try to live in harmony with it. To discover how nature acts, Laozi, sit by a river, feel a breeze, and observe a drifting cloud. In doing so, one notices that nothing in nature strives for fame, power, or knowledge. The river, the breeze, and the stream move without effort because they follow the Dao, the way of nature that guides all things. Similarly, a simple creature like a squirrel is naturally wise because it does not argue or strive for personal glory. The squirrel simply follows the Dao of its nature.

Likewise, Laozi felt that the small agricultural villages in which most Chinese lived were ideal communities. These villages had little government or formal education systems, and villagers lived in harmony with the agricultural cycles on which their lives depended. He believed that these communities would remain happy and prosperous if left to themselves, rather than controlled by intellectuals and government officials.



- How did Laozi believe that people should find happiness?
- What is the Dao?
- According to Daoists, how should people discover how to behave?
- Why did Laozi feel small agricultural villages were ideal communities?

According to Laozi, to achieve oneness with the Dao, individuals should contemplate (think about) nature and lead a balanced life in tune with nature. Daoism teaches that harmony comes from balancing the opposite forces of nature, called *yin* and *yang*. A classic Daoist metaphor is a simple bowl: the yang is the clay that makes up the bowl, but the bowl’s true usefulness lies in the yin, the empty space, the nothing at its center. Laozi taught that it is impossible to have good without bad, beauty without ugliness, or pleasure without pain.