

## Great Teachers of Tao

We decided to explore the cultural roots of the Tao practice, particularly Chinese Buddhism and Taoism. We did a little research, and gave mini-presentations on the legendary figures and myths that grew up around these traditions. The metaphors they provide are still relevant today. These symbolic expressions of virtue inspire, and remind us that our lives are most meaningful when we live up to our highest potential. Below are summaries of the presentations on key legendary figures in Buddhist and Taoist mythos.



### Ji gong

Ji gong, often referred to as the “crazy monk”, was a non-conformist. On figurines of Ji gong, he is often holding a fan, cricket or flask. The fan symbolizes the act of letting negative energy go, and consciously bringing in positive energy. In China, people would put two crickets together and watch them fight. The cricket, in this case, symbolizes the internal battle we have with ourselves. We fight in order to develop our strengths and to understand and transform our weaknesses; it is a spiritual battle, and we aspire to constantly take ourselves to higher levels of understanding, awareness and practice. The flask Ji Gong carries represents non-attachment and the temporal nature of the material world. It is said that while he was alive, he carried around a flask which people presumed was alcohol. However, he could change the liquid to be vinegar, water or another liquid so people were constantly surprised when they drank out of it. Ji gong tried to teach others not to judge anything based on external appearances. He did not care what people looked like, or where they came from. If they had a good heart, he would

try to help them. One time, Ji gong and his students were freezing cold and had no way of getting warm. Ji gong tore down the wooden altar they used for worship, and made a fire out of it. One of his students was horrified and cried out, “What are you doing? That’s our sacred altar!” Ji gong took the statue of Buddha and cut it into two pieces. The student exclaimed, “You are cutting Buddha! Don’t do that!” Ji gong answered, “This statue is not Buddha. This is just wood.” He wanted to teach his students how to let go of material attachments—that what really matters is the True Heart. Wood decays over time; compassion is timeless; it touches people at the deepest level. It was not important to Ji gong whether or not a person appeared to have great virtue: appearances meant nothing to him. He was only interested in the qualities of one’s heart.

### Di Zang

Di Zang Wang Pu Sa is the Bodhisattva of hell. His name has been written as: Di Zang, Ti Tzang, Jizo and Ksitigarbha. The images of Di Zang usually show him dressed as a monk and holding a ringed staff in his right hand that jingles to alert people of his presence. In his left hand, he carries a “wish-fulfilling jewel” that shines light in dark, foreboding places. He is sometimes shown with a five leaf crown on his head. Di Zang is well-known for possessing the qualities of persistence and optimism. This is because, during each of his incarnations, Di Zang repeatedly vowed to not become a Buddha until all sentient beings were liberated from hell. He has the most difficult and undesirable job of all, but he has the best attitude. Di Zang teaches people



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how they can earn spiritual merit in order to leave hell and he offers expediences to limit the suffering they must endure. There are many different hells, and Di Zang presides over all of them. He is dressed differently depending on which hell he is presiding over. Di Zang is said to protect: sinners, travelers, women, infants, the sick and disabled, the poor and oppressed and the hungry. He also protects those who are troubled by spirits or nightmares. There are many Di Zang statues lining the roads in Japan, to provide good luck to travelers. Di Zang's festival day is the 30th day of the 7th month of the lunar year, which is the last day of Ghost Month. This is when the gates of hell are closed.



## Lao Tzu

Lao Tzu is widely known as the author of the Tao Te Ching, which is translated as The Classic of the Way and Virtue. Lao Tzu's birth name was Li Er and he was called Lao Tzu, or "old man", after his death. Lao Tzu was born around 570 B.C. but no one knows when he died. When he was about twenty years old, he began working for the government, and when he was forty-five he became the Chief Archivist of Zhou's Archives, where he read avidly and learned as much as he could. At this time, Confucius heard of Lao Tzu's wisdom and traveled to meet him. Confucius said that Lao Tzu was like a dragon, because he came and went as he pleased, and no one could keep hold of him. Lao Tzu was a secluded person who preferred to keep to himself. As the legend goes, one day, Lao Tzu mounted a water buffalo and began traveling west. Before Lao Tzu entered the des-

ert, a gatekeeper stopped him and requested that he write down his wise thoughts. This is when Lao Tzu is said to have written the Tao Te Ching. Lao Tzu was connected to Tao and therefore was a channel for it. But even he did not understand all of the paradoxical and esoteric verses that he wrote in the Tao Te Ching. A central theme of the Tao Te Ching is non-action, or wu wei. Non-action is not laziness but rather acting naturally (in harmony with Tao) and without expectations. There is a story that was told about Lao Tzu in extreme old age. Lao Tzu apparently asked his disciple to look in his mouth. "What do you see?" asked Lao Tzu. His disciple said he saw nothing. Lao Tzu asked, "No teeth?" The disciple replied, "No, no teeth. But I do see a tongue." This was Lao Tzu's dying lesson: that hard, brittle things disappear and the soft and yielding things remain.



## Guan Shih Yin

Guan Shih Yin, called "Guan Yin" or "Kuan Yin" for short, is the Bodhisattva of Karuna, or Compassion. Guan means "to observe, watch, or monitor". "Shi" means "the world", and "yin" means "sounds", specifically the sounds of those who suffer. The name therefore translates to mean "one who hears the cries of the world". The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was depicted in the Lotus Sutra as male and female, so that he/she could assume any form necessary in order to help others. The word "karuna" means "to weep". Karuna is our ability to relate to another so intensely that his or her plight affects us as much as if it had been our own. The Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara was apparently so overwhelmed with the task of saving so many people that Amitabha Buddha (the Buddha of boundless light) gave him 11 heads and 1000 arms so that he could hear the cries of the suffering people, and help as many as possible. Eventually, Avalokitesvara was able to deliver all sentient beings from suffering, so that they were all enlightened. Enthused, he reported the success of his efforts to his spiritual father, Amitabha. Amitabha asked Avalokitesvara to look behind him.

Turning back, Avalokitesvara saw the world being filled with new sufferers, and shed tears of compassion. It is said that Avalokitesvara's tears gave birth to the female embodiment of compassion. When Buddhism came to China in

the 12th century, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara morphed into a female figure named Kuan Yin. The legend during that time was of a Buddhist saint named Miao Shan. Miao Shan was the human personification of Kuan Yin. She was a Chinese princess who refused to get married. She wanted to be a nun and dedicate her life to spiritual matters. Her father, enraged by her decision, ordered the nuns to give her the most detestable and difficult chores at the nunnery. This did not deter Kuan Yin, and she eventually received help from all of the animals surrounding the nunnery. Her father, seeing this, became so frustrated that he attempted to burn down the temple. Kuan Yin put out the fire with her bare hands and suffered no burns. Struck with fear, her father ordered her to be put to death.

After she died, Kuan Yin was transformed into a goddess for all of her kindness and began her journey to heaven. She was about to cross over into heaven when she heard a cry of suffering back on earth. Kuan Yin asked to be sent back to earth and vowed to stay until all suffering had ended. Due to the fact that Kuan Yin symbolizes compassion, Kuan Yin is associated with vegetarianism.

### **Maitreya Buddha**

Maitreya Buddha is also known as the Laughing Buddha, Milè, and the Future Buddha of Love. His name originates from the Sanskrit word “matri,” meaning “loving-kindness.” He is the Buddha prophesized to be the successor of Shakyamuni Buddha, also known as Siddhartha.

The prophecy says that Milè will come several thousand years following Shakyamuni Buddha’s death- after the Buddhist teachings have been forgotten. Milè will then help people become free from their attachments and delusions and experience greater happiness. His coming does not signify the end of the world, but a progression within the natural cycle of the universe, or Tao.

Milè is often depicted as a fat Buddha, carrying a large sack in the style of a famous Chinese monk. The reason he is so big and burdened is because he carries all the troubles of the world. Yet, even with such weight upon him, Milè is always smiling and laughing and embodies the virtue of loving-kindness. In this way, Milè is an amazing role model. He inspires us to remember that suffering is both relative and universal, and that we can always develop more strength and compassion.

We can feel defeated by the intensity of our troubles, and we might whine or want to give up. But, cultivation can make us become more like Milè Buddha. Like a diamond that must be exposed to intense pressure and heat in order to shine, we grow by learning to withstand greater trials. This transformation allows us to greater help ourselves and those with whom we have affinity.

But, it is important to know that we haven’t reached the level of Milè and we don’t possess his capacities. We aren’t ready to take on the weight of the world. Yet, Maitreya still shows us the virtue to which we can aspire. He also serves as a reminder to bear our problems with grace and to always come from a foundation of love and gratitude as we progress to wisdom.

Milè is very important in the Great Light Tao practice. His name is invoked in almost every ceremony and his statue is one of three that to be found on the altars of Great Light Tao temples, along with Guan Yin and Ji Gong. This is because his energy and virtue are vital to the purpose of our cultivation. He embodies exceptional love, clarity and wisdom and is an extraordinary representative of Tao. □



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