

The Three Treasures of Daoism

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“Venerate the Dao and honor inner power”
—*Dàodé jīng*, ch. 51

The external Three Treasures (*sānbǎo* 三寶) refer to the Dao 道, the scriptures (*jīng* 經), and the teachers (*shī* 師). While these were primarily adapted from the Three Jewels/Three Refuges of Buddhism, the phrase actually first occurs in chapter 67 of the fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power):

我有三寶持而保之。

一曰慈；

二曰儉；

三曰不敢為天下先。

慈故能勇；

儉故能廣；

不敢為天下先、故能成器長。

I have Three Treasures that I maintain and protect:

The first is compassion;

The second is frugality;

The third is not daring to be first in the world.

Through compassion, one can be brave.

Through frugality, one can be expansive.

Through humility, one can become a vessel-elder.

Nonetheless, in the larger, organized Daoist tradition, the external Three Treasures refer to the Dao, the scriptures, and the teachers (in this order). These are the core and interrelated constituents of the Family of the Dao (*dàojiā* 道家) and the Tradition of the Dao (*dàotǒng* 道統) as such.

The Dao 道 (Tao/Way) is the first of the external Three Treasures of Daoism. The Dao is the sacred and ultimate concern of Daoists. The Chinese character consists of the radical *chuò* 辵/辵 (“walk/move”) and *shǒu* 首 (“head”). On a more straightforward etymological level, it indicates a path that one walks and a larger cosmic Way by extension. However, under an esoteric Daoist reading, *shǒu*-head consists of yin/earth (丿) and yang/heaven (ノ) united-as-One (*yī* 一) in suchness (*zì* 自), including in/as/through oneself. Daoists also refer to the Dao with various other cognate terms, including Ancestor (*zōng* 宗), Mother (*mǔ* 母), Mystery (*xuán* 玄), One (*yī* 一), and so forth. The latter is sometimes understood as a circle (O) on its side and corresponds to both the One (unity/nondifferentiation) and each one (individuality/differentiation). From a classical and

foundational Daoist perspective, the Dao has four primary defining characteristics: (1) Source of everything (*yuán* 元/原); (2) Unnamable mystery (*xuán* 玄); (3) Sacred presence (*líng* 靈; *qì* 氣); and (4) Universe as transformative process (*huà* 化). That is, from a Daoist theological perspective, the Dao is fundamentally amoral, formless, impersonal, and nondifferentiated. There is no divine or transcendent agency, intentionality, or purpose behind the universe as such. Considered comparatively, the primary Daoist theology is apophatic (sacred beyond human conception and comprehension), monistic (one impersonal reality [Reality]), panentheistic (sacred in and beyond the world), and panenhenic (Nature as sacred). The secondary Daoist theology is animistic (gods and spirits in Nature) and polytheistic (multiple gods in multiple sacred realms). Although Daoists emphasize an energetic view and approach, this is not *qì* 氣 in a general sense. Rather it is a specific form of presence associated with the Dao, and with the Daoist community and Daoist adherents by extension. Daoists refer to this as the “*qì* of the Dao” (*dàoqì* 道炁), or “Way-energy” for short. Its presence is one of the defining qualities of aligned and attuned Daoists and one of the ways that Daoists recognize each other. “Because they could not be recognized, we feel compelled to describe them.” This is Daoism as the “teaching beyond/without words” (*bùyán zhī jiào* 不言之教). The Dao is that towards which we orient and that which we aspire to realize.

The scriptures (*jīng* 經) are the second of the external Three Treasures of Daoism. Scriptures are Daoist sacred texts. *Jīng*-scripture, which is short for *dào jīng* 道經 (lit., “scriptures of the Dao”; or “Way-classics” for short), refers to a specific category of Daoist literature that is considered most important and authoritative. They are Daoist texts written in classical Chinese with traditional Chinese characters, traditionally using calligraphy from top-to-bottom and right-to-left. The Chinese character consists of the *mì* 糸 (“silk”) radical and *jīng* 罍 (“underground stream”). *Jīng*-scriptures are threads and watercourses forming and reforming networks of connection. Daoist scriptures, with *jīng* also used in other contexts to refer to certain Ruist (Confucian) “classics” and Buddhist “sutras,” are usually anonymous and considered inspired and/or revealed. They are, in turn, often associated with specific deities (*shén* 神), immortals (*xiānrén* 仙人), and Perfected (*zhēnrén* 真人), with the most important one being Lǎojūn 老君 (Lord Lao), the deified Lǎozǐ 老子 (“Master Lao”), early high god (cosmocrat) of Daoism, and personification of the Dao. Given their sacred origins and standing, Daoist scriptures are generally viewed as among the purest (linguistic) expressions of the Dao. This is all the more important given the Daoist skepticism of language. Interestingly, there also are sacred cosmic scripts, said to be transcriptions of more primordial cosmic vapors. Historically speaking, different Daoist movements are associated with specific textual corpuses, usually revealed scriptures, and thus different Daoists venerate different scriptures. Generally speaking, the most foundational and revered Daoist scriptures are the *Dàodé zhēnjīng* 道德真經 (Perfect Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) and *Nánhuá zhēnjīng* 南華真經 (Perfect Scripture of Master Nanhua [Southern Florescence]), which are the honorific titles of the *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (Book of Venerable Masters) and *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang), respectively. Containing historical and textual layers from at least the fourth to second centuries BCE, both of these scriptures are part of the classical Daoist textual corpus, specifically the inner cultivation lineages. Thus, to invoke these titles is to invoke the Daoist tradition in some sense. The earliest Daoist *jīng*-scriptures as such (i.e., revealed works) began to appear and to be composed around the second to third centuries CE, with the *Tàipíng jīng* 太平經 (Scripture of Great Peace), associated with its namesake movement, possibly being the earliest extant one. The

various Daoist scriptures were later collected into the *Dào zàng* 道藏 (Daoist Canon), the title of which literally means “storehouse of the Dao.” The “received Daoist Canon” was compiled in 1445, with a supplement in 1607, and consists of 1,487 texts. Only about 20% of these are *jīng*-scriptures, most of which are largely unknown outside of and sometimes even inside of specific Daoist circles. That is, there are degrees of authoritative status, importance, and influence. Here it also should be mentioned that Daoist scriptures are often read in concert with Daoist commentaries and/or under the guidance of “scripture masters” (*jīngshī* 經師), thus the importance of the third of the Three Treasures. This includes the necessity of reliable Daoist translators. In the case of Quánzhēn 全真 (Complete Perfection) Daoism, there are three core scriptures (*sānjīng* 三經), namely, the *Dàodé jīng*, sixth-century *Yīnfú jīng* 陰符經 (Scripture on the Hidden Talisman), and eighth-century *Qīngjìng jīng* 清靜經 (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness). Scriptures assist us in deepening our understanding and application of foundational Daoist views, principles, and values. They also provide guidance on Daoist lifeways and Daoist practice-realization, including specific cultivation methods. In the modern world, and given the amount of nonsense presented as “Daoist,” Daoist scriptures also offer talismanic protection from mistaken views and spiritual disorientation, including in the form of the egoism and narcissism of self-proclaimed “Daoist masters.”

The teachers (*shī* 師) are the third of the external Three Treasures of Daoism. *Shī*-teacher, also referred to as “master,” is shorthand for *shīfu* 師父 (“master-father”)(not *shīfu* 師傅 [“sifu”]), which is used as a gender-neutral honorific. Teachers are committed Daoist adherents and representatives of the tradition, specifically as connected to the other two treasures of the Dao and scriptures. The Chinese character consists of *duī* 阜 (阜) (“hill”) and *zā* 巾, with the latter including *jīn* 巾 (“kerchief”) and possibly connected to *zā* 匝 (“surround”). The character thus suggests troops stationed on a hill, with *shī* also indicating a division of 2,500 soldiers as well as the associated “commander” and “chief strategist.” By extension, *shī*-teachers are leaders of the Daoist community, which might be thought of as a spiritual underground resistance movement. This recalls the early Daoist Tàipíng 太平 (Great Peace) movement, also known as Huángjīn 黃巾 (Yellow Kerchiefs [“Turbans”]). Here one might invoke Daoist precepts (*jiè* 戒), with the latter consisting of *gē* 戈 (“spear”) and *gǒng* 井 (“joined hands”). In any case, Daoist *shī*-teachers refer, first and foremost, to Daoist ordinands, whether priests or monastics, and lineage-affiliates. In Chinese Daoism, such individuals are *dàoshi* 道士 (lit., “adepts of the Dao”; or “Way-adepts” for short). They also receive the honorific title and reverential address of *dào zhǎng* 道長 (lit., “elder of the Dao”; or “Way-elder” for short). These are Daoist adherents with formal religious affiliation and authoritative standing in a given Daoist community and the larger Daoist tradition. Given their/our location among the external Three Treasures, Daoist teachers should be connected to the Dao and informed by Daoist scriptures. This may be understood as a “hidden contract” (*yīnfú* 陰符). Ideally, they/we should be *embodiments* of the tradition. This involves the Three Expressions (*sānxiàn* 三見), namely, cultivation (*xiū* 修), embodiment (*tǐ* 體), and transmission (*chuán* 傳). While all Daoists should be committed to and rooted in the first two, Daoist teachers, especially as priests and spiritual advisers, have a unique responsibility with respect to transmission. They/we should be transmission-vessels for the Dao’s numinous presence and scriptural guidance. Daoist priests provide spiritual direction (*zhǐshén* 指神), attending to each individual’s innate nature (*xìng* 性). This is our original and inherent connection to the Dao. At the same time, standing as Daoist *shī*-teacher and *zhǎng*-elder is based on realization and presence over “credentials” and titles; it is

based on veneration by and transformative influence on students and the larger community. On a larger level, *shī*-teacher is a placeholder for the entire Daoist community, especially understood as the Daoist body. Given the association with vital essence, this treasure may be understood as the bones and marrow. Advanced Daoist adepts and senior Daoist teachers and elders provide guidance and serve as models for Daoist practice-realization. They/we are caretakers of community and tradition.

Although Daoism is not a “membership religion,” and Daoists traditionally are not interested in evangelism, proselytization or conversion, Daoists often emphasize taking the Three Refuges (*sānguī* 三皈; *sān guīyī* 三皈依) as an initial and formal step in being/becoming a Daoist. While this can simply be an internal vow, it often involves bowing before a formal Daoist altar (*dàotán* 道壇) dedicated to the Three Purities (*sānqīng* 三清) in a ritual conducted by an ordained Daoist priest. These Three Refuges primarily correspond to the above-mentioned Three Treasures.

There also are various other ternary associations.



<p>Dàodé tiānzūn 道德天尊 (Celestial Worthy of the Dao & Inner Power)</p>	<p>Yuánshǐ tiānzūn 元始天尊 (Celestial Worthy of Original Beginning)</p>	<p>Língbǎo tiānzūn 靈寶天尊 (Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure)</p>
<p>Tàiqīng 太清 (Great Clarity)</p>	<p>Yùqīng 玉清 (Jade Clarity)</p>	<p>Shàngqīng 上清 (Highest Clarity)</p>
<p>Teachers (<i>shī</i> 師)</p>	<p>Dao (<i>dào</i> 道)</p>	<p>Scriptures (<i>jīng</i> 經)</p>
<p>Vital Essence (<i>jīng</i> 精)</p>	<p>Spirit (<i>shén</i> 神)</p>	<p>Qi (<i>qì</i> 氣)</p>
<p>Lower Elixir Field Navel</p>	<p>Upper Elixir Field Head</p>	<p>Middle Elixir Field Heart</p>

Following traditional Chinese host-guest relationships and Daoist altar configuration, Yuánshǐ tiānzūn (YSTZ) is the center/highest position, Língbǎo tiānzūn (LBTZ) is on YSTZ's left (first-guest)/second position, and Dàodé tiānzūn (DDTZ) on YSTZ's right (second-guest)/lowest position. As Dàodé tiānzūn corresponds to Lǎojūn 老君 (Lord Lao), and given Lord Lao's standing in early organized Daoism, this may create confusion. First, it is a later systematization of the larger Daoist pantheon. Second, Lǎojūn is sometimes understood as a personal god and divine mediator between the Three Purities and humanity. In any case, Daoists generally understand the Three Purities as impersonal primordial cosmic energies, which are represented in anthropomorphic form as three old Chinese men. For Daoists committed to the Three Expressions, showing reverence to the Three Purities, specifically through formal bowing, involves realizing that these also reside in our very own bodies. To connect with one invokes and activates all of the others. As chapter 22 of the mid-fourth century BCE classical Daoist *Nèiyè* 內業 (Inward Training) advises us, "Inwardly still; outwardly reverent" (*nèijìng wàijìng* 內靜外敬). Such is Daoist being within and beyond being Daoist.

