Taoism is a religious tradition that began in China about 2,500 years ago—at about the same time Confucius lived. While Confucius was interested in how people treated one another, Taoism is a spiritual philosophy that focuses on a person’s outlook on life and the world around them. Taoism is practiced today in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, and Thailand, but there are Taoists throughout the world.

Taoists believe that humankind, nature, and heaven are all interconnected, and that harmony exists when everything acts according to its own nature. Living in harmony with one’s own nature is known in Taoism as wu wei. A person who practices wu wei avoids aggression and bends to accommodate life’s problems rather than break under their weight. A Taoist strives to live in harmony with the natural order.

The natural order is an unknowable force called the Tao. Tao can be translated as “the way.” Taoists view the Tao as the connection that makes all life and movement in nature possible. They believe that when a person lives out their life on earth, the Tao returns them to heaven.

Taoism developed during a period of disorder in Chinese history we call the Age of Warring States. Local warlords engaged in battles; greed was rampant and many Chinese people lived in a constant state of fear.

Legends say the founder of Taoism is Lao Tzu, though it is possible he never existed. Lao Tzu is said to have been a scholar who worked as a keeper of records for a Chou lord. Lao Tzu was unhappy with moral decay of his time, so he withdrew to his home to think about the meaning of life. Lao Tzu’s meditation made him a very wise man. Once, while traveling, a gatekeeper recognized Lao Tzu and asked him to write down his wisdom. According to legend, Lao Tzu wrote the Tao Te Ching, then rode through the gate, never to be seen again.

The Tao Te Ching means “the Way of Life.” It is a very short book—an English language translation is 128 pages. The Tao Te Ching recommends bending to accommodate rather than breaking under the stresses of life. The book discourages learning or ambition, instead stressing that we should live according to our nature. It places nature above culture, and a solitary individual above society. According to the Tao Te Ching, inaction is better than action. By not allowing events to unfold according to their nature, a person has challenged the Tao.

Many Taoists compare the Tao to water. When it is restricted, water seeks the weakest spot of any obstruction and applies constant force until it is free. Given the slightest opening, water will pass through and will widen the opening if possible. Water always seeks to do the easiest thing for as long as it can. The Tao Te Ching says, “there is nothing stronger and weaker than water, any yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and strong things.”

Answer in complete sentences

1. According to Taoists, what is the Tao?
Fill in the Blanks

Taoism is a s__i__i__i__u__l philosophy that posits that h__m__n__d, nature, and heaven are i__t__r__o__n__c__ed and that h__r__y exists when everything acts according to its n__t__re. The natural order that connects all things is the Tao. The Tao is composed of two o__p__si__e energies called y__n and y____g.

A Taoist strives to practice w__ w____, which is to live in harmony with his or her own nature. They believe that disturbances in nature and unhappiness in people are the result of a__t__ng against the T____.

According to Taoist l__g__n__, Lao Tzu is the f__u__d__r of T__o__sm. L__o T__u is believed to have lived in the fifth century BCE, at about the same time of C__n__u__s. He is said to have mysterious disappeared immediately after writing the T__o__ T__ C__i__g, a book outlines the tenets of Taoism.

Answer in complete sentences

*2. How would a person practice wu wei?

3. What are yin and yang?

*4. Do you believe a Taoist could be a successful businessperson? Explain your reasoning.

5. Choose one of the quotes from the Tao Te Ching and explain how the quote is an example of Taoist philosophy.

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.