

# DONGZHI:

## Taoist celebration of Winter Solstice

### Spiritual Tradition

The Taoist spiritual tradition is a vast ocean. Flowing into it are the indigenous beliefs of the early Chinese, the personal vision of the sages, the theories and findings of the natural and medical sciences, and influences from Buddhism and Hinduism. Taoism is deeply rooted in the history and culture of China, going back several thousand years to the beginnings of Chinese civilization. The Tao is the reality underlying all existence and is the driving force of Nature. The “Way” teaches how to blend with the flow of nature and not to struggle against the inevitable. The mystery of life lies in the vital principles of yin and yang. Yin and yang represent the opposing powers of the universe united in perfect harmony. Understanding the harmony of the fundamental energies of the universe can lead to gaining access to personal and social wisdom and even immortality.



### The Shamanic Origins of Taoism

The Taoist spiritual tradition is rooted in the shamanic beliefs of early China. The giants of Taoist thinking, Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, were natives of Ch'u where shamanism had a strong influence on the beliefs and cultural practices of the people. A collection of poetry titled the Ch'u-tz'u (Songs of the Land of Ch'u) describes the sacredness of nature, the ecstatic union of the shaman and the nature spirits, and the flight to the celestial realm. The people's connection with nature was not one of distant respect but of passionate love. The shaman's relationship with the spirits of

nature was like that of a lover, and the dances and ceremonies were humanity's attempts to “attract” the sacred powers. Now, three thousand years later, these themes are still a part of the spiritual tradition of Taoism.

## The Classics of Taoism

The Lao-tzu (Tao-Te Ching), Chuang-tzu, and Lieh-tzu are called the Three Classics of Taoism. Although they were written over two thousand years ago, their wisdom is timeless, and their teachings are remarkably relevant to our times.

## Taoist Ethics

Practitioners of Taoist spirituality use meditation as the primary method to cultivate the mind for health, longevity, and spiritual transformation. Although enlightenment and the attainment of immortality are the highest goals of Taoism, the importance of everyday living in the mortal world is not neglected in Taoist practice. After all, it is in this lifetime that we prepare ourselves for the return to the Tao. Taoist ethics are intimately tied to traditional Chinese views of right action. Walking in the “ways of goodness” ensures that we live a peaceful, prosperous, healthy, and long life.



## Winter Solstice—Dong Jie (Dongzhi)

The day of the year that is the shortest and the night of the longest is the **Fourth Day of the 11th lunar month**, which marks Winter Solstice, Guo Dong. For farmers, it is the end of the harvest season. They put their tools away in preparation for the long winter days ahead. Farm animals are brought home to the barn from grazing in the pastures to be kept safe from the winter snow. The harvested crops of rice, millet and wheat are already stowed or sold.

Families travel from near and far to gather at their parents' home for the evening meal which is very much a family affair. Mongolian hot pot is a

popular dinner for this festive occasion. The next time the family is all together again under one roof will be to celebrate a brand new year at the coming of spring. Winter Solstice is also a time for visiting the cemeteries of departed family members, and paying respect to elders, ancestors, and teachers.

Shujiu, which literally means “counting nines,” is a Chinese custom that is a kind of countdown to spring. The days after Winter Solstice are divided into nine segments of nine days each. After 81 days, spring is said to be arriving. In northern China, Jiaozi (dumplings) is a must-eat food on the Winter Solstice!

In southern China, it is customary to eat glutinous rice balls on the Winter Solstice. Glutinous rice balls symbolize reunion in China; many southern Chinese also present them to relatives as gifts, and are offered to the ancestors as well.

