

## LAO-TZU

### Thoughts from the *Tao-te Ching*



THE AUTHOR of the *Tao-te Ching* (in English often pronounced “dow deh ching”) is unknown, although the earliest texts ascribe the work to Lao-tzu (sixth century B.C.), whose name can be translated as “Old Master.” However, nothing can be said with certainty about Lao-tzu as a historical figure. One tradition holds that he was named Li Erh and born in the state of Ch’u at a time that would have made him a slightly older contemporary of Confucius (551 – 479 B.C.). Lao-tzu was said to have worked in the court of the Chou dynasty for most of his life. When he decided to leave the court to pursue a life of contemplation, the keeper of the gate urged him to write down his thoughts before he went into a self-imposed exile. Legend has it that he wrote the *Tao-te Ching* and then left the state of Ch’u, never to be seen again.

Taoism is a religion founded by Chang Tao-ling in about 150 A.D., but the *Tao-te Ching* is a philosophical document as much about good government as it is about moral behavior. The term *Tao* cannot be easily understood or easily translated. In one sense it means “the way,” but it also means “the method,” as in “the way to enlightenment” or “the way to live.” Some of the chapters of the *Tao-te Ching* imply that the Tao is the allness of the universe, the ultimate reality of existence, and perhaps even a synonym for God. The text is marked by such complex ambiguities and paradoxes. It constantly urges us to look beyond ourselves, beyond our circumstances, and become one with the Tao — even though it cannot tell us what the Tao is.

The *Tao-te Ching* has often been called a feminine treatise because it emphasizes the creative forces of the universe and frequently employs the imagery and metaphor of the womb — for ex-

From *Tao-te Ching*. Translated by Stephen Mitchell.

ample, "The Tao is called the Great Mother." The translator, Stephen Mitchell, translates some of the pronouns associated with the Master as "she," with the explanation that Chinese has no equivalent for the male- and female-gendered pronouns and that "of all the great world religions the teaching of Lao-tzu is by far the most female."

The teachings of Lao-tzu are the opposite of the materialist quest for power, dominance, authority, and wealth. Lao-tzu takes the view that possessions and wealth are leaden weights of the soul, that they are meaningless and trivial, and that the truly free and enlightened person will regard them as evil. Because of his antimaterialist view, his recommendations may seem ironic or unclear, especially when he urges politicians to adopt a practice of judicious inaction. Lao-tzu's advice to politicians is not to do nothing but to intercede only when it is a necessity and then only inconspicuously. Above all, Lao-tzu counsels avoiding useless activity: "the Master / acts without doing anything / and teaches without saying anything." Such a statement is difficult for modern westerners to comprehend, although it points to the concept of enlightenment, a state of spiritual peace and fulfillment that is central to the *Tao-te Ching*.

Lao-tzu's political philosophy minimizes the power of the state — especially the power of the state to oppress the people. Lao-tzu takes the question of the freedom of the individual into account by asserting that the wise leader will provide the people with what they need but not annoy them with promises of what they do not need. He argues that by keeping people unaware that they are being governed, the leader allows the people to achieve good things for themselves. As he writes, "If you want to be a great leader, / you must learn to follow the Tao. / Stop trying to control. / Let go of fixed plans and concepts, / and the world will govern itself" (Verse 57); or in contrast, "If a country is governed with repression, / the people are depressed and crafty" (Verse 58).

To our modern ears this advice may or may not sound sensible. For those who feel government can solve the problems of the people, it will seem strange and unwise. For those who believe that the less government the better, the advice will sound sane and powerful.

### THE RHETORIC OF THE TAO-TE CHING

Traditionally, Lao-tzu is said to have written the *Tao-te Ching* as a guide for the ruling sage to follow. In other words, it is a handbook for politicians. The *Te* emphasizes the virtues that the ruler

must possess, and in this sense the *Tao-te Ching* invites comparison with Machiavelli's efforts to instruct his ruler.

The visual form of the text is poetry, although the text is not metrical or image-laden. Instead of thoroughly developing his ideas, Lao-tzu uses a traditional Chinese form that resembles the aphorism, a compressed statement weighty with meaning. Virtually every statement requires thought and reflection. Thus, the act of reading becomes an act of cooperation with the text.

One way of reading the text is to explore the varieties of interpretation it will sustain. The act of analysis requires patience and willingness to examine a statement to see what lies beneath the surface. Take, for example, one of the opening statements:

The Master leads  
by emptying people's minds  
and filling their cores,  
by weakening their ambition  
and toughening their resolve.  
He helps people lose everything  
they know, everything they desire,  
and creates confusion  
in those who think that they know.

This passage supports a number of readings. One centers on the question of the people's desire. "Emptying people's minds" implies eliminating desires that lead the people to steal or compete for power. "Weakening their ambition" implies helping people direct their powers toward the attainable and useful. Such a text is at odds with western views that support advertisements for expensive sneakers, color television sets, luxury cars, and other items that generate ambition and desire in the people.

In part because the text resembles poetry, it needs to be read with attention to innuendo, subtle interpretation, and possible hidden meanings. One of the rhetorical virtues of paradox is that it forces the reader to consider several sides of an issue. The resulting confusion yields a wider range of possibilities than would be possible with a self-evident statement. Through these complicated messages, Lao-tzu felt he was contributing to the spiritual enlightenment of the ruling sage, although he had no immediate hope that his message would be put into action. A modern state might have a difficult time following Lao-tzu's philosophy, but many individuals have tried to attain peace and contentment by leading lives by its principles.

# Thoughts from the *Tao-te Ching*

3

If you overesteem great men,  
people become powerless.  
If you overvalue possessions,  
people begin to steal.

1

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by emptying people's minds  
and filling their cores,  
by weakening their ambition  
and toughening their resolve.  
He helps people lose everything  
they know, everything they desire,  
and creates confusion  
in those who think that they know.

2

Practice not-doing,  
and everything will fall into place.

3

17

When the Master governs, the people  
are hardly aware that he exists.  
Next best is a leader who is loved.  
Next, one who is feared.  
The worst is one who is despised.

4

If you don't trust the people,  
you make them untrustworthy.

5

The Master doesn't talk, he acts.  
When his work is done,  
the people say, "Amazing:  
we did it, all by ourselves!"

6

18

When the great Tao is forgotten,  
goodness and piety appear.  
When the body's intelligence declines,

7

cleverness and knowledge step forth.  
When there is no peace in the family,  
filial piety begins.  
When the country falls into chaos,  
patriotism is born.

19

Throw away holiness and wisdom,  
and people will be a hundred times happier.  
Throw away morality and justice,  
and people will do the right thing.  
Throw away industry and profit,  
and there won't be any thieves.

8

If these three aren't enough,  
just stay at the center of the circle  
and let all things take their course.

9

26

The heavy is the root of the light.  
The unmoved is the source of all movement.

10

Thus the Master travels all day  
without leaving home.  
However splendid the views,  
she stays serenely in herself.

11

Why should the lord of the country  
flit about like a fool?  
If you let yourself be blown to and fro,  
you lose touch with your root.  
If you let restlessness move you,  
you lose touch with who you are.

12

29

Do you want to improve the world?  
I don't think it can be done.

13

The world is sacred.  
It can't be improved.

14

If you tamper with it, you'll ruin it,  
If you treat it like an object, you'll lose it.

There is a time for being ahead,  
a time for being behind; 15  
a time for being in motion,  
a time for being at rest;  
a time for being vigorous,  
a time for being exhausted;  
a time for being safe,  
a time for being in danger.

The Master sees things as they are,  
without trying to control them. 16  
She lets them go their own way,  
and resides at the center of the circle.

## 30

Whoever relies on the Tao in governing men  
doesn't try to force issues 17  
or defeat enemies by force of arms.  
For every force there is a counterforce.  
Violence, even well intentioned,  
always rebounds upon oneself.

The Master does his job  
and then stops. 18  
He understands that the universe  
is forever out of control,  
and that trying to dominate events  
goes against the current of the Tao.  
Because he believes in himself,  
he doesn't try to convince others.  
Because he is content with himself,  
he doesn't need others' approval.  
Because he accepts himself,  
the whole world accepts him.

## 31

Weapons are the tools of violence;  
all decent men detest them. 19

Weapons are the tools of fear; 20  
a decent man will avoid them  
except in the direst necessity  
and, if compelled, will use them  
only with the utmost restraint.  
Peace is his highest value.  
If the peace has been shattered,  
how can he be content?  
His enemies are not demons,  
but human beings like himself.  
He doesn't wish them personal harm.  
Nor does he rejoice in victory.  
How could he rejoice in victory  
and delight in the slaughter of men?

He enters a battle gravely, 21  
with sorrow and with great compassion,  
as if he were attending a funeral.

## 37

The Tao never does anything, 22  
yet through it all things are done.

If powerful men and women 23  
could center themselves in it,  
the whole world would be transformed  
by itself, in its natural rhythms.  
People would be content  
with their simple, everyday lives,  
in harmony, and free of desire.

When there is no desire, 24  
all things are at peace.

## 38

The Master doesn't try to be powerful; 25  
thus he is truly powerful.  
The ordinary man keeps reaching for power;  
thus he never has enough.

The Master does nothing,  
yet he leaves nothing undone.  
The ordinary man is always doing things,  
yet many more are left to be done. 26

The kind man does something,  
yet something remains undone.  
The just man does something,  
and leaves many things to be done.  
The moral man does something,  
and when no one responds  
he rolls up his sleeves and uses force. 27

When the Tao is lost, there is goodness. 28  
When goodness is lost, there is morality.  
When morality is lost, there is ritual.  
Ritual is the husk of true faith,  
the beginning of chaos.

Therefore the Master concerns himself 29  
with the depths and not the surface,  
with the fruit and not the flower.  
He has no will of his own.  
He dwells in reality,  
and lets all illusions go.

## 46

When a country is in harmony with the Tao, 30  
the factories make trucks and tractors.  
When a country goes counter to the Tao,  
warheads are stockpiled outside the cities.

There is no greater illusion than fear, 31  
no greater wrong than preparing to defend yourself,  
no greater misfortune than having an enemy.

Whoever can see through all fear 32  
will always be safe.

## 53

The great Way is easy, 33  
yet people prefer the side paths.

Be aware when things are out of balance.  
Stay centered within the Tao.

When rich speculators prosper 34  
while farmers lose their land;  
when government officials spend money  
on weapons instead of cures;  
when the upper class is extravagant and irresponsible  
while the poor have nowhere to turn —  
all this is robbery and chaos.  
It is not in keeping with the Tao.

## 57

If you want to be a great leader, 35  
you must learn to follow the Tao.  
Stop trying to control.  
Let go of fixed plans and concepts,  
and the world will govern itself.

The more prohibitions you have, 36  
the less virtuous people will be.  
The more weapons you have,  
the less secure people will be.  
The more subsidies you have,  
the less self-reliant people will be.

Therefore the Master says: 37  
I let go of the law,  
and people become honest.  
I let go of economics,  
and people become prosperous.  
I let go of religion,  
and people become serene.  
I let go of all desire for the common good,  
and the good becomes common as grass.

## 58

If a country is governed with tolerance, 38  
the people are comfortable and honest.  
If a country is governed with repression,  
the people are depressed and crafty.

When the will to power is in charge, 39  
 the higher the ideals, the lower the results.  
 Try to make people happy,  
 and you lay the groundwork for misery.  
 Try to make people moral,  
 and you lay the groundwork for vice.

Thus the Master is content 40  
 to serve as an example  
 and not to impose her will.  
 She is pointed, but doesn't pierce.  
 Straightforward, but supple.  
 Radiant, but easy on the eyes.

## 59

For governing a country well 41  
 there is nothing better than moderation.

The mark of a moderate man 42  
 is freedom from his own ideas.  
 Tolerant like the sky,  
 all-pervading like sunlight,  
 firm like a mountain,  
 supple like a tree in the wind,  
 he has no destination in view  
 and makes use of anything  
 life happens to bring his way.

Nothing is impossible for him. 43  
 Because he has let go,  
 he can care for the people's welfare  
 as a mother cares for her child.

## 60

Governing a large country 44  
 is like frying a small fish.  
 You spoil it with too much poking.

Center your country in the Tao 45  
 and evil will have no power.

Not that it isn't there,  
 but you'll be able to step out of its way.

Give evil nothing to oppose 46  
 and it will disappear by itself.

## 61

When a country obtains great power, 47  
 it becomes like the sea:  
 all streams run downward into it.  
 The more powerful it grows,  
 the greater the need for humility.  
 Humility means trusting the Tao,  
 thus never needing to be defensive.

A great nation is like a great man: 48  
 When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.  
 Having realized it, he admits it.  
 Having admitted it, he corrects it.  
 He considers those who point out his faults  
 as his most benevolent teachers.  
 He thinks of his enemy  
 as the shadow that he himself casts.

If a nation is centered in the Tao, 49  
 if it nourishes its own people  
 and doesn't meddle in the affairs of others,  
 it will be a light to all nations in the world.

## 65

The ancient Masters 50  
 didn't try to educate the people,  
 but kindly taught them to not-know.

When they think that they know the answers, 51  
 people are difficult to guide.  
 When they know that they don't know,  
 people can find their own way.

If you want to learn how to govern,  
avoid being clever or rich. 52  
The simplest pattern is the clearest.  
Content with an ordinary life,  
you can show all people the way  
back to their own true nature.

## 66

All streams flow to the sea 53  
because it is lower than they are.  
Humility gives it its power.

If you want to govern the people, 54  
you must place yourself below them.  
If you want to lead the people,  
you must learn how to follow them.

The Master is above the people, 55  
and no one feels oppressed.  
She goes ahead of the people,  
and no one feels manipulated.  
The whole world is grateful to her.  
Because she competes with no one,  
no one can compete with her.

## 67

Some say that my teaching is nonsense. 56  
Others call it lofty but impractical.  
But to those who have looked inside themselves,  
this nonsense makes perfect sense.  
And to those who put it into practice,  
this loftiness has roots that go deep.

I have just three things to teach: 57  
simplicity, patience, compassion.  
These three are your greatest treasures.  
Simple in actions and in thoughts,  
you return to the source of being.  
Patient with both friends and enemies,  
you accord with the way things are.

Compassionate toward yourself,  
you reconcile all beings in the world.

## 75

When taxes are too high, 58  
people go hungry.  
When the government is too intrusive,  
people lose their spirit.

Act for the people's benefit. 59  
Trust them; leave them alone.

## 80

If a country is governed wisely, 60  
its inhabitants will be content.  
They enjoy the labor of their hands  
and don't waste time inventing  
labor-saving machines.  
Since they dearly love their homes,  
they aren't interested in travel.  
There may be a few wagons and boats,  
but these don't go anywhere.  
There may be an arsenal of weapons,  
but nobody ever uses them.  
People enjoy their food,  
take pleasure in being with their families,  
spend weekends working in their gardens,  
delight in the doings of the neighborhood.  
And even though the next country is so close  
that people can hear its roosters crowing and its dogs barking,  
they are content to die of old age  
without ever having gone to see it.

## QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. According to Lao-tzu, what must the ruler provide the people with if they are to be happy? See especially Verse 66.

2. To what extent does Lao-tzu concern himself with individual happiness?
3. How would you describe Lao-tzu's attitude toward the people?
4. Why does Lao-tzu think the world cannot be improved? See Verse 29.
5. Which statements made in this selection do you feel support a materialist view of experience? Can they be resolved with Lao-tzu's overall thinking in the selection?
6. What are the limits and benefits of the expression: "Practice not-doing / and everything will fall into place"?
7. To what extent is Lao-tzu in favor of military action? What seem to be his views about the military? See Verse 31.
8. The term "Master" is used frequently in the selection. What can you tell about the character of the Master?

### SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. The term "the Tao" is used often in this selection. Write a short essay that defines what Lao-tzu seems to mean by the term. If you were a politician and had the responsibility of governing a state, how would you follow the Tao as it is implied in Lao-tzu's statements? Is the Tao restrictive? Difficult? Open to interpretation? How well do you think it would work?
2. Write a brief essay that examines the following statements from the perspective of a young person today:

The more prohibitions you have,  
the less virtuous people will be.  
The more weapons you have,  
the less secure people will be.  
The more subsidies you have,  
the less self-reliant people will be.

To what extent do you agree with these statements, and to what extent do you feel they are statements that have a political importance? Do people in the United States, as you interpret it, seem to agree with these views, or do they disagree? What are the most visible political consequences of our nation's position regarding these ideas?

3. Some people have asserted that the American political system benefits the people most when the following views of Lao-tzu are carefully followed:

Therefore the Master says:  
I let go of the law,  
and people become honest.  
I let go of economics,  
and people become prosperous.  
I let go of religion,  
and people become serene.  
I let go of all desire for the common good,  
and the good becomes common as grass.

In a brief essay, decide to what extent American leaders follow these precepts. Whether you feel they do or not, do you think that they should follow these precepts? What are the likely results of their being put into practice?

4. Some of the statements Lao-tzu makes are so packed with meaning that it would take pages to explore them. One example is "When they think that they know the answers, / people are difficult to guide." Take this statement as the basis of a short essay and, in reference to a personal experience, explain the significance of this statement.
5. What does Lao-tzu imply about the obligation of the state to the individual it governs, and about the obligation of the individual to the state? Is one much more important than the other? Using the texts in this selection, establish what you feel is the optimum balance in the relationship between the two.
6. **CONNECTIONS** Compare Lao-tzu's view of government with that of Machiavelli in the next selection. Consider what seem to be the ultimate purposes of government, what seem to be the obligations of the leader to the people being led, and what seems to be the main work of the state. What comparisons can you make between Lao-tzu's Master and Machiavelli's Prince?