

THE BEST OF THE OLL #26

Lão-3ze, “The Tao of Governing” (6th century B.C.)

“Therefore a sage has said; I will do nothing (of purpose), and the people will be transformed of themselves; I will be fond of keeping still, and the people will of themselves become correct. I will take no trouble about it, and the people will of themselves become rich; I will manifest no ambition, and the people will of themselves attain to the primitive simplicity.”



Lão-3ze (6thC B.C.)

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[March, 2013]

Editor's Introduction

Lào-3ze (or Laozi) is remembered as the first philosopher of Taoism. He is often cited as a contributor to, if not the author of, the Tao-te Ching (Tào Teh King), the basic philosophical discourse on Taoism. His life is shrouded in mystery and legend, but it is generally accepted that he was active sometime in the early sixth century B.C. and served as a resident scholar, called a shih, at the royal court of the Shou. By the seventh century A.D. he was worshipped as an imperial ancestor by the T'ang and regarded by commoners as the equivalent of a Western saint, or demigod. Legend says that an aged Lao Tzu upbraided a young and overconfident Confucius and that the young man later compared Lao Tzu to a dragon rising in the sky, riding on the winds and clouds.

The following extracts are 16 passages taken from the collection of 81 contained in the two books of Tào Teh King in this translation from 1891. They are philosophical maxims designed to guide the actions of "the wise ruler" and they contain a number of assumptions about how political and economic systems work which modern day classical liberals find congenial. These are the idea that world operates according to natural laws which cannot be violated by rulers without harming the interests of "their" people; that order in the world arises spontaneously and that the best thing the wise ruler can do is step back, not interfere, and allow these ordering forces to operate by themselves; that excessive numbers of laws and regulations create more criminals; that the use of violence, especially in war, harms the people; that rulers are faced with a Hayekian "problem of knowledge" and that sometimes the best thing for them to do is not to meddle in the affairs of other people.

“57. In the kingdom the multiplication of prohibitive enactments increases the poverty of the people; the more implements to add to their profit that the people have, the greater disorder is there in the state and clan; the more acts of crafty dexterity that men possess, the more do strange contrivances appear; the more display there is of legislation, the more thieves and robbers there are.”

“Tao-te Ching (Tào Teh King)” (6thC BC)¹

21. "The Nourishment of the Person."

2.1. All in the world know the beauty of the beautiful, and in doing this they have (the idea of) what ugliness is; they all know the skill of the skilful, and in doing this they have (the idea of) what the want of skill is.

2. So it is that existence and non-existence give birth the one to (the idea of) the other; that difficulty and ease produce the one (the idea of) the other; that length and shortness fashion out the one the figure of the other; that (the ideas of) height and lowness arise from the contrast of the one with the other; that the musical notes and tones become harmonious through the relation of one with another; and that being before and behind give the idea of one following another.

3. Therefore the sage manages affairs without doing anything, and conveys his instructions without the use of speech.

4. All things spring up, and there is not one which declines to show itself; they grow, and there is no claim made for their ownership; they go through their processes, and there is no expectation (of a reward for the results). The work is accomplished, and there is no resting in it (as an achievement).

The work is done, but how no one can see;
’Tis this that makes the power not cease to be.

15. "The Exhibition of the Quality"

15.1. The skilful masters (of the Tào) in old times, with a subtle and exquisite penetration, comprehended its mysteries, and were deep (also) so as to elude men’s knowledge. As they were thus beyond men’s knowledge, I will make an effort to describe of what sort they appeared to be.

2. Shrinking looked they like those who wade through a stream in winter; irresolute like those who

are afraid of all around them; grave like a guest (in awe of his host); evanescent like ice that is melting away; unpretentious like wood that has not been fashioned into anything; vacant like a valley, and dull like muddy water.

3. Who can (make) the muddy water (clear)? Let it be still, and it will gradually become clear. Who can secure the condition of rest? Let movement go on, and the condition of rest will gradually arise.

4. They who preserve this method of the Tào do not wish to be full (of themselves). It is through their not being full of themselves that they can afford to seem worn and not appear new and complete.

“Who can (make) the muddy water (clear)? Let it be still, and it will gradually become clear. Who can secure the condition of rest? Let movement go on, and the condition of rest will gradually arise.

17. "The Unadulterated Influence"

17.1. In the highest antiquity, (the people) did not know that there were (their rulers). In the next age they loved them and praised them. In the next they feared them; in the next they despised them. Thus it was that when faith (in the Tào) was deficient (in the rulers) a want of faith in them ensued (in the people).

2. How irresolute did those (earliest rulers) appear, showing (by their reticence) the importance which they set upon their words! Their work was done and their undertakings were successful, while people all said, ‘We are as we are, of ourselves!’

¹ Lǎo-3ze, "Tào Teh King" in *The Sacred Books of China. The Texts of Taoism. Part I: The Tao Teh King. The Writings of K'wang Ze Books I-XVII*, trans. James Legge (Oxford University Press, 1891). Chapter: THE TÀO TEH K ING, OR THE TÀO AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS. <oll.libertyfund.org/title/2272/213658>. Extracts 2-31 come from Part I; and 53-75 come from Part II.

19. "Returning to the Unadulterated Influence"

19.1. If we could renounce our sageness and discard our wisdom, it would be better for the people a hundredfold. If we could renounce our benevolence and discard our righteousness, the people would again become filial and kindly. If we could renounce our artful contrivances and discard our (scheming for) gain, there would be no thieves nor robbers.

2.

Those three methods (of government)
Thought olden ways in elegance did fail
And made these names their want of worth to veil;
But simple views, and courses plain and true
Would selfish ends and many lusts eschew.

*“If we could renounce our sageness
and discard our wisdom, it would be
better for the people a hundredfold. If
we could renounce our benevolence and
discard our righteousness, the people
would again become filial and kindly. If
we could renounce our artful
contrivances and discard our
(scheming for) gain, there would be no
thieves nor robbers.”*

27. "Returning to Simplicity."

27.1. The skilful traveller leaves no traces of his wheels or footsteps; the skilful speaker says nothing that can be found fault with or blamed; the skilful reckoner uses no tallies; the skilful closer needs no bolts or bars, while to open what he has shut will be impossible; the skilful binder uses no strings or knots, while to unloose what he has bound will be impossible. In the same way the sage is always skilful at saving men, and so he does not cast away any man; he is always skilful at saving

things, and so he does not cast away anything. This is called 'Hiding the light of his procedure.'

2. The unwrought material, when divided and distributed, forms vessels. The sage, when employed, becomes the Head of all the Officers (of government); and in his greatest regulations he employs no violent measures.

29. "Taking no Action"

29.1. If any one should wish to get the kingdom for himself, and to effect this by what he does, I see that he will not succeed. The kingdom is a spirit-like thing, and cannot be got by active doing. He who would so win it destroys it; he who would hold it in his grasp loses it.

2. The course and nature of things is such that

What was in front is now behind;
What warmed anon we freezing find.
Strength is of weakness oft the spoil;
The store in ruins mocks our toil.

Hence the sage puts away excessive effort, extravagance, and easy indulgence.

30. "A Caveat against War"

30.1. He who would assist a lord of men in harmony with the T'ao will not assert his mastery in the kingdom by force of arms. Such a course is sure to meet with its proper return.

2. Wherever a host is stationed, briars and thorns spring up. In the sequence of great armies there are sure to be bad years.

3. A skilful (commander) strikes a decisive blow, and stops. He does not dare (by continuing his operations) to assert and complete his mastery. He will strike the blow, but will be on his guard against being vain or boastful or arrogant in consequence of it. He strikes it as a matter of necessity; he strikes it, but not from a wish for mastery.

4. When things have attained their strong maturity they become old. This may be said to be not in accordance with the T'ao: and what is not in accordance with it soon comes to an end.

“Now arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures. Therefore they who have the Tào do not like to employ them.”

31. "Stilling War"

31.1. Now arms, however beautiful, are instruments of evil omen, hateful, it may be said, to all creatures. Therefore they who have the Tào do not like to employ them.

2. The superior man ordinarily considers the left hand the most honourable place, but in time of war the right hand. Those sharp weapons are instruments of evil omen, and not the instruments of the superior man;—he uses them only on the compulsion of necessity. Calm and repose are what he prizes; victory (by force of arms) is to him undesirable. To consider this desirable would be to delight in the slaughter of men; and he who delights in the slaughter of men cannot get his will in the kingdom.

3. On occasions of festivity to be on the left hand is the prized position; on occasions of mourning, the right hand. The second in command of the army has his place on the left; the general commanding in chief has his on the right;—his place, that is, is assigned to him as in the rites of mourning. He who has killed multitudes of men should weep for them with the bitterest grief; and the victor in battle has his place (rightly) according to those rites.

53. "The Cultivation (of the Tào), and the Observation (of its Effects)"

53.1. If I were suddenly to become known, and (put into a position to) conduct (a government) according to the Great Tào, what I should be most afraid of would be a boastful display.

2. The great Tào (or way) is very level and easy; but people love the by-ways.

3. In this way the effect will be seen in the person, by the observation of different cases; in the family; in the neighbourhood; in the state; and in the kingdom.

4. How do I know that this effect is sure to hold thus all under the sky? By this (method of observation).

“In the kingdom the multiplication of prohibitive enactments increases the poverty of the people; the more implements to add to their profit that the people have, the greater disorder is there in the state and clan; the more acts of crafty dexterity that men possess, the more do strange contrivances appear; the more display there is of legislation, the more thieves and robbers there are.”

57. "The Genuine Influence"

57.1. A state may be ruled by (measures of) correction; weapons of war may be used with crafty dexterity; (but) the kingdom is made one's own (only) by freedom from action and purpose.

2. How do I know that it is so? By these facts:—In the kingdom the multiplication of prohibitive enactments increases the poverty of the people; the more implements to add to their profit that the people have, the greater disorder is there in the state and clan; the more acts of crafty dexterity that men possess, the more do strange contrivances appear; the more display there is of legislation, the more thieves and robbers there are.

3. Therefore a sage has said, ‘I will do nothing (of purpose), and the people will be transformed of themselves; I will be fond of keeping still, and the people will of themselves become correct. I will take no trouble about it, and the people will of themselves become rich; I will manifest no ambition, and the people will of themselves attain to the primitive simplicity.’

58. "Transformation according to Circumstances"

58.1.

The government that seems the most unwise,
Oft goodness to the people best supplies;
That which is meddling, touching everything,
Will work but ill, and disappointment bring.

Misery!—happiness is to be found by its side!
Happiness!—misery lurks beneath it! Who knows what
either will come to in the end?

2. Shall we then dispense with correction? The
(method of) correction shall by a turn become
distortion, and the good in it shall by a turn become
evil. The delusion of the people (on this point) has
indeed subsisted for a long time.

3. Therefore the sage is (like) a square which cuts
no one (with its angles); (like) a corner which injures no
one (with its sharpness). He is straightforward, but
allows himself no license; he is bright, but does not
dazzle.

*"The government that seems the most
unwise, Oft goodness to the people best
supplies; That which is meddling,
touching everything, Will work but ill,
and disappointment bring."*

59. "Guarding the Tâo."

59.1. For regulating the human (in our
constitution) and rendering the (proper) service to the
heavenly, there is nothing like moderation.

2. It is only by this moderation that there is
effected an early return (to man's normal state). That
early return is what I call the repeated accumulation of
the attributes (of the Tâo). With that repeated
accumulation of those attributes, there comes the
subjugation (of every obstacle to such return). Of this
subjugation we know not what shall be the limit; and

when one knows not what the limit shall be, he may be
the ruler of a state.

3. He who possesses the mother of the state may
continue long. His case is like that (of the plant) of
which we say that its roots are deep and its flower stalks
firm:—this is the way to secure that its enduring life
shall long be seen.

65. "Pure, unmixed Excellence"

65.1. The ancients who showed their skill in
practising the Tâo did so, not to enlighten the people,
but rather to make them simple and ignorant.

2. The difficulty in governing the people arises
from their having much knowledge. He who (tries to)
govern a state by his wisdom is a scourge to it; while he
who does not (try to) do so is a blessing.

3. He who knows these two things finds in them
also his model and rule. Ability to know this model and
rule constitutes what we call the mysterious excellence
(of a governor). Deep and far-reaching is such
mysterious excellence, showing indeed its possessor as
opposite to others, but leading them to a great
conformity to him.

69. "The Use of the Mysterious (Tâo)."

69.1. A master of the art of war has said, 'I do not
dare to be the host (to commence the war); I prefer to
be the guest (to act on the defensive). I do not dare to
advance an inch; I prefer to retire a foot.' This is called
marshalling the ranks where there are no ranks; baring
the arms (to fight) where there are no arms to bare;
grasping the weapon where there is no weapon to
grasp; advancing against the enemy where there is no
enemy.

2. There is no calamity greater than lightly
engaging in war. To do that is near losing (the
gentleness) which is so precious. Thus it is that when
opposing weapons are (actually) crossed, he who
deplores (the situation) conquers.

71. "The Disease of Knowing"

71.1. To know and yet (think) we do not know is the highest (attainment); not to know (and yet think) we do know is a disease.

2. It is simply by being pained at (the thought of) having this disease that we are preserved from it. The sage has not the disease. He knows the pain that would be inseparable from it, and therefore he does not have it.

“The people suffer from famine because of the multitude of taxes consumed by their superiors. It is through this that they suffer famine. The people are difficult to govern because of the (excessive) agency of their superiors (in governing them). It is through this that they are difficult to govern.”

75. "How Greediness Injures"

75.1. The people suffer from famine because of the multitude of taxes consumed by their superiors. It is through this that they suffer famine.

2. The people are difficult to govern because of the (excessive) agency of their superiors (in governing them). It is through this that they are difficult to govern.

3. The people make light of dying because of the greatness of their labours in seeking for the means of living. It is this which makes them think light of dying. Thus it is that to leave the subject of living altogether out of view is better than to set a high value on it.

Further Information

SOURCE

The edition used for this extract: Lâo-3ze, "Tào Teh King" in *The Sacred Books of China. The Texts of Taoism. Part I: The Tao Teh King. The Writings of K'wang Ze Books I-XVII*, trans. James Legge (Oxford University Press, 1891). Chapter: THE TÀO TEH K ING, OR THE TÀO AND ITS CHARACTERISTICS. Extracts 2-31 come from Part I; and 53-75 come from Part II. <oll.libertyfund.org/title/2272/213658>.

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“The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State.”
[Ludwig von Mises, “Liberty and Property” (1958)]



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