

7 DAOIST TEACHINGS

Amid the intellectual ferment of the three centuries after Confucius, a bewildering array of new ideas were propounded. Two strands that proved particularly long-lasting are those generally labeled “Daoist” and “Legalist” The two key texts of Daoism are the Laozi, also called the Classic of the Way and Its Power, traditionally ascribed to Lao Dan (sixth century B.C.) but probably written in the third century, and the Zhuangzi, a good portion of which was probably written by the philosopher Zhuang Zhou (369-286 B.C.). These two works share disapproval of the unnatural and artificial. Whereas plants and animals act spontaneously in the ways appropriate to them, humans have separated themselves from the Way by plotting and planning, analyzing and organizing. Both texts reject social conventions for an ecstatic surrender to the spontaneity of cosmic processes. The two books, nevertheless, differ in many regards as well. The Laozi is a long philosophical poem, so elliptical that it can be read in many ways. The Zhuangzi is more like a collection of tall tales; it is full of flights of fancy, parables, and fictional encounters between historical figures. Whereas Laozi seems concerned with protecting each person’s life, Zhuangzi searches for a view of man’s place in the cosmos which will reconcile him to death.

These two works are of interest not only for what they reveal of the intellectual ferment of the late Zhou, but also because they were among the favorite books of Chinese readers throughout history, enriching the Chinese imagination and giving pleasure to people who accepted most social conventions. Both books were also granted canonical status in the literature of the Daoist religion which developed after the second century A.D.

PASSAGES FROM THE LAOZI

The Way that can be discussed
Is not the constant Way.

The name that can be named Is not the invariant name.

The nameless is the source of Heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of all creatures.

Ever without desires, one can observe its secrets.
Ever possessed of desires, one can observe its manifestations.
These two truths are the same, but appear under different names.
Their identity can be called a mystery. Mystery upon mystery—the gate of the many secrets.

When everyone in the world sees beauty in the beautiful,
Ugliness is already there.

When everyone sees good in the good,
Bad is already there.

Thus existence and nonexistence give birth to each other,
The hard and the easy complement each other,
The long and the short stand in comparison to each other,
The high and the low incline toward each other,
Sounds and notes harmonize with each other,
And before and after follow each other.

Thus the sage takes on the task of doing nothing
And teaches without speaking.

All things arise from him, and he does not reject them.
He produces them but does not own them.
He acts on their behalf but does not depend on them.
He succeeds but does not stay.
Because he does not stay,
Nothing leaves.

Do not honor the worthy,
And the people will not compete.

Do not value rare treasures,
And the people will not steal.

Do not display what others want,
And the people will not have their hearts confused.

A sage governs this way:
He empties people's minds and fills their bellies.
He weakens their wills and strengthens their bones.

Keep the people always without knowledge and without desires,
For then the clever will not dare act.
Engage in no action and order will prevail.

Heaven and earth are ruthless.

They treat all creatures like straw dogs [to be discarded after the sacrifice].
The sage is ruthless and treats the common people like straw dogs.

Isn't the realm of Heaven and earth like a bellows?
Empty, it does not collapse,
But the more it is moved, the more that comes out.
But too much talking leads to depletion.
It is better to preserve what is within.

The spirit of the valley never dies.
Call it the mysterious female.

The gateway to the mysterious female
Is called the root of Heaven and earth.
Hard to perceive,
It cannot be used up.

Heaven persists and earth endures.
The reason they can do this is that they do not generate themselves.
Therefore the sage puts his own person behind and yet is ahead.
He puts his own person outside and yet survives.
Isn't it because he is without selfishness that he is able to be successfully selfish?

The highest good is like water. Water benefits all creatures but does not compete. It occupies the places people disdain. Thus it comes near to the Way.

For dwelling, the earth is good,
For minds, depth is good,
In social relations, human-heartedness is good,
In speaking, trustworthiness is good,
In governing, order is good.
For tasks, ability is good,
For action, timeliness is good.
Simply by not contending,
Blame is avoided.

The Way is eternally nameless.
The uncarved block may be small,
But no one in the world can subordinate it.

If lords and kings could preserve it,
All creatures would pay homage of their own accord,
Heaven and earth would join to send down sweet dew,
And without any decrees being issued, the people would be equitable.

As soon as cuts are made names appear.
Once there are names, one should sense it is time to stop.
Knowing when to stop is the means of avoiding danger.
The Way functions in the world
Much like the rivers flow into the sea.

If you want to shrink something,
Be sure to stretch it.

If you want to weaken something,
Be sure to strengthen it.

If you want to discard something,
Be sure to promote it.

If you want to take from something,
Be sure to give to it.

This is called the brilliance of the minute.
The soft and weak overcomes the hard and strong.
Fish should not be taken from the water;
The tools of statecraft should not be shown to people.

In ancient times, those who excelled in the Way
Did not use it to enlighten the people but to keep them ignorant.
When people are hard to govern, it is because they know too much.
Thus those who use knowledge to rule a state
Are a plague on the country.

Those who do not use knowledge to rule the state
Are the country's blessing.

Understand these two—they are the standard.
Constant recognition of the standard is called mysterious virtue.
Mysterious virtue is deep and far-reaching;
It returns with things all the way to the great conformity.

Make the state small and its people few.
Let the people give up use of their tools.
Let them take death seriously and desist from distant campaigns.
Then even if they have boats and wagons, they will not travel in them.
Even though they have weapons and armor, they will not form ranks with them.
Let people revert to the practice of rope-tying [instead of writing].

Then they will find their food sweet,

Their clothes beautiful,
Their houses comfortable,
Their customs enjoyable.

People from neighboring states so close that they can see each other and hear the sounds of each other's dogs and chickens will then grow old without ever visiting each other.

SELECTIONS FROM THE *ZHUANGZI*

Hui Shi said to Zhuangzi, "I have a large tree, of the sort people call a shu tree. Its trunk is too gnarled for measuring lines to be applied to it, its branches are too twisted for use with compasses or T-squares. If you stood it on the road, no carpenter would pay any attention to it. Now your talk is similarly vast but useless; people are unanimous in rejecting it."

Zhuangzi replied, "Haven't you ever seen a wildcat or a weasel? It crouches down to wait for something to pass, ready to pounce east or west, high or low, only to end by falling into a trap and dying in a net. But then there is the yak. It is as big as a cloud hanging in the sky. It has an ability to be big, but hardly an ability to catch mice. Now you have a large tree but fret over its uselessness. Why not plant it in Nothing At All town or Vast Nothing wilds? Then you could roam about doing nothing by its side or sleep beneath it. Axes will never shorten its life and nothing will ever harm it. If you are of no use at all, who will make trouble for you?"

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How do I know that enjoying life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death we are not like people who got lost in early childhood and do not know the way home? Lady Li was the child of a border guard in Ai. When first captured by the state of Jin, she wept so much her clothes were soaked. But after she entered the palace, shared the king's bed, and dined on the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know that the dead do not regret their previous longing for life? One who dreams of drinking wine may in the morning weep; one who dreams of weeping may in the morning go out to hunt. During our dreams we do not know we are dreaming. We may even dream of interpreting a dream. Only on waking do we know it was a dream. Only after the great awakening will we realize that this is the great dream. And yet fools think they are awake, presuming to know that they are rulers or herdsmen. How dense! You and Confucius are both dreaming, and I who say you are a dream am also a

dream. Such is my tale. It will probably be called preposterous, but after ten thousand generations there may be a great sage who will be able to explain it, a trivial interval equivalent to the passage from morning to night.

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Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly. What fun he had, doing as he pleased! He did not know he was Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and found himself to be Zhou. He did not know whether Zhou had dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly had dreamed he was Zhou. Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is what is meant by the transformation of things.

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Cook Ding was cutting up a cow for Duke Wenhui. With a touch of his hand, a lunge of his shoulder, a stamp of his foot, a bend of his knee, zip, his knife slithered, never missing a beat, in time to “the dance of the mulberry forest,” or the “Jingshou suite.” Lord Wenhui exclaimed, “How amazing that your skill has reached such heights!”

Cook Ding put down his knife and replied, “What I love is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first butchered cows, I saw nothing but cows. After three years, I never saw a cow as a whole. At present, I deal with it through my spirit rather than looking at it with my eyes. My perception stops and my spirit runs its course. I rely on the natural patterning, striking at the big openings, leading into the main cavities. By following what is inherently so I never cut a ligament or tendon, not to mention a bone. A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he cuts. An ordinary cook changes his knife every month, because he hacks. This knife of mine is nineteen years old. It has carved several thousand cows, yet its blade looks like it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces in the joints, and the blade has no thickness. So when something with no thickness enters something with space, it has plenty of room to move about. This is why after nineteen years it seems fresh from the grindstone.

However, when I come to something complicated, I inspect it closely to prepare myself. I keep my eyes on what I am doing and proceed deliberately, moving my knife imperceptibly. Then with a stroke it all comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling. I stand there, my knife in my hand, look all around, enjoying my success. Then I clean the knife and put it away.”

Lord Wenhui said, “Excellent! By listening to Cook Ding I learned how to nurture life.”

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Consider Cripple Shu. His chin is down by his navel. His shoulders stick up above his head. The bones at the base of his neck point to the sky. The five pipes of his spine are on top; his two thighs form ribs. Yet by sewing and washing he is able to fill his mouth; by shaking the fortune-telling sticks he earns enough to feed ten. When the authorities draft soldiers, a cripple can walk among them confidently flapping his sleeves; when they are conscripting work gangs, cripples are excused because of their infirmity. When the authorities give relief grain to the ailing, a cripple gets three measures, along with ten bundles of firewood. Thus one whose form is crippled can nurture his body and live out the years Heaven grants him. Think what he could do if his virtue was crippled too!

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Root of Heaven roamed on the south side of Mount Vast. When he came to the bank of Clear Stream, he met Nameless Man and asked him, "Please tell me how to manage the world."

"Go away, you dunce," Nameless Man said. "Such questions are no fun. I was just about to join the Creator of Things. If I get bored with that, I'll climb on the bird Merges with the Sky and soar beyond the six directions. I'll visit Nothing Whatever town and stay in Boundless country. Why do you bring up managing the world to disturb my thoughts?"

Still Root of Heaven repeated his question and Nameless Man responded, "Let your mind wander among the insipid, blend your energies with the featureless, spontaneously accord with things, and you will have no room for selfishness. Then the world will be in order."

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Duke Huan was reading a book in the hall. Wheelwright Pian, who had been chiseling a wheel in the courtyard below, set down his tools and climbed the stairs to ask Duke Huan, "May I ask what words are in the book Your Grace is reading?"

"The words of the sages," the duke responded.

"Are these sages alive?"

"They are already dead."

"That means you are reading the dregs of long gone men, doesn't it?"

Duke Huan said, "How does a wheelwright get to have opinions on the books I read? If you can explain yourself, I'll let it pass; otherwise, it's death."

Wheelwright Pian said, “In my case, I see things in terms of my own work. When I chisel at a wheel, if I go slow, the chisel slides and does not stay put; if I hurry, it jams and doesn’t move properly. When it is neither too slow nor too fast, I can feel it in my hand and respond to it from my heart. My mouth cannot describe it in words, but there is something there. I cannot teach it to my son, and my son cannot learn it from me. So I have gone on for seventy years, growing old chiseling wheels. The men of old died in possession of what they could not transmit. So it follows that what you are reading is their dregs.”

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When Zhuangzi’s wife died and Hui Shi came to convey his condolences, he found Zhuangzi squatting with his knees out, drumming on a pan and singing. “You lived with her, she raised your children, and you grew old together,” Hui Shi said. “Not weeping when she died would have been bad enough. Aren’t you going too far by drumming on a pan and singing?”

“No,” Zhuangzi said, “when she first died, how could I have escaped feeling the loss? Then I looked back to the beginning before she had life. Not only before she had life, but before she had form. Not only before she had form, but before she had vital energy. In this confused amorphous realm, something changed and vital energy appeared; when the vital energy was changed, form appeared; with changes in form, life began. Now there is another change bringing death. This is like the progression of the four seasons of spring and fall, winter and summer. Here she was lying down to sleep in a huge room and I followed her, sobbing and wailing. When I realized my actions showed I hadn’t understood destiny, I stopped.”

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When Zhuangzi was about to die, his disciples wanted to bury him in a well-appointed tomb. Zhuangzi said, “I have the sky and the earth for inner and outer coffins, the sun and the moon for jade disks, the stars for pearls, and the ten thousand things for farewell gifts. Isn’t the paraphernalia for my burial adequate without adding anything?”

“We are afraid the crows and kites will eat you, master,” a disciple said.

“Above ground, I will be eaten by crows and kites; below ground by ants. You are robbing from the one to give to the other. Why play favorites?”

Translated by Patricia Ebrey