THE WAY OF LAO TZU
(Tao-te ching)

Translated, with introductory essays, comments, and notes, by WING-TSIT CHAN

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THE TAO that can be told of is not the eternal \footnote{1} Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The Nameless \footnote{2} is the origin of Heaven and Earth; \footnote{3}
The Named is the mother of all things.
Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety.\footnote{4}
And let there always be being,\footnote{5} so we may see their outcome.\footnote{6}
The two are the same,
But after they are produced, they have different names.\footnote{7}
They both may be called deep and profound.\footnote{8}
Deeper and more profound,
The door of all subtleties! \footnote{9}

COMMENT

This is the most important of all chapters, for in one stroke the basic characteristics of Tao as the eternal, the nameless, the source, and the substance of all things are explicitly or implicitly affirmed. It is no wonder the opening sentences are among the most often quoted or even chanted sayings in Chinese.

The key Taoist concepts of the named and the nameless are also introduced here. The concept of name is common to all ancient Chinese philosophical schools, but Taoism is unique in this respect. Most schools insist on the correspondence of names and actualities and accept names as necessary and good; Taoism, on the contrary, rejects names in favor of the nameless. This, among other things, shows its radical and unique character. To Lao Tzu, Tao is nameless and is the simplicity without names; when names arise, that is, when the simple oneness of Tao is split up into individual things with names, it is time to stop.\footnote{10}

The cardinal ideas of being and non-being are also important here, for in Taoism the nameless (wu-ming) is equiva-
lent to non-being and the named (yu-ming) is equivalent to being. For this reason, when he comments on the saying about the named and the nameless, Wang Pi says, "All being originated in non-being." As students of Chinese thought well know, the ideas of being and non-being have been dominant throughout the history of Chinese philosophy. They are central concepts in Neo-Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, and also Neo-Confucianism. It was the importance of these concepts, no doubt, that led the Neo-Confucianist Wang An-shih to deviate from tradition and punctuate the phrases "always be no desires" and "always be desires" to read "Let there always be non-being, so we may..." and "Let there always be being, so we may...

Wang's punctuation not only underlines the importance of these ideas; it also shows the new metaphysical interest in Neo-Confucianism. Confucianism had been fundamentally ethical in tradition, but under the impact of Buddhist and Taoist metaphysics, the Neo-Confucianists developed Confucianism along metaphysical lines. In this case, in substituting the ideas of being and non-being for the ideas of having desires and having no desires, Wang shows a greater recognition of the philosophical content of the Lao Tsu, as it deserves.

Notes

1. On the basis of some ancient texts, Yü Yüeh equates ch'ang (eternal) with shang (high), but few commentators have followed him.

2. It is possible to punctuate wu-ming (nameless) and yu-ming (named) to mean "non-being is the name of" and "being is the name of," respectively. This is the reading by Cheng Lin (p. 1, sec. 6), and Duyvendak. Duyvendak refers to Ma Hsü-lun as authority; indeed, he depends chiefly on Ma. Ma did punctuate in this way in 1924 but in the revised edition of his book (1956), he has discarded the punctuation and has reverted to the generally accepted way as we have it. Wu-ming and yu-ming are key terms in the Lao Tsu, and are found also in chapters 32, 37, and 41.

3. On the basis of Wang Pi's commentary, which mentions "the origin of all things," Ma Hsi-lun contends that "Heaven and Earth" must have been originally "all things." Chiang Hsi-ch'ang supports him, and says that similar ideas appear in chapters 40 and 52. Such evidences are hardly strong enough to alter the text.

4. This translation of miao as "subtlety" rather than "mystery" is according to Wang Pi.

5. Both Wang Pi and Ho-shang Kung punctuate yu-yü and wu-yü to mean "having desires" and "having no desires." These are the traditional interpretations. Wang An-shih, however, punctuates them after wu and yu, thus making the phrases mean "there is always being," and "there is always non-being." Several Neo-Confucians, notably Su-ma Kuang, Su Ch'ei, and Fan Ying-yüan, and many modern writers such as Ma Hsi-lun, Kao Heng, and Ting Fu-pao, and some translators, like Medhurst, Old, Ch' u Ta-kao, Duyvendak, Cheng Lin (p. 2, sec. 7), and Mei have followed him. I have also departed from tradition because the idea of desires interrupts the thought of the chapter. To say that the two in the next line means desires and absence of desires, as Ho-shang Kung says, is forced; even in Wang Pi's own explanation about desires, he has to resort to the ideas of being and non-being. As Chiang Hsi-ch'ang has pointed out, we may grant that the term wu-yü (having desires) is a technical term in the Lao Tsu and appears in chapters 3, 37, and 57; as Ch' en Ching-yüan has said, we should read the Lao Tsu in its own light. But the term yu-yü does not appear anywhere else, whereas the terms yu and wu are found in chapters 2, 11, and 40. Besides, as Ch'en himself has noted, Chuang Tsu says that Lao Tsu "established his doctrines on the principles of eternal being and non-being" (ch. 33, SPTK, 10:35b. Cf. Giles [tr.], p. 319).

6. The word chiao (outcome) is open to many interpretations. Two of the variants, chiao (bright) in a Tun-huang manuscript, and ch'iao (hole) in the Huang Mao-ts'ai text, may readily be ruled out, since they do not make sense. The third variant, chia (fortunate) in the Li Yüeh text, is interchangeable with chiao (outcome). But this chiao itself can be understood variously and has led to different translations—as "manifest forms" (Lin Yutang), "the manifest" (Yu-Young Sum Nung), "outer manifestations" (Mei), "outer fringe" (Giles [p. 19], and Legge), "outer aspects" (John Wu), "limitations" (Hughes), "boundaries" (Cheng Lin, p. 2, sec. 7), "borders"
When all the people of the world know beauty as beauty,  
There arises the recognition of ugliness.

When they all know the good as good,  
There arises the recognition of evil.

Therefore:  
Being and non-being produce each other;  
Difficulty and ease complete each other;  
Long and short contrast each other;  
High and low distinguish each other;  
Sound and voice harmonize each other;  
Front and behind accompany each other.

Therefore the sagely manages affairs without action  
And spreads doctrines without words.  
All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.  
He produces them but does not take possession of them.  
He acts but does not rely on his own ability.  
He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it.  
It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him.

COMMENT

That everything has its opposite, and that these opposites are the mutual causations of each other, form a basic part of Chuang Tzu’s philosophy and later Chinese philosophy. It is important to note that opposites are here presented not as irreconcilable conflicts but as complements. The traditional Chinese ideal that opposites are to be synthesized and harmonized can be said to have originated with Lao Tzu.

The idea of teaching without words anticipated the Buddhist tradition of silent transmission of the mystic doctrine, especially in the Zen (Ch’An) school. This is diametrically opposed to the Confucian ideal, according to which a superior man acts and thus “becomes the model of the world,” and
The spirit of the valley never dies.
   It is called the subtle and profound female.
The gate of the subtle and profound female
   Is the root of Heaven and Earth.
   It is continuous, and seems to be always existing.
   Use it and you will never wear it out.

Comment

The valley and the female, like the infant and water, are Lao Tzu's favorite symbols for Tao. The symbol of the valley is employed again and again. There is nothing mysterious about it or its spirit; it simply stands for vacuity, vastness, openness, all-inclusiveness, and lowliness or humility, all of which are outstanding characteristics of Tao. This is the interpretation of Wang Pi, and commentators, with only a few exceptions, have followed him. To understand the "continuous" operation as breathing, or the valley as the belly or the Void, and then to interpret the whole passage as one on the yoga technique of breathing, or to single out the characteristic of stillness of the valley and then to present it as an evidence of Taoist quietism, is to fail to interpret the passages in the context of the whole. These interpretations are not supported by the symbolic meaning of the valley elsewhere in the book.

The spirit of the chapter is far from quietism. Instead, it involves the idea of natural transformation and continuous creation. As Chu Hsi has said, "The valley is vacuous. As sound reaches it, it echoes. This is the spontaneity of spiritual transformation. To be subtle and profound means to be wonderful. The female is one who receives something and produces things. This is a most wonderful principle and it has the meaning of production and reproduction."

Notes

1. Yü Yüeh equates ku (valley) with ku (grain) so that the valley means nourishment of life, or, according to Takeuchi, the production and transformation of the myriad things. Hung I-hsian equates ku with yü (desire). Neither improves the understanding of the text. Many Japanese translators have understood ku in the sense of vacuity or emptiness. Thus, to Hattori Unokichi, the spirit of ku means the condition of vacuity and nothingness; to Koyanagi, it is the view of emptiness; and to both Taoka and Yamamoto, it is pure intelligence or the spirit of vacuity.

2. The "Hsiang-eh" commentary interprets ku as "passion" and the gate of the female as the female reproductive organ. Significantly, this sexual interpretation has received no support. See below, chapter 10, notes 2 and 8.

3. This chapter is quoted in the Lieh Tzu as from the Book of the Yellow Emperor. (See Lieh Tzu, 1:1b. Cf. Graham [tr.], The Book of Lieh Tzu, p. 17.) The Lieh Tzu, however, freely attributes words to people and is therefore unreliable. The Book of the Yellow Emperor, if it ever existed, has long been lost.

4. See below, chapter 10, and comment on chapter 8.

5. In chapters 15, 28, 32, 39, and 41.

6. As Wu Ch'eng, Yang Tseng-hsin, Chiang Hsi-ch'ang, and Chang Chung-yüan (p. 169) have done. See comment on chapter 10.

7. This has been done by Waley (p. 57).

Heaven is eternal and Earth everlasting. They can be eternal and everlasting because they do not exist for themselves, and for this reason can exist forever.

Therefore the sage places himself in the background but finds himself in the foreground.
He puts himself away, and yet he always remains.
Is it not because he has no personal interests?
This is the reason why his personal interests are fulfilled.

COMMENT

This Taoist doctrine of self-denial expresses the same spirit as do the Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice and the Buddhist doctrine of non-ego. Although Buddhism puts its idea in the metaphysical term “non-ego” and Taoism in the ethical term “having no personal interest,” their import is the same. In Taoism, however, unlike Buddhism, personal interests are to be fulfilled after all. He who loses his life will find it.

The best (man) is like water. Water is good; it benefits all things and does not compete with them.

It dwells in (lowly) places that all disdain.
This is why it is so near to Tao.

(The best man) in his dwelling loves the earth.
In his heart, he loves what is profound.
In his associations, he loves humanity.
In his words, he loves faithfulness.
In government, he loves order.
In handling affairs, he loves competence.
In his activities, he loves timeliness.
It is because he does not compete that he is without reproach.

COMMENT

Water is perhaps the most outstanding among Lao Tzu’s symbols for Tao. The emphasis of the symbolism is ethical rather than metaphysical or religious. It is interesting to note that, while early Indian philosophers associated water with creation and the Greek philosophers looked upon it as a natural phenomenon, ancient Chinese philosophers, whether Lao Tzu or Confucius, preferred to learn moral lessons from it. Broadly speaking, Western thought, derived chiefly from the Greeks, has been largely interested in metaphysical and scientific problems, Indian thought largely interested in religious problems, and Chinese thought largely interested in moral problems. It is not too much to say that these different approaches to water characterize the Western, the Indian, and the Chinese systems of thought.
The people starve because the ruler eats too much tax-grain. Therefore they starve. They are difficult to rule because their ruler does too many things. Therefore they are difficult to rule. The people take death lightly because their ruler strives for life too vigorously. Therefore they take death lightly. It is only those who do not seek after life that excel in making life valuable.\(^3\)

**COMMENT**

This is easily the strongest protest against oppressive government in Chinese literature. It is so strong that it has led Hu Shih to describe Lao Tzu as a rebel.\(^2\) Lao Tzu's bitterness reflects the unbearable situation at the time, but it is also a natural consequence of the Taoist philosophy, which is essentially that of the lowly people and the oppressed.

**NOTES**

1. Ma Hsü-lun proposes to transfer this sentence to chapter 50.
2. Chung-kuo che-hsüeh shih ta-kang, pp. 50-51.

When man is born, he is tender and weak. At death, he is stiff and hard. All things,\(^1\) the grass as well as trees, are tender and supple while alive. When dead, they are withered and dried.

Therefore the stiff and the hard are companions of death. The tender and the weak are companions of life. Therefore if the army is strong, it will not win. If a tree is stiff, it will break.\(^3\) The strong and the great are inferior, while the tender and the weak are superior.

**COMMENT**

The superiority of weakness over strength is a constant theme of the *Lao Tzu*.\(^2\) Here a new note is struck about that theme. Weakness is not only superior to strength; it is the very principle of life.

**NOTES**

1. Some texts omit these two words.
2. Fu I, Huang Mao-t'ai, Yü Yüeh, I Shun-ting, Hsi T'ung, Liu Shih-p'ei, and Ma Hsü-lun are unanimous in saying that ping (soldier) in the Wang Pi text and kung (together) in the Ho-shang Kung text are corruptions of the word che (to break).
3. See especially chapters 45 and 78.
The texts of Taoism, specifically The Tao Te Ching of Lao-Tzu, are instructive here on the event of Learning as occurring in the Leap into the mystery of Being, which appears to us as the openness of an abyss, a primeval chaos. Becoming teachable, we have said, is to be re-posed in the repose, the dignified calm of letting-be. Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching, has become a modern classic in its own right. Unlike prev


Reference Manual on Scientific Evidence: Third Edition. 2011-10.53 MB-70,193 Downloads-New! Start by marking “The Way of Lao Tzu” as Want to Read: Want to Read saving… Want to Read. So I will read the Tao again sometime. And I believe letting both Jesus and Lao Tzu shape and reshape my character will make me a better follower of Jesus; and a better person as a whole. And that's a life journey worth taking. ...more. flag Like · see review. Mar 31, 2014 Bob Nichols rated it it was ok. A problem with reading the Tao of Lao Tzu is that the intended meaning is so elusive that each commentator can turn the writing into what he or she wants it to say. That is a problem with this book. The commentary by Wing-Tsit Chan seems selective.