

The Asian Sages: Lao-Tzu

About

Lao Tzu was a Chinese philosopher who lived and died in China during the 6th century BC. He didn't go by his real name; Lao Tzu is translated as "Old Master", and also went by the name Laozi. It is believed that Lao Tzu was born as a full grown man at the age of 62, already wise and lived a long life. Lao Tzu sought out to answer questions about humans and their place in the universe; he lived in a time of instability, the Period of the Warring States, a time where there was a lot of political and social development with confusion and disagreement. After much of his life living in society, he became to dislike the hypocrisy and artificiality of society, and wanted to live in a natural habitat. During his journey away from society, he reached the Hanku Pass, west of Loyang; a gatekeeper stopped him and asked him to write down a book of his teachings. Lao Tzu then composed a small book of five thousand words in two sections describing the theory of the Tao and Te, this book was called Tao Te Ching (the way of things, book of the way) one of the most influential books in Chinese History. Lao Tzu was the founder of Taoism, a philosophical and religious tradition that emphasizes living in harmony with the Tao, living in a simple life.

Tao Te Ching

A collection of sayings describing the principal s of Taoist teachings, Tao Te Ching is very unclear and hard to understand, although the book is divided into chapters, the passages don't always refer to the same subject. There are nearly a thousand commentaries from China and Japan. Scholars find the book to be either cloudy and obscure, or romantic and poetic. The lack of clarity gives the reader an opportunity to make it mean all sorts of different things, or just

timeless wisdom. The most confusing part to this book is learning the Tao, an indescribable reference with no real definition, more of a lifestyle, and way of thinking, “road” or “way”.

The Tao

According to Lao Tzu, the Tao cannot be expressed in words, it is constantly nameless, and struggles to find a definition, words cannot “trap” Tao, those who wish to understand the Tao must find the words without speaking. Quoted from chapter 1 of Tao Te Ching translated:

“The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao
The name can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth
The named is the mother of myriad things
Thus constantly without desire, one observes its manifestations
These two emerge together but differ in name
The Unity is said to be the mystery
Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders,”

Just because words cannot define the Tao, does not mean phrases can be said that are important to it. The Tao is the source of all things, beginning of all things, the origin and goal of things, originality, necessary, invisible energy of the universe, melody of life, ceremonial rule, the natural flow of things, counsels man to follow the course of nature, the way human life progresses when it’s in harmony and respects the universe, a force that flows throughout all life and in a way connects many things. Understanding the Tao as poetic, a natural instinct, and an intuition, eternal, spontaneous, nameless, a way of life, tranquility, weakness, entering harmony with the Tao is the best way to know it. The ever flowing stream of the Tao is too big, and too small, it’s too much to be trapped by a definition. Tao Te Ching places strong emphasis on wu

wei (non action). The term Te is translated as power, or virtue, the healing virtue of certain plants, Te is the Tao at work.

The Wu Wei

The “Wu Wei” is Lao Tzu’s core ethic, it is defined as respect to the flow of time, non-action, no need for human tampering with the flow of reality, and engaging in effortlessness, let the way of things happen spontaneously to help attain happiness, taking no action that is contrary to nature, getting your mind out of the way of judgment, labeling, classifying, and arranging things. In later periods this term was influential in leading to special breathing exercises, and eating habits to maintain calmness and harmony with the Tao.

Yin and Yang

Yin and Yang are two continual opposing forces according to Chinese cosmology, they operate together in a never ending cycle, opposites, but need each other, the coming together and falling apart. They cannot exist without each other, although they are a contradiction, they are the foundation of the universe, the root and source of life and death. Although they fight against each other, they need each other, and have a love-hate relationship. The symbol (yin-yang) is defined as the understanding of how things work. Lao Tzu prefers Yin.

Yang, a force of light, peace and serenity, destruction, disintegration, knowledge, male, full, above, before, moving, big, strong, hard, straight, logical, bright, day, sky, fast, aggressive.

Yin, the force of darkness, confusion and turmoil, conservation, gives the shape to things, female, empty, below, after, still, small, weak, soft, bent, slow, passive, intuitive, night, earth.

Moral Philosophy:

Lao Tzu taught that peaceful actions do not require moral justification. One must avoid constant feudal, conflict, ambition, desire, competitiveness, wealth, status, and things that may cause harm to relationships and friendships only for personal satisfaction. Desires are triggered by a variety of things that attract. Withdrawal from society, and living in harmony will bring freedom from desires, solitude, creative silence, selflessness, softness, moderation, openness, peace, simplicity, and escape from being harmed by the world. Causal evil is a term Lao Tzu used to describe consequential evils brought upon by human will. Causal evil occurs when an individual asserts something in thought or action against nature, other people, or their own nature. Lao Tzu sought to eliminate causal and consequential evil from the world. He believed life without man-made sufferings is the ideal way to live.

The reason for the fall of the Tao for many people is the culture, and laws of society. Lao Tzu believes they have lost their truth. Passiveness and not trying to change anything is the way the world should work, it's been working this way for eternity. Liberation and withdrawal brings about perfection and eternity. Lao Tzu believed individual happiness is the only thing needed for society.

Social Philosophy

Because Lao Tzu lived in a time of warfare, government oppression, taxation, disagreement, and disorder, he criticized and despised society. He was skeptical of civilization, and saw it to be over-refined. He somewhat opposed technical and social contrivances, he did not dismiss technology, but worried it might give a feel of false progression.

Lao Tzu preferred nature over society, art over science, intuition over logic, and believed the perfect society is impossible, society is the death of authentic self. He recommended absence from society and to retreat into the wisdom and values of inner self. Simplicity, harmony, and contentment are the values of his ideal society, minimize desires, minimal personal interests, limit the self, and returning to the state of primitive contentment.

Maximal freedoms is crucial to Lao Tzu's ideal society, he is extremely against exploitation, domination, interference, and enforcing laws. A good ruler is humble, at peace, does not demand anything, and takes no willful action. When non-action is taken place, the people will prosper, influence peace and happiness. Laws bring about crime, rebellion, and transformation of self-identity. Aggressive measures are also self-destructing; heavy taxation, cruel punishment, and war, suffering. This brings about greedy rulers who desire power and wealth. Lao Tzu does not believe in revolution, simplicity is the key to truth. A silent man is a powerful man, who cannot solve social problems, but can forsake them.

Epistemology

“Mastering others is strength. Mastering yourself is true power.”

“To see things in the seed, that is genius.”

“Watch your thoughts, they become words. Watch your words, they become actions. Watch your actions, they become habit. Watch your habits, they become character. Watch your character, it becomes your destiny.”

“Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished.”

“When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be.”

“To the mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders.”

“Do the difficult things while they are easy and do the great things while they are small. A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”

“Music in the soul can be heard by the universe.”

“At the center of your being you have the answer, you know who you are and you know what you want.”

I chose to write about Lao Tzu because he stuck out to me more than any other philosopher I have learned about so far in this class. Although Confucius lived around the same time as Lao Tzu, their values and beliefs were almost opposite to each other. I like how Lao Tzu believes in nature and inner harmony, there isn't much of that anymore in this time. People seem to be a lot more preoccupied with work, school, friends, personal goals, and money than they are with inner peace and having a strong connection with yourself and nature. Having a strong connection with inner self and nature brings independence, peace, tranquility, and a lot less worries. Lao Tzu to me comes off as a very independent person who knows what he wants and knows what's right and wrong, citizens often get blind and aren't aware of their surroundings. There are a lot of harmful things society allows that I think Lao Tzu would be very disappointed about. From harmful chemicals in processed food, some of the music out there, what they allow on TV and in movies, and the manners of children.

Living in a world where every person was humble, and calm is a dreamland for me. I wanted to look more into the kind of world Lao Tzu lived in and I believe simplicity, honesty, wu wei, and being one with nature are major keys to happiness and fulfillment. Much of what society today advertises as something that can make people happy is artificial, material items and large properties aren't going to bring happiness if there is loneliness, cheating, or lying involved. The satisfaction of knowing that something was earned and worked hard for the honest way is far more rewarding.

As a child, I often saw the yin-yang symbol, but never knew what it meant, I thought it was just a design that was popular for toys or t-shirts. Yin and Yang is a perfect example to describe how the world works. The world may struggle with natural disasters, but it needs natural disasters for its evolution. The world may not like the destruction animals may do, but it needs it in order for necessary changes. The world works in mysterious ways and everything that occurs happens for a reason, and is meant to happen. Otherwise many habitats would probably look similar to one another, and there would be no reason for curiosity or discoveries in our world.

In conclusion, Lao Tzu's abstract way of thinking, and his way of opening a new world to me is life changing. A part of me feels like I have always believed in simplicity, withdrawal, and non-action, but I have forgotten as I got older. Silence and a calm lifestyle has always been important to me, it's easy to get caught up in the way of friends and family, but time alone is key to staying stronger and more independent, like Lao Tzu.