



Lao Tzu (lǎo' dzu'), which means "Old Master" or "Ancient One," is the name given to the author of a book called the *Tao Te Ching*, or *The Way and Its Power*, one of the two basic texts of Taoist philosophy.

No one knows exactly who the "Old Master" was or when he lived, though it seems most likely that he lived during the fourth or fifth centuries B.C. Legend has it that he remained in his mother's womb for sixty-two years before birth and emerged as a white-haired old man. According to tradition, he served as Keeper of the Archives in the ancient Chinese kingdom of Chou. Unhappy with the political situation of his day, the legend goes, he mounted a black ox and headed for a western pass, hoping to leave the chaos in China. As he approached the pass, the gatekeeper recognized him as a sage and refused to let him through until he would write down some words of wisdom. Lao Tzu proceeded to write the 5,000-word *Tao Te Ching* and was allowed to depart through the pass. Some say he was 160 years old when he departed, while others put his age at 200.

Perhaps one reason why so many legends have emerged about the author of the *Tao Te Ching* is the mysterious and cryptic nature of the text itself—such an unusual text must have an unusual author. The book is written partly in verse and partly in compact prose. The author speaks of mysteries and secrets, of knowledge that cannot be spoken, and of words that have no meaning but behind which lie profound significance. The ideas expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* frequently contradict both logic and intuition, yet on reflection they seem to contain a truth that is beyond words.

Lao Tzu has two primary concerns: understanding the way of the universe and using that understanding for self-preservation. He is not interested in how to win fame, glory, honor, or wealth, but rather in how to survive. Some of the passages seem to be addressed to a ruler, advising how to ensure the survival of a kingdom in a time of political upheaval. Others are addressed to anyone who wishes to understand the fundamental principles of existence and to use them to preserve himself or herself in a chaotic world.

from the *Tao Te Ching*

Commentary

Taoism. Along with Buddhism and Confucianism, **Taoism** is one of the three dominant Chinese philosophical schools. The Taoists get their name from the term Tao, which means "Path" or "Way." For the early Chinese, including both Taoists and Confucianists, the Tao was the force that controlled the universe. Confucianists thought of the Tao as a moral force, calling for righteous behavior and respect for one's superiors. In contrast, Taoists did not ascribe human moral qualities to the Tao. They thought of it as being beyond the scope of human concerns, but believed we could see its workings by observing nature.

The *Tao Te Ching* is the primary work expressing the Taoist understanding of the Way. Lao Tzu begins his book by commenting that we are not able to talk about the Way, because whatever we say will be incomplete. He goes on to suggest that we can begin to understand the Way by observing how nature works, though we must be careful not to impose human desires on our observations. In addition, he points out that to appreciate the Way we must find a balance between opposites, because the Way is characterized by regular alterations of contradictory phenomena, such as day and night.

The difference between the Taoist and Confucian understanding of the Tao is hinted at in section III of the *Tao Te Ching*. While Confucius stresses duty and education, and teaches that people should strive to serve society and should honor people of worth, Lao Tzu recommends *not* honoring men of worth, *not* educating people, and *not* encouraging clever people to act. He suggests that placing value on certain people, things, or actions, and labeling them "better" results in undesirable sentiments and situations, such as jealousy and strife. Instead, he argues, people should seek to simplify their lives and should free themselves of desires. Once people have achieved freedom and simplicity, they can focus on the mystical contemplation of nature that will enable them to discover the Way.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu also applies his understanding of the Way to politics. He suggests that the best type of ruler is one who protects his or her people from material wants, while imposing a minimum of governmental regulations. In addition, he argues that the government, as well as the individual, that seems the weakest is most likely to escape destruction, just as grass that bends with the wind is more likely to survive a storm than a mighty tree.

Writing

Write a journal entry in which you explore your thoughts about Lao Tzu's suggestion that the weakest governments and individuals are the most likely to escape destruction. Do you agree with Lao Tzu?

from the **Tao Te Ching**
Lao Tzu
translated by D. C. Lau



WHITE CLOUDS OVER XIAO AND XIANG
Wang Chien
Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D.C.

I

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name,
The nameless was the beginning of heaven and
5 earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad
creatures.
Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to
observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order
to observe its manifestations.
These two are the same
10 But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery—
The gateway of the manifold secrets.

III

Not to honor men of worth will keep the people
from contention; not to value goods which are
hard to come by will keep them from theft; not to
display what is desirable will keep them from being
unsettled of mind.
15 Therefore in governing the people, the sage
empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens
their wills but strengthens their bones. He always
keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from
desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act.
Do that which consists in taking no action, and
order will prevail.

IX

Rather than fill it to the brim by keeping it upright
Better to have stopped in time;
Hammer it to a point
20 And the sharpness cannot be preserved forever;
There may be gold and jade to fill a hall
But there is none who can keep them.
To be overbearing when one has wealth and posi-
tion
Is to bring calamity upon oneself.
25 To retire when the task is accomplished
Is the way of heaven.

1. **Rather than . . . in time:** These lines refer to a container that stands in position when empty but overturns when full.

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Interpreting

1. To what do the "nameless" and the "named" refer in section I, lines 5 and 6?
2. (a) What values does Lao Tzu expound in section III? (b) How does he apply his belief in freedom from desire to government in this section?
3. In section IX, how do the images in the first six lines relate to the examples of human behavior in the final four lines?
4. What type of behavior does Lao Tzu advocate in section XLIII?

Applying

5. How do the values set forth in section III contrast with the dominant values of American society?
6. How do you think Lao Tzu would view the current Chinese government? Why?
7. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi advocated nonviolence and passive resistance in dealing with one's opponents. How does this approach relate to the ideas of Lao Tzu?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Understanding Taoism

The Taoist philosophy focuses on the quest to understand the Tao, or Way. Although the Tao is elusive

XLIII

The most submissive thing in the world can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world—that which is without substance entering that which has no crevices.

That is why I know the benefit of resorting to no action. The teaching that uses no words, the benefit of resorting to no action, these are beyond the understanding of all but a very few in the world.

Reader's Response *What is your immediate reaction to the ideas expressed in these selections from the Tao Te Ching? Do the ideas seem unusual or different? Why or why not?*

and difficult to define, it has been described as "the source of all being and governor of all life, human and natural, and the basic, undivided unity in which all the contradictions and distinctions of existence are ultimately resolved.

1. How does Lao Tzu capture the elusive, mysterious nature of the Tao in section I?
2. What are the main beliefs expressed in the four selections from the *Tao Te Ching*?
3. How does the style in which the *Tao Te Ching* is written echo the elusive, mysterious nature of the Tao?

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing About Taoism

Write an essay in which you discuss the aspects of the Taoist philosophy that can and cannot be applied to life in our society. Begin by reviewing the Guide for Interpreting page on Taoism and rereading the selections from the *Tao Te Ching*. Note as many Taoist beliefs as you can. Then think about whether each of these beliefs could or could not be applied to life in our society. After arranging your ideas into an outline, begin writing your essay. Make sure that you include an introduction with a clear thesis statement. When you revise your essay, make sure that you have supported each of your opinions with facts, reasons, or details.