

LAO TZU ON THE WAY OF ALL THINGS

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Act without action. Lao Tzu

Lao Tzu is a mysterious character if we consider the persisting uncertainties concerning his real existence, the period of his life and the virtues that the mystical Taoists endowed him with. Even though the details of his existence are shrouded in the mist of time, we know with a fair degree of certainty that his name was Li Er.

Legend has it that King Wu of Zhou appointed him head librarian of the imperial archives at Luoyang. In this capacity Lao Tzu was able to immerse himself in the study of history, philosophy and literature, gaining wisdom and insights along the way.

Three significant moments stand out in Lao Tzu's life: 1) Lao Tzu was an archivist at the Royal Court of Chou dynasty; 2) Confucius visited Lao Tzu; 3) He became disgusted with the Court's life and left to the west and he dictated on the way his book and then disappeared without a trace.

According to legend, Confucius visited with Lao Tzu and was in awe of Lao Tzu's intellect. Confucius recognized in Lao Tzu a deep understanding about the world that was beyond his own view and went so far as to liken Lao Tzu to the mysterious dragon.

Lao Tzu is accredited with the writing of the Tao-te ching, tao-meaning the way of all life, te-meaning the fit use of life by human beings and ching-meaning text.

For Lao Tzu human life, like everything else in the universe, is constantly influenced by outside forces. Simplicity is the key to truth and freedom. One needs to observe and understand the way of nature; to develop intuition and build up personal power; and to use that power to lead life with love and without force.

For Lao Tzu the world moves in accord with a divine pattern. It is seen in the rhythmic movements of nature. For one to be happy one needs to adjust oneself to the way the world moves. One does not change one's life one accepts it.

In so doing one seeks wisdom, goodness and contentment. But wisdom is trust; goodness is acceptance and contentment is simplicity.

When one moves with the universe one is in accord with the themes of interdependence and interaction. This means being natural or spontaneous, Tzu-jan or self-so. This is the way the universe moves.

The Tao is the source of all things.¹ The Tao is reality. Tao continues to keep the universe working through the release of its energy. Nature is understood as the natural and proper way of all things. The movements of the Tao are of continuous interplay between opposites, yin and yang. When one recognizes the relativity of all things one becomes enlightened.

Natural means that one is relaxed within and able to accept what life offers. Lao Tzu says relax and accept the world as it is, instead of trying to change it.² The Tao is never forceful, yet there is nothing that it does not accomplish. Lao Tzu believed that no task should be rushed, all things should occur in their natural time.

Guided by love, moderation and humility one can live in harmony with the world. When one sees the Tao in oneself one can see the Tao in others. When one's thoughts and actions are moderate one takes whatever presents itself as the simplest and most natural way to follow. When one realizes that one cannot help others by directing their actions one comes to understand humility. There is no need for one to be ahead of another. The way is to act but not to compete. Lao Tzu's philosophy is a natural way to live life with goodness, serenity and respect.

There is this painting by Shen Chou (1427-1509) called Walking with a Staff. It shows the side of a mountain with water coming down, rocks here and there, trees here and there and a bridge. One finds oneself looking all over for the person walking with a staff. Ah! Finally a little figure a ways before the bridge hardly noticeable hardly visible comes to view. We are insignificant in terms of the cosmos.

The world is ours to live in.

Notes

- 1) Tao does not ask us to worship. The only authority is the way of life itself. There is no faith in authority only the authority of the heart. The heart is a basic natural rhythmic. Live has a beat.
- 2) Taoism is not a philosophy of negativism or one of quietism. It calls not only for non-action but also for practical uses of action. It calls for one to be submissive but strongly opposes oppression.