

## Foundations (8000 B.C.E. to 600 C.E.)

Tzu-lu asked how a sovereign should be served. The Master said, "Do not impose on him, and, moreover, withstand him to his face.

The Master said, "The full observance of the rules of propriety in serving one's prince is accounted by people to be flattery.

What is called a great minister, is one who serves his prince according to what is right, and when he finds he cannot do so, retires.

Hsien asked what was shameful. The Master said, "When good government prevails in a state, to be thinking only of one's salary. When bad government prevails, to be thinking, in the same way, only of one's salary. That is what is shameful."

When a country is well governed, poverty and mean condition are things to be ashamed of. When a country is poorly governed, riches and honor are things to be ashamed of.

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### On Religion

Someone asked the meaning of the great sacrifice. The Master said, "I do not know. Anyone who knew its meaning would find it as easy to govern the kingdom as to look on this," and he pointed to the palm of his hand.

Zilu asked about serving the ghosts of the dead. The Master said, "Until you are able to serve men, how can you serve their ghosts?" When Zilu ventured to ask about death, the answer was: "While you do not know life, how can you [hope to] know about death?"

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## Lao Tzu: Tao te Ching

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*The Tao te Ching (literally, "the classic of the way of virtue") is attributed to Lao Tzu, though scholars disagree about his actual existence. In its very poetic form it teaches that there is a dynamic, cosmic structure underlying everything that happens in the world. We humans need to discover that Way (Tao), which is immanent in all aspects of the world, not a rule imposed from without; and we need to fit into it, letting things take their course, not exerting ourselves in opposition to it by trying to bend things to our will.*

*Our naming (describing) of things always falls short of the way things are, since things are not limited as our language presupposes. Even the Tao which we are trying to talk about here eludes our words. The original polarity is that of being and non-being, and it will be found to interplay throughout the world, with non-being (emptiness, what is not) having as much significance as does being (the fullness of things, what is). Thus the notion of the Tao recaptures the earlier Chinese concept of Yin and Yang, the polarities running through all things.*

*What price is paid when people come to know beauty and goodness? (i.e., what comes along with such knowledge?) Is that bad, according to Taoism?*

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### 1

The Tao that can be spoken of is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.

Having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; having a name, it is the Mother of all things.

We should rid ourselves of desires if we wish to observe its subtlety; we should allow our

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desires if we wish to see something of its manifestations.

Under these two aspects, it is really the same; but as development takes place, it receives the different names. Together we call them the mystery; where the mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful.

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### 2

All in the world know the beauty of the beautiful, and in doing so they have the idea of ugliness; they all know the good, and in doing so they have the idea of what is the bad.

So it is that being and non-being give birth each to the other; that difficulty and ease each produce the idea of the other; that the ideas of height and lowness arise from the contrast of the one with the other; that the musical notes and tones become harmonious through the relation of one with another; and that being before and behind give the idea of one following the other.

Therefore the sage manages affairs without doing anything, and conveys his teachings without the use of speech.

[In that way] all things come forth, and there is not one which declines to show itself; they grow, and there is no ownership claim made upon them; they go through their processes, and there is no expectation placed on them. The work is accomplished, and there is no disruption of order.

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*Taoism eschews many of the practices and principles of Confucianism, as in the following passage, where we are urged not to single out exemplary individuals and not to store up treasures and invest in fancy clothing and such. The sage rules his people not by force from the*

*top but by subtly encouraging those trends and inclinations which are in keeping with the Tao; thus he can "act without action."*

*Which kind of knowledge is it that the sage ruler protects his people from?*

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### 3

Not to value and employ men of superior ability is the way to keep the people from rivalry among themselves; not to prize articles which are precious difficult to procure is the way to keep them from becoming thieves; not to show them what is likely to excite their desires is the way to keep their minds from disorder.

Therefore the sage, in the exercise of his government, empties their minds, (1) fills their bellies, weakens their wills, and strengthens their bones.

He constantly (tries to) keep them without knowledge and without desire, and where there are those who have knowledge, to keep them from presuming to act (on it). When there is this abstinence from action, good order is universal.

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*The Tao te Ching uses a series of images to show the potency of that which is not. The vessel or bowl is essentially an empty space, but it makes containment, hence drinking and life, possible. Similarly a room gets its usefulness from being empty; and doors and windows are important because there is nothing there. The valley, as a female receptacle, is rich and productive. The hub of the wheel is the empty space to which the spokes connect. Water becomes an image for the moral character of humans (at least in its passive mode), for it "does not compete" but fills in the cracks*

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*between other things. While our task is to fit in quietly, we may still "love the earth," i.e., extreme asceticism is not called for.*

*A brief list of what Taoists love and appreciate can be gleaned from Chapter 8. What are those sorts of things?*

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### 4

The Tao is (like) the emptiness of a vessel; and in our employment of it we must be on our guard against all fullness. How deep and unfathomable it is, as if it were the Honored Ancestor of all things!

We should blunt our sharp points and unravel the complications of things; we should moderate our brightness and bring ourselves into agreement with the obscurity of others. How pure and still the Tao is, as if it would ever so continue!

I do not know whose son it is. It might appear to have been before God.

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### 6

The spirit of the valley dies not, but remains the same;  
Thus we name it the mysterious female.  
Its gate is called the root from which grew heaven and earth.  
Long and unbroken does its power remain,  
Used gently, it will never be exhausted.

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### 8

The highest excellence (2) is like that of water. The excellence of water appears in its

benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving, the low place which all men dislike. Hence it is near to the Tao.

The excellence of a residence is in the suitability of the place; that of the mind is in the stillness of the abyss; that of relationships is in their being with the virtuous; that of government is in its securing good order; that of the conduct of affairs is in its ability; and that of any movement is its timeliness. And when one with the highest excellence does not strive against his low position, no one finds fault with him.

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### 11

The thirty spokes unite in the one center; but it is on the empty space for the axle that the use of the wheel depends. Clay is fashioned into vessels; but it is on their empty hollowness that their use depends. The door and windows are cut out from the walls to form an apartment; but it is on the empty space that its use depends. Therefore, whatever has being is profitable, but what does not have being can be put to use.

*Translated by James Legge (1887), revised by Michael Neville*

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(1) "Emptying the mind" seems here to mean "freeing from concerns which might press in upon them."

(2) Some translators take this to be "the good man." In any case, it is human virtue that is being talked about.