



CHAPTER IV

TAOISM

Next to Confucianism the most important and influential native philosophy of the Chinese has undoubtedly been that of the Taoist school. No other doctrine of the ancient period except Confucianism has for so long maintained its vigor and attractiveness to the Chinese mind. In many ways the doctrines of Confucianism and Taoism complement each other, running side by side like two powerful streams through all later Chinese thought and literature, appealing simultaneously to two sides of the Chinese character. To the solemn, rather pompous gravity and burden of social responsibility of Confucianism, Taoism opposes a carefree flight from respectability and the conventional duties of society; in place of the stubborn Confucian concern for things human and mundane it holds out a vision of other, transcendental worlds of the spirit. Where the Confucian philosophers are often prosaic and dull, moralistic and commonsensical, the early Taoist writings are all wit and paradox, mysticism and poetic vision. As the two streams of thought developed in later ages, Confucianism has represented the mind of the Chinese scholar-gentleman in his office or study, being a good family man, a conscientious bureaucrat, and a sober, responsible citizen; Taoism has represented the same gentleman in his private chamber or mountain retreat, seeking surcease from the cares of official life, perhaps a little drunk, but more likely intoxicated by the beauties of nature or of the world of the spirit.

Without this Taoist leaven of poetry and mysticism Chinese literature and thought would undoubtedly be a much poorer and shallower affair. But this very preoccupation with mystic worlds has proved to be the greatest weakness of the Taoists. After a brilliant beginning Taoism tended to become appropriated by those who wandered off on an inter-

minable search for the secret of eternal life, which led them into such a slough of superstitious hocus-pocus that they eventually lost credit in the eyes of the intellectual class. The early classics of the Taoist school never ceased to be read by the educated, and to exert an influence upon the formation of their ideas. Indeed many of the most important elements of Taoist teaching were absorbed into Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism. But the Taoist school itself became more and more a cult of popular religion, adopting rites and organizational forms from the Buddhist church, absorbing all sorts of popular superstitions and demon lore, until it became an object of ridicule among educated Chinese.

METAPHYSICS AND GOVERNMENT IN THE LAO TZU

The Taoist school is often referred to as the "Teachings of the Yellow Emperor and Lao Tzu" or of "Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu." The Yellow Emperor is a purely legendary figure, but we possess two books attributed to the other two fathers of the sect, Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. Chuang Tzu seems to have been an actual historical person, but who the philosopher called Lao Tzu was, when he lived, or what his connection was with the text that we have, have been questions of doubt since the first history of the ancient period was written. The tales of the philosopher-recluse Lao Tzu need not concern us here, however; what is important is the book—one of the shortest, most provocative, and inspired works in all Chinese literature. Though the quietism, mysticism, and love of paradox that distinguish this work probably represent very old strains in Chinese thought, whether the book itself is any earlier than the third century B.C. is a question still much debated by scholars.

In a sense, the *Lao Tzu* (or *Tao-te ching*), like so many of the works of this period of political chaos and intellectual ferment, proposes a philosophy of government and a way of life for the ruling class, probably the only people who could read its pages. Yet its point of view and approach to the problems of government are vastly broader than this statement would at first suggest. For the teaching of the *Lao Tzu* is based upon a great, underlying principle, the Way or Tao (from which the name of the Taoist school derives) which is 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. Much of the book deals with the nature and workings of this first principle, while admitting that it must remain essentially indescribable and known only through a kind of mystic intuition. The way of life which accords with this basic Tao is marked by a kind of yielding passivity, an absence of strife and coercion, a manner of action which is completely spontaneous, effortless, and inexhaustible.

In the human sphere the *Lao Tzu* describes the perfect individual, the sage, who comprehends this mystic principle of Tao and orders his own life and actions in accordance with it, humbling himself, pursuing a course of quietude and passivity, free from desire and strife. It is clear that the sage is conceived of as the ideal ruler, for the *Lao Tzu* gives definite instructions as to how the sage is to conduct his government. He is to cease from meddling in the lives of the people, give up warfare and luxurious living, and guide his people back to a state of innocence, simplicity, and harmony with the Tao, a state that existed in the most ancient times before civilization appeared to arouse the material desires of the people and spur them to strife and warfare, and before morality was invented to befuddle their minds and beguile them with vain distinctions.

But such is the vagueness and ambiguity of the *Lao Tzu* text and the subtlety of its thought that it may yield different interpretations and be approached on very different levels. There have been times in Chinese history, notably at the beginning of the Han dynasty, when men attempted to translate the doctrines of the *Lao Tzu* into action through government policies embodying an extreme *laissez-faire* attitude. But the teachings of the *Lao Tzu* may also be understood as the creed of the recluse, the man of superior wisdom and insight who, instead of taking a part in society, chooses to retire from public life in order to perfect his own purity and intelligence. It is this interpretation of the *Lao Tzu* that has most often prevailed in later Chinese thought. This, perhaps, is largely because of the influence of the second great Taoist teacher, Chuang Tzu, the author of numerous stories about sages and worthies who were entreated by the rulers of their time to accept high political positions, but who rejected all such offers in favor of seclusion and self-cultivation. It is for this reason that Taoism has so often been the philosophy and consolation of the Chinese gentleman in retirement, of the political failure, and of the

scholar who abandons human society in search of a mystic harmony with the world of nature.

The style of the *Lao Tzu* is quite unlike that of the works of the other schools. The text appears to be a combination of very old adages or cryptic sayings, often in rhyme, extended passages of poetry, and sections of prose interpretation and commentary. There is extensive use of parallel constructions and neatly balanced phrases; the statements are laconic and paradoxical, intended not to convince the mind by reasoning but to startle and capture it through poetic vision. The writer makes striking use of symbols such as water, the symbol of a humble, self-effacing force that is in the end all-powerful, or the female and the mother, symbol of passivity and creation. It is this symbolism, this paradoxical, poetic view of life which have won for the work the tremendous popularity and influence which it has exercised through the centuries of Chinese literature, and these same appealing qualities that have made it the Chinese work most often translated into foreign languages.

Selections from the Lao Tzu (or Tao-te Ching)

I

The Tao [Way] that can be told of

Is not the eternal Tao;

The name that can be named

Is not the eternal name.

Nameless, it is the origin of Heaven and earth;

Namable, it is the mother of all things.

Always nonexistent,

That we may apprehend its inner secret;

Always existent,

That we may discern its outer manifestations.

These two are the same;

Only as they manifest themselves they receive different names.

That they are the same is the mystery.

Mystery of all mysteries!

The door of all subtleties!

. . . .

3

Refrain from exalting the worthy,
 So that the people will not scheme and contend;
 Refrain from prizing rare possessions,
 So that the people will not steal;
 Refrain from displaying objects of desire,
 So that the people's hearts will not be disturbed.

Therefore a sage rules his people thus:

He empties their minds,
 And fills their bellies;
 He weakens their ambitions,
 And strengthens their bones.

He strives always to keep the people innocent of knowledge and desires, and to keep the knowing ones from meddling. By doing nothing that interferes with anything (*wu-wei*), nothing is left unregulated.

4

The Tao is empty [like a bowl],
 It is used, though perhaps never full.
 It is fathomless, possibly the progenitor of all things.
 It blunts all sharpness,
 It unties all tangles;
 It is in harmony with all light,
 It is one with all dust.
 Deep and clear it seems forever to remain.
 I do not know whose son it is,
 A phenomenon that apparently preceded the Lord.

5

Heaven and earth are not humane:
 To them all things are as straw-dogs.
 The sage is not humane:
 To him all the people are as straw-dogs.

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8

The highest good is like water. Water benefits all things generously and is without strife. It dwells in the lowly places that men disdain. Thus it comes near to the Tao.
 The highest good loves the [lowly] earth for its dwelling.
 It loves the profound in its heart,
 It loves humanity in friendship,
 Sincerity in speech, order in government,
 Effectiveness in deeds, timeliness in action.
 Since it is without strife,
 It is without reproach.

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10

In keeping your soul and embracing unity,
 Can you forever hold fast to the Tao?
 In letting out your vital force to achieve gentleness,
 Can you become as the new-born babe?
 In cleansing and purifying your mystic vision,
 Can you be free from all dross?
 In loving the people and governing the land,
 Can you practice nonaction (*wu-wei*)?
 In opening and shutting the gates of Heaven,
 Can you play the part of the female?
 In perceiving all and comprehending all,
 Can you renounce all knowledge?

To beget, to nourish,
 To beget but not to claim,
 To achieve but not to cherish,
 To be leader but not master—
 This is called the Mystic Virtue (*te*).

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14

You look at it, but it is not to be seen;
 Its name is Formless.
 You listen to it, but it is not to be heard;

Its name is Soundless.
 You grasp it, but it is not to be held;
 Its name is Bodiless.
 These three elude all scrutiny,
 And hence they blend and become one.

Its upper side is not bright;
 Its under side is not dim.
 Continuous, unceasing, and unnamable,
 It reverts to nothingness.

It is called formless form, thingless image;
 It is called the elusive, the evasive.
 Confronting it, you do not see its face;
 Following it, you do not see its back.

Yet by holding fast to this Tao of old,
 You can harness the events of the present,
 You can know the beginnings of the past—
 Here is the essence of the Tao.

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 16

Attain utmost vacuity;
 Hold fast to quietude.
 While the myriad things are stirring together,
 I see only their return.
 For luxuriantly as they grow,
 Each of them will return to its root.

To return to the root is called quietude,
 Which is also said to be reversion to one's destiny.
 This reversion belongs with the eternal:
 To know the eternal is enlightenment;
 Not to know the eternal means to run blindly to disaster.

He who knows the eternal is all-embracing;
 He who is all-embracing is impartial,

To be impartial is to be kingly,
 To be kingly is to be heavenly,
 To be heavenly is to be one with the Tao,
 To be one with the Tao is to endure forever.
 Such a one, though his body perish, is never exposed to danger.

17

The best [government] is that whose existence only is known by the people. The next is that which is loved and praised. The next is that which is despised. . . .

18

It was when the Great Tao declined,
 That there appeared humanity and righteousness.
 It was when knowledge and intelligence arose,
 That there appeared much hypocrisy.
 It was when the six relations lost their harmony,
 That there was talk of filial piety and paternal affection.
 It was when the country fell into chaos and confusion,
 That there was talk of loyalty and trustworthiness.

19

Banish sageliness, discard wisdom,
 And the people will be benefited a hundredfold.
 Banish humanity, discard righteousness,
 And the people will return to filial piety and paternal affection.
 Banish skill, discard profit,
 And thieves and robbers will disappear.

These three are the ill-provided adornments of life,
 And must be subordinated to something higher:—
 See the simple, embrace primitivity;
 Reduce the self, lessen the desires.

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 21

The expression of Vast Virtue (*te*)
 Is derived from the Tao alone.
 As to the Tao itself,

It is elusive and evasive.
 Evasive, elusive,
 Yet within it there are images.
 Elusive, evasive,
 Yet within it there are things.
 Shadowy and dim,
 Yet within it there is a vital force.
 The vital force is very real,
 And therein dwells truth.

From the days of old till now,
 Its name has never ceased to be,
 And it has witnessed the beginning of all things.
 How do I know the shape of the beginning of all things?
 Through it.

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25

There was something nebulous yet complete,
 Born before Heaven and earth.
 Silent, empty,
 Self-sufficient and unchanging,
 Revolving without cease and without fail,
 It acts as the mother of the world.

I do not know its name,
 And address it as "Tao."
 Attempting to give it a name, I shall call it "Great."
 To be great is to pass on.
 To pass on is to go further and further away.
 To go further and further away is to return.

Therefore Tao is great, Heaven is great, earth is great,
 And the king is also great.
 These are the Great Four in the universe,
 And the king is one of them.
 Man follows the ways of earth,
 Earth follows the ways of Heaven;

Heaven follows the ways of Tao;
 Tao follows the ways of itself.

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28

He who knows the masculine but keeps to the feminine,
 Becomes the ravine of the world.
 Being the ravine of the world,
 He dwells in constant virtue,
 He returns to the state of the babe.

He who knows the white but keeps to the black,
 Becomes the model of the world.
 Being the model of the world,
 He rests in constant virtue,
 He returns to the infinite.

He who knows glory but keeps to disgrace,
 Becomes the valley of the world.
 Being the valley of the world,
 He finds contentment in constant virtue,
 He returns to the uncarved block.¹

The cutting up of the uncarved block results in vessels,
 Which, in the hands of the sage, become officers.
 Truly, "A great cutter does not cut."

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32

Tao is eternal, nameless. Though the uncarved block seems small, it may be subordinated to nothing in the world. If kings and barons can preserve it, all creation would of itself pay homage, Heaven and earth would unite to send sweet dew, and the people would of themselves achieve peace and harmony.

Once the block is cut, names appear. When names begin to appear, know then that there is a time to stop. It is by this knowledge that danger may be avoided.

¹The "uncarved block" is a favorite figure used by the author of the *Lao Tzu* in referring to the original state of complete simplicity which is his highest ideal.

[The spontaneous working of] the Tao in the world is like the flow of the valley brooks into a river or sea.

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34

The great Tao flows everywhere:
It can go left; it can go right.

The myriad things owe their existence to it,
And it does not reject them.

When its work is accomplished,
It does not take possession.
It clothes and feeds all,
But does not pose as their master.

Ever without ambition,
It may be called small.
All things return to it as to their home,
And yet it does not pose as their master,
Therefore it may be called Great.

Because it would never claim greatness,
Therefore its greatness is fully realized.

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37

Tao invariably does nothing (*wu-wei*),
And yet there is nothing that is not done.

If kings and barons can preserve it,
All things will go through their own transformations.
When they are transformed and desire to stir,
We would restrain them with the nameless primitivity.

Nameless primitivity will result in the absence of desires,
Absence of desires will lead to quietude;
The world will, of itself, find its equilibrium.

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40

Reversal is the movement of the Tao;
Weakness is the use of the Tao.
All things in the world come into being from being;
Being comes into being from nonbeing.

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42

Tao gave birth to One; One gave birth to Two; Two gave birth to Three; Three gave birth to all the myriad things. The myriad things carry the yin² on their backs and hold the yang in their embrace, and derive their harmony from the permeation of these forces.

To be "orphaned," "lonely," and "unworthy" is what men hate, and yet these are the very names by which kings and dukes call themselves. Truly, things may increase when they are diminished, but diminish when they are increased.

What others teach I also teach: "A man of violence will come to a violent end."³ This I shall regard as the parent of all teachings.

43

The most yielding of things outruns the most unyielding.
Having no substance, they enter into no-space.
Hence I know the value of nonaction (*wu-wei*). The instructiveness of silence, the value of nonaction—few in the world are up to this.

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48

To seek learning one gains day by day;
To seek the Tao one loses day by day.
Losing and yet losing some more,
Till one has reached doing nothing (*wu-wei*).
Do nothing and yet there is nothing that is not done.
To win the world one must attend to nothing.
When one attends to this and that,
He will not win the world.

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² Yin is the passive, negative, or female principle of the universe; yang is the active, positive, or male principle.

³ An ancient saying.