

Way  
Viper  
Classic

1.5

The Tao Te Ching

(Lao Tzu) "old master"

6th C.  
BCE

**Preparing to Read**

What if we are not merely culture bound but totally wrong about the nature of what is? The first four readings have introduced us to diversity and even disagreement, but all have shared a respect for reason or at least honored the value of thinking. These assumptions are dramatically challenged by our last reading from the Taoist classic *Tao Te Ching*. If "The Tao we can speak of has already lost its wholeness," our usual reliance on words and concepts may be more of a hindrance than a help. By observing the Tao, at play in the natural world, we can see that it produces everything, yet takes no credit and demands no loyalty.

Our senses and our powers of direct observation—the very things that Plato disparaged in our first selection—are the keys to a wisdom deeper than words. Words and reasoning may be the way to knowledge, but wisdom is reached through simplicity and ego-free action. This classic, written (according to legend) as Lao-tzu was leaving the city in disgust for a life as a hermit, offers the Way of wisdom and happiness.

*Tao Te Ching*

CHAPTER ONE

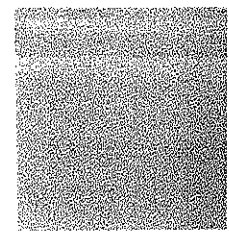
The Tao we can speak of  
has already lost its wholeness.  
The name we can name  
is no longer the everlasting Way.  
How can we give a name  
to the source of heaven and earth?  
The mother or matrix of all  
is beyond naming.  
Free yourself from desire  
and live within the mystery of creation.  
Caught in desire, you will see  
only its manifestations.  
And yet, at a deeper level,  
the source and its expression are one.  
Meditate on this profound pairing —  
it opens the way to all wisdom

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

With ego-free leadership  
only the Tao is visible.  
Leaders who are loved, feared,  
or (worst of all) despised  
proclaim with increasing intensity  
how much of themselves  
they place  
between the Way and the people.  
Lack of faith breeds unfaithfulness.  
The best leaders know  
the Tao accomplishes everything anyway.  
They smile when the people say,  
"Look what we did!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The way of Nature is clear  
to anyone who looks.



Bend with the wind  
 if you wish to remain rooted and upright.  
 Empty yourself and expect to be filled.  
 What wears out is continually renewed.  
 Don't be foolish enough  
 to try to improve upon Nature  
 or to set yourself against  
 its immutable ways.  
 Instead, learn from Nature  
 how to lead your own life.  
 Let others discover how clever you are  
 and how much you've accomplished.  
 Those who don't compete  
 meet the least resistance  
 and reach their goals unopposed.  
 The wise have always understood this.  
 Bend with the wind  
 if you wish to remain rooted and upright.

#### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Tao moves the stars  
 and rests in the heart of the atom.  
 All things arise from it  
 yet it takes no credit,  
 demands no loyalty,  
 asserts itself over nothing.  
 Since it is the invisible force within everything,  
 we might think of it as humble.  
 Because all things return to it, pulled like the  
 waves, we recognize its power.  
 The Tao has no need to make claims.  
 All of nature acclaims it.

#### CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

When we pursue knowledge,  
 acquiring more is the goal.  
 When we pursue wisdom,  
 simplicity is the path.  
 Less and less doing is required until,  
 ultimately, we reach perfect efficiency.  
 Without striving, everything is accomplished  
 effortlessly.  
 We have simply gained the wisdom  
 to let everything follow its own nature  
 This is the path of pure mastery.

#### CHAPTER SEVENTY-NINE

In any decision,  
 the world sees  
 winners and losers  
 This sows the seeds  
 of future conflict.  
 If you find yourself  
 declared a winner,  
 win graciously.  
 Be scrupulous in monitoring  
 your own conduct.  
 Remember that the Tao  
 remains impartial  
 and recognizes  
 neither winners  
 nor losers.

### *Continuing to Think*

What if everything we needed to know about what is was right in front of us? This is the claim of Taoist wisdom. We don't need to spend our lives lost in wisdom texts, or spend years apprenticed to a master. All we really need to do is to pay attention to the world around and within us—and, the further claim is—they are the same.

Just as the trees are wise enough and practical enough to bend in a windstorm and, therefore, live to remain straight and tall; we would be wise to know when to bend and when to insist on standing firm. Nature doesn't deplete herself by being ac-

tive all the time. Even the sun takes a rest for part of each day-night cycle. Why would we be foolish enough to burn ourselves out in a burst of energy that permits no rest? Seasons change throughout the year, reminding us that there is a time for planning, for joy, for thoughtfulness, for grieving, and for deep wisdom—in every day as well as in every year.

What an astounding claim! The key to understanding the mystery of all that is, and the way to happiness and a life well lived, are right outside our windows and right inside ourselves. The wisdom text we seek is all around us and within us—what could be simpler?

### ***Summing Up the Readings***

Why philosophy? All five answers in this chapter seem to be negative ones. If you don't pursue philosophy, Plato warns, you can never leave the cave of sense experience and crowd psychology. Aristophanes agrees: If philosophy is misused, the weaker argument will appear the stronger and you may get more than you bargained for. Draw too narrow a definition of philosophy, Professor Onyewuenyi asserts, and you wrongfully exclude those who differ from you in minor ways but who are your partners in the search for wisdom and truth. If you don't know and understand your place in the cosmos, Rigoberta Menchú explains, how will you honor your ancestors and fulfill the duties your community expects? Finally, Lao-tzu gently urges us to let go of our frantic search for wisdom and happiness and open our eyes to what is everywhere to be seen.

All these readings agree that an unreflective life is a waste of time, less than we are capable of, and may be downright dangerous. Philosophy, like many valuable things, must be handled carefully, protected from abuse, and kept out of the hands of those who don't know what to do with it. Used with respect, it is the royal road to wisdom and its roots lie deep in every culture. Our task in this book will be to discover those roots and follow them to their sources.

### ***Continuing to Question***

1. What is there about the philosophy of the Sophists that was so repulsive to Plato? Do you agree with his criticisms of them? Why or why not?

2. Are you convinced that there is an African philosophy? Does fitting into the thought and logic patterns of the Western world constitute the only path to philosophical legitimacy? From what you know of Western philosophy at this point, is it "divorced from real life"?

3. Where does your own worldview place you? Do you think of yourself only as an autonomous individual with rights that must be protected, or do you also see yourself as having duties that complement those rights?