



Laozi on an Ox, Zhang Lu, Ming Dynasty

The Daodejing

The legendary author of the *Daodejing*, Laozi (老子) is depicted in a famous painting riding an ox, holding in his hand a scroll that is the text of the *Daodejing*. The story suggested by the image is a key part of the legend of Laozi. Whereas Confucius emphasized the importance of taking on a responsible role in society, being a ruler or at least holding some office and serving as a role model for the people, Laozi is depicted here riding that ox on his way out of the city. He is about to pass through the gate of the city, and there he will hand the text off to the gatekeeper, and then disappear forever into the mountains. Laozi is mentioned in the later texts, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Liezi*, and it is suggested there that he is an older contemporary of Confucius, which would place him in the sixth century BCE. Most scholars are now convinced that there may not have existed a single person named "Laozi" who wrote the book. The name simply means "Old (*lao*) Master (*zi*)," and was probably just a name given to an anthology of sayings written by a number of individuals who lived in the time just after Confucius. Nevertheless, for convenience it perhaps makes sense to still refer to an author named Laozi.

1

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.
A name that can be named is not a constant name.
Nameless (*wuming*), it is the beginning of Heaven and earth;
Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures.
And so,
 Always eliminate desires in order to observe its mysteries;
 Always have desires in order to observe its manifestations.
These two come forth in unity but diverge in name.
Their unity is known as an enigma.
Within this enigma is yet a deeper enigma.
The gate of all mysteries!

無名
wuming

2

Everyone in the world knows that when the beautiful strives to be beautiful, it is repulsive.
 Everyone knows that when the good strives to be good, it is no good.
 And so,

To have and to lack generate each other.
 Difficult and easy give form to each other.
 Long and short off-set each other.
 High and low incline into each other.

Note and rhythm harmonize with each other.

Before and after follow each other.

This is why the sages abide in the business of nonaction
 (*wuwei*),

and practice the teaching that is without words.

They work with the myriad creatures and turn none away.

They produce without possessing,

They act with no expectation of reward.

When their work is done, they do not linger,

And, by not lingering, merit never deserts them.



陽

Yang

male
 brightness
 something
 doing something
 knowledge
 full
 above
 before
 moving
 big
 strong
 hard
 straight

陰

Yin

female
 darkness
 nothing
 doing nothing
 ignorance
 empty
 below
 behind
 still
 small
 weak
 soft
 bent

3

Not paying honor to the worthy leads the people to avoid contention.

Not showing reverence for precious goods leads them not to steal.

Not making a display of what is desirable leads their hearts away from chaos.

This is why sages bring things to order by opening people's hearts (*xin*) and filling their bellies.

They weaken the people's commitments and strengthen their bones;

They make sure that the people are without knowledge (*wuzhi*)
 or desires (*wuyu*);

And that those with knowledge do not dare to act.

Sages enact nonaction (*wuwei*) and everything becomes well ordered.

[In the Chinese conception of human beings, there is no distinction between the heart and the mind. Thus *xin* could be rendered "heart-mind."]

4

The Way is like an empty vessel;

No use could ever fill it up.

Vast and deep!

It seems to be the ancestor of the myriad creatures.

It blunts their sharpness;

Untangles their tangles;
Softens their glare;
Merges with their dust.
Deep and clear!
It seems to be there.
I do not know whose child it is;
It is the image of what was before the Lord himself.

5

Heaven and earth are not benevolent (*ren*);
They treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.
Sages are not benevolent;
They treat the people as straw dogs.
Is not the space between Heaven and earth (*tian*) like a
bellows?
Empty yet inexhaustible!
Work it and more will come forth.
An excess of speech will lead to exhaustion.
It is better to hold on to the mean.

["Straw dogs" were used as ceremonial offerings. Before and during the ceremony they were protected and cherished, but as soon as the ceremony ended, they were discarded and defiled. Since benevolence (*ren*) is one of the most important Confucian virtues, the text here challenges Confucianism. Heaven (*tian*) is treated in the *Daodejing* as the impersonal forces of nature or the regular operations of the natural world. *Tian* is often used as an abbreviation for *tiandi* "Heaven and earth."]

6

The spirit of the valley never dies;
She is called the "Enigmatic Female."
The portal of the Enigmatic Female;
Is called the root of Heaven and earth.
An unbroken, gossamer thread;
It seems to be there.
But use will not unsettle it.

[The valley spirit is called *xuanpin*, from *xuan* (mysterious, profound, secret, dark) and *pin* (woman, mother, womb); thus, the "hidden creator," or "enigmatic" or "dark female" is the *men tiandi* "gate" of Heaven and Earth. The image of the "portal" or "gateway" of the female is used as an analogy for the source or the "root" of Heaven and earth (or all things).]

7

Heaven is long lasting;
Earth endures.
Heaven is able to be long lasting and earth is able to endure,
because they do not live for themselves.
And so, they are able to be long lasting and to endure.
This is why sages put themselves last and yet come out first;
Treat themselves as unimportant and yet are preserved.
Is it not because they have no thought of themselves,

that they are able to perfect themselves?

8

The highest good is like water.

Water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures, while not contending with them.

It resides in the places that people find repellent, and so comes close to the Way.

In a residence, the good lies in location.

In hearts, the good lies in depth.

In interactions with others, the good lies in being gentle and kind.

In words, the good lies in trustworthiness.

In government, the good lies in orderliness.

In carrying out one's business, the good lies in ability.

In actions, the good lies in timeliness.

Only by avoiding contention can one avoid blame.

9

To hold the vessel upright in order to fill it is not as good as to stop in time.

If you make your blade too keen it will not hold its edge.

When gold and jade fill the hall none can hold on to them.

To be haughty when wealth and honor come your way is to bring disaster upon yourself.

To withdraw when the work is done is the Way of Heaven.

10

Embracing your soul and holding on to the One,

can you keep them from departing.

Concentrating your *qi*, "vital energies," and attaining the utmost suppleness,

can you be a child?

Cleaning and purifying your enigmatic mirror, can you erase every flaw?

Caring for the people and ordering the state, can you eliminate all knowledge?

When the portal of Heaven opens and closes, can you play the part of the feminine?

Comprehending all within the four directions, can you reside in nonaction (*wuwei*)?

To produce them!

To nurture them!

To produce without possessing;

To act with no expectation of reward;

To lead without lording over;

Such is Enigmatic Virtue (*de*).

氣
Qi

無為
wuwei

11

Thirty spokes are joined in the hub of a wheel.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the carriage.
 By adding and removing clay we form a vessel.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the vessel.
 By carving out doors and windows we make a room.
 But only by relying on what is not there, do we have the use of the room.
 And so, what is there is the basis for profit.
 What is not there is the basis for use.

15

In ancient times, the best and most accomplished scholars;
 Were subtle, mysterious, enigmatic, and far-reaching,
 Their profundity was beyond understanding.
 Because they were beyond understanding, only with difficulty can we try to describe them:
 Poised, like one who must ford a stream in winter.
 Cautious, like one who fears his neighbors on every side.
 Reserved, like a visitor.
 Opening up, like ice about to break.
 Honest, like the unhewn wood (*pu*).
 Broad, like a valley.
 Turbid, like muddy water.

Who can, through stillness, gradually make muddied water clean?
 Who can, through movement, gradually stir to life what has long been still?
 Those who preserve this Way do not desire fullness.
 And, because they are not full, they have no need for renewal.

樸
Pu

18

When the great Way is abandoned, there are benevolence (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*).
 When wisdom and intelligence come forth, there is great hypocrisy.
 When the six familial relationships are out of balance, there are kind parents and filial children.
 When the state is in turmoil and chaos, there are loyal ministers.

19

Cut off sageliness, abandon wisdom, and the people will benefit one-hundred-fold.
 Cut off benevolence, abandon righteousness, and the people will return to being filial and kind.
 Cut off cleverness, abandon profit, and robbers and thieves will be no more.
 This might leave the people lacking in culture.

So give them something with which to identify:
Manifest plainness. Embrace Simplicity.

22

Those who are crooked will be perfected.
Those who are bent will be straight.
Those who are empty will be full.
Those who are worn will be renewed.
Those who have little will gain.
Those who have plenty will be confounded.
This is why the sages embrace the One and serve as models for the whole world.
They do not make a display of themselves and so are illustrious.
They do not affirm their own views and so are well-known.
They do not brag about themselves and so are accorded merit.
They do not boast about themselves and so are heard of for a long time.
Because they do not contend, no one in the world can contend with them.
The ancient saying “Those who are crooked will be perfect” is not without substance!
Truly the sages are and remain perfect.

23

To be sparing with words is what comes naturally.
And so,
A blustery wind does not last all morning;
A heavy downpour does not last all day.
Who produces these?
Heaven and earth!
If not even Heaven and earth can keep things going for a long time,
How much less can human beings?
This is why one should follow the Way in all that one does.
One who follows the Way identifies with the Way.
One who follows loss identifies with loss.
The Way is pleased to have those who identify with the Way.
Virtue is pleased to have those who identify with Virtue.
Loss is pleased to have those who identify with loss.
Those lacking in trust are not trusted.

There is a thing confused yet perfect, which arose before Heaven and earth.
 Still and indistinct, it stands alone and unchanging.
 It goes everywhere yet is never at a loss.
 One can regard it as the mother of Heaven and earth.
 I do not know its proper name;
 I have given it the style “the Way.”
 Forced to give it a proper name, I would call it “Great.”
 The Great passes on;
 What passes on extends into the distance;
 What extends into the distance returns to its source.
 And so the Way is great;
 Heaven is great;
 Earth is great;
 And a true king too is great.
 In the universe are four things that are great and the true king is first among
 them.
 People (*ren*) model themselves on the earth (*di*).
 The earth models itself on Heaven (*tian*).
 Heaven models itself on the Way (*dao*).
 The Way models itself on what is natural (*ziran*).

人

ren

地

di

天

tian

道

dao

自然

ziran

* * *