

TAO TE CHING:
THE CLASSIC OF THE WAY AND ITS VIRTUE

by
B. S. SATYANARAYANA
BANGALORE UNIVERSITY

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In 1984 a series of lectures and discussions were held on the Great Books of the World. One such book discussed was the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tse. This transaction represents the text of the talk delivered by Professor B. S. Satyanarayana who teaches at the University of Bangalore.

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**TAO TE CHING:
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**B. S. SATYANARAYANA
BANGALORE UNIVERSITY**

INTRODUCTION

Man on this earth has always been seeking untiringly for something beyond himself and it is this seeking that has led him, on the one hand, to the advancement in Science and Technology at the physical plane, and to the highest attainment in sublime poetry profound religion and exacting philosophy at the intellectual realms on the other. The history of religion all over the world is the story of this struggle of man for the Unattainable. It is also his greatness that he never stopped in his struggle, always looking beyond himself at every step of his progress. The sorcery and magic among the primitive man, the mysterious practices and rituals, myths and legends, the various art. forms and music; trance and 'possession' by gods and spirits, shamanism, the phenomenon of guidance from the other worlds ; the worship of the ancestors, of nature - spirits, the animal-spirits, the institution of priesthood, the belief in the intervention of the supernatural - anthropomorphic or otherwise, in the affairs of man ; the everlasting dialogues and discussions among the intellectuals about the higher dimensions of existence ; the speculations about the life after death, the belief in re-incarnation, the idea of Holy-God, the Father in the Heaven, many theories explaining the evil in the world, the concept of *Karma*, the transcendental mysticism- each one of them, has been an attempt on the part of man to understand himself, his world and the mystery of his existence. Obviously, man cannot live only by bread and butter. He needs something, more profound, sublime and everlasting, by which he can order his life more meaningfully, purposefully, significantly and harmoniously.

Even the modern Science, which parted company from religion and philosophy long ago in order to be exact and objective in its investigation, has been forced to come back and has begun to speak the language of the mystic to explain its mysteries of sub-atomic, world !

Every country in the world has contributed to the development of human thought, in various fields; and many are the works of great thinkers which have left an indelible mark on the posterity. *Tao Te Ching*, a small Chinese treatise has always fascinated the thinkers all over the world for more than two thousand five hundred years.

THE BACKGROUND

Tao Te Ching is a small volume containing about 5,250 ideographs, word-pictures distilling the Tao Philosophy, an indigenous Chinese approach to life. It is one of the source books for studying the mysticism and philosophy of Taoism.

The roots of Taoism are traced back to the golden age of China, about five thousand years ago. The teachings of Taoism combine within the elements of folk-lore of ancient China, occult sciences, cosmology, meditation, sublime poetry, a philosophy of quietism and an exalted mysticism. It is a way of living that has almost vanished from the present busy world. There are traditional beliefs which take back its philosophy to *Huang Ti*, the Yellow Emperor whose date is believed to be 2697 to 2597 B.C. Whether he was a historical person or not is besides the point. The poetic legends surrounding his personality have made the followers of Taoism believe that their philosophy is 'Huang Lao' philosophy, thus accepting and honouring both the Yellow Emperor and Lao Tzu as the founders of Taoism.

There might have been a golden age, as most of the world myths and legends affirm, perhaps before the disappearance of the great continent, Atlantis. Whatever it may be the popular Taoism believes that during the Golden Age, men and gods were kin; wherein men were in possession of the secret of immortality, longevity, and sages were in communion with the Great Formless, sitting as they were in rapt stillness!!

In the religious history of China, two streams of thought were found to be most influential; Taoism, the philosophy of withdrawal and quietism, and Confucianism, a moral philosophy of with a realistic and legalistic orientation. When Buddhism entered into China it became the third main force to become a popular religion in that country.

During the later development of religious thought, there was a mutual borrowing of ideas and ideals from among these; one influencing the other to certain extent. Thus, the Zen Buddhism has been influenced by Taoism and Taoism itself has taken a number of worldly wisdom from Confucianism, where as, the mystical element of Confucianism are the results of the influence of Taoism and Buddhism.

The development of Taoistic thought in China has seen its ups and downs. It had its royal patronage for some time, before the ascent of Confucianism as the religion of China. Earlier, i.e., before the emergence of the philosophy of Confucius, all educated Chinese were heirs to the one divine tradition: Around fifth century there was a need to differentiate with the emergence of Confucians who stressed social values such as loyalty to rulers and filial piety instead of seeking stillness and mystical communion with the Way.

With the decline of the T'ang dynasty (around 618 to 907 AD), the influence of Taoism also began to decline. During the time of Sung (960 to 1280 AD) and Ming (1368 to 1644 AD) dynasties Buddhism became very popular and the Confucianism had a strong revival. The higher teachings of Taoism got absorbed into Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism and the popular Taoistic practices degenerated into superstitious magic, because of which Taoism itself has been discarded by many scholars as sheer nonsense! Even though the real Taoist teachers were living here and there in the mountains, the final curtain was drawn in China on Taoism as a spiritual influence, with the coming of Communism.

Among the many sages of Taoism the two important personalities whose influence is very significant are *Lao Tzu* and *Chuang Tze*. *Tao Te Ching* is believed to be the work of Lao Tzu, even though there are some scholars who would not subscribe to this view. *Tao Te Ching* is one of the profoundest books in the world's philosophy. Its language is terse and vigorous and the style of Lao' Tzu is epigrammatic. It is the most translated of all the Chinese books, mainly due to its small size, even though its profound message is not less attractive and captivating.

THE TEXT

Tao Te Ching is a small classic of Tao Teaching with 5,250 ideographs said to have been written by Li Er, Poh-Yang, popularly known to posterity as LAO TSZE (TSZU), which means venerable philosopher, or venerable Lord. His period is considered to be 604 to 517 B. C. He is supposed to have been born as an oldman, probably signifying his ripe wisdom and maturity of thought. He, by virtue of his stillness, attained communion with the Way. Having given up the impossible task of instructing the feudal princes and their ministers to deliver them from the reigning anarchy, he, an old wise man, rode off on a buffalo into the solitude beyond the Empires confines. At the gate of the frontier, the Gate Keeper of the pass besought him to leave behind some record of his wisdom for future generation. The great sage, obliged him in this by brushing the five thousand and odd characters (ideographs)

which became the *Tao Te Ching*, the Scripture of the Way and its Virtue. Then he rode on. There are many accounts regarding his end, some believing that he lived to be 160 years old, others that he lived for over 200 years, and yet others affirming that he achieved fleshy immortality.

Another great mystic of Taoism whose influence is quite considerable is Chuang Tzu, who is believed to have lived a century later than Lao Tzu'. There are many other sages or immortals like Ko Hung, Mao Meng, (third Century B. C.), whose contribution to the development of Taoist philosophy is quite substantial.

There are other scholars like Arthur Waley (1934) who question the authorship and the date of *Tao Te Ching*. According to Waley the text of *Tao Te Ching* was produced(?) in about 240 B.C. by a Quietist and he subjects the text to a detailed criticism. He presents his own arguments for why it cannot be accepted as the work of Lao Tzu etc. and also gives reasons as to how it got associated with Lao Tzu.

The *Tao Te Ching* has been translated into many languages. There are about more than 350 commentaries on it available. It combines philosophical speculations with mystical reflections. Its style is abstruse, terse and its meaning often vague and cryptic, making interpretation often difficult. Its main theme is TAO, the Eternal Unchanging Principle, effortless and spontaneous in its working. The message of the Classic and its dozen ideas are repeated in epigrammatic form again and again. The main ideas it covers are : the rhythm of life, the unity of the world and human phenomena, the importance of keeping the original simplicity of human nature, the danger of over-governmental rule, and interference with the simple life of the people, the doctrine of *Wu- Wei* or 'non-action' or 'letting things go', the pervading influence of the Spirit, humility, quietude and calmness in life, folly and foolishness of force, pride and of self-assertion. Thus, at the core, its message is at once profound and clear, mystic and practical.

Probably, the Chinese Classic *Tao Te Ching* was introduced to the western world around 1788 A.D. when a Latin translation of it was brought to the Royal Society in London. By 1844 the complete translation of the text was available both in German and in French. Arthur Schopenhauer quotes *Tao Te Ching* in his 'The World as Will and Representation (1844)': 'All men desire solely to be free themselves from death; They do not know how to free themselves from life.'

Many attempts have been made to compare the teachings of Tao with the world thinkers like Hegel, Plato, Kant and others in order to bring out the contrasting and comparable aspects of their writings. Among the modern philosophers, Professor Martin Heidegger seems to have been influenced by the *Tao Te Ching*, as evidenced both in his writing and his mode of living, like a true Tao Master. It is very interesting to note that Professor Heidegger proclaims that the present epoch 'is the end of philosophy' and 'the beginning of a new task of thinking.' He observes that 'perhaps there is a thinking outside the distinction of rational and irrational still more sober than scientific technology, more sober and thus removed, without effect and yet having its own necessity.' In the words of *Tao Te Ching*, this would be : "To learn, one accumulates day by day ; To study Tao, one reduces day by day. (Chapter 48). Kumarajiva, the great Indian Buddhist who went to China in the fourth century comments on this saying: "reduction and further reduction means to reduce all defilements and all subtleties until one reaches forgetfulness of all evil and all good. When one is free from both evil and good, one's inner potentiality identifies with the higher reality.'

Thus, it would be evident that the Classic *Tao Te Ching*, has its impact on both ancient

and modern thinkers of the world.

The word 'Tao' is translated as 'The Way' by some and others render it as 'The Truth' or 'Eternal Reason'. There are some who equate it with 'Logos' or 'word of Life' of the New Testament.

Lao Tzu says: 'Its name is unknown, I simply call it TAO'.

The word 'Te' is rendered into English as 'Virtue'. It is that mode of living in harmony with the Tao, which leads to the Tao. If Tao is the Goal to be attained then Te is the means or the guiding force which takes one to Tao. The last word 'Ching' is a classic or a canon or scripture. Thus, the title would mean the Classic of the Way and its Virtue, or 'The Scripture of the Way and its Virtue.'

The style of the text is cryptic and paradoxical and as the original ideographs are representations of 'Whole idea' and not graphic representation of letters as in other languages, the meaning becomes difficult and vague. Therefore a lot of variation is seen in many translations of Tao Te Ching by different authors.

There is no division of the original manuscript into chapters or sections by its author. Even though many topics are covered in the text ranging from sublime transcendental ideas about the Nameless Truth to morality, polity and so on, the flow of thought of the text runs like a river, frequently changing its course with considerable abruptness. Therefore, the atmosphere of the text becomes natural as its purpose and content, retaining the native beauty and grandeur of the Tao Itself. However, most of the texts in translation have presented the text in about 81 chapters.

Brevity and conciseness is the keynote of the text. The crystalline conciseness of its epigrammatic style is difficult to capture in translations. Each 'ideograph' or thought structure serves as an object of contemplation helping oneself to cleanse one's mind of all mundane thoughts leading one back to one's Source. The whole text is sheer poetry ! One cannot miss the poetic atmosphere created in the text, as one meets over and again the rhythmical motif of structure of vision and expression.

The Taoist masters were great lovers of nature. The main concern of Taoism is Nature, more than man. The Taoism has influenced the later poetry and art of China to such an extent that Nature became the central theme in both. In the traditional Chinese paintings landscape, flower-and-birds precede people-and-things. The truly representative art of China is landscape, where man seems to be subordinated to Nature, sometimes totally absent. The same is true in the case of Chinese poetry.

As Ko Hsi (1985 A D) puts it 'Poetry is formless painting, and painting is poetry in visual form.' The two art forms are not merely related but identical as far as their ultimate functions are concerned. Chinese artists paint landscape for the same reason the poets describe scenery in their poems. Their purpose is to refine the feelings, stimulate the mind, and to create a mood so that when the reader or the on-looker emerges from the mood, he becomes a nobler soul, a friendlier neighbour, a more pious son, in short a better human being.

Taoist poetry itself is very stimulating, fascinating and joyous ; its effect on the mind always being ennobling and refining. - The central theme of these poems is '*Stillness*', as it is of the Tao's Teaching. When asked by a messenger, why he is staying in a deep forest alone, the great poet Li Tai-po said : (John Blofeld's translation):

You ask me why I dwell

Amidst these jade-green hills?
I smile, No words can tell
The stillness in my heart.
The peach-bloom on the water,
How enchantingly it drifts !
I live in another realm here
Beyond the world of men.

Ch'uan Te-yu, a busy official during his retreat in forests has captured the silent beauty of Mao Shan mountains:

Dismounting from my house,
Dusk falling on the wild,
I hear amidst the silence
The splash of a mountain rill.
Birds sing and petals fall
Of men there is not a trace,
The window of my hut
Is curtained with white cloud.

Here is .a poem by the poet Li Feng about the bliss of meditation :

Faintly upon the breeze
Come the scents of Cassia and pine
The moon's cold radiance
Bathes the temple hall.
Lapped in stillness,
The hermit sits
And flies beyond the world.
To him, all sounds are silence
And there is nothing else at all-
Just all-pervading coolness.

THE TEACHINGS OF TAO IE CHING

The central theme of Tao Te Ching is 'TAO', the Way, the Truth, the Void, the Beyond and the Sadhana it advocates is *Wu Wei*, non-being and non-doing, effortless stillness, free from all calculated and profit-seeking activity. One has to read *TAO*, the Truth through *Te*, the Virtue. The description of a recluse by the Poet Li Fend Lan-Jen illustrates this:

Cool as ice
His Taoist heart.
No vain strife
Towards the goal.
The Tao arises
of Itself,
So still his mind —
A shining moon-disc
Glistening, immaculate.

Tao is the highest attainment of primordial intuition. Tao is preontological experience, which is gained through the interfusion and identification of the subjectivity of man and the objectivity of things. This inner experience, is nameless and formless; yet it is the fountain of

potentiality from which all things emerge. The Tao Te Ching says (Mackintosh's translation);

Changeless yet moving ; from its womb
All things came into birth;
This is the mystic bride and groom,
Maker of heaven and earth.
Its name I know not, and none knows
Its nature, God, I call;
From whence all came, to which all goes -
The heart and home of all (83 and 84)

Its call to every one is to return to the Tao, the Unity, which is at the very root of all manifest multiplicity. The Text says: 'Through It(Tao), *minds*, become *souls* at length; In it earth Shall endure.'

In order to attain to full realization, one does not have to *do* or to *become* anything whatsoever; what is needed is just to *be* what in fact one really has been from the first. Wang Ching-yang illustrates this method in his poem :

Then before you lies the truth
That, there's nothing to be sought.
Of *themselves* the hills are green;
Of *themselves* the waters flow.
Let the mind by night and day
Embrace this single thought -
By thought wherein there's no thought
Must one cultivate the Way.

THE NATURE OF TAO

The very opening Chapter sets the tone and approach of the text towards the 'TAQ', its theme, by noting that: 'The Tao that can be spoken of is not the Tao itself; The name that can be given is not the name itself.' This is a warning concerning the limitation of speech to exhaust the meaning of Reality. What one can talk about is not the eternal Tao; and what one can name is not the Eternal Name. Tao can only be termed as the nameless, or Non-being ; it is beyond any categorization, but it is the necessary source of all. The text says:

From the Tao, one is created;
From one, two;
From two, Three,
From three, ten thousand things. (Chap.42)

The unnamable Tao is vast, eternal, undifferentiated void, pure spirit; *it is* the mother of the cosmos. Itself being a 'No-being', it is the source of Being. The Text says :

Reverse is the movement of Tao.
Yielding is the action of Tao.
Ten thousand things in the universe are created from being;
Being is created from non-being. (Chap. 40)

When one tries to express the Truth through the medium of language, one is caught in paradoxes. No wonder, therefore, that Tao Te Ching is full of paradoxes. Many are the paradoxical expressions used to indicate the nature of Tao.

Tao functions through its nothingness (*hsu*)

and cannot be conceived of as full of things. (Chap.4)

Many are such expressions in the text, aiming to lift the attention of the reader beyond the levels of contradictions of human existence.

One can ponder over these statements from the text profitably.

“Never be the first in the world” (Chap. 67) ; “The greatest cleverness appears like stupidity” (Chap. 45)” “The greatest eloquence seems like stuttering” (Chap. 45). “A Victory should be celebrated with the Funeral Rite” (Chap. 31). “The honest ones I believe; the liars also I believe.” (Chap. 48). “The farther one pursues knowledge, the less one knows” (Chap. 47).

Chapter fourteen gives a few pointers about the nature of Tao in a paradoxical language:

“Gaze at it, there is nothing to see; It is called the formless. Heed it, there is nothing to hear ; It is called the soundless. Grasp it, there is nothing to hold on to ; It is called the immaterial. We cannot inquire into these three; Hence they interfuse into one. Above, is not light. Below it is not dark. Invisible, it cannot be called by any name. It returns again to nothingness. Thus, we called it the form of the formless. The image of the imageless. It is the evasive. Approach it, you cannot see its face. Go after it; you cannot see its back. Adhere to the Tao of the remote past, and apply it to the present. This will enable you to understand the primordial beginning. This is the essential Tao.”

There is an ancient Chinese poem which captures this atmosphere of Tao:

“The wind ceases, yet blossoms fall;
Birds sing, yet the mountain becomes more silent.”
In Chapter 34 we read:
“The magnificent Tao is all-pervading.
It may penetrate to either this side or that side.
All creatures abide with it and grow; none are excluded from it.
When its work is done, it does not demand merit.
It nurtures all things, but does not rule them.”

Again we understand from the Chapter 37 the way Tao functions:

“Tao is Teal and free from action,
Yet nothing is not acted upon.”

When the approach of Tao is seen from the worldly point of view it appears to be most ridiculous if not sheer nonsense. The sage is also aware of this and hence he says :

When a man of superior talent listens to Tao,
He earnestly applies it.
When an ordinary man listens to Tao, he seems to
believe it and yet not to believe it.
When the worst man listens to Tao, he greatly ridicules it.
If he did not ridicule it, it would not be Tao. (Chap. 41)

TECHNIQUES OF ATTAINMENT

The keynote of Lao Tzu’s Teachings in his Tao Te Ching is ‘simplicity’, which is the central idea by which other apparently strange concepts must be understood. A simple life is a life of plainness, in which profit is discarded, cleverness abandoned, selfishness

minimized, and desires reduced. It is the life of 'perfection which seems to be incomplete' and 'of fullness which seems to be empty' of 'absolute straightness which seems to be crooked' of 'skill which seems to be clumsy' and of 'eloquence which seems to be stuttering.' It is a process of emptying oneself from moment to moment, thus freeing one's consciousness from its contents. Tao is achieved through the method of reduction. In chapter 48 of the Text the approach to the attainment of Tao is indicated, which is based upon the nature of the Tao itself:

"To learn, one accumulates day by day;
To study Tao, One reduces day by day."

The stages of this attainment include, *i*) purgation, the freeing oneself from the bondage to the external world, *ii*) concentration, leading to the unification of the self, and *iii*) enlightenment, or Union with Tao. The emphasis is on *Wu Wei* (non-being and non-action). This state of non-action is possible only when the individual is able to attain the virtue (*Te*), humility and simplicity. The virtue essentially is a mental state which has the ideal of 'sageliness within and kingliness without'. He should live naturally and spontaneously. A simple life would mean a life of plainness, in which profit is discarded, cleverness abandoned, selfishness minimized, and desires reduced. To live naturally would be to live and be like water, which is 'similar to the highest good', and 'near to the Tao'. Chapter 8 gives the natural course of water, which should be the ideal for the Man of Tao.

That which is best is similar to Water.
Water profits ten thousand things and does not oppose them.
It is always at rest in humble places that people dislike.
Thus, it is close to Tao.

The doctrine of in-action, *Wu Wei*, should not be mistaken for total inactivity, renunciation or the cult of unconsciousness. It is a *natural* way of behaviour. "The sage manages affairs without action, and spreads doctrines without words." (Chap.2).

"When action is through non-action, no one is uncultivated" (Chap. 3). The natural way is to 'support all things in their natural state.' and thus allow them to transform spontaneously. Thus, it would be clear that the Way of *Wu Wei* is the way of spontaneity, to be contrasted with the artificial way, the way of effort, the method of cleverness and superficial morality. It is for this reason that the man of Tao is free from self, free from reputation, and free from claiming credit. It is not that he has no self; rather, his self is the self of 'no-self'.

It is said that the Sage Lao Tzu condemned Confucius for his attachment *to* the past and for his excessive concern with the external displaying of goodness. He urged him: "Get rid of that arrogance of yours, all those desires, that self-sufficient air, that over-weening zeal; all that is of no use to you true person."

There is another example of Lao Tzu's view about human pretence. Once Confucius happened to come upon Laotzu bathing in a stream. The elderly sage emerged from the water to receive, stark naked. 'Sir! Cried the great moralist, hastily averting his eyes,' I perceive you are lacking in a proper sense of human dignity. If humans were to go around unclad, in what way would they be distinguishable from birds and beasts?" Lao-tzu replied: 'Sir, is it such a bad thing' to put ourselves on the level of birds and beasts ? They are strangers to lust for fame, covetousness, stinginess, wallowing in luxury and countless other vices. You will excuse me if I go on with my bath."

The highest attainment in virtue is a state of 'non-being' or void which is equated to

the Tao. The text asks:

“The thirty spokes within the wheel unite upon a hole:
Yet, but for that which none can feel, how could the carriage roll?”

The significant aspect of non-being is the principle of unity of multiplicity. The manifest aspects like spokes of a wheel, the four walls of a room, the moving vessel Kaye their functional unity not in themselves, but in the empty space they enclose like the hub at the centre, doors and windows in the walls and the space in the vessel. It is for this reason Tao Te Ching illustrates how a Man of Tao functions;

“REST conquers motion; at the heart
of lightness there is mass.
And so the wise one sits apart
As pleasures come and pass.”

Chapter 37 observes:

“Tao is real and free from action, yet nothing is
not acted upon.
If rulers abide with it, all things transmute
by themselves....
To be free from intending to have non-intention
is to be quiescent.
Thereby, the world is naturally led to tranquility.”

Chuang Tzu sings about the tranquility of the Man of Tao:

“Like a dry skeleton in his frame;
Like sparkless ashes in his mind.
Genuine in his knowledge, solid and true,
Not supported by reasoning.
Dark and dim, he has no mind,
Not accessible to discussion.
O ! Lo ! What kind of person is he now.”

CONCLUSION

Tao Te Ching presents an approach to life which is at once natural, simple and profound. Unfortunately, man involved as he is in his worldly affairs does not heed to it. Even though it examines the problems of cosmology, and the duality of manifestation in terms of Yin and Yang, and presents the functioning of the universe on the basis of the three principles of (which it calls as three treasures), *Ching*, the essence, *Chi*, the vitality and *Sh'en*, the spirit, it emphasizes more on stillness, non-action, humility, simplicity, harmony with the nature's law. The man of Tao, instead of going forward with the world, is prepared to trace his footsteps back to the source of all manifestation. The Sage Lao-tzu in the chapter 67 sets down three essentials that are absolutely necessary on the Way.

“There are three essentials that I value and maintain:
One is compassion (*tzu*)
Another is renunciation (*Ch'ien*)
The third is never longing to be the first in the world.”

He makes a profound observation when he says: ‘one who renounces is able to broaden one’s self;’ Chapter 72 gives a word picture of how the Man of Tao lives:

“The wise man will observe his heart,
And yield not to displays;
Endeavoring to play his part,
He will not seek for praise.”

The greatness of Tao is perfect primarily because it never considers itself great.

As Reality is natural, so must our life be. This is the call of Taoism. The natural state of Virtuous existence is compared to an infant. “When a man is enriched with *Te*, He may be identified with an Innocent child.... The essence of his life is perfect... . His inner harmony is supreme.” (Chap. 55).

To know the Eternal naturally is called ‘enlightenment’. Lao Tzu says :

Attain compete vacuity.
Maintain steadfast quietude.
All things come into being
.....
Reality is all-embracing
To be all-embracing is to be selfless.
To be selfless is to be all-pervading.
To be all-pervading is to be transcendent.
To be transcendent is to attain Tao.
To attain Tao is to be everlasting.
Even when the body dies, it is not the end. (Chap.16)

The universal message of Tao Te Ching to every seeker after Truth is to have that Experience which is nameless and not to accumulate nor argue. One has to emulate the Tao Sage who:

“Will not argue, then, not strive,
And yet will never cease
His toil, till everyone alive
Has seen and known Tao’s PEACE.” (Chap. 81).

