

# THE WISDOM OF LAO TZU

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**If** it were kosher to have a favorite philosopher, Lao Tzu would be the favorite of many. His teachings and aphorisms are intriguingly contemporary and personal. We live in times where even ethical behavior is characterized by moral outrage rather than moral values. Although people claim intellectual expertise on solving the problems of the world, solutions continue to evade us, in the absence of an ability to reflect and take responsibility through self-understanding. In such times, a man who simply states: "Respect for ourselves guides our morals; respect for others, our manners", is priceless in his worth.

A philosopher and poet from ancient China, Lao Tzu is believed to have lived around the 6th century BC, and is credited with having authored the bedrock of Taoism, a treatise entitled "Tao Te Ching". He was an older contemporary of another iconic Chinese philosopher, Confucius. Lao Tzu spoke about spiritual love being a necessary ingredient of social interaction. Although modern society, in many ways, is obsessed with love, the manifestation of this beautiful virtue is often adversarial, negotiatory or self-centered. In such

times, Lao Tzu teaches: **"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage"**.

In the middle of the 20th century, there emerged serious doubt among scholars about the historical existence of Lao Tzu. However, the philosophical pitfalls of history-centrism, and the politics that surround it, are best left as idle ruminations of the non-subtle literalists.

Today it is widely accepted that Lao Tzu was a native of the settlement of Chu Jen in village Li, in the state of Ch'u. He was the designated Historian-in-Charge of the archives in the court of the Chou dynasty. A man of untold wisdom, even in the absence of a formal school established by him, he is said to have been surrounded by many disciples. He lived in Ch'u for a long time, but seeing the state's eventual decline he decided to leave. According to legend, as he was leaving, a simple guard named Yinxi, on the western gates of the city, recognized him. He requested the Master to write down his teachings for posterity; what emerged was the works of Lao Tzu, in the



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**PEARLS OF WISDOM**

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He who knows his innocence and  
recognizes his evil, Te will not fail him.

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Be Content with what you have;  
rejoice in the way things are.  
When you realize there is nothing lacking,  
the whole world belongs to you.

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Ever desireless, one can see the  
mysteries. Ever desirous, one can see the  
manifestations.

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**LAO TZU**

two volumes of the "Tao Te Ching". He is thought to have travelled westward atop a water buffalo and lived as a hermit till the ripe old age of 160. Some apocryphal accounts hold that his travels led him to India, where he is thought to have instructed Siddhartha Gautama.

**He who understands others is intelligent. He who understands himself is enlightened. He who conquers others has force. He who is able to control himself is mighty.**

### **Tao Te Ching**

Tao means "the way", "the path" or "the creative force". It is conceptualized as the source of life and the cosmos, spirit and matter, soul and body. Tao is much like the Hindu concept of Dharma; it is the way life naturally, and rightfully, is.

Te means Virtue. It is akin to the formless Archetypes, to which Plato refers (Beauty, Justice, etc.) which are expressed in numerous forms. Tao, the creative force, gives birth to thousands of entities or Te; which he calls the "ten thousand things". These ten thousand things carry Yin (feminine impulse) and Yang (masculine impulse). They achieve harmony by combining.

Ching can be loosely translated as "the great book". Therefore, the Tao Te Ching is the "Great Book of the Way of Virtue". Lao Tzu prescribes a means by which to re-unite with Tao, called Wu Wei. Wu means "without" and Wei translates as "action", "effort", "doing". Modern scholars with an affinity for non-philosophical observations have interpreted this beautiful concept as passive

escapism from active engagement with the world. On the contrary, Wu Wei is the purest form of action, in which the doer and the deed are in a state of oneness, and deliberate effort becomes redundant; "nothing is left undone" in this non-action.

Lao Tzu states that the one who realizes the Tao is in a state of Wei Wu Wei – doing without doing. This assertion reflects his faith in the intelligence of the cosmos which results in the dissolution of separateness and a merging with the cosmic force of the universe – the Tao. When in this state, one would be able to say again, with humility, that "I am the Tao" - reminiscent of the Hindu assertion of oneness, "Aham Brahmasmi": I am Brahman.

The state of Wei Wu Wei can be observed in a ballerina performing a flawless grand jeté or a pirouette; a gymnast performing effortlessly on a balance beam; a samurai warrior moving in harmony with nature; a sufi mevlevi dervish mystically whirling around his axis in a state of mesmeric spiritual ecstasy; as the planets naturally orbiting the Sun, in a state of "effortlessness".

**Compassion will make you brave, economy will make you generous, humility will help you be of service.**

What blocks the play of these forces within human beings is the ego, which creates the illusion of exclusion from the universe, of which we are an integral part. Lao Tzu's legacy endorses the need to live in unison with Life and the cosmos. ★★★