

# TAO TE CHING THE ANCIENT CLASSIC

**TAO TE CHING**  
**THE ANCIENT CLASSIC**  
**THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER**

**LAO TZU**  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

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## THE ANCIENT CLASSIC

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With an Introduction by  
TOM BUTLER-BOWDON



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# AN INTRODUCTION

BY TOM BUTLER-BOWDON

*"Elusive and obscure, indeed, but at its heart... is all being.  
Unfathomable and obscure, indeed, but at its heart is all  
spirit, and spirit is reality. At its heart is truth."*

**What is Tao? Very simply, it is the timeless, changeless spirit that runs through all life and matter.** God, or Universal Mind or Intelligence, are other ways of describing it, but it is beyond the categorization of man. According to Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese personage who drew attention to the Tao, it is "Being that is all-inclusive and that existed before Heaven and Earth." Tao both creates everything in the universe, and keeps it all going.

This is all very well, but why should the Tao matter to you, an individual in the 21st century? What is the relationship between this spirit or force, and the individual?

The task of life, according to Lao Tzu, is to bring ourselves into attunement with the Tao, so that we are always moving with the grain of the universe, and not against it. This may not sound like much, but it makes all the difference to the quality and usefulness of our lives.

Tao is variously translated as "Way" or "Creative Principle," the principle behind all reality. In concrete terms, Tao manifests as

“Teh,” which means virtue or moral action. By being in tune with Tao, we naturally know the best action to take in any situation. Yet Lao Tzu did not lay out a set of social rules to be obeyed as such, but rather pointed to a certain positive way of being and acting that upholds the Tao’s creative principle.

Broken down, the title means “The Classic (*Ching*) of the Way (*Tao*) and Virtue” (*Teh*). In other words, it is a book about recognizing truth and acting in accordance with it. The *Tao Teh Ching*, or (*Daodejing*, as it is also known) is sometimes called “The Way of Power,” because one who is in accordance with the Tao is naturally insightful and powerful.

In this introduction we will go further into the value of the *Tao Teh Ching* for the individual, before discussing Taoism and Lao Tzu himself. All quotes below come from the classic rendering of the *Tao Teh Ching* by Dwight Goddard, which follows this Introduction. We also use Goddard’s spelling of “Teh,” which has the same meaning as the more often used “Te.”

## A PERSON OF POWER AND WISDOM

*“Therefore the wise man, embracing unity as he does, will become the world’s model. Not pushing himself forward he will become enlightened; not asserting himself he will become distinguished; not boasting of himself he will acquire merit; not approving himself he will endure. Forasmuch as he will not quarrel, the world will not quarrel with him.”*

The *Tao Teh Ching* famously rejects the value of worldly power, fame and riches, and teaches instead the peace and freedom of a life of service. This does not sound that exciting, but as Lao Tzu points out, someone of this nature is much closer to knowing “the way things are” than another who simply chases illusory material or egoistic goals.

The paradox is that because such a person is so grounded, people naturally tend to be drawn to them. They have something others don't, and tend to become a natural leader in their domain. The wise person, Lao Tzu says, "... is inaccessible to favour or hate; he cannot be reached by profit or injury; he cannot be honoured or humiliated. Thereby he is honoured by all."

Lao Tzu notes that "Heaven is eternal, earth is lasting." He means that the heavens and the earth we walk on are the base and ground for life, and yet "Because they do not live for themselves... that is the reason they will ever endure." Observing this, the wise person learns that in a world of competing egos, their personality is not really important. In a disinterested way they look to support others and foster their wellbeing. Yet the irony of doing so, Lao Tzu notes, is that their personality is preserved and they begin to be noted by others.

The opposite is a person who seeks only wealth and self-glorification. Yet Lao Tzu notes that a building "crowded with gold and jewels" can't be protected, and simply becomes a target of theft and a magnet to misfortune. Instead, "To win true merit, to preserve just fame, the personality must be retiring." He observes:

*"It is not natural to stand on tiptoe ... One who displays himself is not bright, or one who asserts himself cannot shine. A self-approving man has no merit, nor does one who praises himself grow.*

*"The relation of these things (self-display, self-assertion, self-approval) to Tao is the same as offal is to food. They are excrescences from the system; they are detestable; Tao does not dwell in them."*

Running through the book is a gentle call for restraint and limiting one's desires. According to Lao Tzu, desires lead only to an awareness of the extent to which matter is limited, and its ultimate

meaninglessness. In contrast, not desiring things related to the senses allows us to exist in the freedom of the spiritual realm, where truth resides.

At several points, the reader is told that before they can become effective leaders, they must first be able to control themselves. Such restraint means that, when we have to act, it is done so out of pure objective justice rather than through any kind of emotional compulsion:

*"By patience the animal spirits can be disciplined. By self-control one can unify the character. By close attention to the will, compelling gentleness, one can become like a little child. By purifying the subconscious desires one may be without fault."*

"The wise man," Lao Tzu notes, "attends to the inner significance of things and does not concern himself with outward appearances."

Yet by focusing on the spiritual realm, his physical world naturally becomes well ordered. He can see through the world's appearances, separating truth from delusion. Though we exist in bodies, the value of our lives will be determined by the extent to which we *don't* focus on the material, contemplating instead what is eternal and timeless. If you do this, you will become akin to the hub of a wheel, the steady centre around which other people and life turns. "True goodness is like water," Lao Tzu says, "in that it benefits everything and harms nothing."

It is possible for the contemporary person to become like the wise ancients, he says. To do this, we must become "like a valley between high mountains," and "cautious like men wading a river in winter." We must feel content, without feeling it necessary to seem up with the latest things. By understanding the timeless, we will know what is important right now.

In a section titled "Returning to source," Lao Tzu notes that "All things are in process, rising and returning. Plants come to blossom, but only to return to the root." We should be able to observe the world of phenomena, experienced through our senses, and know that it is like a dream compared to the diamond-like hardness, clarity and timelessness of the Tao's truth. Believing too much in appearances only brings heartache and disorder:

*"Tao is the Eternal. The decay of the body is not to be feared."*

Seek first the Tao always, and your life will tend to be free of dramas and troubles, because you will not get lost in the way things seem, but rest in how they are. In practical terms, the path to this kind of peace that Lao Tzu advocates is simple:

*"... let all men hold to that which is reliable, namely, recognize simplicity, cherish purity, reduce one's possessions, diminish one's desires."*

The Tao treasures three things in human beings: compassion, economy and humility. Only the person who is compassionate can be truly brave; one who is thrifty can be generous; and those who are humble can be a good servant to others. Compassionate action is the joy of life, and Lao Tzu notes the paradox that the person always working for others, and not trying to hoard things, usually ends up with security and plenty.

## **TAO LEADERSHIP AND SUCCESS**

Let's now go further into what the *Tao Teh Ching* can teach us about the nuts and bolts of life: work, success and leading people.

Central to its understanding of leadership is cultivating a certain way of seeing others. The usual approach of those at the

top of an organization is, “I’m the boss, I’m special; you’re the employee, you’re less special – do what I say.” But reminiscent of the “high view” of people that Buddhism advocates, and Jesus’s extreme emphasis on the value of each life, Lao Tzu’s wise person is always trying to find and highlight the concealed value of individuals.

The other essential quality of Lao Tzu’s leader is their self-control:

*“How does it come to pass that the Emperor, master of ten thousand chariots, has lost the mastery of the Empire? Because being flippanant himself, he has lost the respect of his subjects; being passionate himself, he has lost the control of the Empire.”*

The wise person therefore recognizes:

*“If a ruler practices wu wei the people will reform of themselves. If I love quietude the people will of themselves become righteous. If I avoid profit-making the people will of themselves become prosperous. If I limit my desires the people will of themselves become simple.”*

What is “wu wei”? One of the most important terms in the *Tao Teh Ching*, its literal meaning is “not doing.” It is the approach of non-assertion, or a conscious “action of non-action.” In the language of everyday life and work, it simply means “not forcing things.” By not forcing one’s own views onto a situation, we are able to see what is actually happening, and act accordingly. By not forcing things, they naturally fall into place.

People mistakenly take *wu wei* to mean sitting around doing nothing, or drawing one’s self away from the world in meditation. Rather, it means allowing one’s self to become a vehicle or expression for the infinite power, goodness and all-ordering wisdom of

the Tao. The humble leader practicing *wu wei* does not neglect their duties; they don't seem to be overly busy or concerned, and yet nothing seems to be left undone. The leader does not waste their time in argument or quarrel, but simply acts, always in the appropriate way and at the appropriate moment.

Lao Tzu saw two types of leader: the conventional one, a warrior who uses force to achieve his ends, and the servant leader who blends into the background so that his or her people can star. Of the latter, he says:

*"When great men rule, subjects know little of their existence. Rulers who are less great win the affection and praise of their subjects."*

Also:

*"How carefully a wise ruler chooses his words. He performs deeds, and accumulates merit! Under such a ruler the people think they are ruling themselves."*

Listening, yielding, co-operating, being open, seeking the best possible outcomes – these *yin* aspects must balance the masculine *yang* decisiveness. The integration of the two characterizes the genuine leader, whose credibility rests not on what they say or even what they have so far achieved, but what they are.

As you might expect, the *Tao Teh Ching's* view of conflict and war is different to the norm. In a section titled "Be stingy of war," Lao Tzu notes that when a public leader follows Tao, "... he has no need to resort to force of arms to strengthen the Empire, because his business methods alone will show good returns." The wise person or leader:

*"[Will] be resolute and then stop, he dare not take by force. One should be resolute but not boastful; resolute but not*

*haughty; resolute but not arrogant; resolute but yielding when it cannot be avoided; resolute but he must not resort to violence."*

By a resort to force, things may flourish for a time but then decay. In the wake of a war there are many years of bad harvests, and where army camps once stood now only briars and thorns grow. Whatever comes out of Tao, grows and prospers; whatever does not, decays.

*"Peace and quietude are esteemed by the wise man, and even when victorious he does not rejoice, because rejoicing over a victory is the same as rejoicing over the killing of men. If he rejoices over killing men, do you think he will ever really master the Empire?"*

No, for one who can only achieve things through brute force is weak. Through their attunement to Tao, the leader can "see in the dark," knowing the motives of others and waiting until their energies are spent. In the vacuum or gap thus created, they act in ways that benefit all. The average modern leader, in contrast, feels they must be ever on their guard, paranoid even, that they are taking the right steps to success in every moment. Which type of leader will we be? It depends on where we put our faith: in our relatively ineffectual selves, or the intelligence governing the universe itself (Tao).

The compulsion to strive surely arises out of a perception that we are separate to the world, and that by gaining mastery of the world we are somehow redeemed. But striving, while a natural way to express our identity, is not actually the best path to success, since it is usually the *symbols* of unity or wholeness that we try to obtain. What we all really want is the underlying unity. This unity is what the *Tao Teh Ching* describes as "the way of heaven."



## LOVE OF TAO

In a section titled "The opposite of the commonplace," Lao Tzu notes the vastness of the difference "between ignorance and the limitless expression of the Tao."

The common person takes to their milieu or environment like a duck to water, never thinking greatly about Being or the deeper meaning of life. They take their pleasures in food, holidays and the like. Many are lively, prosperous and intelligent. In contrast, the person infused with consciousness of Tao may seem dull, simple, a wanderer even. Where the common people are useful, such a person may seem awkward, a bit out of place.

Yet the obvious way to live is not the best way. What matters, beyond the surface attractions and preoccupations, is our ability to get back to the Source. Better to have the innocence and endless possibility of "a baby who has not even learned to smile," Lao Tzu says. Despite going without all the good things he has described, he hails a bigger prize: the infinite wisdom of the Tao:

*"Music and dainties attract the passing people, while Tao's reality is seen as insipid. Indeed it has no taste, when looked at there is not enough seen to be prized, when listened for, it can scarcely be heard, but, the use of it is inexhaustible."*

If there is a choice between the two lives, it is a false choice, since Tao is life. The rest is illusion. And Lao Tzu cannot be clearer on the benefits of Tao:

*"He who identifies himself with Tao, Tao rejoices to guide. He who identifies himself with teh, teh rejoices to reward. And he who identifies himself with loss, loss rejoices to ruin."*

For Lao Tzu, the Tao is "... that intangible cosmic influence which harmonizes all things and brings them to fruition; it is the norm and standard of truth and reality."

But as Goddard notes, Lao Tzu did not just see the Tao as an impersonal principle, but something to be loved, and this he did with all his heart.

## THE TRUTH THAT LAO TZU POINTS TO

In his famous essay, "The hedgehog and the fox," the philosopher Isaiah Berlin examined Leo Tolstoy's theory of history. Tolstoy, he observed, saw history as an inexorable flow, or an impossibly complex and intricate web of events and time. The great writer railed against neat, rational explanations of history as being "smooth, thin, empty, 'abstract', and totally ineffective." The scientist, general or politician who believed that he could rationally locate the exact causes of things was a fool, and the desire to put one's stamp on the world was pure vanity, since individual actions were part of an infinitely larger pre-determined flow of events.

Though Tolstoy's criticism related to history, can we apply it to life generally? The explanations we are usually given to explain how people or organizations become successful have mostly been rational; reasons and causes are spouted as if this question was a matter of exact science. But the fact that there are as many explanations and theories for success as there are, would seem to suggest that none of them are quite right. But why should this be? Is there some missing, deeper factor that accounts for the way things go?

Rational explanations give leave little room for what cannot be defined. Cleverness, specialization and rationality are child's play next to what Berlin calls "the superhuman sources of knowledge – faith, revelation, tradition." Science, criticism and secularism are nothing next to the power of insight that these deeper things give into reality. The sciences (natural and social) are ill-equipped to

identify or quantify such indefinables. They are sometimes passed off as “fate” or the “zeitgeist,” but surely such unforeseen factors make the difference between right action and ill-conceived action, success and failure.

When Berlin wrote that, “Only the Church understands the ‘inner’ rhythms, the “deeper” currents of the world, the silent march of things,” he might have been speaking of Lao Tzu’s wisdom – a kind of knowing not to be found in scholarly articles, textbooks or “research,” or in the noise of revolutions or manifestos. Berlin described this greater awareness as “... a sense of what fits with what, of what cannot exist with what; and it goes by many names: insight, wisdom, practical genius, a sense of the past, an understanding of life and of human character.”

Tolstoy did not believe that the more bits of information you had, the more you would “know.” When his characters have moments of illumination, it is an understanding of the real relationship between things, and the peace that comes in submitting to this. The best moments in his work give us is an awareness of the limits of reason, of the separation between the world that can be observed and analyzed and constructed – and the underlying structure of reality which contains all this, including our emotional lives and existence. We can’t give this framework any names or categories, because names and categories are part of the observed, experienced world only. As Berlin put it:

*“Wisdom is ... a special sensitiveness to the contours of the circumstances in which we happen to be placed; it is a capacity for living without falling foul of some permanent condition or factor which cannot be either altered, or even fully described or calculated; an ability to be guided by rules of thumb – the ‘immemorial wisdom’ said to reside in peasants and other “simple folk” – where rules of science do not, in principle, apply. This inexpressible sense of cosmic orientation is the “sense of reality,” the “knowledge” of how to live.”*

In other words, it is in replacing our “analyses” with awareness of the deeper natural law – Tao – that we can begin to be really useful in the world. Only in appreciating what is timeless can we begin to have a grasp of the way things really are.

Some people, like Lao Tzu, are better than others at seeing such truth, and so take with a grain of salt all the theories, plans, instruments and creations of the superficial world. Indeed, if we wish to talk of happiness as well as success, it is not through techniques or circumstances or theories that we find ourselves happy, but through giving ourselves up to something beyond us or larger than us: the Tao, Love, God, Universal Intelligence. The *Tao Teh Ching* is one source that points to this deeper reality.

## WHY THE *TAO TEH CHING* STILL MATTERS

Taoism flourished during the Tang and Song dynasties in China, then gradually lost influence before being banned, along with other religions, during Mao’s Cultural Revolution. However, it is now making something of a comeback in mainland China.

Communist party officials appreciate it as the only indigenous Chinese religion, one that provides a moral ground for a harmonious society, and the picture painted in the *Tao Teh Ching* of a healthy state run by selfless rulers is one the party would like to identify with. Indeed, at a recent conference on Taoism in China sponsored by the government, one professor, Xion Tiejie from Central China Normal University noted, “Many thoughts of Lao Tzu are instructive towards the construction of a clean and honest administration... If [officials] become corrupt, they will incur disasters.” A Peking University academic, Xu Kangsheng, observed that “all bad things are born out of people’s greed, especially the greed of rulers. Lao said that if rulers adopt a simple lifestyle and set a good example, an honest society will be established naturally.”

Teaching that desires and wealth are the source of misery, not happiness, Lao Tzu certainly provides a calm alternative to the insatiability and greed that is part of a more materialist China. And in a country that is becoming more individualized, indifference to others is balanced by Lao Tzu's emphasis on the worth of every human being.

Yet the *Tao Teh Ching* is not just a good model for China, but for every nation, and indeed organization. Lao Tzu's thoughts on the duties of "rulers" could easily be applied to those who run today's corporations and banks. Would not the troubles of the last few years have been avoided if they had followed Lao Tzu's advice to be good stewards of resources for the long-term benefit of all?

There is another area where the *Tao Teh Ching's* message is waiting to be heard: the environment. Taoist sages and priests have long dwelled and meditated in beautiful mountain areas, and their foundational text is a call for harmony between man and nature. Just as corrupt officials can bring down a state, so the misuse of land and natural resources tempts a later rebalancing by Nature, and with terrifying force and consequences.

## **TAO, RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY**

As a religion, Taoism emerged during the Hundred Schools of Thought, a golden age in Chinese philosophy which also saw the rise of Confucianism. Yet this era also straddled the time of the Warring States, so both philosophies were a reaction to their era, attempting to identify the sources of order in times of turmoil.

As the previous anecdote of Lao Tzu's meeting with Confucius suggests, Taoists felt that Confucianism had become too ritualized and rigid. And whereas Confucius laid out an ethical and philosophical system for ordering society in which everyone had their appropriate place, Lao Tzu's outlook was more spiritual and free flowing. Finally, Confucius provided a recipe for living in