

Selections from Tao Te Ching

Tao Te Ching is an ancient Chinese philosophical text, said to be written by Lao Tzu, the forefather of Taoism. Following are some verses from this text that I liked very much. I use John Wu's translation (1961) here. Parentheses indicate the number of the verse.

What is Tao?

The very first line of TTC reads:

The Tao that can be described is not the Tao. (1)

But a description appears later:

*There was Something undefined and yet complete in itself,
Born before Heaven-and-Earth.*

*Silent and boundless,
Standing along without change,
Yet pervading all without fail,
It may be regarded as the Mother of the world.
I do not know its name;
I style it "Tao";
And, in the absence of a better word, call it "The Great." ...*

*Man follows the ways of the Earth.
The Earth follows the ways of Heaven,
Heaven follows the ways of Tao,
Tao follows its own ways. (25)*

One can consider the "Inner Nature" of things, living and non-living, as the Tao.

Greatness of Tao

Tao may not please the senses, but it is profound:

*Music and dainty dishes can only make a passing guest pause.
But the words of Tao possess lasting effects,
Though they are mild and flavourless,
Though they appeal neither to the eye nor to the ear. (35)*

Tao may be difficult to grasp, but it is powerful:

*We make doors and windows for a room;
But it is these empty spaces that make the room livable.*

Thus, while the tangible has advantages,

It is the intangible that makes it useful. (11)

Tao is great by definition, not intention:

*It is just because [Tao] does not wish to be great
That its greatness is fully realized. (34)*

Contempt for Tao is to be expected:

*When a wise scholar hears the Tao,
He practises it diligently.
When a mediocre scholar hears the Tao,
He wavers between belief and unbelief.
When a worthless scholar hears the Tao,
He laughs boisterously at it.
But if such a one does not laugh at it,
The Tao would not be the Tao! (41)*

Tao is paradoxical by nature:

Indeed, Truth sounds like its opposite! (78)

Description of Taoist

The Taoist seems a complex personality on first reading:

*Hesitant like one wading a stream in winter;
Timid like one afraid of his neighbours on all sides;
Cautious and courteous like a guest;
Yielding like ice on the point of melting;
Simple like an uncarved block;
Hollow like a cave;
Confused like a muddy pool;
And yet who else could quietly and gradually evolve from the muddy to the clear?
Who else could slowly but steadily move from the inert to the living?*

*He who keeps the Tao does not want to be full.
But precisely because he is never full,
He can always remain like a hidden sprout,
And does not rush to early ripening. (15)*

But the key is:

This is called "following the guidance of the Inner Light." (27)

At every moment, he is awake and aware of the Tao, his Inner Nature, and goes by what the Tao says.

The Taoist does not try to be great, yet his actions are such that people recognize him to be a noble personality. (This is called *wu wei*, or “effortless action”, in Chinese.) He trusts his instincts and follows the laws of Nature. Note the paradoxes, again:

*[The Sage] does not make a show of himself,
Hence he shines;
Does not justify himself,
Hence he becomes known;
Does not boast of his ability,
Hence he gets credit;
Does not brandish his success,
Hence he endures;
Does not compete with anyone,
Hence no one can compete with him. (22)*

The Taoist is childlike (“return to infancy”):

*All the people strain their ears and eyes:
The Sage only smiles like an amused infant. (49)*

He is not materialistic. Rather, he tries to be as frugal as possible:

*Learning consists of daily accumulating;
The practice of Tao consists in daily diminishing. (48)*

TTC defines “frugal” too:

To be frugal is to return before straying. (59)

The Taoist observes temperance and does not disturb the natural setup of things:

*The world is a sacred vessel, which must not be tampered with or grabbed after.
To tamper with it is to spoil it, and to grasp it is to lose it.*

*In fact, for all things there is a time for going ahead, and a time for following behind;
A time for slow-breathing and a time for fast-breathing;
A time to grow in strength and a time to decay;
A time to be up and a time to be down.*

Therefore, the Sage avoids all extremes, excesses and extravagances. (29)

He does not try to teach anyone forcefully, he is quick to see harm coming:

*Tackle things before they have appeared.
Cultivate peace and order before confusion and disorder have set in. ...*

*[The Sage] only helps all creatures to find their own nature,
But does not venture to lead them by the nose. (64)*

Respect for Nature

Taoism scoffs at any disturbance in natural scheme of things:

*To hasten the growth of life is ominous.
To control the breath by the will is to overstrain it. ...
All this is against Tao,
And whatever is against Tao soon ceases to be. (55)*

It believes that the “river will run its course” and “water will find its level”:

*It is Heaven's Way to conquer without striving,
To get responses without speaking,
To induce the people to come without summoning,
To act according to plans without haste. (73)*

Use of force is despised:

*Wherever armies are stationed, thorny bushes grow.
After a great war, bad years invariably follow. ...*

You must never think of conquering others by force. (30)

And so is artificiality:

*Now, ceremony is the merest husk of faith and loyalty;
It is the beginning of all confusion and disorder. (38)*

Simplicity

Desire is the root cause of evil. Simplicity can curb desires:

*[Primal Simplicity] alone can curb the desires of men,
When the desires of men are curbed, there will be peace,
And the world will settle down of its own accord. (37)*

Peace can be achieved by living in harmony with nature:

*For flourishing as [things] do,
Each of them will return to its root.*

*To return to the root is to find peace.
To find peace is to fulfill one's destiny. (16)*

Materialism is to be shunned. Hedonic treadmill can wear one out:

*An excessive love for anything will cost you dear in the end.
The storing up of too many goods will entail a heavy loss. (44)*

“Multitasking” is not good:

*Block all the passages!
Shut all the doors!
And to the end of your days you will not be worn out.
Open the passages!
Multiply your activities!
And to the end of your days you will remain helpless. (52)*

Intellect Has Limits

The brain clouds instincts. Reason and logic can hurt by suppressing natural behaviour:

*When intelligence and wit arose,
There appeared great hypocrites. (18)*

*Drop wisdom, abandon cleverness,
And the people will be benefited a hundredfold. (19)*

*To realize that our knowledge is ignorance,
This is a noble insight. (71)*

*The wise are not erudite,
The erudite are not wise. (81)*

Selflessness and Detachment

Truly, humility is the root from which greatness springs. (39)

Ego is the obstacle to achieving goals:

*The farther you go,
The less you know.*

*The Sage knows without travelling,
Sees without looking,
And achieves without Ado. (47)*

Dwelling on something needlessly is to be avoided:

*Here is the Way of Heaven:
When you have done your work, retire! (9)*

As also attachment (cf. "Children come through you, not from you." --Gibran):

*Enlightened and seeing far into all directions,
Can you at the same time remain detached and non-active?*

*Rear your people!
Feed your people!
Rear them without claiming them for your own! (10)*

Selflessness applies to administration too:

*The highest type of ruler is one of whose existence the people are barely aware.
(17)*

*Why are the people hard to manage?
Because those above them are fussy and have private ends to serve.
That is why they are hard to manage. (75)*

Ending Words

Tao Te Ching is a precept for living relevant to all times. Its essence is in realizing the greatness of Nature and living in harmony with it. Its epithets strive to achieve this goal, either directly or indirectly.

Taoism assumes special importance in the modern technologically-advanced world, and to the multitasking, stressed-out human beings. Without bringing an assemblage of gods and demons, it points to ways within our control to enrich our lives. It not only makes us question the direction we are taking, but also holds up a bold sign on the right way to go.

*(Compilation and notes by Deepak N,
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