

The Great Tao

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Abstract

Very little is known of the similarities shared by the Great Tao as conceived in the immortal Taoist canon, the Tao-te ching, and the nature of God and the teachings of God's messengers as expounded by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This article focuses on the Great Tao of the ancient Chinese people, a Tao whose eternal spirit has seeped into the very heart of Chinese tradition, culture, and way of life for centuries, and which is manifest in various aspects of Chinese thought and life as well as in the more apparent aesthetics of calligraphy, painting, and poetry. This article compares the similarities of the spiritual insights of the Tao-te ching with that of other major religions, notably the Bahá'í Faith, and argues that no understanding of the Chinese mind and spirit can be complete without a perusal of some of the main spiritual tenets of this imperishable canon. It must be noted that this article is concerned with the original philosophy of Tao and not with what is today popularly known as the "Taoist religion," an invention only loosely connected with the spiritual insights of the Tao-te ching.

Résumé

Nous connaissons peu des similarités qui existent entre le Grand Tao tel que conçu dans l'immortel livre saint Taöiste, le Tao-te ching, et la nature de Dieu et entre les enseignements des messagers de Dieu tels qu'expliqués par Bahá'u'lláh et 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Cet article traite du Grand Tao de l'antiquité chinoise, le Tao dont l'esprit éternel a pénétré le coeur de la tradition chinoise, de la culture et de la façon de vivre depuis des siècles, et qui se retrouve dans différents aspects de la pensée chinoise, aussi bien que dans l'esthétique apparente de la calligraphie, de la peinture et de la poésie. Cet article compare les similarités des pénétrations spirituelles dans le Tao-te ching avec celles des autres grandes religions, notamment la foi bahá'íe, et insiste sur le fait que nul ne peut comprendre l'esprit et l'âme des chinois complètement sans un examen de certaines doctrines spirituelles de ce livre immortel. Il faut noter que cet article se préoccupe de la philosophie première du Tao et non de sa popularité actuelle connue sous le nom de «Religion Taöiste», une invention seulement légèrement connectée avec la conception spirituelle du Tao-te ching.

Resumen

Poco se conoce acerca de las semejanzas compartidas entre el Gran Tao según se concibe en el Tao-te ching, el canon inmortal Taoista, y la naturaleza de Dios y las enseñanzas de Sus Mensajeros según lo exponen Bahá'u'lláh y 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Esta disertación enfoca sobre el Gran Tao del antiguo pueblo chino, un Tao cuyo espíritu eterno se ha entrañado a través de los siglos en lo mas hondo de la tradición, cultura, y modo de vida chino, y que se presenta en los varios aspectos del pensamiento y vivir chino y también en la estética que resalta aún más en su caligrafía, pintura, y poesía. El escrito compara las semejanzas de los discernimientos espirituales del Tao-te ching con

aquellas de otras religiones principales, en particular la Fe Bahá'í, y razona que la comprensión de la mente y el espíritu chino no podrá considerarse completa sin una lectura a fondo de las doctrinas centrales de este canon imperecedero. Vale tomar en cuenta que esta disertación se concierne con la filosofía original del Tao y no con lo que hoy se conoce popularmente como la "religion Taoista," una invención sólo vagamente conectada con los discernimientos espirituales del Tao-te ching.

Something there is without form and complete,
 Born before heaven and earth,
 Solitary and vast,
 Standing alone without change,
 Everywhere pervading all things,
 Mothering all beneath heaven.
 I don't know its name;
 I style it Tao,
 And for want of a name call it great.
 (Ch. 25)¹

There should not be a problem in naming what has generally been believed to be the "philosophy" of Lao-tzu (and for that matter, Confucius) a religion, if one considers Paul Tillich's definition of religion as "ultimate concern" (Scharlemann, *Paul Tillich* 231) and A. N. Whitehead's concept of religion as "the art of the internal life of man" (*Religion* 16). Julian Huxley's concept of religion as a way of life, an inner awareness, and a sublimation, is also similar to the Chinese approach to religion (*Religion*). The Chinese concept of contemplating the intrinsic value of things is also similar to Einstein's concept of wonder and the experience of the mysterious in daily routine.

In addition, the Chinese cosmological view of life, particularly the Chinese concept of the mandate of heaven descending upon humanity and all things, corresponds to the worldview of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose central idea is that God permeates all things and that human beings can encounter God in their own actions (*Divine* 122, 141). The Chinese believe that the love of heaven is in all creatures and that in meeting the creatures, humankind encounters God. The divine love energy is the unifying power of the universe. The universe has consciousness and is progressing toward the Great Unity that Teilhard de Chardin calls the "Omega point." The power of love unifies and spiritualizes all things.²

However, although we may refer to a Chinese religion, we should note here

1. For convenience, I shall refer to all quotations from the *Tao-te ching* by simply putting "ch." for "chapter" after each quotation. All quotations from the *Tao-te ching* are taken from Herrymon Maurer, translator, *Tao: The Way of the Ways*.

2. See Chih, *Chinese Humanism* passim, for an elaboration.

that there is no Chinese word that corresponds exactly to the word *religion*. To the Chinese, there is no difference between religion and education. The Chinese word *chiao* (teaching) includes all religions. Both “teaching” and “learning” have the purpose of bringing enlightenment. A great teacher teaches one to understand the great principle of life and the universe, how to reach the good and to appreciate the beautiful. Although the Chinese notion of “teaching” does not indicate an explicit belief in God, it is incorrect to say that the Chinese do not believe in God, or what is otherwise referred to as the Absolute Truth, the Ultimate Reality, or the Eternal Ground of Being.³ Sprinkled throughout the *Tao-te ching* and other major Chinese classical texts are references to the presence of the Great Tao.⁴

The essence of Chinese religion—of which a significant part is contributed by Taoism—can be said to comprise the belief in the presence of a Great Tao that is unknowable. Referred to often by the Chinese word *heaven*, the Great Tao was not so much the personal Creator, Ruler, and Judge of the world such as the God of Jews and Christians, but rather, the remote, absolute, and ultimate reality that cannot logically be well defined. There is also a realization that the love of the Great Tao is embodied in all created things.⁵ This belief that all things reflect the image of God encouraged the Chinese to strive for unity or wholeness in general. The Chinese temperament seeks a union of the ideal and real, and of heaven and earth. Its perspective is synthetic rather than analytic. A harmonious and peaceful life with the sense of unity or wholeness is the ideal life in Chinese tradition. Such a way of life is called Tao, and it is the essence and goal of the Chinese mind, at least in the traditional sense. Thus, the traditional Chinese attitude was for tolerance instead of ideological opposition, since the sense of unity and wholeness led the Chinese mind towards the sense of relativity of particulars within the universal totality.⁶

A part of the essence of traditional Chinese belief is that wise sages from time to time will come to show the path to enlightenment. There is a Chinese

3. If it is occasionally expressed in certain circles that the Chinese do not believe in God, it is because the word *God* has all the wrong “Western” connotations. There is the conception first of all in the Chinese mind of an old man with a long white beard, or the evangelizing God of the Christian missionaries saving sinners and eradicating idolatry from the land of the heathens.

4. See, for example, the works of Mencius, Confucius, and Chuang-tzu in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Sourcebook*.

5. “The Great Tao is simple and near because He is present in everything” (Mencius VIIA, 41). Confucius also said that “God is not far from man” (*Doctrine of the Mean* 13:1).

6. There may be an argument here that Communist China is an anti-traditional and relatively intolerant society, but we must remember that Chinese communism is only fifty years old in relation to a tradition of spirituality that is more than three-thousand years old and which has not been completely eradicated.

belief that every 500 years, a sage would come to show the Way (Chan, *Religious* 24). This does not mean that only the literate or those in personal contact with the sage can be fortunate enough to comprehend and walk the way of the Great Tao, for Tao can be found in the simplest things of the world.

Lao-tzu and the *Tao-te ching*

The most famous exposition of the Tao is found in the *Tao-te ching*. It was composed sometime in the sixth century BC. To that remarkable century also belong the writings of the Buddha, Jeremiah, and Confucius. The *Tao-te ching* is believed to have been written by Lao-tzu, said to be the first ancient sage of China, who dedicated his whole life to the study of Tao (Sih, *Chinese Humanism* 53). However, we cannot be sure of his real name. Lao-tzu is a description rather than an appellation. The term can mean "old philosopher" or "old sir," but it can also mean "old child" or "old fellow." Perhaps following his own dictates of not being attached to names, Lao-tzu kept himself so well hidden that very little is known of him except what he wrote.

The story goes that Lao-tzu was a custodian at the imperial archives in the State of Chou and as such had access to the ancient books of China. However, being disillusioned with the depravity of the nobility's conduct and their oppression of the peasants and slaves, as well as the frequent warfare between divided States, he departed from China as a sign of protest, to live outside its borders.⁷ The officer of the frontier, Yin Hsi, noted Lao-tzu's intention and took the opportunity to urge him to write a book before leaving. Lao-tzu took up the suggestion and wrote a book discussing Tao and virtue. At first, the work was simply called *Lao-tzu*. Later, during the Han Dynasty (202 BC-AD 9), the work was dignified with the title *Tao-te ching* (Classic of the Way and its Virtue). The book can be divided into two parts: the first being on the metaphysical, a treatment of the ultimate reality (ch. 1-37) and the second being on the practical, a description of how to live in this world (ch. 38-81).⁸

Although the *Tao-te ching* is generally traced to Lao-tzu, many of its basic ideas are scattered in earlier writings, such as the *I Ching* (Book of Changes) and *Shu Ching* (Book of History), traditionally considered the oldest books in

7. This account is attributed to his early biographer, Ssu-ma Ch'ien. However, this account has mixed fact and fantasy, as it lists a few titles and places Lao-tzu may have possibly frequented, but it also contains some quite fantastic and absurd speculations. See B. Watson, translator, *Ssu-Ma Ch'ien: Records of the Grand Historian of China*.

8. Although it has been translated into English as *The Way and its Power* by Arthur Waley in the book of the same title, the title need not be interpreted as logically connecting *Tao* with *Te*. However, due to recent archeological work in China, we are now sure that these terms were applied to the respective halves of the work as early as the beginning of the Han Dynasty. See Lau (*Chinese Classics*).

China.⁹ Nevertheless, whatever ideas Lao-tzu may have derived from the ancient Chinese cultural heritage must have been spiritually digested by him before expression in his unique and inimitable style. One may conclude that Lao-tzu's great contribution was his gathering together all the spiritual wisdom scattered throughout ancient documents and putting them in a small volume.

A word now on the *Tao-te ching*, believed to be the most translated work next to the Bible. Indeed, the *Tao-te ching* has been called the Chinese Bible. It can be said that not even the Confucian doctrine can approach the *Tao-te ching* in popularity and prestige. Its influence has been circumscribed, however, by the fact that even the best translation would fail to do it justice because there are untranslatable, subtle images and rhythms in the original work. Unfortunately, these untranslatable aspects are the very factors that arouse human intuition as to the nature of essential truths.

In relation to its small size (some five-thousand characters), the influence directly or indirectly exerted by this extraordinary work on Chinese life and culture is profound and far-reaching. Expounding a consistent and coherent view of life and the universe, it has, for instance, contributed considerably towards the development of various classical schools of Chinese philosophy, notably, those established by Han Fei Tzu (d. 233 BC), a great leader of the Legalist School, and Chuang-tzu (369–286 BC), second only to Lao-tzu as a Taoist mystic and philosopher. By raising the spiritual consciousness of the Chinese people,¹⁰ the *Tao-te ching* also facilitated the introduction of Buddhism into China. Not only did the work play a major role in the development of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism, it also strengthened the metaphysical aspect of Confucianism and contributed to the emergence of Neo-Confucianism in the Sung Dynasty (AD 960–1279).

Like all the great religions, Taoism has contributed towards the pool of not only the spiritual but also the material knowledge of humankind. The development of such sciences as chemistry, mineralogy, and geography in China can be traced to Taoism (Needham, *Science*). In addition, Taoism has also played a signal part in the development of medicine, acupuncture, and the practical arts and crafts, as well as alchemy, astrology, divination, and martial art (kung fu).¹¹

Not surprisingly, in the course of succeeding centuries, commentaries on the

9. Lao-tzu (as well as Confucius) drew heavily from the *Shu* of *The Book of Documents* although he did not quote explicitly from this or other books (Sih, *Chinese Humanism* 53).

10. According to Shoghi Effendi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá often spoke "in most hopeful words" of "its brilliant future and of the spiritual capacity of its people" (letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to individual believers, 26 January 1923. In "A Compilation on China."

11. Needham's treatise "Fundamental ideas of Chinese Science" in volume 2 of *Science and Civilization in China* provides valuable reading for the understanding of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements.

Tao-te ching have come out in great profusion, attesting to the immense interest and importance attached to this work. About 1,000 such commentaries are known to exist—some 500 in Chinese, over 250 in Japanese, and a small number in Western languages (Wei, *Guiding* 5). There have also been numerous translations of the Taoist canon.¹² The earliest translation was in Sanskrit and done by Tripitaka-Master Hsuan Tsang, a Buddhist luminary of the T'ang Dynasty. The next translation was in Latin and appeared about 1750. It was apparently done by a Jesuit missionary who had been to China. In 1828, the first Russian version appeared and forty years later, the English version. Today, there are upwards of forty English translations in the field, vying with one another for superior merit.¹³

It goes without saying that no understanding of the Chinese mind and spirit is complete without a perusal of this imperishable canon, especially in relation to the latest religious revelation, the Bahá'í Faith. I would like now to compare these two great belief systems, separated, it would seem at first, by a vast geographical gulf and historical span of time. On deeper examination, however, a remarkable similarity surfaces that is especially apparent in Bahá'í and Taoist expositions on the nature and the teachings of the Great Tao.

In terms of the nature of Tao, both Taoism and the Bahá'í Faith refer to Tao as immanent, transcendent, and unknowable; both teach that great virtue exists in following Tao alone; that all spiritual truth comes from the same source; and that these truths are expounded by sages who are unfortunately not recognized during their lifetimes by the great masses of humanity. Where the teachings of Tao are concerned, striking similarities are found with regard to the mutual call for abstinence from actions contrary to nature (*wu-wei*); the importance of an unbiased mind in the search for truth; the advocacy of humility, forgiveness, justice, contentment, and moderation; and the emphasis on deeds over words.

12. The translations cannot be said to have served the *Tao-te ching* well because the nature of the work attracted many whose enthusiasm for Eastern mysticism far outstripped their acquaintance with Chinese thought or Chinese language.

13. Some scholarly translation is somewhat contradictory, but it is possible to aim at exactness. The translation I am using and with which I am most impressed is that of Herrymon Maurer. Maurer's translation is not only recent (1986) but also appealing, as he tries to preserve the force, the rhythm, the repetitions, and the parallelism of the original, and even attempts a pun or two and an occasional rhyme. He declines to defer to the conceptual habits of other translations by rendering such terms of Chinese concreteness as "the ten thousand things," "the hundred families," and "beneath heaven" into such abstractions as "all things," "the people," and "the world." The manner in which the Way is presented is itself the Way. Generally, Maurer tries to tamper least with the original terseness and impact. He makes no effort to explain the inexplicable and also avoids trying to make clear what is not clear, leaving unclear the unclear. It should be mentioned here that Maurer's translation draws heavily from that of John C. H. Wu's *Lao Tzū / Tao Teh Ching*.

As a result of the little known but remarkable similarities of the teachings of Lao-tzu with those of Bahá'u'lláh (and indeed of the other founders of the great religions), as well as the enduring quality of Lao-tzu's work, the intriguing question of whether Lao-tzu was a sage or a prophet is then posed.

The Nature of Tao

While "God" was the supreme concept in the West in terms of questions regarding the highest reality, "Dharma" (truth or law) took its place in the Indian tradition. In the Chinese tradition, "heaven" and "Tao" occupied the place of the highest reality; and of the two, Tao was the most important concern.

Due to its intrinsic popularity, as well as the recent successes of books such as *The Tao of Physics*, the word *Tao* has now gained currency and is listed in well-known English dictionaries.¹⁴ However, such dictionaries describe Tao simply as a "way" or "path." This definition is correct in a literal sense but is not complete. One should note that besides indicating the multifarious ways of communicating with this ultimate reality, Tao also denotes the ultimate reality in Chinese religious experience. Tao means both the Way as Principle and the Way as the means to realize the principle (cf. Chiu, *The Tao* 403). We note as well that *Tao* is the common term used by all Chinese religious thinkers to denote the essence of religion. It is used to exemplify their understanding of the most subtle nature of religious experience. Tao means both the essence and manifestation of religion. Because it is often beyond categories of knowledge, Tao can only be defined by such negative terms as *wu* (nothingness or non-being), *wu-chih* (non-ultimate), and *kung* (emptiness). But there are also positive expressions such as *Shang Ti* (the supreme lord), *T'ien* (heaven) and *Tao* (the way or the principle).

Immanent, Transcendent, and Unknowable

For Lao-tzu, "the world is a sacred vessel" (ch. 29), and the intent of the *Tao-te ching* is to speak about the unspeakable and to discourse on the unknowable. Like the first chapter of *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, the first chapter of the *Tao-te ching* expounds on the immanent and the transcendent aspect of Tao:

If Tao can be Taoed, it's not Tao.
 If its name can be named, it's not its name.
 Has no name: precedes heaven and earth;
 Has a name: mother of ten thousand things . . .
 Mystery of mysteries, the door to inwardness.

(Ch. 1)

14. See, for example, *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, *Random House Dictionary*, and the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*.

Tao here is the origin of the universe and “mother” of all things (ch. 1). It is transcendent and defies being named. The *Tao-te ching* continues to expound that Tao is shapeless, soundless, and bodiless (ch. 14). Throughout the first half of the text, the descriptions used to suggest Tao’s nature are that it is cloudy, formless, obscure, elusive, silent, and void. Tao is essentially indefinable in human language and inexplicable by human reasoning. Tao cannot be understood as “God” in the sense of ruler, monarch, commander, architect, shaper, or maker of the universe. In fact, any imagery associated with Tao is more maternal (denoting “a creative force”) than paternal (see opening quotation). The image of the military and political overlord is not in the idea of Tao. There is, then, an interesting similarity between the metaphysics of Tao in Taoism and Brahman in Hinduism. Both Tao and Brahman are in essence and in themselves indescribable and nameless; while in manifestation and function, both are identifiable with many and all things in the universe. In the Bahá’í writings, this is given expression:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine Essence. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 3–4).

For Lao-tzu to postulate a similar conception of the Supreme Ultimate at so early a date was truly remarkable. The ancient Chinese notion of *T’ien* (heaven) or *Ti* (Supreme God), as represented in the songs and hymns of *The Book of the Odes*, was that of a knowing, feeling, loving, and hating supreme ruler of humankind and the universe. The fate of humankind was also supposed to be in the hands of all kinds of gods and spirits. In place of such an anthropomorphic deity or deities, an entirely new rational and logical concept of God was proposed.

In addition, the true Taoist knows that Tao is not only the Way but also the Origin and End of all things, yet it cannot be identified with anything in particular. Immanent in the universe, it nonetheless transcends the universe. It is the mystery of mysteries that evokes in the minds of thinking people a perennial sense of wonder. Taoism never hides the mysterious nature of Tao. In fact, Taoism glorifies Tao. The wiser the person, the more amazed he or she is by this mystery. Only ignorant fools think that they *know* (ch. 22, 24, passim). Bahá’u’lláh expresses this feeling:

How can I claim to have known Thee, when the entire creation is bewildered by Thy mystery, and how can I confess not to have known Thee, when, lo, the whole universe proclaimeth Thy Presence and testifieth to Thy Truth? (*Gleanings* 63)

The Báb reaffirms the same eternal truth that there is no beginning and no end to this awesome mystery that had dawned on the Chinese people early in the history of humankind (The Báb, *Selections* 91, 125; Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 140).

Deeply influenced by the *Tao-te ching*, Chuang-tzu,¹⁵ a literary genius with profound spiritual insight, composed many verses on the nature of Tao. With Chuang-tzu the philosophy of Taoism can be said to have reached its summit, since later works have not contributed anything significantly new. Together, Chuang-tzu's and Lao-tzu's ideas become the leaven of Chinese thought.¹⁶ They can be called the pilgrims of the absolute precisely because of their faith and confidence in the Tao. The following two quotations on the nature of the Tao are typically Chuang-tzu's:

... it [Tao] may be obtained, but cannot be seen. Before heaven and earth were, Tao was. It has existed without change from all time. Spiritual beings drew their spirituality therefrom, which the universe became what we can see now. To Tao, the zenith is not high, nor the nadir low; no point in time is long ago, nor by lapses of age has it grown old. (Quoted in Giles, *Chuang Tzu* 76)

Sometimes, Chuang-tzu enters into an I-thou relation with the Tao reminiscent of a Bahá'í prayer:

O My Master, O my Master. Thou who destroyest all things, and dost not account it cruelty; thou who benefittest all time, and does not account it charity; thou who art older than antiquity, and dost not account it age; thou who supportest the universe, shaping the many forms therein, and dost not account it skill;—this is the happiness of God! (Quoted in Giles, *Chuang Tzu* 132)

The many titles of Tao referred to by Chuang-tzu include the Great Negative (Omnipotent), the Great One (Omnipresent), the Great Law (i.e., Perfection), the Great Nomenclature (All-Inclusive), the Great Uniformity (All-Assimilative), the Great Eye (i.e., the Omniscient), as well as the Great Space, the Great Truth, and the Great Unity (Giles, *Chuang Tzu* 247, *passim*). This is a forerunner of the many titles of Bahá to be revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, such as Most Great Spirit, Pre-existent Root, Supreme Heaven, and the Most Great Name.¹⁷

Following Tao Alone

The *Tao-te ching* advocates that the nature of great virtue is to follow Tao alone (ch. 21). In being in harmony with Tao, everything is made whole—there are no metaphorical demons or spirits to upset the people's constitution:

15. Chuang-tzu's date of birth is unknown. All we can say is that he was a younger contemporary of Mencius (371–289 BC).

16. One notes that Chuang-tzu's book, together with the *Tao-te ching*, has been a source of inspiration to Chinese scholars and poets through the centuries. Although it deals with roughly the same subject, it is however ten times larger than the *Tao-te ching*.

17. For a compilation of the many titles of Bahá, see Rúhíyyih Rabbání, comp., *The Desire of the World* 177–81.

When beneath-heaven is ruled with Tao,
 Demons don't go spiriting.
 Not only do the demons not spirit,
 But the spirits don't harm people.

(Ch. 60)

This is not dissimilar from the Bahá'í belief that "the beginning of all things is the knowledge of God . . ." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 5) and the admonition by Bahá'u'lláh:

. . . Barter not away this Youth, O people, for the vanities of this world or the delights of heaven. By the righteousness of the one true God! One hair of Him excelleth all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth. Beware, O men, lest ye be tempted to part with Him in exchange for the gold and silver ye possess. (*Gleanings* 38)

Great virtue comprises the recognition that everything stems from the Tao and that true happiness and peace of mind rest in adhering to its principles, not in bartering them away.

The immortality of the spirit as mentioned in the holy books is the fundamental basis of the divine religions. Similarly, the *Tao-te ching* affirms immortality for those who adhere to Tao:

It is said that
 He who preserves his life
 Meets no tigers or wild buffaloes on the road
 Remains untouched by weapons in the wars.
 In him the wild buffalo
 Finds no space for his horns,
 the tiger no space for his claws
 the soldier no space for his blade.
 How is this?

Because there is no place for death in him.

(Ch. 50; also ch. 16, 52)

Accordingly, the *Tao-te ching* expounds that it is natural for human beings to turn to Tao and that separation from Tao is unnatural. Tao gives life, nurses, rears, nurtures, shelters, comforts, feeds, and protects (ch. 51). Thus, every creature that is conscious of its origin has a natural and intimate kinship with Tao. Tao is like the mother to the newborn (ch. 25). Logically, then, turning towards Tao is life, and turning away is death. Being on the path is as life-giving as reaching the end of it, while being off the path is more death-dealing than ignorance of where the path leads:

If I have a grain of wisdom,
I walk along the great Tao
And only fear to stray.
(Ch. 53)

Just as the sun rises on both the evil and good and sends rain on both the just and unjust, one characteristic of the Great Tao, as reflected in the character of the sage, is that it does not differentiate, but rather, loves all nature and all humanity:¹⁸

The sage has no fixed heart.
He finds his heart
In the hundred families' heart,
He is good to the good;
He is also good to the not-good,
For virtue is good.
He is faithful to the faithful;
He is also faithful to the unfaithful,
For virtue is faithful.
(Ch. 49)

Virtue (*Te*) in the above quotation is not so much virtue in the sense of moral rectitude, but rather, “virtuality” in the sense of having the possession of force or power. It is a *Te* that is believed by the ancient Chinese to be manifest in, for example, the miraculous fruition of plants and the unconscious circulation of blood.

This bounty and generosity of Tao, however, does not mean that Tao does not take an active hand in redressing inequities. “The Tao of Heaven plays no favorites, / But it always succors the good” (ch. 79). Here, it is interesting to note that the otherwise impersonal and remote Tao gives way to a more personified conception of activity and differentiation.

The Same Source

Being significantly and spiritually ahead of his time, Lao-tzu advanced the notion that all the great spiritual truths come from the same source and that, in reality, there is no difference between their persons, words, messages, acts, and manners. Thus, very early in Chinese history, the Chinese people realized that each religion contained something intrinsically good and valuable. The acknowledgement of mutual goodness in all religions eventually led to the

18. Bahá'u'lláh says something similar: “Thou art the All-Bountiful, the overflowing showers of Whose mercy have rained down upon high and low alike, and the splendors of Whose grace have been shed over both the obedient and the rebellious” (*Prayers and Meditations* 250; *Divine Art of Living* 12). See also the Bible, Matthew 5:44–45 for a similar idea.

realization that all religions are harmonious in having the same origin and goal. The unity of all religions has thus become one of the tacit understandings of the Chinese people:

The names are different but the source the same.
 Call the sameness mystery:
 Mystery of mystery, the door to inwardness.
 (Ch. 1)

The influence of this particular and significant insight of the *Tao-te ching* has been manifested since the beginning of the Han Dynasty (206 BC–AD 220), where, with the establishment of Confucian bureaucracy, the Confucian officials and intellectuals began to develop a new metaphysics that they called “the way to heaven” and which could encompass all philosophical and religious ideas. Berling describes the way to heaven as follows:

This belief in the Unity of the way of heaven established a foundation of syncretic thought; unless religious ideas could be shown to be outright fantasies they had some claim on truth even if a distorted or partial truth. Distortion or partiality could be rectified; the believers were seldom called upon to choose one God or one truth over all others. The way of Heaven included all Truths of men. (*Syncretic Religion* 20–23)

As the Taoist Ku Huan (c. 392–453) puts it, “Taoism and Buddhism are equal in illuminating and transforming people.” Different religions develop under a variety of conditions to meet basic needs of the times, but they are all “convenient means” to the same end (quoted in Chan, “Historic” 122). This idea can be likened to the Chinese saying that tributaries branching out from the same river may start off at different points and time, bearing different names, but the supply of water content that each receives from its sources does not vary. It is the water rather than the name of the tributaries that serves a purpose for humanity.

The Mission of the Sage

Unfortunately, spiritual leaders with revolutionary “new” insights are never loved during their lifetime and especially not among their own people. Indeed, Lao-tzu was considered heretical and odd and his teachings incongruous with the current social trends:

All beneath heaven say
 My Tao seems like folly.
 But it is great
 because it seems like folly.
 Were it not like folly,
 Long indeed would it have been petty.
 (Ch. 67)

Lao-tzu broke the conventions of the day. In his time, he was against the autocratic, the patriarchal, the hierarchic, the superstitious, the ritualistic, the oppressive, and the violent. Such opposition was indeed unconventional. His life was also scandalous. He withdrew from Chinese civilization to live outside the Chinese border with people whom the Chinese considered barbarians. Just as Jesus' dying the death of a criminal was a great scandal to the Romans, so similarly was Lao-tzu's departure to the country of the barbarians, a scandal to the Chinese. The Chinese had traditionally believed themselves to be more intelligent, more cultured, and more capable than other races. Throughout their history, the Chinese had put down the "barbarians" to the north and west of their country, just as the Jews had put down the temple prostitutes and the Romans, the subversives. Thus, the flight of Lao-tzu to the country of the despised barbarians not only was shocking but also served as a lasting symbol of the sage's denunciation of the trappings of material and conventional success.

So it is that people, especially the intelligentsia, do not usually recognize a sage during the sage's lifetime: "The great Tao is easy indeed / but the people choose bypaths" (ch. 53). And Lao-tzu, reminiscent of the founders of past religions, refers to this lack of recognition and acceptance:¹⁹

My words are very easy to know,
Very easy to follow;
But beneath-heaven can't know them,
Can't follow them.

(Ch. 70; see also ch. 78)

He acknowledges that only the truly spiritual can see beyond the personality of the sage to recognize the original Source, which throughout history has always been the same:

My words have an ancestor;
My deeds have a lord.
People don't know Him,
So they don't know me.

(Ch. 70)

Despite receiving a possibly cool reception, a sage continues to work tirelessly to return the people to the light—the Great Tao, the Universal Law or Truth, the Right Way:

19. Jesus, for example, quotes Isaiah: "You will hear and hear and never understand. You will see and see and never perceive" (Matthew 13:14).

Therefore the Sage . . .
Returns the people to what they have lost,
Helps all things find their nature.

(Ch. 64)

The central mission of the founders of the world religions can be said to be focussed on lifting the people “from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding” as well as “to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 79–80). With this in mind, the sage is thus the exemplar par excellence, an epitome of the ideal character—humble, selfless, and spiritual—the sage’s life being an example of how one may walk along the path of Tao. Throughout the *Tao-te ching*, numerous verses expound the sage’s behavior as one who desires but is desireless (ch. 74), loving, brave, simple, and generous (ch. 67), as one who conquers without competing, answers without speaking, attracts without summoning (ch. 73), and one who completes work but takes no credit (ch. 77).

The sage knows himself,
But makes no show of himself.
Loves himself,
But does not exalt himself.
He rejects the outward,
Accepts the inward.

(Ch. 72)

The Teachings of Tao

Tao never does anything,
And everything gets done.

(Ch. 37)

Wu-wei

These often-quoted words denoting the Taoist doctrine of *wu-wei* should not be taken literally to mean inertia, laziness, laissez-faire, or mere passivity. *Wu-wei* can be generally defined as the act of following the natural order flowing in the current of Tao, something that Needham refers to as “refraining from activity contrary to nature” (*Science* 88), justifying this statement with a quotation from Chuang-tzu: “Non-action does not mean doing nothing and keeping silent. Let everything be allowed to do what it naturally does, so that its nature will be satisfied” (quoted in Needham, *Science* 68–69). If one refrains from acting contrary to nature or going against the grain of things, one is in harmony with

the Tao, and thus one's action will be successful. It is easier to sail with the wind than against it.²⁰

Wu elaborates on the connotations of *wu-wei* and describes it as comprising two aspects: physical and mental ("Taoism" 54). Physically, *wu-wei* implies that one's actions should not exceed what is essential to the accomplishment of a given aim. One should not engage in activity for activity's sake. Mentally, *wu-wei* implies that even if we are called upon to perform a necessary function for the welfare of the people, and even if we have accomplished our work, we must never be attached to what we have done, knowing that our true happiness does not lie in what we do, but in what we are. "Do your work, retire: This is the Tao of Heaven" (ch. 9).

Applied to practical life, *wu-wei* basically refers to the abstinence from action that is contrary to nature. According to the *Tao-te ching*, "flowing with the Tao" means following the key principles of humanity, that is, inculcating the values of humility, forgiveness, justice, contentment, and moderation, and emphasizing deeds rather than words in one's daily life.²¹

The Unbiased Mind

One should first empty oneself of all human learning so as to be objective in the partaking of divine knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to empty ourselves of all learning so that we may partake of divine knowledge (*Hidden Words* 25). 'Abdu'l-Bahá warns that "with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on error and indifference to God" (*Selections* 110). In a letter to the intellectuals of the court of the Shah in Persia, Bahá'u'lláh begged them "not to depend upon their intellect, their comprehension and learning . . ." (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 248).

To show the importance of an unbiased mind in the search for Truth, the *Tao-te ching* frequently uses metaphor to describe a human being's uncontaminated nature, likening it to the "uncarved wood" (ch. 15), "the innocence of a spewing infant" (ch. 10), "the seeming obscurity of muddy water" (ch.15), and "the openness of a valley" (ch. 15). Lao-tzu believes that a human being's original nature is constant although its pristine simplicity has been smothered by layers upon layers of the "knowledge" and "desire" generated in a contrived and unnatural society. For Lao-tzu, this encrustation of social norms, values, and conventional erudition can be pared away through a cultivation of the Taoist way and a return to the beginning:

20. One may note here that in, for example, the martial art of aikido, an opponent may be defeated by the force of his own attack. With great skill, one can throw an attacker to the floor without the attacker being touched. This is because force is not directly opposed, but rather given way to and redirected. A Taoist-derived aikido principle is "Flexibility and softness masters hardness; in yielding there is strength."

21. This is only a brief summary of the main tenets of the *Tao-te ching*. No mere article can hope to list comprehensively what this classic teaches.

To get learning, add to it daily.
 To get Tao, subtract daily.
 Subtract and subtract
 Until you achieve nothing-doing
 Do nothing-doing
 and everything will get done.
 (Ch. 48)

The *Tao-te ching* stresses that one must unlearn conventional knowledge and reject all artificially established values before one can return to a natural and uncontaminated state. The cultural accumulation around one's original nature—the unnatural carving of the “uncarved wood”—represents a real deterioration of the human condition. Truth will only be distorted if seen through prejudiced eyes. Lao-tzu goes on to elaborate on the fact that most people see the concrete aspect of the wheel, vessel, or room, not realizing that its utility lies in its hollowness:

Thirty spokes share one hub;
 In emptiness lies the wheel's utility.
 Kneading clay makes a pot;
 In emptiness lies the pot's utility.
 Cutting doors and windows makes a room,
 In emptiness lies the room's utility.
 (Ch. 11)

Tao is to be known by “nothing-knowing,” a clear and unobstructed state of mind, made possible only by first emptying oneself of all human learning. The mind should be opened to Tao by absorbing and becoming intimate with it and not by building mental constructions on top of it.²² This statement is equivalent to the saying that one should be cleansed “from the idle sayings of men” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70) and “cast away . . . the things [we] have composed with the pen of . . . idle fancies and vain imaginings” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 98).

“Nothing-knowing” can be achieved not only by the learned but also by the common people. As in past revelations, people devoid of learning have comprehended the Truth, a power whose reality some of learning have failed to grasp (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 142, 235–36). This concept is perhaps most clearly exemplified in the recognition of Christ by the illiterate and the rejection of Christ by the intellectuals of his time.

Without going out of the door
 You can know beneath-heaven.

22. This is a far cry from our current Faustian way of thinking or the scientific method of controlling nature through understanding it, conceptualizing it, cutting it down to human size, and subjecting it to the operations of the intellect.

Without looking out of the window
You can see heaven's way.
The further you go,
the less you know.

(Ch. 47)

Indeed, Lao-tzu warns that "the wise are not learned; / the learned are not wise" (ch. 81), as learning is more often a hindrance than an aid to spiritual insights.²³ In this context, Tao is attained not by knowledge, but rather, by an absence of knowledge.

Humility

The truly great in religious history have been those who thought least of their own glory or interests and were focussed only on giving peace and rest to the people. "Therefore the sage / Puts himself last, / Finds himself first; / Abandons his self, / Preserves his self. / Is it not because he has no self, / That he is able to realize his self?" (ch. 7); "The Way of Heaven is / To benefit but not to harm"; and "the way of the Sage is / To work but not compete" (ch. 81). Many of the verses in the *Tao-te ching* that extol the life of the sage remind us of the life led by "the Servant of Bahá," 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

The sage does not hoard,
The more he does for others,
The more he has himself.
The more he gives,
The more he gets.

(Ch. 8)

Perhaps the central insight of the *Tao-te ching* is that lowliness or humility is the foundation of greatness. "Pride in wealth and fame breeds its own collapse" (ch. 9). Therefore, the sage

holds to the One and
Becomes beneath-heaven's model.
He does not show himself,
Hence he shines.
Does not assert himself,
Hence he is seen.
Does not boast his merits,
Hence he gets credit.

23. Unfortunately, these lines by Lao-tzu have often been misunderstood by scholars as showing a sort of negative, passive attitude and a philosophy of withdrawal. See, for instance, Yong, *Oriental Thought* 69.

Does not vaunt himself,
 Hence he survives.
 Does not compete with anyone,
 Hence no one beneath heaven
 Can compete with him.

(Ch. 22)

The *Tao-te ching* is the source of the often-quoted saying that only from low places is it possible to look upon heaven and earth. From high places, the temptation is to look down on earth and think oneself superior to it. Chinese landscape painters, for instance, always lifted their eyes up into the hills, never looked down from them:

Rivers and seas become kings of the valleys
 Because they lie lower:
 That is why they become kings.
 Hence the sage,
 wishing to be higher than the people,
 Keeps his speech lower;
 Wishing to lead the people,
 Puts himself behind them.

(Ch. 66)

A central metaphor in the *Tao-te ching* is water, and Lao-tzu equates water with the highest form of goodness. Water knows how to benefit all things without competing with them. Water stays in crevices and unattractive low-lying areas not often frequented and usually loathed by humans. "Therefore it comes near to the Tao" (ch. 24). The paradox is that nothing is as soft or as weak as water, yet nothing is better to attack the hard and strong through attritional action, and nothing can take its place (ch. 78).

Another metaphor equated with lowliness is that of the traditional female role. Here, the *Tao-te ching* exhorts the reader to "know the masculine but keep to the feminine" and "to know the white (*yang*) but keep to the black (*yin*)" (ch. 28). The sage and the ruler are urged to adopt *yin* qualities commonly associated with the female role.²⁴ The power of weakness is also shown in the image of the infant, whose helplessness can dominate the whole family. Here, the Bahá'í scriptures remind us that through meekness, a human being is elevated to the heaven of power while "pride degrades him to the lowest station of humiliation and debasement" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith* 180):

24. The *Tao-te ching* can be said to be the first classic to raise the very delicate question about reaching the goal of sexual equality. When both men and women remember *yang* but emphasize *yin*, they will obtain greater equality.

The weak overcome the strong;
The soft overcome the hard.
There is no one beneath heaven
Who doesn't know this,
And no one who practices it.
Therefore the sage says:
To bear the dirt of the country
Is to be master of the grain-shrines
to bear the sins of the country
Is to be lord of beneath-heaven.
(Ch. 78)²⁵

This philosophy of gentleness and softness, meekness and humility stems from the concept that power and weakness, being and non-being, and success and failure are all relative to one another. All things turn from life to death and from death to life. If one tries to weaken others, one becomes strong. According to Taoism, softness overcomes toughness. The Taoist notion here foreshadows the words of Jesus five-hundred years later: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Forgiveness and Justice

Faithful to the theme of the revealed religions, the *Tao-te ching* balances the concept of forgiveness with justice. It calls for requiting hatred with virtue (ch. 3):²⁶

Why did the ancients prize Tao?
Because if it is sought, it is found;
Because the guilty are forgiven.
That is why it is beneath-heaven's treasure.
(Ch. 62)

However, forgiveness must be balanced with justice. Thus, while heaven forgives, heaven also dispenses justice to the wicked:

When people don't fear force,
Greater force is on the way.
(Ch. 72)

Vast is heaven's net and wide-meshed
Yet nothing slips through.
(Ch. 73)

25. We may note that the last four lines of this quotation also portray the idea of bearing the guilt of the people on one's own shoulders. This "scapegoat" idea is reminiscent of the sacrifice of the life of the prophet for the people who refuse to recognize the prophet.

26. This is different from Confucius's teaching, "Requite a grievance with justice."

Similarly, Bahá'í prayers ask for God's forgiveness and mercy, and Bahá'ís are assured that although "justice and equity are twin Guardians that watch over men" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 13) and that "all your doings hath My Pen graven with open characters upon tablets of chrysolite" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 210) God is at the same time "forgiving and compassionate toward the concourse of the faithful" (The Báb, *Selections* 45).

Contentment

The scriptures of the major religions warn their believers of the variable fortunes of the world and exhort them not to be attached to material wealth. Bahá'u'lláh warns, "Be content, O people, with that which God hath desired for you and predestined unto you . . ." (*Gleanings* 103). Christ said the same thing, "For what is a man profited if he should gain the whole world and lose his soul?" (Matthew 16:26). The *Tao-te ching* contributes the following:

No calamity is greater
Than not knowing what is enough.
No fault worse than wanting too much.
Whoever knows what is enough
Has enough.

(Ch. 46)

Attachment comes at wasteful cost;
Hoarding leads to a certain loss;
Knowing what is enough avoids disgrace;
Knowing when to stop secures from peril.
Only thus can you long last.

(Ch. 44)

Moderation

There are two sides to human nature: the material and the spiritual. Although material pleasure—labeled "music and dainties" by Lao-tzu—is at once absorbing and attention getting, we should not forget our spiritual nature or the Tao within us, since it is only by a balance of humankind's material and spiritual natures that one can be truly happy (ch. 35). Moderation is the key to successful living. This idea is supplemented by the theory that there is "cyclical reversion" in Tao's movement (ch. 48). Cyclical reversion refers to the idea that Tao, after reaching the climax in its movement, will revert from one pole to the opposite pole. The lesson we should learn from this teaching is moderation or contentment. In other words, one should not push any activity to the extreme limit, so as to avoid the reaction or setback that will inevitably occur when the limit is reached. Thus, the true sage eschews excesses, extremes, and extravagances:

Keep to simplicity
Grasp the primal,

Reduce the self
And curb desire.
(Ch. 29)

Bahá'u'lláh states, "How often have things been simple and easy of accomplishment, and yet most men have been heedless, and busied themselves with that which wasteth their time!" (*Epistle* 137). Lao-tzu continues to stress the importance of moderation:

Therefore the sage is
Severe, but he doesn't cut;
Exact but he doesn't hurt;
Straight, but he doesn't strain;
Bright, but he doesn't dazzle.
(Ch. 58)

Moderation in thought and behavior should be the aspiration of all those who flow with Tao. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was known to tread the spiritual path with practical feet. In the *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih*, Bahá'u'lláh gave great importance to moderation, "If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil" (*Tablets* 69), and exhorted the rulers that moderation is a necessity, since freedom in excess will "exercise a pernicious influence upon men . . ." (*Gleanings* 216).

Without moderation, there will be the signs of the "anti-Tao," such as civil disturbances and war. "The countryside will be out of joint and man will hear the cry of loyalty and allegiance" (ch. 18). "Rulers will be taxing their people heavily" (ch. 75). Indeed, the court will be resplendent while the fields are weedy and the granaries empty:

The court is very resplendent;
Very weedy are the fields,
and the granaries very empty.
They wear gaudy clothes,
Carry sharp swords,
Exceed in eating and drinking,
Have riches more than they can use.
Call them robber-braggarts;
They are anti-Tao indeed!
(Ch. 53)

This description covers people in any epoch (not only the early Chinese epoch) who are autocratic, competitive, class conscious, deceitful, violent, or oppressive. Nevertheless, although the anti-Tao may thrive and the covetous and aggressive ones succeed for a short time, they are never rich and powerful enough, and the very causes of their temporary success must lead inevitably to their downfall:

Squalls do not last the morning
Nor downpours the day.

(Ch. 23)

Be not troubled in poverty nor confident in riches, for poverty is followed by riches and riches are followed by poverty. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 40)

The themes of all major religions can be said to be love, peace, and non-violence. While Bahá'ís today cherish the hope that “the weapons of war throughout the world may be converted into instruments of reconstruction and that strife and conflict may be removed from the midst of men” (Bahá'u'lláh *Tablets* 23), in 600 BC, Lao-tzu echoed this feeling:

Killing multitudes brings weeping and sorrow;
treat victory like a funeral.

(Ch. 31)

Fish should not leave the depths;
Neither should weapons of state ever be aired.

(Ch. 36)

Weapons may be necessary, but they should be used sparingly. In fact Taoism believes that wisdom is to ignore challenges and never to have aggressive attitudes toward nature or other people. According to Lao-tzu, humanity cannot achieve its aims by aggressive action. In fact, to yield is to be preserved whole, since the sage “does not compete with anyone, hence no one beneath heaven can compete with him” (ch. 22).

Deeds, not Words

Both the Bahá'í scriptures and the *Tao-te ching* stress the preference of deeds over words. The famous Chinese saying “He who speaks does not know, and he who knows does not speak” resounds throughout the *Tao-te ching* (ch. 56). Bahá'u'lláh warns that “the tongue is a smouldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 193) and that the most negligent of people is the one who “disputeth idly and seeketh to advance himself over his brother” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words* 23–24). In inimitable word-play, Lao-tzu continues:

True words are not nice;
Nice words are not true,
A good man does not argue;
An arguer is not good.

(Ch. 81)

The *Tao-te ching* argues that the sage manages without doing and teaches without talking, rears children without owning them, accomplishes meri

without taking credit, and, because the sage takes no credit, credit cannot be taken from the sage (ch. 22). Lao-tzu warns:

Many words exhaust Truth
Keep to the empty center!
(Ch. 2)²⁷

When prudence and wit appear
Great hypocrites are here.
(Ch. 18)

Sage or Prophet?

As to whether Lao-tzu was a sage or prophet, we must note that although his teachings were very similar to the prophets of the world religions, he was not one of them. Indeed, Lao-tzu never claimed or alluded to prophethood in his writings. Shoghi Effendi confirms this:

Regarding Lao-Tse; the Bahá'ís do not consider him a prophet, or even a secondary prophet or messenger, unlike Buddha or Zoroaster, both of whom were Divinely-appointed and fully independent Manifestations of God. (From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights of Guidance* 502).

Similarly, Confucius was also not regarded as a prophet by Shoghi Effendi: "Confucius was not a Prophet. It is quite correct to say he is the founder of a moral system and a great reformer" (from a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights of Guidance* 501). It is acknowledged, however, that Confucius "became the cause of civilization, advancement and prosperity for the people of China" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets* 469) and that the teachings of Confucius like those of Buddha "bestow a fresh life upon mankind and constitute the immediate remedy for all the ills of social life" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* 348).

Thus, in China, we have the unique case of a religion without a prophet.²⁸ It is a religion without a revelation. With respect to Confucianism and Taoism seen together, the former can be said to constitute the *Yang*, or positive aspect of life and culture, and the latter the *Yin*, or passive aspect, the two balancing and complementing each other. It is meaningful to view these two religions holistically. They are two halves, inexorably linked in the cultural thought of

27. For Tao, the empty center is also the center of humankind's multiform personality, with its unfathomable ability to explore unconsciously whole fields of activity that the conscious mind overlooks and to let courses of action merge through rumination about facts rather than through conceptualization of them.

28. Of course, there might have been a revelation in China before Lao-tzu. The legends of the Yellow Emperor could also have been the hazy memory of a manifestation. But these are mere speculations compared with the more substantial evidence available regarding the teachings and lives of Lao-tzu and Confucius.

the Chinese people, originating in the same century. While Confucianism manifests its influence mainly in the ethical and political sphere, Taoism manifests its influence in the literary, the artistic, and the spiritual.

There is a traditional belief that a meeting took place between Confucius and Lao-tzu.²⁹ The earliest account begins with Confucius going to Chou to put questions to Lao-tzu concerning the rites, although in the actual account nothing further is said about the rites. All that takes place is a lecture from Lao-tzu on the kind of behavior to be avoided. There are other versions: one version of Confucian origin recounts Confucius receiving instruction in the rites, and the other of Taoist origin concerning the censure of Confucius by Lao-tzu. Lau recounts four instances of Confucius recalling what he learned about the rites from Lao-tzu although there is no account of the actual meeting (*Chinese Classics* 148). Confucius is reported to have said the following after the meeting with Lao-tzu:

I know a bird can fly, a fish can swim, and an animal can run. For that which runs a net can be made; for that which swims a line can be made; for that which flies a corded arrow can be made. But the dragon's ascent into heaven on the wind and the clouds is something which is beyond my knowledge. Today I have seen Lao Tzu who is perhaps like a dragon. (Quoted in Lau, *Chinese Classics* 8)

Whatever the version, one notes that it is Confucius who sought advice from Lao-tzu and not vice versa. I for one believe that Confucius was at one time a student of and an apprentice to the older philosopher Lao-tzu, whose influence on the conception of non-anthropomorphic and all-pervasive Tao, a laissez-faire (*we-wei*) philosophy of government, the advocacy of harmony, humility, justice, moderation, and the emphasis of deeds over words can be observed in the thinking of Confucius himself.³⁰

If the author of the *Tao-te ching* were not a prophet, how then do we explain the book's sublime wisdom and enduring spiritual insights? Indeed, the *Tao-te ching* sparkles with such bright gems of wisdom couched in provocative paradoxes that it has an irresistible tug on the heart of the reader. Although brief and pithy, its insights are profound and provocative. Lao-tzu was so near to prophethood a popular legend recounts that after he left his homeland, he traveled to India and was reincarnated as the Buddha! Perhaps it is not unreasonable at this point to advance the argument that, being a man of superior spirituality, he was able to tap the spiritual currents emanating at that time from the Buddha in India. Lao-tzu (like Confucius) can be said to be a religious teacher, sensitive and

29. The earliest historical work that contains an account of such a meeting is the *Shih Chi*. In the *Chuang Tzu*, there is an account of a meeting and the censure of Confucius by Lao-tzu. In the *Li Chi* (Record of Rites), a Confucianist work compiled in the first century BC, we have four instances of Confucius recalling what he learned about the rites from Lao-tzu (Lau, *Chinese Classics* 147).

30. This influence is evident in the four books of Confucius (see Chan, *A Sourcebook*).

attuned to the spiritual waves in the atmosphere of the sixth century BC. How else could one account for the enduring quality of the *Tao-te ching* for two and a half millennia of Chinese history (that included two big book burnings and some sharp rivalries between Tao and Buddhism, especially during the T'ang and Yüan Dynasties) and for its similarity in spirit to the world's scriptures?

Alternatively, there can be another theory. As custodian of the imperial archives, Lao-tzu had access to ancient scriptures, the sources of which were lost in antiquity. A question to ask here is whether it is possible that in the prehistory of China there was a Manifestation of God so ancient that his name is now unknown and who appeared on the Chinese horizon so long ago that the civilization of the ancient Chinese people was always considered "great" and relatively more "advanced" than those outside its borders. It is possible that the remnants of this Manifestation's teachings were preserved sparingly in some ancient books and that it was Lao-tzu (like Confucius), a student of the divine, who discovered and reflected on the ideas and preserved them in a little booklet whose words remained relevant until this day.³¹ One remembers here Shoghi Effendi's comments on the scarcity of references to the Asiatic prophets:

The only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic prophets is because their names seem to be [lost] in the mists of ancient history. Buddha is mentioned and Zoroaster in our scriptures—both non-Jewish prophets or non-semitic prophets. We are taught there always have been Manifestations of God, but we do not have any record of their names. (From a letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Lights of Guidance* 503)

We know that there were Stone Age people who lived in China, but since we have no records of what they wrote (writing not yet having been invented), we can only guess what they may have thought or believed. The earliest Chinese writings were found during the era of the Shang kings around 1400 BC. It was an age of large buildings, beautiful bronze vessels, elaborately woven silks, etc. Although there were books, they have since decayed, and we are only left with short inscriptions on bone and stone. These remnants give us a tantalizing glimpse at their elaborate religious ceremonies and considerable political organization but are insufficient to tell us much beyond their visual form. Is it possible that in their ancient history, a Manifestation of God appeared, leading to a golden period in Chinese civilization—a period that Lao-tzu and Confucius have always referred to and looked back on with longing and inspiration?³²

31. Scholars such as Paul Sih have found that both Lao-tzu and Confucius drew heavily from the *Shu* of the *Book of Documents*, although they did not quote explicitly from this or other books (*Chinese Humanism* 53).

32. See, for example, the references to "the ancients" in the *Tao-te ching* (ch. 62 and 65). References to the ancients are also found throughout the four books of Confucius (see Chan, *A Sourcebook*).

Decline and Decay

Taoism (*Tao Chia*), as it is practiced today, is hardly recognizable as a derivative of the original philosophy of the Tao as propounded by Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. The *Tao-te ching* inspired the genesis of religious Taoism (*Tao Chiao*) by Chang Tao-ling towards the end of the second century AD. Although religious Taoism has shaped many of the popular beliefs, customs, and festivals it is associated today not so much with its original source as with all sorts of mysteries, superstitions, gods, idols, miracles, and magic. The religious Taoists formed a "church," and, through the centuries, generated a massive literature complete with ritualistic and alchemical lore. They became embroiled in politics and sponsored violent revolutionary groups. Religious Taoism also developed regimes of meditation that are coupled with a complicated roster of gods presiding over particular organs and functions.³³

It is perhaps with regard to this development that 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the "despondent hearts of the Chinese" and their "depressed souls"³⁴ and referred to the fact that the beliefs and rites of the Chinese religion have not continued in accordance with their fundamental teachings ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 165). Much that has survived of Taoism (or, for that matter Confucianism) today may be appropriately labelled as "a body without a soul" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 166).

In view of the association of later Taoism with magic, foretelling, and the occult in general, it is well to emphasize that the Taoism of Lao-tzu is no less iconoclastic than other prophetic faiths. The *I Ching*, a work now popular among Westerners, reflects a mixture of wisdom and divination that characterized the Chou Dynasty during which Lao-tzu lived. However, its conventionality and superstition are not Tao but, rather, what Tao is against. The notion that nature can be magically manipulated to further personal interests is foreign to the *Tao-te ching*:

As to foreknowledge,
It is a blossomy path
And the beginning of folly.
(Ch. 38)

Religions may continue to rise and fall as they have done in the past. Similarly, Taoism has had its spring, summer, and autumn, and is obviously now in its late winter. After more than 2,500 years, it has lost its uncarved pristine nature and has become encrusted with layers of thoughts and practices not its own. This degeneration has not gone unpredicted:

33. Not surprisingly, religious Taoism has contributed to the rather popular opinion that there are perhaps more superstitions in China than in other civilized countries in the world.

34. From a tablet to an individual believer; translated by Shoghi Effendi, 18 July 1919 in "A Compilation on China."

Things overgrown fall into decay.
That is not-Tao,
And what is not-Tao soon ends.

(Ch. 55)

To conclude, the *Tao-te ching* is important because it contains the essence of sacred literature. It is a book on how to remain whole during times of confusion and on how to meet Tao. The *Tao-te ching* does not harp on or stress the central necessity of a belief in God because there was no such necessity when the book was written. It was part of the common sense belief of that time that Tao existed. However, the people had forgotten how to live harmoniously with Tao, having attributed erroneous aspects to it. Thus, the main task of the *Tao-te ching* was to dwell on the practical and the factual. It is, therefore, not a mystical book in the sense of seeking absorption in the All, or quietist in the sense of withdrawing from the here and now. The *Tao-te ching* is immensely social in terms of laying down the wisdom of happy living through the practice of humility, contentment, moderation, and good deeds. Lao-tzu provides a model for a good ruler and lessons on what succeeds and what brings grief. The *Tao-te ching* is dedicated to the well-being of both the rulers and the ruled. Lao-tzu avoids subjectivity and turns his back on the superstition that Taoism later embraced.

As a spiritual legacy, the *Tao-te ching* covers a vast variety of subjects ranging from personal culture to political ideals, and expounds on both the immanent and the transcendent aspect of Tao. It has played a major part in fostering a spirit of contentment, a deep love of nature, and a strong sense of humility, moderation, simplicity, and innocence in the psyche of the Chinese people. Could it be these very characteristics of the Chinese people that inspired 'Abdu'l-Bahá to say these remarkable words?

The Chinese people are most simple-hearted and truth-seeking. The Bahai teacher of the Chinese people must first be imbued with their spirit, know their sacred literature, study their national customs and speak to them from their own standpoint and their own terminologies. . . . Truly, I say, the Chinese are free from any deceit and hypocrisies and are prompted with ideal motives.³⁵

And these words from Shoghi Effendi:

. . . China—a land which has its own world and civilization, whose people constitute one-fourth of the population of the globe, which ranks foremost among all nations in material, cultural and spiritual resources and potentialities, and whose future is assuredly bright? (Letter from Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the East, 23 January 1923, in "Compilation on China")

35. *Star of the West* 13.7: 185. The original text of the words spoken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá has not yet been found to make verification of this translation possible.

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