

Living with the Texts: The Tao Te Ching

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I step onto the mat in the gym on the second floor.
I'm here for my first class in the Japanese art of aikido.
I feel self-conscious in my sweats and T-shirt
instead of the white uniforms most of the students are wearing.
But now the teacher has us gather round.
He points to a photo on the wall
of a small elderly Japanese man with a wispy beard.
He says, "This is O Sensei, our teacher."
He tells us, O Sensei was a warrior who gave up violence.
Trained as a soldier, he grew disgusted with killing.
He began to train in a different kind of fighting.
One day a sword master challenged him to a duel.
He accepted but refused to use any weapon
against his opponent's sword.
He stood there unarmed.
The sword master thought he was being insulted.
He lunged at him. Lightning-fast, O Sensei ducked out of the way.
The sword master attacked again and again.
O Sensei just moved aside.
It went on for hours.
Finally the sword master collapsed at O Sensei's feet.
O Sensei had won simply by getting out of the way.

Alas, I was never to become an aikido master myself.
But the story of O Sensei caught in my heart,
a man who discovered how to meet violence with peace
and in so doing became far more powerful than ever before.
This is like the paradoxical Master at the center of the *Tao Te Ching*,
the one who does nothing yet accomplishes everything.

The *Tao Te Ching* was written by such a master,
at least that's the legend.

We think Lao Tzu means something like "The Old Master,"
or it might just mean, "The Old Guy."

We know he was Chinese, but that's about all we really know.
Legend says he lived about the same time as Confucius,
around 500 years before Jesus was born.

They say he was an archivist by profession, sort of like a librarian.
At age 80, he got on a horse, or maybe a buffalo,
and rode off to the south, to cross into Tibet.

At the Tibetan border, the story goes, the guard stopped him
and said, please don't leave China
without writing down your teachings.

And he agreed.

He sat down and wrote a little book which became known as
the *Tao Te Ching*—the *Book of the Way and Its Power*.

This is the text that commands our attention today.

Chapter 38 of the *Tao Te Ching* begins with a riddle:

The Master doesn't try to be powerful;
thus he is truly powerful.

The ordinary man [or *person*; the Chinese doesn't specify a gender]
keeps reaching for power;
thus he never has enough.

If you don't try to be powerful, you have power.

But if you *try* to be powerful,
you will never be as powerful as you wish.

What does this mean?

I go back to the story of O Sensei, the founder of aikido,
who won duels merely by getting out of the way.

It's said he could throw an opponent to the floor
with the merest nudge, the tiniest point of his finger.

How?

By using the energy that his opponent was flinging at him.

He didn't have to be strong.

He didn't have to generate a lot of power inside himself.

Because he was a master at using the energy around him.

The *Tao Te Ching* tells us energy is flowing all around us.

If you want to get something done,

figure out how to use that energy.

Ride it like a wave.

Let it help you.

It's like this:

A river flows fast and smooth.

It is ease itself to hop in a boat and glide downstream.

No effort. You just go.

But if you try to paddle upstream,

you'll exhaust yourself in five minutes!

It's like that with everything in life.

Have you ever decided you wanted to make something happen,
something really good and important?

And you tried, and it didn't work,

so you tried harder, and it still didn't work,

and you tried harder and harder, and it *still* didn't work,

until finally you were banging your head against the wall,

exhausted and frustrated?

The *Tao Te Ching* tells us, save yourself all that trouble.

If it's not working, maybe it's not meant to be.

Back off. Try a different path.

See how things want to be naturally and accept them as they are.

We get in such trouble when we try to fight and fight against what is.

I can't tell you how many times I've had to learn this lesson.

Now and again I'll get what *I* think

is an absolutely brilliant idea for our church,

a new class I want to teach, or a new social justice ministry.
So I start talking about it.
I might ask a few folks, how about we give it a try,
and it just falls flat.
A total dud. Not inspiring to anybody but me.
It's not happening. There's no energy for it.

And sometimes that's just how it is:
for whatever reason, our brilliant idea for how things should be
just doesn't work with the energy that's there.
In such a moment, the *Tao Te Ching* tells us,
don't worry about it; don't feel bad;
but *let it go*. Don't force it. Forcing doesn't help anything.

Other times, we might get a wave of inspiration
and solve the most complicated problem
with the simplest, easiest solution. That happens too.
The perfect idea at the perfect time.
Inner intention working perfectly with outward circumstances.
The *Tao Te Ching* tells us, this is how it should be all the time.

The Master does nothing, [the text says,]
yet he [or she] leaves nothing undone.

In Chinese this doing-and-not-doing is called *wu-wei*.
What it means is, don't *force* anything.
You can't *make* things happen.
But watch and wait for the moment when the merest nudge
will make everything fall into place.
Pure effectiveness.
Creative stillness.¹

The *Tao Te Ching* tells us this is true power,
working with what is, not forcing anything,

¹ Translations offered by Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (HarperCollins, 1991), p. 207.

staying in harmony with everything else.

But it's all very well to *say* that.

Living it is harder.

Things seem so urgent.

We rush and scramble to find solutions to all our problems.

Don't tell me we should just relax and go with the flow
at the nuclear power plant on the verge of meltdown in Japan.

Don't tell me we should just sit back and wait to see what happens.

Absolutely not!

In an urgent and dangerous situation, we have to act.

Lao Tzu says, and I hope we will listen,
act but don't panic.

Don't waste time on wishing things were otherwise.

Deal with what is.

Use what's in front of you; don't panic; do your best.

Once I was a witness to a pretty bad traffic accident.

My husband and I were driving along the highway.

A car right ahead of us started weaving
and flipped and rolled over.

I was so shocked, once I got our car pulled over, I froze.

But John kept a cool head and ran over to help.

He checked for broken bones—

miraculously the two guys seemed more or less OK—

and he sat with the driver and held his hand

until the paramedics pulled up a few minutes later.

Lao Tzu teaches us all to be like that:

do what's needed with no fuss or worry;

pure effectiveness.

He himself lived in a world

that was no less violent and scary than our own.

This is the period of the Warring States.

China is divided up into small states,

each run by a warlord with an army.
They battle back and forth.
Over the years, hundreds of thousands of civilians
are brutalized and executed
for being in the wrong place at the wrong time.
The question on Lao Tzu's mind was very simple and very serious:
how can we stop destroying ourselves?
How can we bring peace back to our world?

His book tells us: peace comes when we accept what is
and act simply, at the right moment.
But it also tells us something very strange:
Goodness and kindness are not what's needed.
Justice is not what's needed.
Morality is not what's needed.
Raise your hand if this doesn't make sense!

This is the trickiest part of the text,
and I want to give you some background to help you understand.
Because it *doesn't* make sense until we understand
this is part of a conversation.
In this text, Lao Tzu is talking to Confucius,
probably the greatest philosopher in all of Chinese history.
Legend tells us these two men were alive at the same time—
so amazing!
And we absolutely cannot understand what Lao Tzu's saying
until we understand what Confucius is saying.

Both of them want to bring peace to a world filled with violence.
But they come at it from opposite directions.
Confucius says, we have to start with rules,
rituals, social customs that tell us how to act.
If you want a peaceful society,
start by teaching people how to be polite.
Teach them to say “please” and “thank you,”

all the rules and manners and social conventions that any society has.
Say “bless you” when someone sneezes.
Hold the door open for the other person.
Why? Because that’s the custom.
It’s all surface stuff, but Confucius says,
if you practice the surface stuff, it will change you on the inside.
You won’t just be a person who *acts* respectfully,
you will *become* a respectful person.
You won’t just be a person who *acts* peacefully,
you will *become* a peaceful person.
And if everybody follows along, everybody will become peaceful
and society will be at peace.
That’s what Confucius says.
Peace happens when everybody knows the rules and follows them.

But Lao Tzu sees it differently.
He says, and he’s got a point,
most people don’t like being told what to do.
His idea is, get rid of rules and compulsions,
and let people freely choose.
He says, most of the time, people will choose what’s right
all on their own.
It’s like the difference between our church
and a church that tells you what you’re supposed to believe.
We don’t tell people, believe this or that or you’re wrong.
We say, follow your conscience and believe what you must.
Lao Tzu is like that.

The moral man [he says] does something,
and when no one responds
he rolls up his sleeves and uses force.

Shades of every dictator,
every extremist who has ever tried to bend people to his will,
rolling up khaki-and-camouflage sleeves

and calling out the tanks and guns
to enforce his vision of what should be.

Lao Tzu dreamed of a world where leaders honored their people,
brought out people's natural gifts,
trusted people to do what is right.
Forcing will get you nowhere.

Gentleness is all.

In this world of oppression and violence and dueling ideologies,
the *Tao Te Ching* calls us back to freedom.

Let people be as they are.

Dwell in reality and let illusions go.

Stop forcing.

Relax. Pay attention.

When the time comes, you will know what to do.

May it be so.

Amen.