

SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING)

Introduction

The *Daodejing* ("The Classic of the Way and Its Power") is a compilation reflecting a particular strain of thought from around 300 BCE. It is traditionally attributed to a mysterious character known as Laozi ("the old master"). There is no evidence that such a person existed at all. The book attributed to him, the *Daodejing* is, however, tremendously popular. It exists in several different versions and became one of the bases of both the philosophy of Daoism and the related but distinct Daoist religion. Like the Confucian *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Han Feizi*, and others, the *Daodejing* is the product of that period in Chinese history when the kings of the Zhou dynasty had lost all real authority and their kingdom had disintegrated into a coterie of feudal states that squabbled and fought with one another in ever-shifting arrangements of alliances and enmities.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 79-94. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Selections from the Laozi (Daodejing)

1

The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way;
The name that can be named is not the constant name.
The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth;
The named is the mother of all things.
Thus be constantly without desire,
so as to observe its subtlety.
And constantly have desire,
so as to observe its outcome.
These two have the same origin,
But are named differently.
Both may be called mysterious.
Mysterious and still more mysterious,
The gateway of all subtleties!

42

The Way gives birth to the One;
The One gives birth to two;
Two give birth to three;
And three give birth to all things.
All beings support the yin and embrace the yang;
And through the blending of *qi*¹ they create harmony.
What people hate is to be orphaned, lonely, unfortunate,
Yet kings and lords call themselves by these names.
Therefore things may gain by losing, and lose by gaining.
What others teach, I also teach:
The violent do not attain a natural death.
This I take as the father of my teaching.

43

What is softest in the world
Overcomes what is hardest in the world.
No-thing penetrates where there is no space.
Thus I know that in doing nothing there is advantage.
The wordless teaching and the advantage of doing nothing --
there are few in the world who understand them.

Questions:

1. What does "Laozi" mean by the term "The Way"?
2. How would Laozi recommend that we deal with problems and challenges?
3. How is Laozi's philosophy different from that of your own?
4. How is Laozi's philosophy different than that of Confucius? Of Han Fei and Lord Shang?

¹ *Qi* is a fundamental concept in Chinese thought. Its sense depends on the context, but among the most frequently encountered translations are "vital energy," "vital force," "material force," and "breath."

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on *SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING)*

Longer Selection

From *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, 2nd ed., vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 79-94. © 1999 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

Selections from the Laozi (Daodejing)

1

The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way;
The name that can be named is not the constant name.
The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth;
The named is the mother of all things.
Thus be constantly without desire,
so as to observe its subtlety.
And constantly have desire,
so as to observe its outcome.
These two have the same origin,
But are named differently.
Both may be called mysterious.
Mysterious and still more mysterious,
The gateway of all subtleties!

2

When everyone in the world knows beauty as beauty,
ugliness appears.
When everyone knows good as good,
not-good arrives.
Therefore being and non-being give birth to one another;
Difficult and easy give completion to one another;
Long and short form² one another;
High and low fill³ one another;
Sound and voice harmonize with one another;
Ahead and behind follow after one another.
Therefore the sage accomplishes things by doing nothing (*wuwei*),
Furthering a teaching that is without words.
All things arise, and he does not leave them.
He gives them life but without possessing them.

² Reading *xing* with the Mawangdui texts rather than *qiao* with the text of the third-century commentator, Wang Bi.

³ Reading *ying* with the Mawangdui texts rather than *qing* with the Wang Bi text.

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on *SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING)*

He acts but without relying on his own ability.
He succeeds but without dwelling on his success.
And because he does not dwell on it, it does not leave him.

3

Do not exalt the worthy,
and the people will not compete.
Do not value goods that are hard to come by,
and the people will not steal.
Do not display objects of desire,
and the people's minds will not be disturbed.
Therefore the ordering of the sage
empties their minds,
fills their bellies,
weakens their ambitions,
strengthens their bones.
He always causes the people to be without knowledge,
without desire,
And causes the wise ones not to dare to act.
He does nothing (*wuwei*), and there is nothing that is
not brought to order.

4

The Way is empty.
It may be used without ever being exhausted.
Fathomless, it seems to be the ancestor of all things.
Blunting the sharpness,
Untying the tangles,
Subduing the light.
Merging with the dust.
Profound, it appears to exist forever.
Whose child it is I do not know.
It seems to have existed before the Lord.

5

Heaven and Earth are not humane,
Regarding all things as straw dogs.⁴

⁴ Straw dogs were used for sacrifices in ancient China. After they had been used, they were thrown away and there was no sentimental attachment to them.

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING)

The sage is not humane,
Regarding the people as straw dogs.
Between Heaven and Earth -- how like a bellows!
Vacuous but inexhaustible,
Moving and producing ever more.
An excess of words ends in impoverishment.
It is better to hold to the center.

...

42

The Way gives birth to the One;
The One gives birth to two;
Two give birth to three;
And three give birth to all things.
All beings support the yin and embrace the yang;
And through the blending of *qi*⁵ they create harmony.
What people hate is to be orphaned, lonely, unfortunate,
Yet kings and lords call themselves by these names.
Therefore things may gain by losing, and lose by gaining.
What others teach, I also teach:
The violent do not attain a natural death.
This I take as the father of my teaching.

43

What is softest in the world
Overcomes what is hardest in the world.
No-thing penetrates where there is no space.
Thus I know that in doing nothing there is advantage.
The wordless teaching and the advantage of doing nothing --
there are few in the world who understand them.

47

Without passing through the door one may know
all-under-Heaven;
Without looking out the window one may observe
the Way of Heaven.
The further one goes, the less one knows.

⁵ See footnote 1, above.

Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQs) on *SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING)*

This is why the sage knows without moving,
understands without seeing,
succeeds without doing.

48

Devotion to learning means increasing day by day;
Devotion to the Way means decreasing day by day.