

## **The legend of the origin of the Tao Te Ching**

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An old man is riding an ox, accompanied by a boy, up steep deserted mountain slopes. They carry a small amount of provisions and a few blankets. They leave behind a prosperous kingdom with a refined culture and go west, toward grasslands inhabited only by barbarians. On the top they come to a mountain pass, the kingdom's border. Sitting in the shade of a pine tree a single soldier is guarding the pass. He is a poor soldier, wearing a wornout uniform and no shoes. True to duty, he stops the travellers and questions them: who are they? where are they going? But these two seem to have no goal. They are simply going west, toward the sunset. And who is this noble looking old chap who is venturing on such an exhausting journey? "The old man," says the boy, "was a teacher." "Ah, and what did he teach?" "Strange things," says the boy. "Like that water, the softest of all substances, excavates the hardest rocks. He taught that the soft and pliable overcome the hard and rigid."

The boy tugs at the ox, anxious to move on. It's getting dark and there is still a good stretch of the journey ahead before coming to a shelter. But the soldier now got interested. "What is this business about water?"

The old man looks at him through half closed eyelids. No winner this one for sure. "Do you want to know?" "My person is not important," says the soldier. "But this idea that the soft and pliable overcome the hard and rigid seems important to me. It is getting dark. Why don't you stay overnight and you tell me about it? My hut is a mean thing, but one feels cozy sheltered from the wind and sitting by the fire."

His curiosity is sincere and the advice sensible. One must not refuse a teaching to one who sincerely asks. Moreover, it is getting cold. And the ox will appreciate the rest and the fresh mountain grass. Stiffly, the old man dismounts.

They stay with the soldier that night, and the following one, and the following one. In the meantime the soldier has asked the old man to write down some of his unusual teachings and the old man agreed. He had never done that, in all the time he had spent in the capital. But now, asked by this simple man, who is barely able to read, strangely, without a moment's thought, he said yes. So he is spending days sitting in the pine tree's shade, writing.

Seven days go by in tranquil simplicity. Smugglers wonder at the sudden leniency of the guardian of the pass. Finally the old man hands in the manuscript to the soldier. The travellers take leave of their host; the boy helps the old man to get back on the ox and off they go. They disappear in the distance behind a turn of the path.

This is a free version of a poem by Bertolt Brecht.<sup>1</sup> The poem's title is "Legend of the origing of the book *Tao Te Ching* on Lao Tzu's way into exile." It is in turn a free version of a legend passed on by Sima Qian, the first great Chinese historian. In truth, we don't know if Lao Tzu (the name simply means 'old master') even existed. But the legend carries a profound meaning.

"The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao": thus begins the manuscript the old man hands over to the soldier. The Chinese word *tao*'s primary meaning is 'way, road, path', and metaphorically 'way to be followed, guiding principle, norm, doctrine, method'. Then by extension also 'say, speak, express, teach'. The sentence is interesting and worth to be studied in greater detail. First it is good to keep in mind that ancient Chinese has no articles and does not distinguish singular and plural or nouns and verbs. Therefore a literal word by word translation of the sentence would be something like:

"*tao* can say/communicate/teach not constant/eternal *tao*."

On a first level we can read it as:

"any doctrine that can be taught or communicated is not a constant doctrine," or "an eternal doctrine," or "any guiding principle or norm that can be put into words is not a costant norm," or "an eternal norm."

This statement implies a radical critique of language, not far from that which characterises postmodern thought: any statement that claims to be true, any doctrine that claims to have normative value is merely relative and changeable. It depends on the viewpoint and interests of the speaker. More generally, all our theories about reality are relative. They are merely maps; and, as the mathematician Korzybski reminded us, "a map is not the territory." Reality, the territory, is forever beyond all our representations.

But, although taoists and postmodern thinkers share the same skepticism with respect to language (and rationality), the conclusions they draw from it are markedly different. If language is unable to contain reality, postmodern philosophers choose to forego 'reality' and to concentrate on the universe of discourse as creator of intersubjective realities, of shared maps, of social worlds.

The taoists make the opposite choice. If language is unable to contain reality, they forego language and focus entirely on what is beyond language, on the unspeakable. The *tao* of human beings may be inconstant and relative, but the Tao of nature, the Tao of the world, the Tao of being (and of non-being, of emptiness, which the taoists see as the origin of all things) simply is. Therefore they introduce a new meaning of the word *tao*: it is the meaning we usually indicate by capitalising it (the Chinese has no capitals), Tao. Granted, it is a paradoxical meaning, because it points to the unspeakable, to That which is beyond all discourse, and therefore it negates itself as

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<sup>1</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "Legende von der Entstehung des Buches Taoteking auf den Weg des Laotse in die Emigration", *Werke*, Frankfurt, 1988, XII, 33. For an English translation see, e.g., [http://www.penninetaichi.co.uk/index\\_files/Page1090.htm](http://www.penninetaichi.co.uk/index_files/Page1090.htm).

soon as it is spoken. It is merely an allusion, a finger pointing to the moon. It is, above all, an invitation to an existential transformation.

Thus we should understand the legend of the origin of the *Tao Te Ching*. Throughout his life, Lao Tzu never put his teachings in writing. Of him Sima Qian says that "he was bent on erasing all personal traces of himself." How could he write, if the only thing worth talking about is unspeakable? At the close of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Wittgenstein says: "Whereof one cannot speak one must be silent."<sup>2</sup> Coherent with himself and with Wittgenstein, for eighty years Lao Tzu kept silent.

But on that mountain pass, on his way to voluntary exile, a miracle happens. The same is told about Gautama Buddha. Suddenly, when least he expects it, when he has given up as futile all ascetic practices, while he is drinking a cup of fresh milk a woman shepherd has given him, the sky breaks open. He is overwhelmed by the splendor of reality and the identification with his body and with his ego melts away like snow in the sun. He is one with the ocean of existence. And, naturally, he longs to share this realisation with all: it belongs to all, it is the goal of the journey of all consciousness, of all sentient beings. But how to do that. Words fall short by far. Any description of his experience betrays the reality it means to purport. And Gautama has a moment of discouragement, a sense of impotence.

Then the miracle happens. The raincloud heavy with water meets the thirsty earth. Compassion for the predicament of sentient beings brings Buddha to turn the wheel of Dharma. Compassion for the sincere longing of the guardian of the pass brings Lao Tzu to write. Both take up the challenge to speak the unspeakable. Conscious of the danger (or certainty!) that one day their words, like bleached bones, will betray the living experience. That looking at the finger people will forget the moon. But Lao Tzu begins his writing with a fair warning:

"The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao."

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<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, statement 7 (1921).