Lao Tzu

**(c. sixth century b.c. )**

Lao Tzu , which means “Old Master” or “Ancient One,” is the name given to the author of a book called the *Tao Te Ching,* one of the two basic texts of Taoist philosophy.

**The Legend of Lao Tzu**

No one knows exactly who the “Old Master” was or when he lived, though it seems most likely that he lived during the sixth century b.c. According to legend, he remained in his mother’s womb for sixty-two years before birth and emerged as a white-haired old man. He then served as Keeper of the Archives in the ancient Chinese kingdom of Chou. Unhappy with the political situation of his day, he mounted a black ox and headed for a western pass, hoping to leave the chaos in China. As he approached the pass, the gate-keeper recognized him as a sage and refused to let him through unless he wrote down some words of wisdom. Lao Tzu proceeded to write the 5,000-word *Tao Te Ching* and was allowed to depart through the pass. Some say he was 160 years old when he departed, while others put his age at 200.

**The Philosophy of Lao Tzu**

*Tao Te Ching* is translated into English as *The Way and Its Power.* In writing this book, Lao Tzu had two primary concerns: understanding the way of the universe and using that understanding for self-preservation. He was not interested in how to win fame, glory, honor, or wealth, but rather in how to survive. Some of the passages of the *Tao Te Ching* seem to be addressed to a ruler, advising how to ensure the survival of a kingdom in a time of political upheaval. Others are addressed to anyone who wishes to understand the fundamental principles of existence and to use them to preserve himself or herself in a chaotic world.

## Aphorisms

**Aphorisms,** sometimes called maxims or proverbs, are short statements expressing general truths or principles. Here are two famous aphorisms:

* “A penny saved is a penny earned.” (Benjamin Franklin)
* “Look before you leap.” (John Heywood)

The *Tao Te Ching* and *The Analects* are collections of philosophical aphorisms that express universal truths about life. They are not fully reasoned explanations; instead, these selections provide a hint of truth to get readers thinking and leave them to draw conclusions.

## Comparing Literary Works

Lao Tzu and Confucius both embrace the idea of a Tao, a “way” that refers to the force that controls the universe. Confucius speaks of this “way” as a “moral force” with which people should align their behavior, but Lao Tzu teaches that the Tao is a natural order with which people should not interfere. As you read, notice the examples each philosopher uses to illustrate and support his essential ideas.

## Reading Strategy

## Questioning Causes and Effects

These selections offer lessons by showing causes and effects. For example, Lao Tzu says, “Not to honor men of worth will keep the people from contention.” However, Lao Tzu does not explain why this statement is true. When you **question causes and effects,** you can fully understand the author’s message. Use a chart like the one shown to analyze cause-and-effect relationships and to identify the principles they demonstrate.

from the *Tao Te Ching*

## Background

Early Taoists and Confucianists both believed the Tao was the force that controlled the universe. However, as these selections demonstrate, Taoists differed from Confucianists in that they did not ascribe human moral qualities to the Tao. They considered it as being beyond the scope of human concerns, but they believed that people could see its workings by observing nature.

## I

 The way that can be spoken of

 Is not the constant way;

 The name that can be named

 Is not the constant name,

5The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth;

 The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

 Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;

 But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its **manifestations** .

 These two are the same

10But diverge in name as they issue forth.

 Being the same they are called mysteries,

 Mystery upon mystery—

 The gateway of the manifold secrets.

## III

Not to honor men of worth will keep the people from **contention** ; not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep them from theft; not to display what is desirable will keep them from being unsettled of mind.

Therefore in governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones. He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act.

Do that which consists in taking no action, and order will prevail.

## IX

 Rather than fill it to the brim by keeping it upright

 Better to have stopped in time;**1**

 Hammer it to a point

 And the sharpness cannot be preserved for ever;

 There may be gold and jade to fill a hall

 But there is none who can keep them.

 To be overbearing when one has wealth and position

 Is to bring **calamity** upon oneself.

 To retire when the task is accomplished

 Is the way of heaven.

## XLIII

The most **submissive** thing in the world can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world—that which is without substance entering that which has no crevices.

That is why I know the benefit of resorting to no action. The teaching that uses no words, the benefit of resorting to no action, these are beyond the understanding of all but a very few in the world.