

Lao Tsu for Government Consultants

Contemporary consultants who provide advise to governments could learn a thing or two from Lao Tsu, a Chinese imperial advisor who lived 2500 years ago.

The 81 poems in the book of Lao Tsu, known as the Tao Te Ching, now form the basis for one of the major religions of the world, Taoism. Buddhism in its Chinese form and Taoism have grown so close over the two thousand years that it is impossible to say with certainty where one stops and the other starts. In China they are as close as Protestants and Catholics. The form of Buddhism known as Zen (in Japan) or Chan (in China) was the most heavily influenced by Lao Tsu.

Scholars doubt that the poems of Lao Tsu are really the work of one man. Evidence suggests that some are extremely old, representing ancient Chinese folk wisdom from the second millenium BC, and some are more recent. But there is probably a core group of poems that were written by Lao Tsu, an imperial advisor in the province of Honan in the 6th century BC. He was roughly a contemporary of both Confucious and Buddha.

Unlike Buddha himself and most Zen Buddhists all the way down to the present century, Lao Tsu was deeply involved in politics and government. He lived and breathed imperial government, and was deeply concerned that the princes and rulers have a spiritual foundation. Perhaps half of his poems deal with when a sage or wise ruler should take action, and when he should not.

If you have never experienced the way Zen teachers instruct their students, you will find Lao Tsu very strange indeed. He taught by using paradoxes: statements that appear to contain their own contradiction. The idea is to use a paradox to force the student to look behind the simple words to see the deeper non-verbal truth underneath. In the hands of a master teacher this method is extraordinarily powerful.

For Lao Tsu, the ultimate paradox concerns the nature of reality itself. He clearly thought that superficial reality is an illusion, that true reality hidden from us by our use of words. His word for this hidden reality is "Tao". But all words for him were the enemy, even the word Tao, because they always distort reality. By using words and phrases that directly contradict each other, he sought to convey this deeper truth to his students. For example, here is his first and most famous poem:

(#1)

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one can only see the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;
 this appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.

If that poem isn't mystical, I don't know what is. The "ten thousand things" refers to everything that can be named — and that is what he wants us to get beyond. Behind words lies darkness, but that darkness itself contains a darkness which is the gateway to understanding. You won't see it unless you eliminate desire for anything and everything, including the desire to see or name the mystery. Then it unfolds. Some would say this is very Zen, but in fact it is much older than Zen. This is Taoism in its purest form.

Lao Tsu did not much like activist rulers who are always running around doing things. He is the original proponent of the doctrine that "less is more", though he never wrote that in so many words. Here is his second verse:

(#2)

Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness.

All can know good as good only because there is evil.

Therefore having and not having arise together.

Difficult and easy complement each other.

Long and short contrast each other;

High and low rest upon each other;

Voice and sound harmonize each other;

Front and back follow one another.

Therefore the sage goes about doing nothing, teaching no-talking.

The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease,

Creating, yet not possessing,

Working, yet not taking credit.

Work is done, then forgotten.

Therefore it lasts forever.

Goodness, for Lao Tsu, exists only in contrast to evil. Recognizing this leads the sage (the wise ruler) to do nothing, or at least as little as possible, creating but not owning, working without taking credit, forgetting and moving on from every task immediately upon its completion. In this way his work will last forever, as part of the realm of the ten thousand things, rising and falling without end.

Lao Tsu had nothing good to say about the loyalty of ministers who always agree with their rulers. He compared them to beaten-down children who cravenly obey and show superficial respect for their strict parents. In almost the same breath, he found similar fault with morality and intelligence:

(#18)

When the great Tao is forgotten,

Kindness and morality arise.

When wisdom and intelligence are born,

The great pretense begins.

When there is no peace in the family,

Filial piety and devotion arise.
When the country is confused,
Loyal ministers appear.

Lao Tsu also did not think much of advisors who advocate war. Abraham Lincoln would have liked these verses, I think:

(#30)

Whenever you advise a ruler in the way of Tao,
Counsel him not to use force to conquer the universe,
For this would only cause resistance.
Thorn bushes spring up wherever the army has passed.
Lean years follow in the wake of a great war.
Just do what needs to be done.
Never take advantage of power.

Achieve results, but never glory in them.
Achieve results, but never boast.
Achieve results, but never be proud.
Achieve results, because this is the natural way.
Achieve results, but not through violence.

Force is followed by loss of strength.
This is not the way of Tao.
That which goes against the Tao comes to an early end.

(part of #31)

...
Weapons are instruments of fear; they are not a wise man's tools.
He uses them only when he has no choice.
Peace and quiet are dear to his heart,
And victory no cause for rejoicing.
If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing;
If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfill yourself.

...
This means that war is conducted like a funeral.
When many people are being killed,
They should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow.
That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral.

Lao Tsu clearly felt that war is caused by rulers looking for shortcuts. He preferred this approach:

(#37)

Tao abides in non-action, yet nothing is left undone.
If kings and lords observed this,
The ten thousand things would develop naturally.
If they still desired to act,
They would return to the simplicity of formless substance.
Without form there is no desire.
Without desire there is tranquility.
And in this way all things would be at peace.

(part of #38)

...
A truly good man is not aware of his goodness,
And is therefore good.
A foolish man is always doing,
Yet much remains to be done.
...

(#48)

In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.
Less and less is done until non-action is achieved.
When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering.

Here is one of Lao Tsu's more interesting poems on the nature of good and evil, and how they relate to ruling a country. He wants rulers to see that evil is a part of nature, that violently trying to defeat it will redouble its power, while creative non-action will deflect it into harmlessness. This message was picked up and became a core belief in all the oriental martial arts:

(#60)

Ruling the country is like cooking a small fish.
Approach the universe with Tao,
And evil will have no power.
Not that evil is not powerful,

But its power will not be used to harm others.
Not only will it do no harm to others,
But the sage himself will be protected.
They do not hurt each other,
And the virtue in each one refreshes both.

Finally, here is as good a prescription for a ruler as one can find anywhere, and it continues to remind me of Abraham Lincoln:

(#78)

Under heaven nothing is more soft and yielding than water.
Yet for attacking the solid and strong, nothing is better.
It has no equal.
The weak can overcome the strong;
The supple can overcome the stiff.
Under heaven everyone knows this,
Yet no one puts it into practice.
Therefore the sage says:
 He who takes upon himself the sadness of the people
 is fit to rule them.
 He who takes upon himself the country's disasters
 deserves to be king of the universe.
The truth often sounds paradoxical.

Plato might have been shocked by some of this, but I think he would have liked the idea of the Tao, and would have been intellectually intrigued by all the paradoxes. Socrates and Lao Tsu would, I am sure, have simply gone out and gotten drunk together.

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Bibliographic Note:

The quoted verses are generally based on the translation of the Tao Te Ching by Gui-Fu Feng and Jane English, published by Vintage Books in 1972.

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