

**Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. Victor H. Mair. New York: Bantam Books, 1990.**

Lao Tzu may not be an individual, but a group of honored Chinese teachers. “Lao Tzu” means “old master.” The text, compiled in the sixth century B.C., is complex in perspective, presenting diverse views. As a result, though there is an underlying coherence among the viewpoints, the text frequently contradicts itself. The text itself has been recently upgraded with the discovery of the Ma-wang-tui manuscripts, some 500 years older than the previous texts of the *Tao Te Ching*, upon which this epitome relies.

**RULING WELL.** To rule well, the ruler must practice “eternal integrity,” which consists in knowledge of yin and yang, the unchanging feminine and masculine principles of the universe. This integrity is a state of perpetual simplicity, like an unhewn log. The ruler must be serious and deliberate. He does not oppress his people. He pleases his people by being humble. He treats opponents with integrity. When a leader is modest, he promotes political unity. Leaders promote political unity by keeping their people ignorant. When he can, a wise leader prefers moderate positions.

The leader with integrity does not insist on his own way, or on anything else, for that matter. A leader takes no action, because non-action has advantages. By non-action, a leader accomplishes what is important. Still, if a leader must act, he should act to preempt problems before they happen. He should act without being contentious. To not-act values life more highly than acting. If a wise leader must act, he acts casually, without pretense or desire to self-promote. The leader who acts devolves into a purveyor of mere etiquette; etiquette is a sham replacement for eroded trust. (*contra* Confucius concerning the rites.)

Leaders who seek praise only lose it. They can destroy political unity, because such unity is fragile. The leader who oppresses his people dies unnaturally.

**THE WAY.** The wise ruler follows the Way (*tao*). The sage struggles with the Way; the normal person vacillates; the inferior person laughs at the Way. The Way is concealed and submerged. It has no name. It is best described by what lies within this box: □. Considered objectively, the Way is nebulous. It is not what a person expects. The Way contains opposites, since truth is self-contradictory. The Way strongly employs weakness. For the sage, softness is strength. The Way contains the male and female. The great person seeks to be small. He desires to be without desire. The sage is near by being distant. Unity is the “form of formlessness” and derives from non-entity. Being derives from non-being. Non-being penetrates non-space. Nothingness is useful. The Way creates and nurtures mankind. The Way is impartial, but nevertheless favors good people. Men, both good and bad, treasure the Way. The sage sees through moral distinctions, prefers the way common people think, and makes them chuckle. The sage prefers the befuddlement of commoners to arrogant clarity. The Way suppresses war. When the Way prevails, war is unnecessary. If, however, one must conduct war, do so with compassion, without anger, without sadness, without arrogance, with a soft heart, and without undue force.

**SAYINGS OF THE WAY.** Possessions are temporary. Seek contentment in a simple life. Avoid entanglements in life. Focus on the small parts of difficult tasks. Finish what you begin, cautious to the end. Give to others. Do for others. What you do rings through into the future. Be frank; your defects are defects. Compromise does not extinguish great resentment; do not insist on getting even. Seek quality in all that you do. Speak little. Love your teachers; love bad men also because by seeing them, you can distinguish goodness. Knowing is difficult. With wisdom, one learns how little one knows. In the Way, the farther one travels, the less one knows. The Way causes one to know without observation. One learns everything by cultivating integrity and observing the particular in one’s own circumstance.