

# What Lao Tzu Didn't Say ...and Why

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## Readings

From the *Tao Te Ching*, chapter one, Ursula Le Guin version

The way you can go  
isn't the real way.  
The name you can say  
isn't the real name.

Heaven and earth  
begin in the unnamed:  
Name's the mother  
of the ten thousand things.

So the unwanted soul  
sees what's hidden,  
and the ever-wanting soul  
sees only what it wants.

Two things, one origin,  
but different in name,  
whose identity is mystery.  
Mystery of all mysteries!  
The door to the hidden.

from *Everyday Tao*, by Deng Ming-Tao – a perhaps somewhat fanciful, yet evocative description of the origins of the concept of Tao:

The ancients who first taught Tao were simple, rustic people. They formed their view by walking in granite-bladed mountains, digging in grainy soil, and sailing down wide rivers. As they worked and traveled, they slowly discerned a grand order to life. They noticed the regular phases of the sun, moon, earth, and tides. They followed the seasons. They watched the births, lives, and deaths of people, as well as the rise and fall of kingdoms.

In the nights, the ancients sat beside open fires and spoke to those who wanted to learn. As illustrations of their ideas, and to aid their students' memories, they drew pictographs in the dirt. They taught their lessons from what they had experienced: life was a movement supreme – greater than humans, greater than heaven and earth. Nothing was fixed, for everything – from the cycles of the sun and moon to the making and destroying of empires – showed endless, cyclical transformation. All this they summed up by drawing a picture of Tao: a person running along a path.

Those who want to study Tao can gain much from that simple image. It represents the organic movement of the cosmos as a great, balanced, and dynamic body in motion, just as it represents the path each of us follows through life. Sometimes intellectual definitions of Tao can be challenging. Returning to the image of Tao centers our contemplation.

## Sermon

We sat around a long seminar table in a brightly lit room near the center of my college campus. Our famously slouching and rumpled, tall, thin philosophy professor, Paul Desjardins, stood at the head of the table and led us in puzzling over the first lines of the *Tao Te Ching*, an ancient Chinese text attributed to Lao Tzu:

The tao that can be told  
is not the eternal Tao.  
The name that can be named  
is not the eternal Name.

My recollection is that this puzzling went on for weeks. But it might only have been a class or two. In any case, Professor Desjardins was far more at ease with the Confucian classics, and we had spent a good part of our semester in this Philosophy East and West class on Confucius and his worldly wisdom. Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* was not as straightforward, particularly when it came to his understanding of the central idea of the Tao.

For though Confucius used the word "tao" also, it didn't seem quite so mysterious when he used it. And, after all, it is not on the face of it a mysterious word.

"Tao" is simply the Chinese word for "way" or "path." You find it on street signs, like "avenue" or "lane." Additionally, you can use it to describe the proper "way" to do anything: carpentry, painting, singing, farming, plumbing, doctoring, lawyering. There is a proper way to do things. Tao. It is not necessarily easy to learn the proper way to do this or that, but it is not mysterious either. It's just a matter of skill and dedication.

The ancient character for tao is also pretty straightforward. As we heard in the reading, it is a stylized head and feet, suggesting someone walking or running down a path – feet guided by the head, and head learning from feet.

So, what's the big deal? Why does Lao Tzu, the legendary author of the *Tao Te Ching*, begin his brief book by telling us – paradoxically to be sure – that there is one Tao that cannot be spoken or named, one Tao which, if you try to speak it, you've somehow missed it?

Well, maybe this too is not so mysterious as it sounds – at least on one level. And I wish I'd thought of this thirty some years ago around that seminar table. Maybe Lao Tzu was simply telling us that whatever else you may think this book is going to be about, it is not about the underlying cosmic principle of the universe. Why not? Because that would be impossible. Because spoken human language is inadequate to the task. So – the rest of the book? It will concern things we *can* talk about – namely how to lead a life in harmony with nature and how to be an effective political leader. And the tao of nature and the tao of leadership... these are "ways" about which we *can* speak. So let's get on with it. Which is by and large what the little book does.

Now, Taoism is not the only religious tradition which insists that the ultimate principle or reality is unnameable. In fact, just about every tradition, one way or another, acknowledges that the ultimate or divine principle or God, is beyond whatever words we might use to try to describe it.

Jews, for example, are prohibited from speaking the name of God. Moses was given a cryptic answer from the famous burning bush when he asked who it was that was sending him on this mission to bring the Hebrews out of Egypt: "I am what I will be" said the divine voice.

Hindus affirm that in their religious universe of thousands of gods and goddesses is also an all-pervading reality, source and sustainer, which cannot be named. “Neti, neti”: “not this, not this” is the only way to *suggest* this Reality... sometimes called Brahman.

The Buddha didn’t bother at all with such matters of ultimacy, concerned as he was only with suffering and the release from suffering.

And though plenty of Christians might seem to be on an intimate first-name basis with the divinity, Christian mystics and theologians have recognized over the centuries that the word “God” is not a name for some thing among other things or person among other persons; but rather is suggestive of a reality beyond human categories.

Many Muslims, too, may seem to think that they have a corner on the name of God, but their mystical tradition of Sufism knows better. And traditionally Islam has 99 names for God, which really is just a way of saying that no name can encompass the reality.

Finally, my own choice to use the word “God” sparingly springs not only from all of this, but also from knowing that the word will always be misunderstood just because it seems to name some “thing” or “person” which is entirely too limiting to what must be without limits if it is at all.

“The tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.”

Okay then. Why does what Lao Tzu *not* say matter – to put it another way, why does it matter that he, like these other traditions, affirmed he couldn’t name the ultimate, that in fact nobody can?

First, it is by no means trivial to realize that if we were all to agree that the ultimate, that God, that Tao was beyond words and naming, we might save a lot of arguing and even fighting over differences between religions and theologies which are only apparent. Not that all the religions actually mean or believe precisely the same things, because they don’t. But wouldn’t it be progress if more of us accepted that when it comes to matters of ultimate principles and so-called divine realities, we are all in the same universe whatever words we choose to describe the principles and realities which guide it? Isn’t it strange, after all, to argue – and sometimes fight wars – over the very principles and realities that, in the real, interdependent, one world in which we live... unite us?

So, yes, it would not be at all trivial to acknowledge that the Tao or God that can be spoken is *not* the eternal Tao or God, which is beyond names and concepts.

And when it comes to each of us as individuals, if we really let it sink in that you can’t name the ultimate mysterious source of all that is, we might realize that we could spend less time worrying about our beliefs concerning such matters and could instead spend more time and energy concerned with our experience of life and with how to live a good and decent life. This is surely the Unitarian Universalist approach – our way. Yes, we are interested in cosmic speculation, we love conversation about the big questions; but we also know that we can’t afford to wait for the answers, much less waste time and energy arguing about the answers, before we learn to live well in the ordinary day-to-dayness of our lives.

And then... wonder of wonders – we may discover that plunging into the ordinary day-to-day, ever in motion, interwovenness of our lives, really *being* in our lives, on our paths... might also be the path to the Tao that we indeed cannot name but which *is* the centering power of our lives, through darkness and light, through easy times and hard times... the centering power to which we can be attentive by being attentive to nature, to one another, to ourselves.

Another way of getting at this is suggested just a few lines later in the first chapter:

So the unwanted soul  
sees what's hidden,  
and the ever-wanting soul  
sees only what it wants.

*(Ursula Le Guin version)*

How are we to understand these lines? First the easy part: When you want something, you will see what you want and not pay much attention to everything else. Nothing complicated here. It's just human. If you're on a road trip and running out of gas, you'll be looking for a gas station – that's what you'll see – so you may not particularly notice the restaurants. Whereas if you have a full tank but an empty stomach, you'll be noticing the restaurants and not the gas stations.

But then there is a deeper point. If you are always wanting one thing or another or another... then you will be missing, the text tells us, "what is hidden." And I take this to be a reference to the Tao itself, that principle or source which underlies everything but which is not itself a thing – and so is in a manner of speaking hidden.

So, the text tells us, if you can let go of wanting, of desire, of grasping (as the Buddhists would put it), then you may "see" or experience this something deeper, this principle, that which is hidden. Indeed, contemplating these lines further, I think we are being told that we must even let go of wanting to know or experience or understand what is hidden, the eternal Tao, God! It may be that if you let go of even wanting to name, to capture, to tie up with a bow the eternal... then you may have a chance to realize that's where you are already!

I'll close with two brief traditional stories which also bear on all I've been saying this morning. The first is told by Taoists of a meeting between Confucius and Lao Tzu.

We are told that Confucius sought out Lao Tzu in order to be instructed in the sacred rites. But when they met Lao Tzu became angry, saying that the sacred rites were nothing but empty words, and Confucius should not concern himself so much about them. Lao Tzu went on to tell Confucius to stop being so arrogant and self-important, and instead simply to be true to himself.

When Confucius returned to his followers he told them:

I know that a bird can fly; that fishes swim; that animals can run. Things that run can be trapped in nets. What can swim can be caught in traps. Those that fly can be shot down with arrows. But what to do with the dragon I do not know. It rises on the clouds and the wind. Today I have met Lao Tzu and he is like the dragon.

Lao Tzu, like the Tao itself, could not be trapped or caught.

So...

...isn't it appropriate that Lao Tzu probably didn't even exist!

You see, the name "Lao Tzu" isn't really a name at all, but simply means "Old Master." And so, the next story. We are told that near the end of his life Lao Tzu, frustrated that the political leaders of his day were not following his teachings, traveled west. As he was about to leave his native state, the gatekeeper stopped him and implored him to remain. Lao Tzu could not be convinced. So the gatekeeper asked for the next best thing. He asked if Lao Tzu would write down all of his wisdom, so that others might benefit from his teachings. This Lao Tzu agreed to do; and during a single night, it is said, composed the *Tao Te Ching*.

But this *is* all legend; lovely, evocative legend, but legend nevertheless. The facts are more likely that the *Tao Te Ching* is a collection of originally oral sayings representing a school of thought that came to be part of the Taoist tradition. Eventually, about two thousand years ago the sayings were written down along with commentary and explanation and compiled into one little book that still speaks to us today.

A little book which accurately reminds us – even through the elusiveness of its author – of the elusiveness of ultimate wisdom, but which reminds us also of the possibility of practical wisdom and more harmonious living, for us as individuals and for leaders, including – appropriately in this season – political leaders. But more about all this next week.

For now, as this new year begins, may we continue on our paths – feet guided by mind and heart, each of our ways part of the larger way we share in this one world, and this larger way growing from the Way, the Tao, which is beyond words, yet which centers and unites and guides us all.

So may it be.