



LAOTZU'S TAO AND WU WEI

HENRI BOREL

Global Grey ebooks

LAOTZU'S TAO AND WU WEI

AN INTERPRETATION

BY

HENRI BOREL

**TRANSLATION BY
DWIGHT GODDARD**

Laotzu's Tao And Wu Wei By Dwight Goddard And Henri Borel.

This edition was created and published by Global Grey

©GlobalGrey 2019



globalgreeyebooks.com

CONTENTS

Introduction

All We Know About Laotzu

Tao Teh King

WU WEI BY HENRI BOREL

Preface

Chapter 1. Tao

Chapter 2. Art

Chapter 3. Love

pureness of the white? Such a figure is, in fact, no longer a figure. The idea of material is entirely obliterated; it is an inspiration."

For a long time I was too much moved to speak. More strongly yet than the pure wisdom of the old man, did the beauty of this art take hold upon and purify my soul. At last I asked gently:

"Who has created this marvel? I would fain know, that I may hold his name with yours in veneration."

"That is of little importance, my young friend! he answered. "The soul that was in this artist is absorbed again into Tao, just as yours will be one day. His body has fallen away, like the leaves from a tree, just as yours in time will fall away. What weight can attach then to his name? Nevertheless, I will tell it you; he was called Tan Wei,¹⁷ and he engraved this name in finely-devised characters upon the back of the figure, such being the custom at that time.-- Who was he? A common workman, surely, who did not even know, himself, that he was an artist; who seemed to himself nothing more than a common peasant, and who had not the least suspicion that his work was so beautiful. But he must have gazed much at the heavens and clouds above him, and have loved the wide seas, and the landscapes, and the flowers; otherwise he could not have been so fine in feeling; for such simple lines and pure colours are only to be found in Nature. He was certainly not celebrated; you will not find his name in any history. I could not tell you whence he came, how he lived, or to what age. I know only that it is more than four hundred years since such figures as these were made, and that connoisseurs reckon that this one dates from the first half of the Ming-Dynasty. Most probably the artist lived quite quietly the same sort of life as the other people, worked industriously as a common labourer, and died humbly, unconscious of his own greatness. But his work remained, and this image, which by a fortunate chance has found its way to this district, where the last wars never raged, is still the same as when he made it. And thus it may last on for centuries and centuries, in inextinguishable radiance, in maidenly majesty. O, to create

¹⁷ The figure in the author's possession is by Tan Wei. Another great artist was Ho Chao Tsung, of certain figures by whom I have also, with very great trouble, become possessed. These names are well known to every artist, but I have endeavoured in vain to discover anything nearer with regard to them. They became famous after death; but they had lived in such simplicity and oblivion, that now not even their birthplace is remembered. One hears conjectures, but I could arrive at no certainty.

will. What is a name? I call it Tao. And the souls of those who love are like two white clouds floating softly side by side, that vanish, wafted by the same wind, into the infinite blue of the heavens."

"But that is not the love that I mean!" I cried. "Love is not the desire to see the loved one absorbed into Tao; love is the longing to be always with her; the deep yearning for the blending of the two souls in one; the hot desire to soar, in one breath with her, into felicity! And this always with the loved one alone--not with others, not with Nature. And, were I absorbed into Tao, all this happiness would be for ever lost! Oh let me stay here, in this goodly world, with my faithful companion! Here it is so bright and homely, and Tao is still so gloomy and inscrutable for me."

"The hot desire dies out," he answered calmly. "The body of your loved one will wither and pass away within the cold earth. The leaves of the trees fade in autumn, and the withered flowers droop sadly to the ground. How can you love that so much which does not last? However, you know, in truth, as yet, neither how you love nor what it is that you love. The beauty of woman is but a vague reflection of the formless beauty of Tao. The emotion it awakens, the longing to lose yourself in her beauty, that ecstasy of feeling which would lend wings for the flight of your soul with the beloved--beyond horizon-bounds, into regions of bliss--believe me, it is no other than the rhythm of Tao; only you know it not. You resemble still the river which knows as yet only its shimmering banks; which has no knowledge of the power that draws it forward; but which will one day inevitably flow out into the great ocean.

Why this striving after happiness, after human happiness, that lasts but a moment and then vanishes again? Chuang-Tse said truly: 'The highest happiness is no happiness.' Is it not small and pitiable, this momentary uprising, and downfalling, and uprising again? This wavering, weakly intention and progress of men? Do not seek happiness in a woman. She is the joyful revelation of Tao directed towards you. She is the purest form in the whole of nature by which Tao is manifested. She is the gentle force that awakens the rhythm of Tao within you. But she is only a poor creature like yourself. And you are for her the same joyful revelation that she is to you. Fancy not that that which you perceive in her is that Tao, that

very holiest, into which you would one day ascend! For then you would surely reject her when you realized what she was. If you will truly love a woman, then love her as being of the same poor nature as yourself, and do not seek happiness with her. Whether in your love you see this or not--her inmost being is Tao. A poet looks upon a woman, and, swayed by the 'rhythm,' he perceives the beauty of the beloved in all things--in the trees, the mountains, the horizon; for the beauty of a woman is the same as that of Nature. It is the form of Tao, the great and formless, and what your soul desires in the excitement of beholding--this strange, unspeakable feeling--is nothing but your oneness with this beauty, and with the source of this beauty--Tao. And the like is experienced by your wife. Ye are for each other angels, who lead one another to Tao unconsciously."

I was silent for a while, reflecting. In the soft colouring and stillness of the evening lay a great sadness. About the horizon, where the sun had set, there glimmered a streak of faint red light, like dying pain.

"What is this sadness, then, in the Nature around us?" I asked. "Is there not that in the twilight as though the whole earth were weeping with a grievous longing? See how she mourns, with these fading hues, these drooping tree-tops, and solemn mountains. Human eyes must fill with tears, when this great grief of Nature looms within their sight. It is as though she were longing for her beloved--as though everything--seas, mountains and heavens--were full of mourning."

And the Sage replied: "It is the same pain which cries in the hearts of men. Your own longing quivers in Nature too. The 'Heimweh' of the evening is also the 'Heimweh' of your soul. Your soul has lost her love: Tao, with whom she once was one; and your soul desires re-union with her love. Absolute re-union with Tao--is not that an immense love?--to be so absolutely one with the beloved that you are wholly hers, she wholly yours;--a union so full and eternal that neither death nor life can ever cleave your oneness again? So tranquil and pure that desire can no more awaken in you--perfect blessedness being attained, and a holy and permanent peace? . . . For Tao is one single, eternal, pure infinitude of soul.

"Is that not more perfect than the love of a woman?--this poor, sad love, each day of which reveals to you some sully of the clear life of the soul by dark and sanguine passion? When you are absorbed into Tao, then only will you be completely, eternally united with the soul of your beloved, with the souls of all men, your brothers, and with the soul of Nature. And the few moments of blessedness fleetingly enjoyed by all lovers upon earth are as nothing in comparison with that endless bliss: the blending of the souls of all who love in an eternity of perfect purity."

A horizon of blessedness opened out before my soul, wider than the vague horizon of the sea, wider than the heavens.

"Father!" I cried in ecstasy, "can it be that everything is so holy, and I have never known it?--I have been so filled with longing, and so worn-out with weeping; and my breast has been heavy with sobs and dread. I have been so consumed with fear! I have trembled at the thought of death! I have despaired of all things being good, when I saw so much suffering around me. I have believed myself damned, by reason of the wild passions, the bodily desires, burning within and flaming without me--passions which, though hating them, I still was, coward-like, condemned to serve. With what breathless horror I have realized how the tender, flower-like body of my love must one day moulder and crumble away in the cold, dark earth! I have believed that I should never feel again that blessed peace at the look in her eyes, through which her soul was shining. And was it Tao!--was Tao really even then always within me, like a faithful guardian? and was it Tao that shone from her eyes? Was Tao in everything that surrounded me? in the clouds, the trees and the sea? Is the inmost being of earth and heaven, then, also the inmost being of my beloved and my own soul? Is it that for which there burns within me that mysterious longing which I did not understand, and which drove me so restlessly onward? I thought it was leading me away from the beloved and that I was ceasing to love her!--Was it really the rhythm of Tao, then, that moved my beloved too?--the same as that in which all nature breathes, and all suns and planets pursue their shining course throughout eternity?--Then all is indeed made holy!--then Tao is indeed in everything, as my soul is in Tao! Oh, Father, Father! it is growing so light in my heart! My soul seems to foresee that which will come one day; and the

heavens above us, and the great sea, they foretell it too! See, how reverent is the pose of these trees around us--and see the lines of the mountains, how soft in their holy repose! All Nature is filled with sacred awe, and my soul too thrills with ecstasy, for she has looked upon her beloved!"

I sat there long, in silent, still forgetfulness. It was to me as though I were one with the soul of my master and with Nature. I saw nothing and heard nothing;--void of all desire, bereft of all will, I lay sunk in the deepest peace. I was awakened by a soft sound close by me. A fruit had fallen from the tree to the ground behind us. When I looked up, it was into shimmering moonlight. The recluse was standing by me, and bent over me kindly.

"You have strained your spirit overmuch, my young friend!" he said concernedly. "It is too much for you in so short a time. You have fallen asleep from exhaustion. The sea sleeps too. See, not a furrow breaks its even surface; motionless, dreaming, it receives the benediction of the light. But you must awaken! It is late, your boat is ready, and your wife awaits you at home in the town."

I answered, still half dreaming: "I would so gladly stay here. Let me return, with my wife, and stay here for ever! I cannot go back to the people again! Ah, Father, I shudder--I can see their scoffing faces, their insulting glances, their disbelief, and their irreverence! How can I retain the wondrous light and tender feeling of my soul in the midst of that ungracious people? How can I ever so hide it under smile or speech that they shall never detect it, nor desecrate it with their insolent ridicule?"

Then, laying his hand earnestly upon my shoulder, he said:

"Listen carefully to what I now say to you, my friend, and above all, *believe* me. I shall give you pain, but I cannot help it. You *must* return to the world and your fellow-men; it cannot be otherwise. You have spoken too much with me already; perhaps I have said somewhat too much to you. Your further growth must be your own doing, and you must find out everything for yourself. Be only simple of heart, and you will discover everything without effort, like a child finding flowers. At this moment you feel deeply and purely what I have said to you. This present mood is one of the highest moments of your life. But you cannot yet be strong enough to

maintain it. You will relapse, and spiritual feeling will turn again to words and theories. Only by slow degrees will you grow once more to feel it purely and keep it permanently. When that is so, then you may return hither in peace and then you will do well to remain here;--but by that time I shall be long dead.

"You must complete your growth in the midst of life, not outside it; for you are not yet pure enough to rise above it. A moment ago, it is true, you were equal even to that, but the reaction will soon set in. You may not shun the rest of mankind; they are your equals, even though they may not feel so purely as you do. You can go amongst them as their comrade, and take them by the hand; only do not let them look upon your soul, so long as they are still so far behind you. They would not mock you from evil-mindedness, but rather out of religious persuasion, being unaware how utterly miserable, how godless, how forsaken they are, and how far from all those holy things by which you actually live. You must be so strong in your conviction that nothing can hinder you.--And that you will only become after a long and bitter--struggle. But out of your tears will grow your strength, and through pain you will attain peace. Above all remember that Tao, Poetry and Love are one and the same, although you may seek to define it by these several vague terms;--that it is always within you and around you;--that it never forsakes you; and that you are safe and well cared for in this holy environment. You are surrounded with benefits, and sheltered by a love which is eternal. Everything is rendered holy through the primal force of Tao dwelling within it."

He spoke so gently and convincingly that I had no answer to give. Willingly I allowed myself to be guided by him to the shore. My boat lay motionless upon the smooth water, awaiting me.--

"Farewell, my young friend! Farewell!" he said, calmly and tenderly.

"Remember all that I have told you!"

But I could not leave him in such a manner. Suddenly I thought of the loneliness of his life in this place, and tears of sympathy rose to my eyes. I grasped his hand.

"Father, come with me!" I besought him. "My wife and I will care for you; we will do everything for you; and when you are sick we will tend you. Do not stay here in this loneliness, so void of all the love that might make life sweet to you!"

He smiled gently, and shook his head as a father might at some fancy of his child's, answering with tranquil kindness:

"You have lapsed already! Do you realize now how necessary it is for you to remain in the midst of the every-day life? I have but this moment told you how great is the love which surrounds me--and still you deem me lonely here and forsaken?--Here, in Tao, I am as safe at home as a child is with its mother. You mean it well, my friend, but you must grow wiser, much wiser! Be not concerned for me; that is unnecessary, grateful though I am to you for this feeling. Think of yourself just now. And do what I say. Believe that I tell you that which is best for you. In the boat lies something which should remind you of the days you have spent here. Farewell!"

I bent silently over his hand and kissed it. I thought I felt that it trembled with emotion; but when I looked at him again his face was calm and cheerful as the moon in the sky.

I stepped into the boat, and the boatman took up the oars. With dextrous strokes he drove it over the even surface of the water. I was already some way from the land when my foot struck against some object in the boat and I remembered that something for me was lying there. I took it up. It was a small chest. Hastily I lifted the lid. And in the soft, calm moonlight there gleamed with mystical radiance the wonderful porcelain of the Kwan-Yin image, the same which the old man had cherished so carefully, and loved so well.

There, in the lofty tranquility of severe yet gentle lines, in all the ethereal delicacy of the transparent porcelain, reposed the pure figure of Kwan-Yin, shining as with spiritual radiance amidst the shimmering petals of the lotus.

I scarcely dared believe that this holy thing had been given to me. I seized my handkerchief, and waved with it towards the shore, to convey to the recluse my thanks. He stood there motionless, gazing straight before him. I

waited longingly for him to wave--for one more greeting from him--one more sign of love--but he remained immovable.

Was it I after whom he was gazing? Was he gazing at the sea? . . .

I closed the lid of the chest, and kept it near me, as though it had been a love of his which I was bearing away. I knew now that he cared for me; but his imperturbable serenity was too great for me--it saddened my mood that he had never signed to me again.

We drew further and further away; the outlines of his figure grew fainter and fainter; at last I could see it no more.

He remained; with the dreams of his soul, in the midst of Nature--alone in infinity--bereft of all human love--but close to the great bosom of Tao.

I took my way back to the life amongst mankind, my brothers and equals--in all the souls of whom dwells Tao, primordial and eternal.

The ornamental lights of the harbour gleamed already in the distance, and the drone of the great town sounded nearer and nearer to us over the sea.

Then I felt a great strength in me, and I ordered the boatman to row still more quickly. I was ready. Was I not as safely and well cared for in the great town as in the still country?--in the street as on the sea?

In everything, everywhere, dwells Poetry--Love--Tao. And the whole world is a great sanctuary, well-devised and surely-maintained as a strong, well-ordered house.
