

SELECTIONS FROM THE LAOZI (DAODEJING)

Introduction

The *Daodejing* ("The Classic of the Way and Its Power") is a compilation reflecting a particular strain of thought from around 300 BCE. It is traditionally attributed to a mysterious character known as Laozi ("the old master"). There is no evidence that such a person existed at all. The book attributed to him, the *Daodejing* is, however, tremendously popular. It exists in several different versions and became one of the bases of both the philosophy of Daoism and the related but distinct Daoist religion. Like the Confucian *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Han Feizi*, and others, the *Daodejing* is the product of that period in Chinese history when the kings of the Zhou dynasty had lost all real authority and their kingdom had disintegrated into a coterie of feudal states that squabbled and fought with one another in ever-shifting arrangements of alliances and enmities.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Selections from the Laozi (Daodejing)

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The Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way;
The name that can be named is not the constant name.
The nameless is the beginning of Heaven and Earth;
The named is the mother of all things.
Thus be constantly without desire,
so as to observe its subtlety.
And constantly have desire,
so as to observe its outcome.
These two have the same origin,
But are named differently.
Both may be called mysterious.
Mysterious and still more mysterious,
The gateway of all subtleties!

42

The Way gives birth to the One;
The One gives birth to two;
Two give birth to three;
And three give birth to all things.
All beings support the yin and embrace the yang;
And through the blending of *qi*¹ they create harmony.
What people hate is to be orphaned, lonely, unfortunate,
Yet kings and lords call themselves by these names.
Therefore things may gain by losing, and lose by gaining.
What others teach, I also teach:
The violent do not attain a natural death.
This I take as the father of my teaching.

43

What is softest in the world
Overcomes what is hardest in the world.
No-thing penetrates where there is no space.
Thus I know that in doing nothing there is advantage.
The wordless teaching and the advantage of doing nothing --
there are few in the world who understand them.

Questions:

1. What does "Laozi" mean by the term "The Way"?
2. How would Laozi recommend that we deal with problems and challenges?
3. How is Laozi's philosophy different from that of your own?
4. How is Laozi's philosophy different than that of Confucius? Of Han Fei and Lord Shang?

¹ *Qi* is a fundamental concept in Chinese thought. Its sense depends on the context, but among the most frequently encountered translations are "vital energy," "vital force," "material force," and "breath."