

An Introduction to Lao-Tzu

by John van Huizum

Lao-Tzu was one of the greatest mystics of all time, but I look at him as a philosopher.

Legend tells us that he was immaculately conceived by a shooting star, long before the alleged immaculate conception of a man named Jesus. Lao-Tzu lived around 600 BC.

His work has been translated more frequently than any other book, except for the Bible.

His legacy was a book called "The Way of Life", but, contrary to what many think of as a religion, his perception was much more than a religion; it was a book full of observations of nature, including mankind, and how to work with the invisible forces of nature.

My most treasured books are short, so is his book which consists of only 81 short verses, almost all of them true wisdoms, not depending on the many changes of time.

Lao-Tzu was a contemporary of Confucius, and Confucius, impressed by Lao-Tzu's influence, visited him once to ask for advice on points of ceremonial etiquette.

Baffled by the answers of the older man, to whom etiquette meant hypocrisy and nonsense, Confucius returned to his disciples and told them:

"Of birds I know that they have wings to fly with, of fish I know that they have fins to swim with, of wild beasts that they have feet to run with. For feet there are traps, for fins nets, for wings arrows.

But who knows how dragons surmount wind and cloud into heaven?

This day I have seen Lao-Tzu and he is a dragon."

I will give a few examples of his views on various subjects, still valid 2500 years later.

His first verse reads as follows:

"Existence is beyond the power of words to define; terms may be used, but are none of them absolute. In the beginning of heaven and earth there were no words.

Words came out of the womb of matter; and whether a man dispassionately sees to the core of life or passionately sees the surface, the core and the surface are essentially the same, words making them seem different, only to express appearance.

If name be needed, wonder names both: From wonder into wonder Existence opens."

The translator used the word "existence" instead of "creation" or "nature" or "life".

Lao-Tzu could not have known the New Testament, or the writings of Heraclitus, but when he calls the Universe a succession of wonders, he was more wise than even he knew.

In my mind he debunks the first verse of the apostle John who wrote *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was close to God, and God was the Word"*.

Lao-Tzu may have imagined how many more "wonders" could be in store for humanity in the micro- and macro-world, in the small atom and in the immensity of space. Flights in space, telescopes and microscopes and evolution were a few future wonders.

The closing verse 81 reads

"Real words are not vain, vain words are not real, and since those who argue prove nothing, a sensible man does not argue, a sensible man is wiser than he knows, while a fool knows more than is wise. Therefore a sensible man does not devise resources: the greater his use to others, the greater their use to him, the more he yields to others, the more they yield to him. The way of life cleaves without cutting: which without need to say should be man's way."

On politics he made many remarks that are just as valid today as in his time, such as

"Be concerned not with obedience, but with benefit."

That, in a nutshell, could and should have been the principle at the Nuremberg trials. It could also apply to the principle of civil disobedience to unjust laws or leaders.

"The faults of starving people are the faults of their rulers."

Did he already foresee an America and a tea party?

"True living would take from those with too much, enough for those with too little, whereas man exacts from those with too little still more for those with too much."

Has income inequality always existed and have we still not found a fair correction?

The importance of humility is emphasized throughout the book, such as

"Be utterly humble and you shall hold to the foundation of peace."

"A man who knows how little he knows is well, but a man who knows how much he knows is sick." or "To know yourself and not show yourself, to think well of yourself and not tell of yourself, be that your no and your yes."

The Greeks said "know yourself".

As to his philosophy, he only used the words “wisdom” or “wise man” four times, but words like “fit, sane and sound” over and over again. Did that show what we call common sense?

He does state though,

"Knowledge studies others, wisdom is self-known."

He speaks a lot about foreign policy and/or wars, such as

"Weapon after weapon conquers everything but chaos"

"Even the finest arms are an instrument of evil, a spread of plague."

"It is an ancient thought, which many men have taught, that he who over-reaches and tries to live by force shall die thereby of course."

"One who would guide a leader of men in the uses of life will warn him against the use of arms for conquest; weapons often turn upon the wielder."

"A good general, daring to march, also dares to halt."

On helping others, he states,

"A good man, before he can help a bad man, finds in himself the matter with the bad man."

To guide them in their life's decisions, conservative Christians often ask themselves "what would Jesus do (in this or that situation)?" Jesus however spoke in parables for the masses, but in secret he spoke to future initiates regarding "the mysteries".

Lao-Tzu taught the same for ordinary people and others who might consider themselves extra-ordinary or superior, like the Pharisees thought of themselves in Jesus' time.

I think Lao-Tzu thought like Einstein: make a thing as simple as possible, but not too simple. I must have read "The Way of Life" dozens of times, but almost every time I find something I missed or overlooked, or did not see how prophetic he really was.

Even the price of the book is very affordable: since I bought it, it has increased from \$5.95 to only \$11.95.

In closing, from *The Way of Life*,

"He who is open-eyed is open-minded; he who is open-minded is open-hearted; he who is open-hearted is kingly, he who is kingly is godly, he who is godly is useful, he who is useful is infinite; he who is infinite is immune, he who is immune is immortal."

"Man at his best, like water, serves as he goes along: like water he seeks his own level, the common level of life, loves living close to the earth, loves kinship with his neighbors, the pick of words that tell the truth, the even tenor of a well-run state, the fair profit of able dealing, the right timing of useful deeds, and for blocking no one's way no one blames him."