

CONFUCIUS AND LAO TZU MEET ALONG THE WAY

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Confucius and Lao Tzu met at a crossroad one day, as each walked a dusty and lonely path to his own journey's goal. Each aware he was in the presence of a wise man, Confucius and Lao Tzu sat and rested facing one another in the shade of a p'o tree by a brook.

After a period of quiet, Confucius sighed and said, "Alas! No one knows me!" He shrugged and added, "I do not blame Heaven, I do not blame men. I study things on the lower level but my understanding penetrates the higher level. It is Heaven alone that knows me."

Lao Tzu well understood the loneliness and difficulty found in bringing a message to the world. "My doctrines are very easy to understand and very easy to practice, but none in the world can understand or practice them," Lao Tzu said.

Lao Tzu and Confucius discussed the difficulty of sharing their thoughts with the world, and the limitations of language in conveying meaning.

"The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao," Lao Tzu said. "He who knows does not speak. He who speaks does not know."

Confucius nodded and said, "Does Heaven say anything? The four seasons run their course and all things are produced. Does Heaven say anything?"

Indeed, "Nature has few words," Lao Tzu added.

They spoke together of good government and proper relations between people. Confucius referred to Shun, the great Chinese ruler, who employed the principle of wu-wei in successful government. "To have taken no action and yet have the empire well governed, Shun was the man! What did he do? All he did was make himself reverent and correct ..."

Lao Tzu was delighted to hear Confucius speak such wisdom. "The sage rightly says: I take no action and the people of themselves are transformed. I love tranquility and the people of themselves become correct. I engage in no activity and the people of themselves become prosperous. I have no desires and the people of themselves become simple," Lao Tzu said.

Confucius, speaking of proper relations, said, "One who practices five things wherever he may be is a man of humanity. If one is earnest, one will not be treated with disrespect. If one is liberal, one will win the hearts of all. If one is truthful, one will be trusted. If one is diligent, one will be successful. And if one is generous, one will be able to enjoy the services of others."

Yes, said Lao Tzu, and "I have three treasures. The first is deep love, the second is frugality, and the third is not to be ahead of the world. Because of deep love, one is courageous. Because of frugality, one is generous. Because of not daring to be ahead of the world, one becomes leader of the world."

Confucius and Lao Tzu shared many ideas that day, and though travelers passing by thought the two men were often at odds and quarreling, Lao Tzu and Confucius knew they were each describing but opposite sides of the same circle.

Confucius said, "The superior man extensively studies literature and restrains himself with the rules of propriety. Thus he will not violate the Way."

Lao Tzu, facing opposite Confucius, replied, "Abandon learning and there will be no sorrow ... When the great Tao declined, the doctrines of humanity and righteousness arose. When knowledge and wisdom appeared, there emerged great hypocrisy. When the six family relationships are not in harmony, there will be advocacy of filial piety and deep love to children."

And so, it seemed, Confucius advocated restraint and ritual to maintain the Way, while Lao Tzu blamed such doctrine as the product of the Tao's decline. How could such opposing views be integrated?

The reconciliation of opposites and the unity of all was known to both the wise men Confucius and Lao Tzu.

"Being and non-being produce each other; difficult and easy complete each other; long and short contrast each other; high and low distinguish each other; front and back follow each other," said Lao Tzu.

Confucius nodded in agreement and added, "A superior man in dealing with the world is not for or against anything."

A balance of opposites is what both men produced, but few in the world could grasp the message. Confucius with ritual as the yin and Lao Tzu with non-action as the yang merged that day to form the endless circle of Tao.

In silence Confucius and Lao Tzu gazed upon one another with empathy and respect. Then one quietly rose and left, the other still remains.

Confucius, as he continued down the dusty road chuckled. "I know that birds can fly and fish can swim and beasts can run. But dragons! I shall never know how they ride wind and cloud up into the sky. Today I saw Lao Tzu. What a dragon!"

Lao Tzu, sitting still, softly hummed and watched the brook flow by.