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Daoism

Picture a strong wind blowing against a blade of grass. Would the grass blow back, seeking revenge? No. It would bend with the wind. According to an ancient Chinese school of thought called Daoism, that blade of grass has the right idea—and we humans could learn a lot from it.

In the fifth and sixth centuries BCE, China was struggling. The Zhou dynasty, which had ruled the country for hundreds of years, was falling apart, and China's various regions were fighting each other over land and power. Life became so violent that the years 475 to 221 BCE are known as the Warring States Period.

New political and social models were clearly needed. And many philosophies did emerge—so many, in fact, that they've become known as the Hundred Schools of Thought. Daoism, which is both a philosophy and a religion, was one of the most influential.

Daoism originated with a sage called Laozi, which translates to "old master." Laozi's writings were eventually collected into the Tao Te Ching, or The Way and Its Virtue.

Well, that's the officially unofficial story. In actuality, it's not clear that Laozi was the true author of the Tao Te Ching. In fact, there's not a ton of evidence for Laozi's existence in the first place, and some scholars suggest he's just some legendary figure. But Daoists believe that the pursuit of knowledge can obscure truth. So Laozi himself, real or not, would probably advise the academics debating his existence not to focus on who wrote the Tao Te Ching—but instead, to consider its ideas.

At the heart of Daoism is dao, or the way. We can think of dao as a natural, eternal force guiding everything in the universe. Dao connects us to each other, to nature, to the cosmos. And peace and happiness come from living in harmony with it.

Living in harmony with dao calls for wu wei, or non-action. I don't mean non-action in the sense of lying on the couch all day (though that doesn't sound terrible). Rather, I mean non-action in the sense of letting

things be instead of disrupting the natural flow of life and nature. This includes not chasing worldly desires like power, fame, or wealth.

It also means going with the flow when it comes to life's curveballs—accepting and adjusting, rather than forcing things to be exactly how we think we want them. As the Tao Te Ching puts it:

Yield and overcome

Empty and become full

Bend and become straight

In other words, don't curse the wind. Be that blade of grass.

According to Daoism, if everyone practiced wu wei, we wouldn't be overrun by our own ambitions, envy, or greed. As a result, there would be no corruption, oppression, or other world-disrupting problems. Hence, there would be little need for government.

But, of course, not everyone practices wu wei, and government is pretty much a fact of life—even for Daoists.

Daoism calls for a government with few laws. The idea is that, in the absence of artificial regulations, people will become more attuned to natural law—that is, dao. Consistent with this is lower taxes, fewer prohibitions, fewer weapons, and fewer subsidies. As the Tao Te Ching says:

Let go of fixed plans and concepts, and the world will govern itself.

This didn't happen right away. The Warring States Period ended with essentially the opposite; in 221 BCE, the Qin dynasty rose to power and established a strong legalistic government. However, the more moderate Han dynasty, which ruled from 206 BCE to 220 CE, incorporated some Daoist principles. And during the Tang Dynasty, which controlled China from 618 to 907, Daoism had a particularly large influence, at one point even becoming the state religion.

But Daoism didn't just influence politics. It has shaped China's visual arts, martial arts, literature, sciences,

and medicine.

Though it espouses a life of simplicity, Daoism itself is complex. But that's OK. As the Tao Te Ching says:

Trying to understand is like straining through muddy water.

Have the patience to wait!

Be still and allow the mud to settle.

Or, you know—be the grass.