

# THE WAY

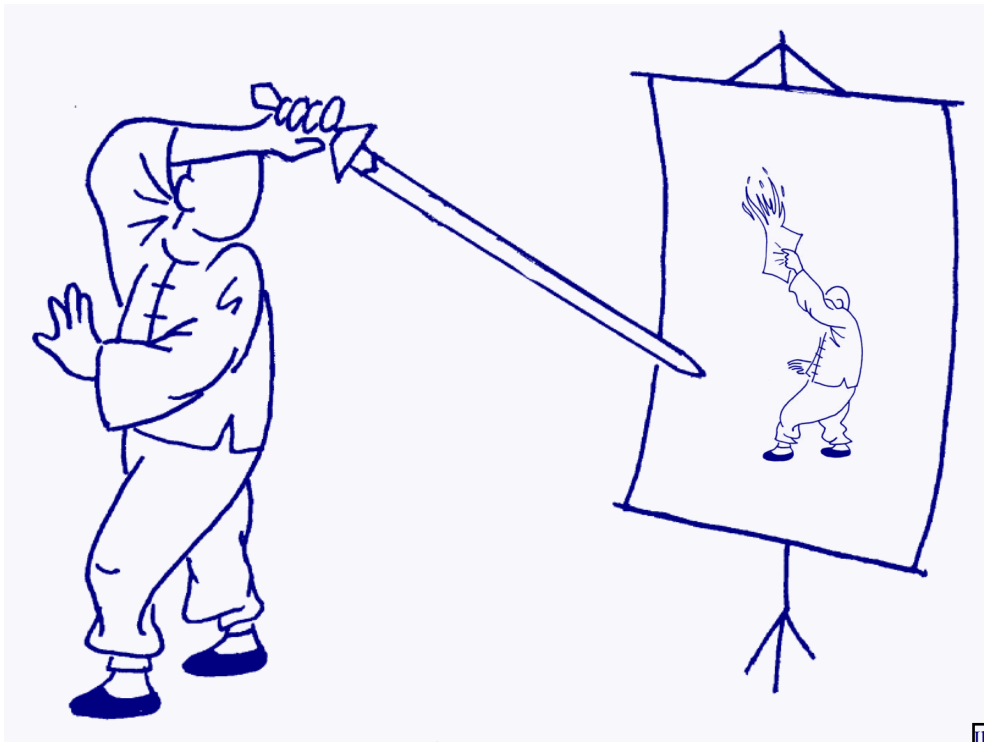


Illustration Rinus Schulz

# TO PEACE

## THE ART OF LIVING

When the desires of men are curbed, there will be peace in mind. When there is peace in mind, there will be peace in the world. —Lao Tzu

In a world of chaos, of competition, of conflicts, of the rat race for survival and success, the voice of Lao Tzu is a voice with a difference. It is like a cool brew on a summer evening after a long hectic day of work and struggle in our short life. Lao Tzu suggests to us that there are other ways of living, that there are more important things in life than fame and fortune. His way is the way of peace, with others as well as with oneself.

A contemporary of Confucius, Lao Tzu lived about two thousand and five hundred years ago. He is the founder of Taoism. We know practically nothing about his life except that he had been the curator of the National Library in Luoyang, the capital of the Zhou Dynasty and lived to the age of one hundred and sixty.

Lao Tzu said his teachings were easy to understand and easy to practice. Yet, just as he himself pointed out, few people seem to really understand or practice them. This made Lao Tzu feel as though he were hiding a crown Jewel inside his coarse clothes, but nobody recognized him. Perhaps the common people's failure to understand the thought of Lao Tzu can be attributed to his ambiguous language, which is frequently paradoxical, and even mystical. Just as one fails to see clearly the real face of a great mountain when there are too many clouds around it, so does one fail to understand the doctrine of Lao Tzu when there are so many interpretations over the years that they threaten to crowd out the true meaning of Lao Tzu's thought.

The following is based on his famous book *The Way*.

## **BE HUMBLE**

Nothing is softer than water. Yet nothing surpasses it in overcoming the hard. The weak overwhelms the strong. The gentle conquers the firm. Everyone knows that, but no one can practice it.

A good man is like water. Water benefits all things but it does not compete with them for a higher ground. It dwells in low places that nobody admires. Similarly, a good man stays in a humble place. He does not force his way ahead. Nor does he struggle for accomplishment. He is serene, sincere, faithful, diligent and compassionate. He accomplishes because he knows how to grasp the opportune moment and achieve his goal in a natural way.

Recede first if you want to proceed. Give first if you want to take. Humble yourself and place yourself below others first if you want to be above them. If you want to be the leader of men, you have to put their interest before your own, so that they will support you without feeling your weight on their backs.

The great oceans are kings of all streams and rivers because they take a low position.

## **BE GENTLE AND COMPASSIONATE**

I have three treasures. Hold and cherish them: the first is compassion; the second, frugality; the third, shunning to be the first in the world.

Compassion for human beings gives one courage in safeguarding life.

Frugality means one's resources will not be exhausted.

And if one does not contend for the first place, he will find himself in the first place.

He will be doomed who abandons compassion to display valor, or gives up frugality in favor of wasteful spending, or throws off humility while contending for the first place.

When a man is alive, his body is soft and pliable. When he is dead, his body becomes stiff and hard. When a plant is alive, it is weak and tender. When it is dead, it becomes dry and brittle.

Therefore, hard and stiff is the way of death. And soft and pliable is the way of life.

A strong army can be the cause of destruction. A strong man often dies an unnatural death. A big tree may be hewed down for its timber.

If one dares to be daring, he will get killed. If one dares to be cautious, he will survive.

Bend in order to be straight. Be hollow in order to be full. Yield in order to be completely preserved.

Weapons are intrinsically ominous instruments. A good general uses war only as the last resort. He stops as soon as he has attained his goal. He takes no pride in what he does. Even if he wins the war, he does not enjoy the victory. For he who enjoys victory enjoys killing. He who takes delight in killing will never make his way in the world.

## **DO NOT HAVE TOO MANY DESIRES**

Lights and colors blind the eyes. Sound and fury deafen the ears. Flavors and spices numb the tongue. The pursuit of pleasure drives a man out of his mind. The possession of rarities gets in the way of their owner.

Those who are violent often die a violent death. Those who indulge in their desires without restraint head for destruction. Those who are too strong quicken the process of aging. Whoever tampers with the way of nature will perish soon.

Take less, and you will have more. Desire more, and you will be overly obsessed. No disaster is greater than insatiable desires. No vice is worse than limitless greed. He who is content is always sufficient.

The Way of Heaven is like drawing a bow. If the bowstring is too high, it will be pushed down; if it is too low, it will be pulled up. If it is too long, it will be shortened; if it is too short, it will be lengthened. The Way of Heaven is the same: Surplus will be cut down; deficiency will be made up.

The way of man is the opposite. He takes where there is want and gives where there is surplus. Only a wise man acts according to the Way of Heaven.

Cherish simple life and plain honesty. Have fewer desires and be less selfish. The essence of achieving peace of mind is to be free of desires. And peace of mind will lead to peace in the world.

## **DO NOT BE TOO SELFISH**

Honor and disgrace can both make you anxious if you attach undue importance to them. Remember those are only external things.

Self is a bad guide to happiness. If you are too conscious of your ego, you may cause yourself to worry too much. But if you can forget yourself, you have nothing to fear.

He who stands on tiptoes cannot stand firm. He who strides cannot go far. He who shows off does not shine. He who proclaims self-righteousness will not be honored. He who applauds himself will lose merit.

If you put yourself behind others, you will find yourself to be the first. If you do not give thought to yourself, you will enjoy life more. If you stop being selfish, your self-interest will be realized. The more you do for others, the more you will have for yourself. The more you give, the richer you will be.

He who achieves without claiming credit for himself will attain everlasting glory. True greatness lies in not claiming to be great. And a selfless person can be entrusted with governing the world.

Heaven takes no part in competition, yet it conquers everything. Heaven does not speak, and yet it responds. Heaven does not summon, and yet all things come to it of their own accord. Heaven is unhurried, and yet it plans well. The net of Heaven is vast and loose but it embraces all things big and small without omission.

Heaven is eternal and earth is everlasting because they do not exist for themselves.

The Way of Heaven is to benefit, not to harm; to serve, not to compete.

## **DO NOT BE TOO SURE**

In dealing with difficulties, tackle easier ones first. In attaining great goals, begin with small ones. A wise man does not regard himself great. For this reason, he accomplishes great things. A wise man does not make big promises for fear he may not be able to keep them. Nor does he make light

of difficulties for fear he may not be able to overcome them. Precisely because he is prepared for difficulties he may have to overcome, he does not encounter any.

It is easy to hold something when it is stable. It is easy to make plans before anything happens. A big tree grows from a tiny sprout. A tall tower is built with a mound of earth. The journey of a thousand miles begins with a small step. Deal with things when they are still easy to handle. Take precautions against problems before they occur.

Things are prone to failure the closer they reach the stage of completion. But if you can be as careful then as you were at the beginning, failure can be avoided.

If you do not know, and you know you do not know, it is good. If you do not know, but you believe you know, it is bad. If you know others, you are smart. If you know yourself, you are enlightened. If you beat others; you prove that you are stronger than they are. But if you conquer yourself, then you have the real power. A wise man knows himself, but does not show off. He loves himself, but does not exalt himself.

Misfortune may be the harbinger of blessing. Blessing can contain seeds of disaster. Who knows what the final outcome will be? How can one be absolutely sure? Everything changes. Do not be deluded by its appearance.

The Way of Heaven is impartial. It has no favorites; but is always on the side of the good people.

## **WITHDRAW IN GOOD TIME**

Sincere words are not flowery. Fine words may not be sincere. He who knows is not talkative. He who is talkative does not know. The world does not contend against anyone who does not contend.

A quiet mind and a patient disposition are the basis of sound living.

Better stop than till the cup to overflowing. Never be too proud, or you will have nothing to be proud of. Never be too sharp, or you will lose your edge. A house full of gold is hard to safeguard. A person too boastful of his fortune invites disaster. Quit in good time when your work is done. Do not hang on.

Fame or life, which is more precious to you? Health or wealth, which is more important to you? Gain or loss, which is more desirable to you?

If you love fame too much, you will pay a dear price. If you hold onto too much wealth, you will lose heavily one day. If you do not know where to stop, you will put yourself in danger. But if you know how to be content, you will not suffer disgrace.

This is the Way of Heaven. If you adhere to it, you can long endure.

## **GOOD GOVERNMENT**

Governing a big nation is like cooking a small fish. You should not stir it too often, or it will come apart.

The best government does not make its presence felt. The second best is the one praised by the people. The next is the one feared by the people. The worst is the one despised by the people.

The best way to govern a nation is to govern in accordance with the nature of things and be simple

and sparing. A good government does not make many policies or issue many orders; it runs the country in such a way that when its work is done, people will say: "All this happened to us naturally." A good government does not disturb the people unnecessarily, nor is it engaged in many activities interfering with the life of the people.

Too much taxes starve the people; too many rules and regulations make the land ungovernable. The more prohibitions there are, the poorer the people will become. The more laws are passed, the more thieves there will be. The more skills people have, and the more novel things they make, the more avaricious they may become.

A wise man does not have any fixed opinions. He regards the wishes of the people as his own wishes. He approves of good people, and also of bad people. Thus all become good. He trusts faithful people, and also unfaithful people. Thus all become faithful. To the wise, there are no hopeless people, for he knows how to educate them; and there are no useless things, for he knows how to make use of them.

When a big country takes a humble position, it will win over small nations. When a small country takes a humble position, it will be embraced by big nations. But a big nation should be more humble, for a humble small nation preserves itself at best, whereas a humble big nation wins the heart of the whole world.

My Way is the secret of the universe. Its greatness is beyond comparison. The superior man cherishes it and practices it. The average man sometimes grasps it but sometimes loses it. The lower man scoffs at it and rejects it.

Comment: The Way of Lao Tzu contains more than one meaning. Different people may read different messages in it. We probably can only scratch the surface of the profundity of Lao Tzu- Even so, we will be greatly benefited.

Our life is a journey of constant strife and endless changes. Sometimes we seem to have lost our way. Sometimes we do not see the forest for the trees.

Reading Lao Tzu, even though we do not understand everything he says, serves to remind us, in the thick of our struggle for existence or a better life, to take a step back and adopt a more detached attitude toward life and toward ourselves.

Let things take their own courses. Do not try to force a solution to a problem if we do not have one at present. If we can extricate ourselves, for a moment, from our daily preoccupations to reexamine our outlooks and values, we probably will be able to put our goals and objectives in perspective and have a better idea of the priorities of our life. Sometimes less means more. Sometimes a step back is better than a step forward. Sometimes the best gain is to lose. And there is also a time simply to let go.

We may never be able to live the way Lao Tzu espouses. But if we know when and how to take a respite and enjoy a moment of inner peace, we may be able to renew our strength and regain our confidence to handle the pressure on us with buoyancy, poise and grace, and to confront the challenges of life more successfully.

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