

Chapter VI

The Mystical Skepticism of the Taoists

UP to this point we have seen, in general, a single attitude toward the problems of the world. Confucius, Mo Tzū, and Mencius differed on many things, but they were alike in the great seriousness with which they addressed themselves to the task of making the world a better place to live in. All of them believed that a proper man should be ready to give up his life, if necessary, for the sake of humanity. Confucius, to be sure, did speak of the necessity for recreation and believed that the enjoyment of life is in itself a good; but he was tremendously earnest, for all that. As Confucianism developed, it came to have less and less of the balance and flexibility of the Master and to demand that the individual dedicate himself more and more completely to a fixed code of action on behalf of a world he had not made.

The aristocrats had not, of course, this same kind of earnestness; but they wanted to exercise despotic control over the individual and make all their subjects mere pawns in the games they played for political, military, and economic power. Between the princes and the philosophers, a man had little chance to call his soul his own.

Since human beings are made as they are, it was to be expected that some of them would rebel. They did; and this rebellion was the basis out of which there grew the very remarkable and interesting philosophy we know as Taoism. A Chinese philosopher of the present day has said that Taoism "is the natural and necessary counterpart to the complacent gregariousness of Confucianism."¹

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It may be that some stirrings of this revolt can be traced back to a time even earlier than that of Confucius. It is very difficult for an individual to achieve independence in a tightly organized feudal society, but there are a few passages in the early literature that may refer to hermits. In the original text of the classic called the *Book of Changes* we find mention of "one who does not serve either a king or a feudal lord, but in a lofty spirit values his own affairs."²

We find this revolt in unmistakable form about a century after the death of Confucius. It will be remembered that Mencius referred to a certain Yang Chu as one of the most popular philosophers of his day, saying that all those who were not Confucians or Moists were followers of Yang Chu. About his ideas, Mencius tells only this: "Yang takes the position of selfishness. Though he might benefit the whole world by merely plucking out one of his hairs, he would refuse to do it."³ A Han dynasty work says that the philosophy of Yang Chu advocated "preserving the integrity of one's personality, holding fast to reality, and not allowing one's self to become ensnared by things."⁴

There is a much more full account, supposedly quoting the words of Yang Chu himself, that appears as a chapter of the Taoist work called *Lieh Tzū*. Unfortunately, the *Lieh Tzū* is a book that is now generally recognized to be a forgery, probably perpetrated many centuries later than the time of Yang Chu, who is believed to have lived in the fourth century B.C. There are a few scholars, however, who believe that, despite the fact that the book as a whole is a forgery, the portion on Yang Chu may include genuine materials which have survived from an earlier day; they point out that it contains the kind of things we should expect Yang to have said. This is a difficult point. These passages in the *Lieh Tzū* may be nothing more than early attempts to reconstruct the kind of statements that Yang Chu might have written, and the kind of sentiments from

which the beginnings of Taoist thought originated. Whatever their origins, they are interesting. The *Lieh Tzū* tells us:

Yang Chu said: "No man lives more than a hundred years, and not one in a thousand that long. And even that one spends half his life as a helpless child or a dim-witted oldster. And of the time that remains, half is spent in sleep, or wasted during the day. And in what is left he is plagued by pain, sickness, sorrow, bitterness, deaths, losses, worry, and fear. In ten years and more there is hardly an hour in which he can feel at peace with himself and the world, without being gnawed by anxiety.

"What is man's life for? What pleasure is there in it? Is it for beauty and riches? Is it for sound and color? But there comes a time when beauty and riches no longer answer the needs of the heart, and when a surfeit of sound and color becomes only a weariness to the eyes and a ringing in the ears.

"Do we live for the sake of being now cowed into submission by the fear of the law and its penalties, now spurred to frenzied action by the promise of a reward or fame? We waste ourselves in a mad scramble, seeking to snatch the hollow praise of an hour, scheming to contrive that somehow some remnant of reputation shall outlast our lives. We move through the world in a narrow groove, preoccupied with the petty things we see and hear, brooding over our prejudices, passing by the joys of life without even knowing that we have missed anything. Never for a moment do we taste the heady wine of freedom. We are as truly imprisoned as if we lay at the bottom of a dungeon, heaped with chains.

"The men of old knew that life comes without warning, and as suddenly goes. They denied none of their natural inclinations, and repressed none of their bodily desires. They never felt the spur of fame. They sauntered through life gathering its pleasures as the impulse moved them. Since they cared nothing for fame after death, they were beyond the law. For name and praise, sooner or later, a long life or a short one, they cared not at all."

Yang Chu said: "In life all creatures are different, but in death they are all the same. Alive they are wise or foolish, noble or base; dead, they all alike stink, putrefy, decompose and disappear. . . . Thus the myriad things are equal at birth, and again become equal in death. All are equally wise, equally foolish, equally noble, equally base. One lives ten years, another a hundred, but they all die. The benevolent sage dies just as dead as the wicked fool. Alive they were [the sage-kings] Yao and Shun; dead, they are just rotten bones. Alive they were [the cruel tyrants] Chieh and Chou; dead, they are just rotten bones. And rotten bones are all alike;

who can distinguish them? Then let us make the most of these moments of life that are ours. We have no time to be concerned with what comes after death."⁵

These ideas are not unique; we could probably find their counterpart in every literature. Ultimately they boil down to the fact that man is born into a world he did not make and can never completely understand. His life is fettered by duties and harassed by fears, and he makes himself still more miserable by demanding of himself and his mind achievements of which, by their very nature, they are incapable. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, in a letter to a friend, made some observations that have remarkable similarities to those of Yang Chu, ending with this reflection: "I wonder if cosmically an idea is any more important than the bowels."⁶

The positive injunctions of such a philosophy are, in general, not to worry but to take life as it comes, not to become entrapped by soaring ambition, and to savor and enjoy as much of one's life as one can, day by day. It may be objected that this is not an exalted philosophy; but it is at any rate consistent, and unless one achieves it to some degree he is likely to develop gastric ulcers.

The philosophy of Yang Chu is interesting, and it resembles Taoism. Yet it lacks one ingredient of Taoism, and that is the most important ingredient of all.

Before we discuss Taoism itself, we must consider the problem of how we can learn anything definite or reliable about early Taoism. This is not easy. The subject is a complex one, about which scholars have wrangled long and sometimes bitterly. It is generally agreed that the oldest Taoist works are the *Lao Tzū* and the *Chuang Tzū*. And that is about all that is generally agreed upon.

Traditionally it has been supposed that the book of *Lao Tzū* was written by a man called Lao Tzū. This name should perhaps be translated as "Old Master." Lao Tzū is alleged to have been a somewhat older contemporary of Confucius and

a keeper of archives at the capital. Confucius is supposed to have met him there, in a celebrated encounter that has been amply shown to be fictitious.

Very few critical scholars any longer believe that Lao Tzū, if there was such a person, lived as early as Confucius. The evidence against such a view is overwhelming. There is no mention of Lao Tzū in any book until we come to a much later time. The book of *Lao Tzū* refers constantly to ideas that were unknown at the time of Confucius and did not become current until much later. Various scholars have tried to establish that Lao Tzū lived at some later date; but, even if there was such a man, it seems quite certain that neither he, nor any other single person, wrote the whole book of *Lao Tzū*. We shall therefore drop the problem of the man, if there was such a man, known as Lao Tzū, as being unprofitable. Instead, we shall consider the book.

The *Lao Tzū* is also known as the *Tao Tê Ching*; this may be translated as "The Canon of the Way and of Virtue." This is a small book, consisting of about five thousand characters. It is an interesting and important book. It is a very difficult book, written in a terse style that often seems deliberately obscure. It has often been translated; and if one compares the various renderings, it is sometimes almost impossible to believe that the different translations are based upon the same text. It is sometimes an exasperating book, partly because in different sections it espouses different and sometimes contradictory doctrines. It has been pointed out that different portions of the work employ different rhymes for the same characters, and different grammatical usages. Clearly it is a composite work, the parts of which were written by more than one person. Numerous dates have been assigned to it, varying from the traditional view that it was written as early as the time of Confucius down to opinions that it was put together as late as the second century B.C. I personally believe that it could not have been written earlier than the fourth century B.C.

When we turn to the man called Chuang Tzū, "Master Chuang," we seem to be on somewhat firmer ground. He is said to have been born in a place in central China that is now in Honan Province, and to have held a minor administrative post there. He is supposed to have died shortly after 300 B.C. We know little of his life, beyond some rather dubious anecdotes. The book of *Chuang Tzū* tells us that the ruler of the great southern state of Ch'u sent messengers with costly gifts to Chuang Tzū, to persuade him to become his prime minister, but Chuang Tzū would have none of it.⁷

When we turn from Chuang Tzū the man to the book called *Chuang Tzū*, there is considerable confusion. Most scholars seem to believe that not all of the book is by Chuang Tzū, but they are not by any means agreed as to which portions are by him and which by others. Some scholars think they detect a multiplicity of authorship even within individual chapters. Here, as in the case of the *Lao Tzū*, we find conflicting points of view. Some scholars believe that this text may not have reached its present form until as late as the second century B.C.

There is little point, then, in saying that Lao Tzū the man or Chuang Tzū the man made such and such statements, for it seems to be almost impossible to be certain that any particular statement was made by either of these individuals. The safer course is to say that the book of *Lao Tzū* or the book of *Chuang Tzū* makes the statements.

In the earliest Taoism, as we find it represented in the *Chuang Tzū* and the *Lao Tzū*, there is the same disillusion, not to say disgust, with human life as it is ordinarily lived that we saw in the thought of Yang Chu. In the *Chuang Tzū* we read: "To labor away one's whole lifetime but never see the result, and to be utterly worn out with toil but have no idea where it is leading—is this not lamentable? There are those who say, 'It is not death,' but what good does this do? When the body decomposes, the mind goes with it—is this not very deplorable?"⁸

Such pessimistic passages are, however, rather rare. For the Taoists have discovered nature and are amazed and fascinated by it. The *Chuang Tzū* asks:

Do the heavens revolve? Does the earth stand still? Do the sun and the moon contend for their positions? Who has the time to keep them all moving? Is there some mechanical device that keeps them going automatically? Or do they merely continue to revolve, inevitably, of their own inertia?

Do the clouds make rain? Or is it the rain that makes the clouds? What makes it descend so copiously? Who is it that has the leisure to devote himself, with such abandoned glee, to making these things happen?⁹

Viewing nature with the eyes of a delighted child, the Taoists found that "every prospect pleases, and only man is vile." Finding the world of men disgusting, they advised that one abandon it. Thus among the persons who figure chiefly in the Taoist writings we find many who are recluses, fishermen, or farmers, living apart, in communion with nature.

In the thoughts attributed to Yang Chu in the *Lieh Tzū* there is a good deal of concern about death. The quest for longevity and for immortality came to have a prominent place in the history of Taoism, and the search for an elixir of life led to the development of a considerable Taoist alchemy. There would seem to be some question, however, whether the desire for immortality had any part in the highest phase of early Taoist philosophy.

In any case we can also discern quite another tendency. This type of Taoist thinking recognizes that, to be sure, one must die, and that when one dies this consciousness, this eager insistent "I," will be exterminated. But what of it? Consciousness is a pain and an evil anyway. Will the universe be any different when there is no more "I"? Not one whit!

Thus the *Chuang Tzū* tells us: "The universe is the unity of all things. If one once recognizes his identity with this unity, then the parts of his body mean no more to him than so much dirt, and death and life, end and beginning, disturb his tran-

quillity no more than the succession of day and night."¹⁰ According to the *Lao Tzū*, true longevity consists in the fact that, "though one dies, he is not lost" from the universe.¹¹

The Taoist philosopher, then, was not merely resigned to such operations of the universe as involve the death of the individual; he delighted in contemplating them, and in identifying himself with the vast cosmic process. To undergo its myriad transformations is, the *Chuang Tzū* says, "an incalculable joy."¹² A character in the same work says:

If my left fore-arm were changed into a cock, I would use it to learn the time of dawn. If my right fore-arm became a crossbow, I'd use it to bring down a bird for roasting. If my buttocks were transformed into wheels and my spirit into a horse, then I would ride; what other carriage would I need?

When life comes, it is because it is time for it to do so. When life goes, this is the natural sequence of events. To accept with tranquillity all things that happen in the fullness of their time, and to abide in peace with the natural sequence of events, is to be beyond the disturbing reach of either sorrow or joy. This is the state of those whom the ancients called "released from bondage."¹³

Taoism is, as Maspero has so well shown,¹⁴ a mystical philosophy. It is a nature mysticism. In the midst of our cities, Taoism may well seem nonsense. But go out to nature, the trees, the birds, the distant view, the placidity of a summer landscape or the savage fury of a storm, and much of Taoism will seem to possess a validity stronger than that of the most intricate logic.

The Christian or Mohammedan mystic seeks communion and union with God. The Taoist seeks to become one with Nature, which he calls the *Tao*.

We have seen that before Confucius the term *tao* usually meant a road, or a way of action. Confucius used it as a philosophical concept, standing for the right way of action—moral, social, and political. For Confucius, however, the *Tao* was not a metaphysical concept.¹⁵ For the Taoists it became one. They used the term *Tao* to stand for the totality of all things, equiva-

lent to what some Western philosophers have called "the absolute." The *Tao* was the basic stuff out of which all things were made. It was simple, formless, desireless, without striving, supremely content. It existed before Heaven and Earth. In the course of the generation of things and institutions, the farther man gets away from this primal state, the less good, and the less happy, he is. The *Lao Tzū* says:

The *Tao* is like a vessel which, though empty,
 May be drawn upon endlessly
 And never needs to be filled.
 So vast and deep
 That it seems to be the very ancestor of all things.
 Immersed in it the sharpest edge becomes smooth,
 The most difficult problem solved,
 The most blinding glare diffused,
 All complexities reduced to simplicity.
 It is as calm as eternity itself.
 I do not know whose child it is.¹⁶

It will be recalled that the *Lao Tzū* is also known as the *Tao Tê Ching*. We have considered *Tao*, but what does *tê* mean here? When this term means "virtue," in the Confucian sense, the Taoists condemn it. But as they themselves use the term it refers to the natural, instinctive, primitive qualities or virtues, as opposed to those enjoined by social sanction and education.

The idea that the primitive is also the good has appealed to men of many lands and many ages. We naturally think of Rousseau, but even Plato in the *Laws* spoke of primitive men in terms remarkably like those of the Taoists, asserting that among them there were neither rich nor poor, and that "the community which has neither poverty nor riches will always have the noblest principles; in it there is no insolence or injustice, nor, again, are there any contentions or envyings. And therefore they were good, and also because they were what is called simple-minded; and when they were told about good and evil, they in their simplicity believed what they heard to be very truth and practiced it."¹⁷

The Taoist ideal is simplicity; the goal, to return to the *Tao*. How can one do this? The *Lao Tzū* says:

The ten thousand things come into being,
 And I have watched them return.
 No matter how luxuriantly they flourish
 Each must go back to the root from which it came.
 This returning to the root is called quietness;
 It is the fulfilment of one's destiny.
 That each must fulfil his destiny is the eternal pattern.
 To know the eternal pattern is to be illumined.
 He who knows it not will be blasted and withered by misfortune.
 He who knows the eternal pattern is all-encompassing;
 He who is all-encompassing is completely impartial.
 Being impartial, he is kingly;
 Being kingly he is like Heaven;
 Being like Heaven, he is at one with *Tao*.
 Being at one with *Tao* he is, like it, imperishable;
 Though his body may disappear into the ocean of existence,
 He is beyond all harm.¹⁸

It is a basic principle of Taoism that one should be in harmony with, not in rebellion against, the fundamental laws of the universe. All artificial institutions and all strivings are wrong. That all striving is wrong does not mean that all activity is wrong, but that all straining after that which is beyond reach is a mistake. The *Chuang Tzū* says: "Those who understand the conditions of life do not seek to do what life cannot accomplish. Those who understand the conditions of destiny do not seek for that which is beyond the reach of knowledge."¹⁹

Thus perspective, poise, a judicious understanding of what is and what is not feasible and suitable, are essential. In this connection it is important to recognize that all things are relative. "It is only because everyone recognizes beauty as beauty," the *Lao Tzū* tells us, "that we have the idea of ugliness."²⁰ Although the whole world is tiny in relation to the universe, nevertheless, the *Chuang Tzū* asserts, the tip of a hair is by no means insignificant.²¹ The same work says:

If a man sleeps in a damp place, he will wake up with an aching back, and feeling half dead; but is this true of an eel? If men tried to live in trees, they would be scared out of their wits; but are monkeys? Of the three, which knows the right place to live? Men eat meat; deer eat grass; centipedes like snakes; owls and crows enjoy mice. Will you tell me, please, which of these four has the correct taste? . . . Men considered Mao Ch'iang and Li Chi the most attractive of women, but on catching sight of them fish dived deep in the water, birds soared high in the air, and deer ran away. Which of these four has the right standard of beauty?"²²

This same relativism is applied to moral problems. Thus the *Chuang Tzū* says:

Concerning the right and the wrong, the "thus" and the "not thus": if the right is indeed right, there is no point in arguing about the fact that it is different from the wrong; if the "thus" is indeed "thus," why dispute about the way in which it is different from the "not thus"? Regardless of whether the various arguments actually meet one another or not, let us harmonize them within the all-embracing universe, and let them run their course.²³

This relativism is applied to our very existence, so that we read: "And one day there will come the great awakening, when we shall realize that life itself was a great dream."²⁴

Since nothing is certain, it would be ridiculous to become so intent on success that one strove with fanatical zeal to attain it. In fact, if one tries too hard, he is certain not to succeed: "One who stands on tiptoe does not stand firm. He who takes the longest steps does not cover the most ground."²⁵ The *Lao Tzū* tells us:

If you would not spill the wine,
Do not fill the glass too full.
If you wish your blade to hold its edge,
Do not try to make it over-keen.
If you do not want your house to be molested by robbers,
Do not fill it with gold and jade.
Wealth, rank, and arrogance add up to ruin,
As surely as two and two are four.
When you have done your work and established your fame, withdraw!
Such is the Way of Heaven.²⁶

Illustrating the point that one who tries too hard will fail, the *Chuang Tzū* notes that an archer who is shooting for a prize no more important than an earthenware dish will nonchalantly display his best skill. Offer him a brass buckle if he hits the mark, and he will shoot cautiously and less well. Offer a prize of gold, and he will become tense, and his skill will desert him entirely.²⁷

One should not care, then, for the possession of external things, but only try to achieve self-knowledge and contentment. Thus the *Lao Tzū* says:

To understand others is to be wise,
But to understand one's self is to be illumined.
One who overcomes others is strong,
But he who overcomes himself is mighty.²⁸

Again:

He who has the greatest possessions
Is he that will lose most heavily,
But he that is content is invulnerable.
He who is wise enough to stop, by his own volition,
Will endure.²⁹

And:

There is no greater misfortune than not to know when one has enough,
And no calamity more blighting than the desire to get more.
If one once experiences the profound satisfaction of being truly content,
He will never again be content to be otherwise.³⁰

What, then, shall one do? Do nothing, says the Taoist. "The operations of Heaven and Earth proceed with the most admirable order," the *Chuang Tzū* tells us, "yet they never speak. The four seasons observe clear laws, but they do not discuss them. All of nature is regulated by exact principles, but it never explains them. The sage penetrates the mystery of the order of Heaven and Earth, and comprehends the principles of nature. Thus the perfect man does nothing, and the great sage origi-

nates nothing; that is to say, they merely contemplate the universe."³¹

"Do nothing," *wu wei*, is a famous injunction of the Taoists. But does it mean simply to do nothing at all? Evidently not. The sense is rather that of doing nothing that is not natural or spontaneous. The important thing is not to strain in any way. We have already noted the simile of the archer, who shoots badly when he strives to win a gold piece but is relaxed and skilful when nothing of consequence depends upon his hitting the mark. The *Chuang Tzū* also includes a famous passage in which the butcher of the king of Liang tells his master how he cuts up an ox. He says that at first he had great difficulty, but that after years of practice he does it almost by instinct; "my senses stand still, and my spirit acts as it will."³²

There are many illustrations in the Taoist books of the fact that the highest skill operates on an almost unconscious level, and we can all think of illustrations from our own experience. One cannot skate or ride a bicycle skilfully until he makes the various motions necessary to maintain his balance without ever thinking about them. On the more intellectual plane, a connoisseur, the moment he sees an object of art, immediately "feels" that it is or is not genuine. He does this for many reasons, most of which he will be able to analyze and explain if he takes the time. But if his knowledge and experience have not given him the ability to feel immediately that an object is good or bad, he is no true connoisseur.

Taoism emphasizes this unconscious, intuitive, spontaneous element. There would seem to be little doubt that most of us live too much of our lives on the conscious level, constantly worrying about what to do when it does not really matter, and that this is one reason we keep the psychiatrists increasingly busy. The Taoists point out, for instance, that a drunken man who falls is much less likely to be injured than a sober man, because he is relaxed.

Thus one's path should be nonaction and quietness. The *Lao*

Tzū tells us that one should speak as little as possible; this is the way of nature. Even Heaven and Earth cannot make a rainstorm or a hurricane last long.³³ The *Tao* that can be talked about is not the eternal *Tao*.³⁴ Those who know do not talk and those who talk do not know.³⁵

True words are not flowery,
And flowery words are not true.
The good man does not argue,
And those who argue are not good.
The wise are not learned,
And the learned are not wise.³⁶

Again: "When we give up learning we have no more troubles."³⁷ "Discard sageness, get rid of wisdom, and the people will be a hundred times better off."³⁸

He never goes outside his door,
Yet he is familiar with the whole world.
He never looks out of his window,
Yet he fathoms the Way of Heaven.
Truly, the farther one travels
The less he understands.
Therefore the Sage knows without investigating . . .
Does nothing, yet accomplishes everything.³⁹

The *Chuang Tzū* says: "There was a time when the wisdom of the men of old was perfect. When? When they were not yet conscious that things existed. Next, they knew that there were things, but did not attempt to distinguish them. Next, they distinguished things but did not try to label some 'right' and others 'wrong.' As soon as such judgments were passed, the integrity of the *Tao* was violated and prejudice came into being."⁴⁰

It is quite logical, in accord with the Taoist views we have considered, that the Taoists should oppose war. Weapons, the *Lao Tzū* tells us, are of evil omen,⁴¹ and war horses are reared only in a state that has fallen away from the *Tao*.⁴² Oppressive government is similarly denounced. The people starve because their superiors eat too much in taxes.⁴³ The more laws there

are, the more thieves and bandits will multiply.⁴⁴ Capital punishment is futile. "The people do not fear death. What is the use, then, of trying to frighten them with the death penalty?" And even if they were afraid, what mortal man is qualified to pronounce this awful judgment against his fellows?⁴⁵

This is, in effect, an anarchistic point of view, and there is a strong element of anarchism in Taoism. "I have heard," the *Chuang Tzū* says, "of letting the world go its own way, but not of governing the world successfully." The following passage in the *Chuang Tzū* illustrates this attitude and is a good sample of the peculiar flavor of the book:

The Spirit of the Clouds, traveling to the east on a gentle breeze, happened to meet with Chaos, who was wandering about slapping his buttocks and hopping like a bird. Surprised at this, the Spirit of the Clouds stood respectfully and asked, "Venerable Sir, who are you, and why do you do that?" Without ceasing to slap his buttocks and hop like a bird, Chaos replied, "I am having a good time." The Spirit of the Clouds said, "I should like to ask you a question." Chaos looked up at him and said, "Pooh!" The Spirit of the Clouds went on, "The ether of heaven is out of harmony; the ether of earth is confined; the six influences are not in proper relation; the four seasons occur irregularly. Now I wish to harmonize the essence of the six influences so as to nourish all living creatures; how can this be done?" Chaos just went on slapping his buttocks and hopping like a bird. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head, "I don't know."

The Spirit of the Clouds had no opportunity to question him further at that time. But three years later, when he was again traveling in the east, just as he was passing by the wilderness of Sung, he again chanced upon Chaos. Overjoyed, he hurried to him and said, "Have you forgotten me, Heaven?" He bowed twice, touching his head to the ground, and requested instruction. Chaos said, "I drift here and there, with no idea of what I seek; moved only by the impulse of the moment, I have no idea where I am going. I wander aimlessly, regarding all things without prejudice or guile; how should I know anything?" The Spirit of the Clouds replied, "I consider myself, also, a creature of impulse, yet the people follow me about. The people take me as their model; I can't help it. I would like a word from you as to what I should do." Chaos said, "The world's basic principles are violated, the constitution of things is overturned, the mysterious operations of nature are

aborted, the herds of animals are scattered, all the birds cry out in the nighttime, plants and trees are blighted, and the harm reaches even to the insect world—all this is because, alas, of the mistake of governing men." "Yes," said the Spirit of the Clouds, "so what shall I do?" "Alas," Chaos said, "this idea of 'doing' is what makes the trouble. Desist!"

"I have had a hard time finding you, Heaven," the Spirit of the Clouds said, "and I would appreciate a word more." Chaos told him, "Nourish your mind. Rest in the position of doing nothing, and things will take care of themselves. Relax your body, spit out your intelligence, forget about principles and things. Cast yourself into the ocean of existence, unshackle your mind, free your spirit, make yourself as quiet as an inanimate thing. All things return to their root, without knowing that they do so. Because they lack knowledge, they never leave the state of primal simplicity. But let them once become conscious, and it is gone! Never ask the names of things, do not seek to spy out the workings of their natures, and all things will flourish of themselves."

The Spirit of the Clouds said, "Heaven, you have bestowed upon me the secret of your power, and unveiled for me the mystery. I have sought it all my life; today it is mine." He bowed twice, touching his head to the ground, took leave of Chaos, and went on his way.⁴⁶

The conclusion of this aspect of Taoist philosophy is negative. "Don't worry." "Do nothing, and everything will be done." Like all true mystics, these Taoist philosophers found their satisfaction in the mystical experience itself. They had no need of the activities and the rewards sought by ordinary men. Thus we are told that when Chuang Tzū was invited to become prime minister of Ch'u he refused, with a smile, to leave his fishing.⁴⁷ The book of *Chuang Tzū* tells us that after Lieh Tzū was enlightened, he "went home and for three years did not go out. . . . He took no interest in what went on. . . . He stood like a clod, sealed up within himself despite all distractions, and continued thus to the end of his life."⁴⁸

Such men illustrate the statement that "the perfect man does nothing, and the great sage originates nothing; they merely contemplate the universe."⁴⁹ They represent what we may call the "contemplative" aspect of Taoism. Such dedicated mystics

are rare, and it is doubtful that there were many of them even among the early Taoists.

The conclusion of contemplative Taoism is clear. One should care nothing for worldly power, position, or honors. One might go into the wilderness as a recluse, or, if one stayed among men, he would be indifferent to their attitude toward himself. Thus the *Lao Tzū* says: "Those who understand me are very few; for this reason I am all the more worthy of honor. It is for this reason that the sage wears a garment of coarse cloth, concealing that which is more precious than the finest jade within his bosom."⁵⁰

Now it is all very well to talk of caring nothing for the world's opinion, of not striving, being perfectly quiescent, remaining content with the lowest position in the world, and so forth. But human beings get tired of that sort of thing. And most of the Taoists were human, not matter how much they tried not to be. Thus we find in their works repeated statements to the effect that, by doing nothing, the Taoist sage in fact does everything; by being utterly weak, he overcomes the strong; by being utterly humble, he comes to rule the world. This is no longer "contemplative" Taoism. It has moved to the "purposive" aspect.

The first step in this remarkable transition probably comes from mysticism. The *Tao* is the absolute, the totality of all that is. If one regards himself as simply a part of that, then it is clear that no matter what happens to him, he cannot get out of it. One seeks then to become merged into the *Tao*; the *Lao Tzū* tells us:

This is called the mysterious absorption.
He who has experienced it cannot be treated as an intimate, or rebuffed,
Cannot be helped, or harmed,
Cannot be honored, or humbled.
Therefore, he occupies the first place among all the world's creatures.⁵¹

This is the transition. One who is absorbed into the *Tao* cannot be hurt because he recognizes no hurt. One who cannot be hurt is impregnable. One who is impregnable is more powerful than all those who would hurt him. Therefore, he is the chief and the most powerful of creatures. This skilful transition is made in many forms. The Taoist sage has no ambitions; therefore, he has no failures. He who never fails always succeeds. And he who always succeeds is all-powerful.

The power of the Taoist sage is, indeed, far beyond the greatest power of which human beings are usually supposed to be capable. For since he is one with the *Tao*, he *is* the *Tao*. Thus he is compared with Heaven and Earth, and described as having the same attributes as are posited of the *Tao* itself.

It should be noted that, even though this reasoning may seem fallacious, the person who is actually convinced that he is "in tune with the infinite" and a channel for all the powers of the universe has great advantages in self-confidence and poise. This is far superior to such autosuggestive devices as telling one's self, "Day by day in every way I am getting better and better." Thus the convinced Taoist would have personal characteristics well calculated to impress others and assure them of his special and sagely character.

The Taoist works tell us of various sages, ancient and contemporary, who refused office as prime ministers and even disdained the offer of thrones; and we should naturally expect the Taoist to be above the vainglory of temporal rule. Nevertheless, we also find a number of passages devoted to telling how one may "get control of the world." Quite evidently the Taoists were human enough to join the competition that was going on among the various philosophies, each of which undertook to point the way to uniting the Chinese world into an empire. Sometimes it appears that a Taoist may act as prime minister to a ruler, but usually the Taoist sage is himself cast in the ruler's role.

Humanly, it was natural for the Taoist to wish to rule. He

knew how the people ought to act to be happy; they should simply remain in a state of primal simplicity. Therefore, the *Lao Tzū* says, "the sage, in governing, empties the people's minds and fills their bellies, weakens their wills and strengthens their bones. He constantly keeps the people without knowledge and without desire. When there are those who have knowledge, he sees to it that they dare not act. When he thus enforces nonaction, good order is universal."⁵² And in the *Chuang Tzū* we read that "the true men of old . . . considering punishments to be the substance of government, were liberal in their infiction of the death penalty."⁵³

This has brought us a long way from the Taoist insistence on individual freedom. Here only the Taoist sage has freedom. Still, the sage is governing in the interests of the people as a whole. But there is worse to come. In some passages we are told that the sage is compassionate, but in others both the *Lao Tzū* and the *Chuang Tzū* tell us that the *Tao*, which is his model, is above such emotion. In the *Chuang Tzū* the *Tao* is apostrophized thus: "My Master! My Master! You destroy all things and yet are not cruel; you benefit ten thousand generations, and yet are not benevolent."⁵⁴ The *Lao Tzū* says: "Heaven and Earth are not benevolent; they treat the ten thousand creatures ruthlessly. The sage is not benevolent; he treats the people ruthlessly."⁵⁵

This conception was capable, if it fell into the wrong hands, of truly terrifying consequences. For the enlightened Taoist is beyond good and evil; for him these are merely words used by the ignorant and foolish. If it suits his whim, he may destroy a city and massacre its inhabitants with the concentrated fury of a typhoon, and feel no more qualms of conscience than the majestic sun that shines upon the scene of desolation after the storm. After all, both life and death, begetting and destruction, are parts of the harmonious order of the universe, which is good because it exists and because it is itself.

In this conception of the Taoist sage, Taoism released upon

humanity what may truly be called a monster. By any human standards, he is unreachable and immovable; he cannot be influenced by love or hate, fear or hope of gain, pity or admiration. Fortunately, this conception has seldom been clothed in flesh; but there is no doubt that some of the more despotic Chinese emperors were inspired, not to say intoxicated, by this ideal. It is ironic that Taoism, at root so completely anarchistic, should have become so greatly associated with government. This connection was so common that a famous Han dynasty work described Taoism as "the method of the ruler on his throne."⁵⁶

In a later chapter we shall consider the philosophy known as Legalism, which proposed a program of unvarnished totalitarian despotism. This would seem to be—and in many ways it is—completely opposed to much that is essential in Taoism. Nevertheless, the Legalists claimed Taoism as the philosophic background for their doctrines. To do this they had to ignore the Taoists' condemnation of war and oppression, but they found a great deal in the "purposive" aspect of Taoism that was very useful to them.

The Taoists condemned the Confucians roundly. This was natural, for more than one reason. In the first place, the Confucians were probably the most successful philosophical school at the time when Taoism developed; this made them a natural target. Furthermore, the Confucians were the chief exponents of a carefully ordered system of government, intended to benefit the people—which the Taoists claimed would only do harm. Thus we find Confucian ideas, as well as Confucius and his disciples, repeatedly made fun of and attacked. Another, and more subtle, method was to assert that Confucius had renounced Confucianism and been converted to Taoism, and then to quote his alleged attacks on his own philosophy at great length. These stories are very obviously fiction, but they were effective propaganda.

One can hardly imagine a world actually governed—or un-

governed—according to the completely laissez-faire program of the Taoist philosophers. If one can imagine it, one would prefer not to. But this is perhaps not a valid criticism. It seems doubtful that they actually expected to be taken altogether seriously. They were poking fun, acting as gadflies, and undoubtedly they performed a useful function. To be sure, what I have proposed to call the “purposive” aspect of Taoist philosophy provided a warrant for despotism. But happily, the Chinese in general seem seldom to have taken this aspect of Taoism very seriously. Perhaps they have regarded it with the proper amount of Taoist skepticism.

The Taoists are fond of paradoxes. And paradoxically this philosophy, so anti-Confucian, so anti-governmental, and in some ways so anti-democratic, has in fact collaborated with Confucianism to produce the very considerable amount of social and political democracy that China has known. While Confucianism has emphasized the worth of the individual and the importance of considering him an end and not merely a means, Taoism has insisted upon his right to call his soul his own. The Taoist emphasis on man's oneness with nature has inspired Chinese art and has given the Chinese people much of the poise that has allowed their culture to endure. By its magnificent assertion of personal autonomy, its universal skepticism, and its doctrine of the relativity of all values, it has contributed incalculably to the development of the individualism and the insistence on compromise which are among the most important ingredients of the Chinese spirit.

Chapter VII

The Authoritarianism of Hsün Tzū

CONFUCIUS was in many respects a failure in his lifetime, but today his name is known all over the world. The Confucian philosopher Hsün Tzū had an opposite fate. In his own day he was an official and was highly honored as a famous scholar. His influence on the form that Confucianism ultimately assumed was tremendous; Homer H. Dubs has quite properly called him “the moulder of ancient Confucianism.” Yet among Confucians, particularly during the last thousand years, he has not enjoyed high favor. Outside China even those who are familiar with the name of Mencius may be quite uncertain who Hsün Tzū was.

It has sometimes been said that this lack of high honor is due to the fact that the great arbiter of recent Confucian orthodoxy, Chu Hsi of the twelfth century A.D., condemned Hsün Tzū because he disagreed with Mencius' statement that human nature is good. This is important, but it is not the whole story. In considerable measure Hsün Tzū brought upon himself the ultimate eclipse of his reputation, by a peculiar limitation in his own thinking.

There was no lack of intellectual power; Hsün Tzū was, without qualification, one of the most brilliant philosophers the world has ever produced. But he lacked faith in humanity. This flaw, like the fatal weakness of the hero in a Greek tragedy, went far to nullify his best efforts. It not only blighted his own fame but did much to impose upon later Confucianism a strait jacket of academic orthodoxy.

Hsün Tzū was born around 300 B.C. in the northwestern state of Chao. He studied philosophy in the state of Ch'i, where