

Bertolt Brecht, Legend of the Origin of the Book Tao-Te-Ching on Lao-Tsu's Road into Exile

1

Once he was seventy and getting brittle
Quiet retirement seemed the teacher's due.
In his country goodness had been weakening a little
And the wickedness was gaining ground anew.
So he buckled on his shoe.

2

And he packed up what he would be needing:
Not much. But enough to travel light.
Items like the book that he was always reading
And the pipe he used to smoke at night.
Bread as much as he thought right.

3

Gladly looked back at his valley, then forgot it
As he turned to take the mountain track.
And the ox was glad of the fresh grass it spotted
Munching, with the old man on his back
Happy that the pace was slack.

4

Four days out among the rocks, a barrier
Where a customs man made them report.
'What valuables have you to declare here?'
And the boy leading the ox explained: 'The old man taught'.
Nothing at all, in short.

5

Then the man, in cheerful disposition
Asked again: 'How did he make out, pray?'
Said the boy: 'He learnt how quite soft water, by attrition
Over the years will grind strong rocks away.
In other words, that hardness must lose the day.'

6

Then the boy tugged at the ox to get it started
Anxious to move on, for it was late.
But as they disappeared behind a fir tree which they skirted
Something suddenly began to agitate
The man, who shouted: 'Hey, you! Wait!'

7

'What was that you said about the water?'
Old man pauses: 'Do you want to know?'
Man replies: "I'm not at all important
Who wins or loses interests me, though.
If you've found out, say so.

8

'Write it down. Dictate it to your boy there.
Once you've gone, who can we find out from?
There are pen and ink for your employ here
And a supper we can share; this is my home
It's a bargain: come!

9

Turning round, the old man looks in sorrow
At the man. Worn tunic. Got no shoes.
And his forehead just a single furrow.
Ah, no winner this he's talking to.
And he softly says: 'You too?'

10

Snubbing of politely put suggestions
Seems to be unheard of by the old.
For the old man said: 'Those who ask questions
Deserve answers'. Then the boy: 'What's more, it's turning cold'.
'Right, then get my bed unrolled.'

11

Stiffly from his ox the sage dismounted.
Seven days he wrote there with his friend.
And the man brought them their meals (and all the smugglers were astounded
At what seemed this sudden lenient trend).
And then came the end.

12

And the boy handed over what they'd written—
Eighty-one sayings—early one day.
And they thanked the man for the alms he'd given
Went round the fir and climbed the rocky way.
Who was so polite as they?

13

But the honour should not be restricted
To the sage whose name is clearly writ.
For a wise man's wisdom needs to be extracted.
So the customs man deserves his bit.
It was he who called for it.

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