

Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu

Translated by Derek Lin, 1994

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Introduction

Our Approach and Guiding Principles

There are many Tao Te Ching translations available, and some of them vary wildly in their rendering of the ancient classic. When we compare these variant renditions side-by-side, they can seem like totally different books. So how can we know, with a reasonable degree of certainty, what the Tao Te Ching actually says?

This translation is an attempt to address this important question. We started out by envisioning the ideal Tao Te Ching translation, to see how close we could get to it. What would such a translation be like? We came up with the following thoughts:

1) Its translator would be a native speaker of both English and Chinese. Without this level of fluency, the translation would miss many linguistic subtleties and nuances. Native command and familiarity is crucial; academic knowledge alone is insufficient.

2) Its translator would be someone who knows ancient Chinese quite well. The Tao Te Ching originated 2,500 years ago, so some of its words are no longer in modern usage, and some have changed meaning over the centuries. A lack of understanding in this respect can lead to mistranslation.

3) Its translator would be held accountable on accuracy. There are very few people with the qualifications cited above, so there is no rigorous peer review of Tao Te Ching translations. The lack of accountability is a major factor that contributes to a situation where anyone can claim to have the most definitive and authoritative translation, and any challenges or disagreements can be labeled as merely opinions.

4) The ideal translation would be a true translation in that every character in the original can be matched to the nearest equivalent word or phrase in English, and no characters are skipped. If we were to scrutinize existing translations, we would find a surprising number failing this basic criterion.

5) The ideal translation would also guarantee the reverse: that every English word or phrase in the translation has a corresponding character in the original Chinese. Again, many translations fail this basic criterion. They contain extraneous concepts or meanings not found in the source material, because sometimes translators cannot resist the temptation to inject pet notions or personal opinions into their work.

6) The ideal translation would resolve the gender issue. Chinese is contextual and gender-neutral, so a line that talks about a sage or a ruler makes no assumptions about the subject's gender. English is gender-specific and forces one to choose male or female pronoun, thereby creating a distortion of the original all-inclusive meaning. (Some translators use the male gender as a convention for the universal third-person reference; some use the female gender to balance the perceived inequality; some switch arbitrarily between the two; some use "his or her" in making the inclusiveness explicit. These are all attempts to resolve the issue.)

A translation that fulfills the six points above, if possible to achieve, would set a higher and unprecedented standard for authenticity and accuracy. So now the questions become: How close can we come to it? How realistic is the ideal? We can fulfill the first requirement, but cannot claim to be perfectly qualified for #2 - perhaps no living person can. However, we do have access to real-life sages who understand the Tao Te Ching better than anyone. We also have access to commentaries that have been passed down through the generations. With these two helpful assets, we should be able to handle the demands of the second point.*

Accountability is an issue that, in our case, would take care of itself. Because the Tao is the way of life for us, and not just an academic subject, we would be extremely interested in preserving the original meaning as much as humanly possible. Our commitment would go far beyond that of the typical scholar or writer. Our purpose in translating the Tao Te Ching is to embark on a quest to deepen spiritual understanding.

We would use #4 and #5 as our overriding principles. Every Chinese character will be linked to an English word or phrase. If we encounter a particularly difficult character, we will spend the time to do the research rather than to gloss over it. All English words except articles and prepositions must correspond with the Chinese original. Anything extra will be summarily discarded.

We would deal with #6 by utilizing the contextual nature of Chinese. Not only is Chinese gender-neutral, it is also unspecific in terms of plurality. Any given sentence about a type of person can refer to either a single individual or multiple individuals. This means it is perfectly acceptable for us to use the plural form in the translation, which would in turn let us use the gender-neutral "their" instead of the gender-specific "his" or "her." This takes care of the common distortion in an elegant way, and yields a more faithful translation.

* Special thanks to Master Wu Han Yih and Grand Master Lin De Yang.

The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the origin of Heaven and Earth
The named is the mother of myriad things
Thus, constantly free of desire
One observes its wonders
Constantly filled with desire
One observes its manifestations
These two emerge together but differ in name
The unity is said to be the mystery
Mystery of mysteries, the door to all wonders

The Tao that can be completely explained or expressed in words is not the constant, eternally unchanging and true Tao.

If the name of this Tao can be defined with words, then it is not the constant, eternally unchanging name of the true Tao.

Names did not exist prior to Creation. The nameless Tao is therefore the source of the universe. Once it manifests itself as the physical universe, it can be named. Everything is derived from it through natural processes. It is therefore the mother of all things.

If we approach the Tao without self-serving desires, we can readily observe its inner wonders and marvels. This establishes a direct connection with the source, the vast intelligence of universal consciousness. This gives us flashes of powerful, intuitive insights, as well as free-flowing creativity.

If we approach the Tao full of self-serving desires, then we can only observe its external physical manifestations, rather than its inner essence. These desires block the connection and interfere with the Tao process. We often do this to ourselves.

The Tao's external manifestations (life, nature, the cosmos, and so on) and its inner wonders (oneness, the living void, the flow, etc.) are both properties of the ultimate reality. Although we call them by different names, they are but two sides of the same coin.

This unity of these two aspects gives us an interesting paradox. They seem distinctively different, and yet they lead to one another. Understanding of the Tao's inner essence gives us greater understanding of its outer manifestations, and vice versa.

Our recognition and acknowledgement of this paradox will open the door for us to further explore the infinite wonders of the Tao.

Notes

The Tao that can be spoken (expressed in words)

Is not the constant (eternal) Tao

The Name that can be named

Is not the eternal Name

The "Nameless Name" - that which existed before there was anything to name - is a synonym for the Tao.

The main idea here is that the Tao is a concept beyond reason and logic. It is the universal principle that permeates every action and every phenomenon, but it cannot be adequately understood through the rational mind. To comprehend it completely, you must exercise your intuition and get in touch with the fundamental divinity that connects everyone.

Lao Tzu is also pointing out the limitation of spoken words and written texts. Our tendencies to categorize, define and analyze only give us the limited understanding of how the Tao acts upon the material world. This is exactly what happens when we study physics, biology, chemistry, and other natural sciences.

On the other hand, if we free ourselves of this limiting human desire to put everything into

words, and become aware of our wordless communion with nature, we can catch glimpses of a divine wisdom. Beyond categories, definitions, and analyses, it is wisdom far more profound than anything that academic knowledge, science and technology can offer.

Translation Notes

One translation renders the first line as "The way that can be trodden," which fails to take the above into account. Another translation mistakes "can" as "possible" and waxes poetic about "The possible Tao." That's even further away from the original meaning.

In this context, this character means "ever-lasting." In one instance a translator renders it as "absolute," which is close, but not quite correct.

2

When the world knows beauty as beauty, ugliness arises

When it knows good as good, evil arises

Thus being and non-being produce each other

Difficult and easy bring about each other

Long and short reveal each other

High and low support each other

Music and voice harmonize each other

Front and back follow each other

Therefore the sages:

Manage the work of detached actions

Conduct the teaching of no words

They work with myriad things but do not control

They create but do not possess

They act but do not presume

They succeed but do not dwell on success

It is because they do not dwell on success

That it never goes away

Tao sages have long recognized the relative nature of the world. While one can certainly find absolutes in abstract theory, in the real world they rarely, if ever, exist. For instance, no metal is absolutely free of impurities. In fact, hardly anything in nature is absolutely pure. One can come close to 100% purity, but never quite get there.

It is the same with people. Absolute good and evil can exist as concepts, but will probably never be found among human beings. Everyone is a mixture of varying proportions. No person is any one thing.

If the world is by and large relative, then descriptions require comparison, perspective and proportion to have meaning. One can be "short" among NBA players and still be "tall" among kindergarten kids. Which description is correct? Both. Neither. It depends.

"Difficult" and "easy" bring about each other

"Long" and "short" reveal each other

"High" and "low" support each other

"Voice" and "music" harmonize each other

"Front" and "back" follow each other

"Hard" and "easy" are concepts relative to one another. "Long" and "short" need each other to have meaning.

The universe is full of dualities. Everything is relative; values have meaning only by comparison. For instance, a task can only be "easy" if it is being compared to some other task that is relatively more difficult. If there's nothing else to compare against, the task cannot be rated in terms of difficulty. Similarly, we can only say an object is "long" if we're comparing it against another similar object that is shorter. Each half of a duality cannot exist without the other half. A descriptive concept creates its own opposite.

Do not glorify the achievers
So the people will not squabble
Do not treasure goods that are hard to obtain
So the people will not become thieves
Do not show the desired things
So their hearts will not be confused
Thus the governance of the sage:
Empties their hearts
Fills their bellies
Weakens their ambitions
Strengthens their bones
Let the people have no cunning and no greed
So those who scheme will not dare to meddle
Act without contrivance
And nothing will be beyond control

When we glorify achievers and set them aside for special treatment, people will compete aggressively and step over one another to achieve that glory. Similarly, when we place a high value on certain goods, there will be those who plot to take them by force or by trickery. This determination of value can be rather arbitrary. For instance, what intrinsic goodness does gold have that makes it so much more valuable than other metals? What is so great about gold other than a particular number that people determine and agree upon? In general, whenever we point to anything as desirable, a wave of disruption ripples through society. People begin to think of ways to get more of the desirable thing, often at the expense of others.

Because of this, a sagacious ruler would refrain from setting aside certain individuals for glorification, or designating certain goods as extremely valuable and putting them on display. These are sure-fire ways of stimulating materialistic desire, which is a bottomless pit. While the sages empty people's hearts of desires and weaken their ambitions for fame, glory, or material wealth, they would also pay particular attention to the basic needs. As rulers, the sage kings would see to it that the people do not go hungry and enjoy good health. As teachers, the sages would give people teachings that provide spiritual sustenance and promote spiritual health.

When people follow the way of the sages, the few who scheme and plot will find themselves unable to utilize their repertoire of clever ploys. The governance of the sages leaves no room for their contrived tactics, and everything falls into place peacefully and naturally.

Notes

The process described in this chapter - showcasing certain things as valuable and thus stimulating demand - is the basis of advertising and modern consumerism. Every day we see an endless parade of colorful, shiny products in front of us, enticing us and encouraging purchase. Not enough money? No problem! All major credit cards are accepted. Buy it now and pay no interest until next year. This is a limited-time offer, so call now!

The trouble, as many people have already discovered, is that the pleasure of materialistic pursuits is fleeting. We can buy many things, but never lasting satisfaction. We can be surrounded by many of the colorful and shiny products and still feel a profound sense of emptiness.

The solution to this cannot be found on the Home Shopping Network or in the Sears Catalog. It is not available by mail order or on the Internet. You will not see it at the shopping mall or your local stores. It isn't a colorful and shiny product. In fact, it isn't a thing at all.

Ultimately, it is what people really want and need. But because it isn't a thing, it does not look

enticing, nor does it encourage purchase or anything else. It cannot be showcased or paraded in front of people - so some of them may never find it. It cannot be put on a credit card and there is no financing available. It doesn't cost anything - so those who do find it may assume it has no value and cast it aside. They may find it only to let it slip through their fingers.

To those who know what it is, no explanation is necessary. To those who do not, no explanation will suffice. Such is the nature of the Tao.

Translation

Quite a few translators render "hard-to-obtain goods" as "rare goods." This is close, but not quite the same thing. The former is the literal, word-for-word translation; the latter is an interpreted meaning.

Goods that are difficult to acquire may simply have a high price tag; they are not necessarily "rare" in the sense of being uncommon or hard to find. For instance, diamond rings are expensive and therefore relatively hard to get, but they are readily available and quite easily found for most people.

In this chapter, Lao Tzu is talking about high-value items (such as jewelry) that are hoarded and thus become the target of thieves. There is no need to bring in the additional context of rarity into the mix. Doing so introduces a subtle distortion in the translation, which should be avoided if at all possible.

4

The Tao is empty

Utilize it, it is not filled up

So deep! It seems to be the source of all things

It blunts the sharpness

Unravels the knots

Dims the glare

Mixes the dusts

So indistinct! It seems to exist

I do not know whose offspring it is

Its image is the predecessor of God

The Tao is like an empty container that you can fill with water and utilize. Yet no matter how much you do this, it will never be filled up because its capacity has no limit. It is a bottomless container; it is infinitely deep.

Despite the emptiness of the Tao, its function is inexhaustible. This emptiness is not the same as "nothingness," for the infinite depths of the Tao conceal the seeds of Creation. There appears to be nothing in the Tao, and yet it contains everything.

The Tao is eternal. It outlasts everything. After millions of years, even the tallest, sharpest mountain peaks will be reduced to gentle rolling hills. After billions of years, even the brightest stars will burn out and shine no more. In the course of time, all problems will be resolved one way or another. The proudest achievements of mankind will be reduced to dust.

The Tao is what we call the source of everything. It is indistinct - we cannot see it clearly, nor can we understand it completely. We do not know how the Tao came to be, or if it came from anywhere at all. Does the ultimate source have a source? We simply cannot say.

All we can say with certainty is that the Tao embodies the principles of Creation. Thus, if there is indeed a God who created the universe, the Tao had to be present before the Creation could take place.

Notes

The Tao is empty; utilize it,

It does not fill up.

The emptiness of the Tao, and its function as the source of all things may seem like a contradiction or a paradox, but this idea happens to coincide with the latest scientific thinking about the origin of the universe.

According to many physicists and cosmologists, the Big Bang can be seen as a singularity event where you actually get "something" from "nothing." MIT professor Dr. Alan Guth expresses it this way: "It is said that there's no such thing as a free lunch. But the universe is the ultimate free lunch."

Blunt their sharpness

Unravel their knots

Dull their glare

Mix their dusts

The Tao is the only constant feature in an ever-changing universe. It has always been there and will always be there. It is entropy, as expressed by the Second Law of Thermodynamics. As time marches on, energy becomes increasingly randomized and dispersed, and all things tend to transition from orderly states to disorderly states, everywhere in the universe.

5

**Heaven and Earth are without bias
And regard myriad things as straw dogs
The sage is without bias
And regards people as straw dogs
The space between Heaven and Earth
Is it not like a bellows?
Empty, and yet never exhausted
It moves, and produces more
Too many words hasten failure
Cannot compare to keeping quiet**

Straw dogs are literally small dog figurines made from straws. They were used in ancient times for rituals.

Too many words / laws quicken defeat / failure

Cannot compare to keeping quiet

An alternative explanation of the above is that too much bureaucracy, too many rules and regulations quickly leads to weakness and failure; it is better to maintain tranquility and non-action.

This is an often misunderstood passage in Tao Te Ching, even by native speakers of Chinese, because some of the characters have a completely different meaning in ancient usage than in modern times.

For instance, this is a simple character meaning "middle," so many scholars assume the last line has to do with holding to the center, or perhaps holding to the principle of moderation. This would make more sense, though, if the previous line speaks of the danger of extremes. Now that we understand it refers to the maddening "noise" of complex and bureaucratic laws, it makes far more sense that the last line is really talking about silence and tranquility.

6

**The valley spirit, undying
Is called the mystical female
The gateway of the mystical female
Is called the root of Heaven and Earth**

**It flows continuously, barely perceptible
Utilize it, it is never exhausted**

The spirit of the valley - a powerful symbol of the female principle - is eternal. It has always been there and will always be. We can call it the mystical female, or the sacred feminine.

The sacred feminine is the universal source of life. Therefore, the doorway to the essence of the mystical female is what we can call the root, origin, or genesis of the entire world. This essence - life itself - is a continuous flow. We tend to take it for granted and not pay attention to it, but it is always there. And it does not matter how much it is utilized - the power of life is literally inexhaustible.

7

**Heaven and earth are everlasting
The reason heaven and earth can last forever
Is that they do not exist for themselves
Thus they can last forever
Therefore the sage:
Places himself last but ends up in front
Is outside of himself and yet survives
Isn't it all due to his selflessness?
That's how he can achieve his own goals**

To be "outside of himself" in this context means to be unconcerned with one's well being, to disregard one's body - to sacrifice oneself.

Here we have another example of the Tao paradox: the sage can advance his own "selfish" agenda, by being totally selfless.

Lao Tzu himself is a good example of this. He was content to be a humble, unknown philosopher; he never sought fame and recognition. And yet here we are, reading his words, which have survived the last twenty five centuries and will continue on long after we are gone.

8

**The highest goodness resembles water
Water greatly benefits myriad things without contention
It stays in places that people dislike
Therefore it is similar to the Tao
Dwelling at the right place
Heart with great depth
Giving with great kindness
Words with great integrity
Governing with great administration
Handling with great capability
Moving with great timing
Because it does not contend
It is therefore beyond reproach**

Water is the most fitting metaphor for the Tao and the nature of sages who follow the Tao. Water nourishes plants and slakes the thirst of animals. Water also assumes the lowest position it can no matter where it happens to be. These observations reveal to us characteristics of both the Tao and the sages.

Water flows to the lowest place not because it intentionally does so, but because it follows its own nature. The sages, like water, also place themselves lower, not because they contrive to do so, but because it is their nature to be humble.

Sages have depth of character. Like a deep body of water, sages are tranquil and composed. A pool of water is not only the surface but also everything below it. Likewise, there is more to a sage than meets the eyes. It may take a while for people to realize this, but the more they get to know the sage, the more they discover.

Water provides its benefits and moves on, without waiting for any benefits in return. Sages benefit others in the exact same way. They give only to give, not because they want recognition or payback. When they provide teachings, assistance or guidance, they do so with no conditions, no strings attached, and no expectations.

Water reflects its surroundings. It does not try to hide or change anything in its reflections.

When sages speak, it is with this same sense of integrity and sincerity. People come to trust the sage, because they realize the sage will give them the truth when no one else will.

Water administers to everything equally. Water plays no favorites. It slakes the thirst of the kind person just as it does the unkind person. Taking a cue from this, sages also do not pick and choose the recipients of the benefits they provide. Their impartial administration is conducted without bias and judgment.

Water is versatile. It conforms to the shape of any container to do its work. Following this, the sages also cultivate flexibility and adaptability in themselves. Because the world is constantly changing, they also make constant adjustments to handle new challenges.

Water moves in accordance with Heaven. Whether it takes the form of rain, snow, or hail, water follows the timing of natural events. The sages are the same way. They live each day following the natural flow of events, and take appropriate actions at the appropriate time.

Most importantly, water does not contend. It gives itself to everything without complaints or protests. Like water, sages do not engage in petty squabbles, because their only wish is to be of service. They are at peace with everyone, and that makes them beyond reproach.

Notes

Quick summary of this chapter - Tao cultivators observe water in order to emulate the following characteristics:

Natural humility.

Depth of character.

Giving without expectations.

Sincerity and integrity.

Equal administration.

Versatility and adaptability.

Natural timing.

9

Holding a cup and overfilling it

Cannot be as good as stopping short

Pounding a blade and sharpening it

Cannot be kept for long

Gold and jade fill up the room

No one is able to protect them

Wealth and position bring arrogance

And leave upon oneself disasters

When achievement is completed, fame attained, withdraw oneself

This is the Tao of Heaven

If you keep filling a container with liquid until it overflows, things will get wet and messy around you. It is better to stop just short of fullness. Similarly, if you pound a blade repeatedly and sharpen it too much, you end up with a blade that is easily broken and won't last very long. A room that is full of treasures becomes the target of thieves and robbers. It cannot be safeguarded forever. If you become arrogant as the result of great wealth or high position, you are sure to cause yourself big problems, one way or another. Once you have achieved success and fame, it is best to step gracefully, quietly aside. This is the best way to live - in full accordance with the Tao.

Notes

The central idea: doing anything to excess is a bad idea. Do just enough and nothing extra.

In our translation, the line "cannot be kept for long" is not referring to the activity of pounding and sharpening a blade. It's a reference to the over-sharpened blade that can easily break and therefore cannot last.

Another interpretation of the above is that the sharp edge of the blade cannot be maintained for long.

The "withdraw oneself" phrase does not mean to retreat from society and become a hermit. It means there is no need to brag about your achievements, take on pompous airs, or put on showy displays. Such egotistic acts invariably bring negative consequences.

10

In holding the soul and embracing oneness

Can one be without straying?

In concentrating the energy and reaching relaxation

Can one be like an infant?

In cleaning away the worldly view

Can one be without imperfections?

In loving the people and ruling the nation

Can one be without manipulation?

In the heavenly gate's opening and closing

Can one hold to the feminine principle?

In understanding clearly all directions

Can one be without intellectuality?

Bearing it, rearing it

Bearing without possession

Achieving without arrogance

Raising without domination

This is called the mystic virtue

In holding to your inner essence and embracing the oneness of your being, can your mind avoid being distracted, and thus going astray?

In focusing on your ch'i (the "breath", or the living energy that courses through the body) and reaching a relaxed, softened state, can you identify with the purity of a newborn child?

In cleansing and getting rid of all the diversions of the materialistic panorama, can you be completely without any lingering attachments?

In caring for the people and governing a nation, can you administer without resorting to manipulative tricks?

When the gateway to the soul opens, the mind is in motion; when it closes, the mind at rest. In the opening and closing of this gateway, can you grasp the yin principle of serenity and quietude?

In approaching a true understanding that reaches out in all directions and encompasses all corners of the world, can you let go of the false knowledge gained through rationalization and

intellectual sophistry?

The Tao gives birth to everything and nurtures everything, but does so without becoming possessive.

Creation is full of wondrous and marvelous works of nature. The Tao is the force behind them, and yet does not become presumptuous in such achievements. It gives life every chance to develop and thrive, and yet does not become domineering or controlling because of that.

We call this attribute the mystic virtue. Sages emulate it in their every action. They nurture, encourage, teach and mentor those around them without the need to possess, gloat, or dominate.

Notes

The line "Can one be without straying?" refers to straying from the path of centered oneness. Some translations render "straying" as "separation" or "division," thus obscuring the original meaning and making the line more difficult to understand.

The line "In loving the people and ruling the nation" may seem to be directed at kings and emperors, but actually addresses the individual as well. Think of a kingdom as a metaphor for your workplace, family, social circle, sports team, and even your immediate surroundings, and the practical utility of this section becomes clear.

11

Thirty spokes join in one hub

In its emptiness, there is the function of a vehicle

Mix clay to create a container

In its emptiness, there is the function of a container

Cut open doors and windows to create a room

In its emptiness, there is the function of a room

Therefore, that which exists is used to create benefit

That which is empty is used to create functionality

In a wheel, thirty spokes come together in one hub. The hole in the center of the hub - the place where it is empty - is what makes the wheel useful as part of a vehicle.

When we mix clay to create a container, we notice that it is the empty space in the center of the container that give it the usefulness of holding things.

When we cut open a wall to make space for windows and doors, we notice that it is these openings that make the room truly useful to us. If such openings did not exist, we would have no way of accessing the room!

Therefore, we can see how we create solid objects to provide us with benefits and convenience, but it is actually the emptiness formed by, or embedded in such objects that really provide them with functionality and usefulness.

12

The five colors make one blind in the eyes

The five sounds make one deaf in the ears

The five flavors make one tasteless in the mouth

Racing and hunting make one wild in the heart

Goods that are difficult to acquire make one cause damage

Therefore the sage cares for the stomach and not the eyes

That's why he discards the other and takes this

Overindulgence in colorful, dazzling sights of the material world can lead to eye fatigue.

Overindulgence in loud music and noisy sounds can lead to loss of hearing.

Overindulgence in flavorful foods and confections can lead to the loss of one's appetite.
Overindulgence in exertions such as racing and hunting can lead to an unsettled, agitated, frantic state of mind.
The pursuit of rare treasures and material acquisitions can lead to ruin and shame upon one's character and reputation.
Because of all this, the sage focuses on his inner self. He satisfies his basic needs and does not obsess over the material things his eyes can see.
This is the reason he lets go of materialistic indulgence and embraces the simplicity of the Tao.

13

**Favor and disgrace make one fearful
The greatest misfortune is the self
What does "favor and disgrace make one fearful" mean?
Favor is high, disgrace is low
Having it makes one fearful
Losing it makes one fearful
This is "favor and disgrace make one fearful"
What does "the greatest misfortune is the self" mean?
The reason I have great misfortune
Is that I have the self
If I have no self
What misfortune do I have?
So one who values the self as the world
Can be given the world
One who loves the self as the world
Can be entrusted with the world**

Both favor and disgrace make us fearful and apprehensive.
The greatest source of adversity and trouble is the ego - the sense of self-importance.
What do we mean when we say that both favor and disgrace make us fearful? Favor is exalted, while disgrace is lowly and despised. We are afraid of getting humiliation. At the same time, we are also afraid of losing recognition. This is why we say both favor and disgrace make us fearful.
What do we mean when we say that the greatest source of trouble is our ego? The reason I've got problems is that my ego gets in the way. If I didn't have this sense of self-importance, what trouble could I possibly have?
Therefore, the humble sage who values the world as much as the self, is the one that can do the world justice. The selfless sage who loves the world as much as the self, is the one that we can trust with great responsibilities.

14

**Look at it, it cannot be seen
It is called colorless
Listen to it, it cannot be heard
It is called noiseless
Reach for it, it cannot be held
It is called formless
These three cannot be completely unraveled
So they are combined into one
Above it, not bright
Below it, not dark**

**Continuing endlessly, cannot be named
It returns back into nothingness
Thus it is called the form of the formless
The image of the imageless
This is called enigmatic
Confront it, its front cannot be seen
Follow it, its back cannot be seen
Wield the Tao of the ancients
To manage the existence of today
One can know the ancient beginning
It is called the Tao axiom**

The Tao is not a material object, therefore it cannot be seen or touched. We say it is invisible and colorless because it is without form or substance.

Sound also cannot be seen or touched. But unlike sound, the Tao cannot be heard. It cannot be detected by any of our physical senses, because it is metaphysical in nature.

These characteristics above must be always be true. None of them stands alone without the others. Together, they are central to the concept of the Tao.

Since the Tao isn't a visible thing, it is neither bright nor dark. It is immaterial, and yet it gives all material things solid reality. This is why we say it is the image of the imageless, and the form of the formless.

The Tao is infinite in extent, not only in itself, but also in its function, as the endless source of all things. It has no beginning and no end, therefore we cannot see the front or the back of it.

"Front" and "back" are concepts that do that apply to something so utterly beyond limits.

The Tao has always been and always will be. It held true for the ancients just as it holds true today. Therefore, we can take the principles that the ancient sages uncovered and apply them in living our lives today. These principles are as relevant in our modern world as they were when they were first envisioned.

From this, we get our underlying assumption in studying the Tao. We take advantage of the work that has already been done, so we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We stand on the shoulders of giants from the ancient beginnings of the Tao in order to see further. This is the most basic axiom - the foundation in our work to build a better understand of spirituality.

15

**The Tao masters of antiquity
Subtle wonders through mystery
Depths that cannot be discerned
Because one cannot discern them
Therefore one is forced to describe the appearance
Hesitant, like crossing a wintry river
Cautious, like fearing four neighbors
Solemn, like a guest
Loose, like ice about to melt
Genuine, like plain wood
Open, like a valley
Opaque, like muddy water
Who can be muddled yet desist
In stillness gradually become clear?
Who can be serene yet persist
In motion gradually come alive?
One who holds this Tao does not wish to be overfilled**

**Because one is not overfilled
Therefore one can preserve and not create anew**

We can learn much from the ancient masters. Their understanding of the Tao was so advanced that it may seem too subtle and profound for us. Rather than to force ourselves to understand them, we can learn by observing and emulating their behavior.

They lived life in a cautious way, not given to frivolous or reckless acts. They resolved issues by carefully considering all sides, and would never jump to conclusions. They handled responsibilities with serious regard, and would never do anything in a perfunctory way.

This does not mean the masters were uptight. Quite the contrary. They were always relaxed and unattached as they went about their activities. This took nothing away from their serious concern for others and their careful handling of life's challenges. These ancient masters could be relaxed without being lax, and thus achieve excellence effortlessly. They could be unattached without being uncaring, and thus focus on the process instead of the end product.

Another defining characteristic of the masters is the simplicity they practiced in every aspect of life. In their words, actions, and surroundings, simple and uncluttered plainness is the rule rather than the exception. By keeping everything simple, they gained peace of mind as well as the *joie de vivre*.

The ancient sages were also known for their openness of mind and heart. They gladly considered new ideas and would never dismiss anything out of hand. They treated everyone, even difficult people, with infinite patience and would never prejudge them.

Despite their spiritual and mental refinements, these masters never put themselves on display. They had no interest in showing off their brilliance. Instead, they were humble and fully of self-effacing humor.

People who did not know the sages very well would never see through the outward appearance to perceive their high levels of intelligence and capabilities. It was only in the course of time that people gradually saw the true picture, like muddy water slowly becoming clear.

The composure and serenity of these masters could be easily mistaken for passivity or apathy. This was because most people could not understand how anyone could embody both tranquility and dynamism simultaneously.

The ancient sages did nothing to clarify whatever misconceptions people around them might have. This was because they were never full of themselves. They never assumed they knew it all. Their definite preference was to cultivate quietly to preserve a sense of calmness in everything they did, without drawing attention to themselves, or creating a disturbance.

16

**Attain the ultimate emptiness
Hold on to the truest tranquility
The myriad things are all active
I therefore watch their return
Everything flourishes; each returns to its root
Returning to the root is called tranquility
Tranquility is called returning to one's nature
Returning to one's nature is called constancy
Knowing constancy is called clarity
Not knowing constancy, one recklessly causes trouble
Knowing constancy is acceptance
Acceptance is impartiality
Impartiality is sovereign
Sovereign is heaven
Heaven is Tao**

Tao is eternal

The self is no more, without danger

Reach for a state of ultimate emptiness. Maintain a state of the utmost stillness and tranquility. All living things rise up in lively activity. I watch them and observe their return in the endless natural process of life.

Everything is thriving and flourishing, and eventually everything will return to its origin in the recurrent cycles of nature.

Returning to the point of origin leads to a state of peaceful and serene tranquility.

This tranquility and quietude leads to a return to one's true nature.

The return to one's true self and fulfillment of one's true nature, is a constant, unchanging principle.

Understanding this constant, unchanging principle leads to clarity, illumination and enlightenment.

Those who do not understand the principle of constancy tend to bring upon themselves problems and disasters in a chaotic way.

Knowledge of this constant, unchanging principle leads to an acceptance that encompasses everything.

Such an all-encompassing acceptance and tolerance leads to an objective, impartial frame of mind.

This objectivity leads to authentic personal power - power over one's own destiny.

Authentic power - sovereignty over oneself - leads to a heavenly divinity and a oneness with nature. This heavenly oneness leads to the Tao. The Tao, in turn, leads to everlasting eternity.

Knowing this, one can live out an entire lifetime in harmony and safety. You will be free from worldly hazards until your body no longer exists.

17

The highest rulers, people do not know they have them

The next level, people love them and praise them

The next level, people fear them

The next level, people despise them

The rulers' trust is insufficient, have no trust in them

Proceeding calmly, valuing their words

Task accomplished, matter settled

The people all say, "We did it naturally"

At the highest level, the ideal rulers are the ones who are so good at what they do that they can achieve their objectives quickly, silently and effectively. They do not glory in their achievements, so the people are not even aware that such rulers exist.

At the next level down, we have rulers whose benevolent actions can be seen, so that people are aware of them. The people feel close to such rulers and they give much praise for the benevolent, positive rule.

At the next level down, we have rulers who resort to intimidation and heavy-handed policies. People fear such rulers.

At the next level down, we have rulers who are incompetent or seek to deceive the people through trickery. People despise such rulers. They insult the leadership and rise up in opposition.

If such rulers cannot have sufficient trust the people, then how can the people have trust in them?

The ideal way is to govern in an unhurried, easy manner where rulers greatly values their words. This means they do more and talk less.

Because things are done this way, without anyone being aware of all the work that go into

governing, when important tasks are completed and major issues are settled, the people all say that they did it themselves, and that it was naturally so.

Notes

The original Chinese is not gender specific in referring to the ruler. It does not assert in any way that the ruler must be male. Most translators arbitrarily force the gender to either male or female, which distorts the original meaning.

Like several other passages from the Tao Te Ching, this chapter seems to be aimed at the ancient kings of China. It is as if Lao Tzu was asked to advise the Emperor on the best way to rule. How can such passages apply to us, who are not necessarily in exalted positions of political power?

Do not think of ruling in the literal way that only applies to governance of a nation. Look at your own life and note all the settings and circumstances where leadership plays a role. Most of us will, at some point, start our own families, and we may be called upon to assume the responsibility of leadership in social settings, community activities, or the workplace.

The Tao of leadership remains constant in any context. Whether you find yourself having to deal with your children, neighbors or coworkers, you'll find the distinctions in this chapter a useful guide.

18

**The great Tao fades away
There is benevolence and justice
Intelligence comes forth
There is great deception
The six relations are not harmonious
There is filial piety and kind affection
The country is in confused chaos
There are loyal ministers**

When people forsake the great Tao, so that it fades away and perishes in their thoughts, concepts like benevolence, compassion, justice and righteousness appear in the world.

When intelligence, book knowledge and cleverness become widespread in the world, we end up with great hypocrisy and deception everywhere

When the six family relationships - parent, child, older sibling, younger sibling, husband, wife - are in a state of disharmony, concepts like filial piety, obedience, and the kind affection of parental love become important and significant.

When the country is in a state of chaos and anarchy, it becomes crucial to make the distinction between ministers who are loyal, and those who are not.

19

**Discontinue sagacity, abandon knowledge
The people benefit a hundred times
Discontinue benevolence, abandon righteousness
The people return to piety and charity
Discontinue cunning, discard profit
Bandits and thieves no longer exist
These three things are superficial and insufficient
Thus this teaching has its place:
Show plainness, hold simplicity
Reduce selfishness, decrease desires**

This chapter presents one of the more difficult teachings to understand, because we have a strong tendency to worship knowledge. We've all been conditioned to believe that knowledge is power, and having more can't possibly be a bad thing.

Lao Tzu is uniquely alone among all the ancient philosophers in steadfastly pointing to the pitfalls of knowledge. He saw the link between academic intelligence and scholarly arrogance clearly, and addressed it several times throughout the Tao Te Ching in no uncertain language. One of the problems with knowledge is that we become very good at using it in a crafty and shrewd way to twist the truth. There are examples of this everywhere, and one of them applies to this very chapter.

The first two words of this chapter are literally "end sagacity." The meaning is that we should put a stop to this obsession with book smarts and focus instead on the wisdom of living an actual life apart from the books. It is the ancient Chinese equivalent of telling a bookworm to "get a life."

But some readers of the Tao Te Ching have such a powerful desire for ever more knowledge that they do not hear this message at all. They interpret "end" to mean "extreme" or "ultimate" so they can change the first line to say something completely different - that if one can gain the ultimate knowledge so that there is nothing more to learn (thus bringing about an end to learning), then people would benefit a hundredfold.

In this fashion, they have taken a warning against the disconnect of knowledge from down-to-earth living, and transformed it to a rallying cry to acquire ever more knowledge. The fact that this can happen at all is the very reason why Lao Tzu emphasizes intuitive wisdom and downplays intelligence.

As we progress through cultivation, let's keep Lao Tzu's admonition in mind: Knowledge isn't a bad thing in and of itself, but book smarts is a very different thing from street smarts... and school learning can never compare to, or supplant life learning.

20

**Cease learning, no more worries
Respectful response and scornful response
How much is the difference?
Goodness and evil
How much do they differ?
What the people fear, I cannot be unafraid
So desolate! How limitless it is!
The people are excited
As if enjoying a great feast
As if climbing up to the terrace in spring
I alone am quiet and uninvolved
Like an infant not yet smiling
So weary, like having no place to return
The people all have surplus
While I alone seem lacking
I have the heart of a fool indeed - so ignorant!
Ordinary people are bright
I alone am muddled
Ordinary people are scrutinizing
I alone am obtuse
So tranquil, like the ocean
So moving, as if without limits
The people all have goals
And I alone am stubborn and lowly**

I alone am different from them And value the nourishing mother

The blind pursuit of learning leads to excessive desires - the more you see, the more you want. Excessive desires, in turn, lead to anxiety and misery. Once we understand this and decide to no longer subject ourselves to information overload, the anxiety and misery disappear as quickly as the mental clutter.

People tend to place too much importance and attachment to value judgments like good, evil, respect and scorn. In reality these are relative variables that change according to perspective. How much do they actually differ, when there are no absolute standards to measure against? Of course, I always proceed cautiously as a Tao cultivator. Whatever the people fear, I must approach with a healthy dose of caution. If they consider something to be bad, there is probably a reason. I will handle it with care, even though I understand the relative nature of value judgments. In this respect, I am not that different from them.

Still, the great Tao is so vast, seemingly without limits. The gap between the Tao and ordinary people is huge indeed. For the most part, what they do and how they behave are quite different from my way of being.

For instance, see how easily they become happy and excited, as if enjoying a great feast, or hiking up to a scenic spot where they can take in the panoramic view. I, on the other hand, maintain my quietness, tranquility, and the purity of my original nature, like a newborn baby that has not yet learned to smile. My demeanor is not jittery and excitable. Instead, it is slow and low-key, as if I am a weary traveler without a home to return to, and is therefore in no rush.

I notice how the people have too much, while I alone seem to have too little. Their lives are filled with things they do not need, while I carry no excess baggage. My way is minimalist. I possess the bare necessities of life and the freedom that comes with having few burdens.

It would certainly appear that I have the heart and mind of a fool. I seem so simple and ignorant compared to the shrewdness of ordinary people. They seem so brilliant and logical. They handle everything in a calculating way, while I react slowly and cannot account for every little thing. They scrutinize every detail in everything with a sharp eye, while I am happy enough with a general idea and fuzzy approximations.

My mind is tranquil and still, like the depths of the ocean. At the same time, it is also moving dynamically, like the wind high in the sky. This is something that most people are not likely to understand.

I see them frantically pursuing various goals in the world, displaying their many talents and abilities, trying to get ahead in the rat race. Meanwhile, I appear to be stubbornly persisting in my lowly ways. Why am I so different? It is only because I hold on to the basis of life, the nurturing mother of all things - the Great Tao itself!

Notes

When Lao Tzu talks about not being overly calculating and scrutinizing, he is specifically referring to our conduct in interpersonal relationships. Most people keep track of "scores" - slights, cold shoulders, back stabs, and so on - with great clarity and precision, so that when the time is right they can dole out vengeance and "even the score."

Tao cultivators do not do that. They take action to protect themselves, or distance themselves from malicious people, but otherwise let go of personal affronts without needing to retaliate in kind.

People who do not understand think cultivators must be obtuse to let others take advantage of them like that. They fail to see that, as Gandhi once pointed out, if we all practice "an eye for an eye," pretty soon the whole world will be blind.

In the game of life, those who shrewdly "win" at the expense of others will end up losing big sooner or later. Tao cultivators, in following Lao Tzu's wisdom, seem to "lose" in the short term, only to end up, inexplicably, as the ultimate winners in the long run.

**The appearance of great virtue
 Follows only the Tao
 The Tao, as a thing
 Seems indistinct, seems unclear
 So unclear, so indistinct
 Within it there is image
 So indistinct, so unclear
 Within it there is substance
 So deep, so profound
 Within it there is essence
 Its essence is supremely real
 Within it there is faith
 From ancient times to the present
 Its name never departs
 To observe the source of all things
 How do I know the nature of the source?
 With this**

The Tao is the infinite field of limitless potential. Therefore, the manifestation of inherent power and great virtue of all things can only follow the Tao and come from the Tao.

If we were to regard the Tao as a "thing," it would be indistinct and unclear. The Tao embodies the mystery and the unknown. No matter how close we get to it, it will remain forever beyond complete comprehension. It will always be one step beyond total clarity.

Within this indistinct and unclear Tao, there is the image of the universe. The stars, the galaxies - the cosmos are contained within the Tao.

The Tao is the ultimate source of everything. Although it will always be vague and elusive, it embodies all the potentialities of the physical world. Material things come out of this void, seemingly out of nowhere.

The Tao has unlimited depth, and it is within this depth that we find the essence of life. The principle and driving force of this essence are undeniable. When we examine this essence, we have no choice but to believe that the Tao exists and is quite real.

This is why the Name - the Tao, the great virtue, and power inherent in all things - have never gone away from antiquity to modern times. It is not a passing fad or temporary fixation; it is the enduring and eternal truth.

We can use this truth to observe and understand the universal source of all Creation. So if people were to ask me how I can know anything about the nature of this mystical source, I would simply let them know this is it.

We may never be able to see it with perfect clarity; we may never have complete comprehension of it. Nevertheless, its existence, function and power are absolutely, positively beyond doubt. It is the Tao.

Notes

Life, as we know it, is all based on DNA. In fact, one can even say that it is the genes that perpetuate themselves generation after generation. They surround themselves with sophisticated and complex cellular mechanisms in order to enable this perpetuation.

But, as science writer Bill Bryson points out, DNA is not in itself alive. So at the very core of the phenomenon known as life, we come up against this interesting puzzle, a profound paradox: the fundamental basis of life is not itself a living thing. How can this be? How can it work?

Study this issue long and hard enough, and one may come to a startling realization. We are in fact not biological machines that have learned how to think. Instead, we are pure consciousness that has learned how to manifest in the physical universe through the workings of life. There is something about this metaphysical consciousness that simply wants to be, and it drives the

process of life, transforming the inorganic to organic in order to enable its manifestations. This is genesis. It is not completely understood and perhaps it never will be. It is indistinct and unclear, and yet within it is the seed of infinite life. Our very existence is proof positive of its function and power. It is the Tao.

22

**Yield and remain whole
Bend and remain straight
Be low and become filled
Be worn out and become renewed
Have little and receive
Have much and be confused
Therefore the sage holds to the one as an example for the world
Without flaunting oneself - and so is seen clearly
Without presuming oneself - and so is distinguished
Without praising oneself - and so has merit
Without boasting about oneself - and so is lasting
Because he does not contend, the world cannot contend with him
What the ancients called "the one who yields and remains whole"
Were they speaking empty words?
Sincerity becoming whole, and returning to oneself**

To yield, when the situation requires yielding, is to remain whole. To bend, like flexible bamboo in the wind, is to remain straight.

To be low is to be filled - just as lowly places tend to be filled with water. To be worn out is to be renewed.

If you don't have much, you are in a position to receive or obtain more; if you have a lot, you are more likely to experience confusion.

Therefore, the sage embraces the unity of the one true Tao, to set a standard and serve as an example for everyone.

The sage does not flaunt, show off, or make himself or herself highly visible in anyway.

Ironically, this makes the sage unique, and therefore conspicuous.

The sage does not presume upon his or her own correctness. This distinguishes him or her in a world with so many presumptuous blowhards.

The sage does not praise his or her own efforts. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, the sage ends up with the credit he or she deserves.

The sage does not brag or boast about his or her own prowess. There is no need to when he or she possesses true staying power.

Because the sage does not contend or get defensive, others cannot contend with him or her - there is nothing to attack.

The sage is what the ancients meant when they talked about the one who yields and remains whole - surely they were not speaking idly of empty words!

The sage achieves integrity and wholeness through sincere effort - thereby returning the virtues to himself or herself.

23

**Sparse speech is natural
Thus strong wind does not last all morning
Sudden rain does not last all day
What makes this so? Heaven and earth**

**Even heaven and earth cannot make it last
How can humans?
Thus those who follow the Tao, are with the Tao
Those who follow virtue, are with virtue
Those who follow loss, are with loss
Those who are with the Tao, the Tao is also pleased to have them
Those who are with virtue, virtue is also pleased to have them
Those who are with loss, loss is also pleased to have them
Those who do not trust sufficiently, others have no trust in them**

To speak sparingly emulates nature, and is therefore natural. For instance, an unusually strong windstorm will not persist the entire morning. In the same way, an unusually sudden downpour will not continue the entire day. What makes these things the way they are? Heaven and earth - nature. If even heaven and earth cannot make events last indefinitely, then how can human beings? This is why we say that too much talk goes against nature. Those who follow the Tao will identify with the Tao and become one with it. Similarly, those who practice virtues will identify with virtues and become one with them; those who pursue loss will identify with loss and become one with it. The working of the universe is indifferent and will give you exactly what you seek. If you are one with the Tao, the Tao will happily accept you. If you identify with virtues, the virtues will be equally pleased to embrace you. If your path leads to the loss of the Tao and virtues, that loss will welcome you just as gladly. Because of this karmic cause and effect, we can see that those who distrust others and have no faith in people, are also the ones that people find most untrustworthy.

24

**Those who are on tiptoes cannot stand
Those who straddle cannot walk
Those who flaunt themselves are not clear
Those who presume themselves are not distinguished
Those who praise themselves have no merit
Those who boast about themselves do not last
Those with the Tao call such things leftover food or tumors
They despise them
Thus, those who possess the Tao do not engage in them**

The one who stands on tiptoes, in order to raise himself or herself above others, cannot stand for long. The one who straddles in an exaggerated gait cannot walk any significant distance for long. The one who shows off himself or herself will, ironically, not be clearly perceived by others. The one who thinks he or she is always right will not be considered respectable or admirable by others. The one who incessantly praises himself or herself is not the person with true merit. The one who is always bragging about his or her achievements is not the person with lasting power. Those who are on the path of Tao speak of such things as if they were leftover food or useless growth, like a tumor. They despise such things and regard them with contempt. This is why those who possess the Tao do not engage in such activities. They do not show off, presume, or boast.

There is something formlessly created
Born before Heaven and Earth
So silent! So ethereal!
Independent and changeless
Circulating and ceaseless
It can be regarded as the mother of the world
I do not know its name
Identifying it, I call it "Tao"
Forced to describe it, I call it great
Great means passing
Passing means receding
Receding means returning
Therefore the Tao is great
Heaven is great
Earth is great
The sovereign is also great
There are four greats in the universe
And the sovereign occupies one of them
Humans follow the laws of Earth
Earth follows the laws of Heaven
Heaven follows the laws of Tao
Tao follows the laws of nature

There is something that is formless, shapeless and non-physical, and yet also complete and perfect. Whatever it is, this "thing" existed before the universe came into being. How silent, tranquil and still! How ethereal, empty and boundless! It is completely independent and self-sufficient. Its nature is eternal and unchanging. Its functions circulate within every level of existence without ever stopping. Because it is the source of all creation, we can consider it to be the mother of all things.

I do not know its name; I do not even know that it has a name. In order to identify it, I reluctantly call it the arbitrary name "Tao." If I were forced to describe it, I would have to say it is great beyond compare. Being great, it is always in a state of transition. Being perpetually in motion, it seems to recede far away from us. Being far away, it returns again to us. This great circle is the nature of Tao.

Therefore, the Tao is great. Heaven and Earth, being manifestations of the Tao, are also great. A leader who manifests the Tao, and can serve as an example for the people, is also great. He or she occupies one of the four aspects of greatness.

The universe is an orchestrated symphony, where human beings follow the laws of the land in which they live. At a level above this, the Earth follows the laws of astronomy - the rules that govern the motions of heavenly bodies. The cosmos in turn follow the patterns of the Tao at a macroscopic level. Ultimately, the Tao itself follows natural laws, which arise from the Tao process. This underscores the self-sufficiency and self-completeness of the Tao.

Heaviness is the root of lightness.
Quietness is the master of restlessness
Therefore the sage travels the entire day
Without leaving the heavy supplies
Even though there are luxurious sights

**He is composed and transcends beyond
How can the lord of ten thousand chariots
Applies himself lightly to the world?
To be light is to lose one's root
To be restless is to lose one's mastery**

Heaviness, or gravitas, lies at the root of human affairs. Lightness, or gaiety, dances carelessly above them. Those who are quiet, unmoved, deliberate and composed possess power over those who are noisy, restless, impulsive and impatient.

Therefore, the sage traverses the Tao an entire day without ever losing track of the essentials of life. Even though there are many colorful sights of luxuries along the way, the sage recognizes them as illusory, and so remains perfectly composed and unmoved, transcending beyond the temptation.

How, then, can the king, who rules the force of ten thousand war chariots, treat lightly the serious task of governing the kingdom?

To be "light," in this context, is to be disconnected from the important foundation of life. In a similar way, being restless or unstable is to lose one's power of mastery - the power of the true self!

27

**Good traveling does not leave tracks
Good speech does not seek faults
Good reckoning does not use counters
Good closure needs no bar and yet cannot be opened
Good knot needs no rope and yet cannot be untied
Therefore sages often save others
And so do not abandon anyone
They often save things
And so do not abandon anything
This is called following enlightenment
Therefore the good person is the teacher of the bad person
The bad person is the resource of the good person
The one who does not value his teachers
And does not love his resources
Although intelligent, he is greatly confused
This is called the essential wonder**

Skilled travelers in the journey of life follow the path of nature. They do not force their way through obstacles or trample over the paths of other travelers. Therefore, they leave no signs of their passing. Similarly, those who are skillful in the art of conversation do not use words to highlight the faults of others. Such actions breed contention - and conflicts leave many tracks indeed!

There are those who are good at capturing people's attention, imagination, and heart. They do not need to lock people in to keep them around. People would naturally not wish to leave. They can also be skillful in bonding with people. When they have connected with people at a deep level, it is a bond that is stronger than any knots tied with ropes.

This is how sages deal with people. Because of their genuine virtue, they maintain a captive audience without having to physically force anyone to be present. They cherish everyone and all things, and it becomes clear to the people that the sage would never abandon them. This is part of the powerful bond that the sage naturally establishes with others.

One reason why sages don't give up on anyone is that everyone plays a role in the overall stage

of life. Everyone has an impact on everyone else, and it is up to an individual to make use of that impact. A good person can serve as a teacher and be a great example for us to emulate. Not-so-good individuals is just as useful, because we can observe the negative consequences of their negative actions, and learn from that as what not to do.

In this way, the sages see everyone as valuable teachers or resources. They do not praise the good people and condemn the bad, because they feel genuine love and affection for all of them. Most of us are not quite that way - we quickly develop likes and dislikes, preferences and aversions in dealing with others. We lack the ability to deal everyone with the same degree of universal love that sages possess; we can only look upon this essential aspect of their character with a sense of wonder.

Perhaps one day, when we have reached a certain level of cultivation, we can also possess the essential wonder of universal love. When that happens, we will no longer see people we despise - only people who represent certain aspects of the greater oneness that is also us.

28

**Know the masculine, hold to the feminine
Be the watercourse of the world
Being the watercourse of the world
The eternal virtue does not depart
Return to the state of the infant
Know the white, hold to the black
Be the standard of the world
Being the standard of the world
The eternal virtue does not deviate
Return to the state of the boundless
Know the honor, hold to the dishonor
Be the valley of the world
Being the valley of the world
The eternal virtue shall be sufficient
Return to the state of plain wood
Plain wood splits, then becomes tools
The sages utilize them
And then become leaders
Thus the greater whole is undivided**

29

**Those who wish to take the world and control it
I see that they cannot succeed
The world is a sacred instrument
One cannot control it
The one who controls it will fail
The one who grasps it will lose
Because all things:
Either lead or follow
Either blow hot or cold
Either have strength or weakness
Either have ownership or take by force
Therefore the sage:
Eliminates extremes**

Eliminates excess
Eliminates arrogance

There are those who want to meddle with the world, or the environment. They want to control it, manipulate it, and interfere with it.

What I observe is that they cannot possibly achieve what they desire. The world is a sacred thing, beyond the insignificant power of mere mortals.

None of us can control the world. Those who try will fail, and those who hang on to it and refuse to let go will still lose their grip.

In nature, all things live in balance with one another. Some of them lead while others follow. Some blow air to impart warmth, while others do so to cool things down. Some are strong, while others are weak. Some occupy their own niche in the environment, while others survive by force and violence.

Because the Tao is all about balance, the sage, seeking to emulate nature, will seek the same balance through moderation. He or she will eliminate from his or her life anything that is extreme or intemperate. The sage will also avoid any excess or wasteful extravagance. And lastly, the sage will let go of thoughts and behaviors that are arrogant or ego-driven.

30

The one who uses the Tao to advise the ruler
Does not dominate the world with soldiers
Such methods tend to be returned
The place where the troops camp
Thistles and thorns grow
Following the great army
There must be an inauspicious year
A good commander achieves result, then stops
And does not dare reaching for domination
Achieves result but does not brag
Achieves result but does not flaunt
Achieves result but is not arrogant
Achieves result but only out of necessity
Achieves result but does not dominate
Things become strong and then get old
This is called contrary to the Tao
That which is contrary to the Tao soon ends

A minister who follows the Tao, and applies the Tao in advising the sovereign ruler, will never attempt to dominate the world with military power. Those who are in tune with the Tao understand that violence begets more violence. What goes around comes around. Those who resort to methods of domination tend to have such methods turn back against them. Acts of aggression will inevitably cause retaliation and counterattack.

The use of military power is, by its very nature, an extremely negative thing to do. The thistles and thorns that flourish where the troops strike camp is symbolic of this negativity. When a great army passes the land, an ominous year of famine invariably follows in its wake.

Military leaders who really understand the use of force will never do any more than is necessary to achieve a particular result. Such leaders will not reach beyond the goal for more self-glorifying conquests. They accomplish the mission without bragging or flaunting. Success in completing the objective does not make them arrogant or over-confident. This is because they use force only when they have no other choice. They know that military power is the last resort, and not a tool with which to dominate others.

In nature, we observe that when things grow excessively strong, they will quickly age and

weaken. We say that this is not in accordance with the unhurried nature of Tao. Things that do not follow the natural progression of Tao will soon come to an end. The same principle applies to the use of military power as well.

31

**A strong military, a tool of misfortune
All things detest it
Therefore, those who possess the Tao avoid it
Honorable gentlemen, while at home, value the left
When deploying the military, value the right
The military is a tool of misfortune
Not the tool of honorable gentlemen
When using it out of necessity
Calm detachment should be above all
Victorious but without glory
Those who glorify
Are delighting in the killing
Those who delight in killing
Cannot achieve their ambitions upon the world
Auspicious events favor the left
Inauspicious events favor the right
The lieutenant general is positioned to the left
The major general is positioned to the right
We say that they are treated as if in a funeral
The multitude who have been killed
Should be mourned with sadness
Victory in war should be treated as a funeral**

Strong military power isn't something to be glorified. We should recognize it as an inauspicious instrument, the use of which inevitably brings misfortunes and calamities.

Violence and aggression are inextricably associated with the military. Thus, it is universally seen as extremely negative. Recognizing this, those who are on the path of Tao distance themselves from it.

During peacetime, honorable individuals value the left in day-to-day living. The left in this case symbolizes harmony.

During wartime, honorable individuals value the right in the utilization of the military. The right in this case symbolizes force.

Because the military is an ominous instrument of destruction, honorable individuals cannot see it as a tool that they identify with. It is the last resort, to be used only when absolutely necessary, when there is no other choice.

When forced to use the military, honorable individuals will do so with calmness above all, and detachment from emotional turmoil. They do not fight out of anger or hatred, and when they achieve victory, they do not consider it glorious. To them, there can be no possible glory in taking lives.

Those who do glorify war tend to be the ones who take delight in killing. Such people may think they have what it takes to conquer the world, but history shows they invariably fail to achieve their ambitions. They may dominate by force but never win the people's hearts.

Auspicious events favor the left (symbolizing harmony) while inauspicious events favor the right (symbolizing force). Thus, the lieutenant general, responsible for the peacetime training of the military organization, is situated to the left of the emperor. The major general, responsible for leading attacks, is stationed to the right.

Because of their involvement with the military, both generals are regarded by Tao cultivators as if they are fixtures in a funeral.

Because many lives are inevitably lost in battle, we understand the grief of those who mourn the dead, no matter which side they belong to.

The military parade that follows victory may just as well be a funeral procession, no matter which side happens to be the victor.

32

**The Tao, eternally nameless
Its simplicity, although imperceptible
Cannot be treated by the world as subservient
If a sovereign can hold on to it
All will follow by themselves
The heaven and earth, together harmoniously
Will rain sweet dew
People won't need to force it, it will adjust by itself
In the beginning of creation, there were names
Names came to exist everywhere
One should know when to stop
Knowing when to stop, thus avoiding danger
The existence of the Tao in the world
Is like streams in the valley into rivers and the ocean**

Rough Draft of notes

The Tao is always nameless.

And even though a sapling might be small

No one can make it be his subject.

If rulers could embody this principle

The myriad things would follow on their own.

Heaven and Earth would be in perfect accord

And rain sweet dew.

People, unable to deal with It on its own terms

Make adjustments;

And so you have the beginning of division into names.

Since there are already plenty of names

You should know where to stop.

Knowing where to stop, you can avoid danger.

The Tao's existence in the world

Is like valley streams running into the rivers and seas.

Tao- the Eternally Nameless.

Though primordial simplicity is infinitesimal, none dare make it a public servant.

Were princes and monarchs able to maintain it, all creation would spontaneously submit.

Heaven and earth harmonized, there would be an abundance of nourishing agencies; the people unbidden, would cooperate of their own accord.

Names arose when differentiation commenced; once there were names it became important to know where to stop. This being known, danger ceased.

The Tao spread throughout the world, may be compared to mountain rivulets and streams flowing toward the sea.

33

**Those who understand others are intelligent
Those who understand themselves are enlightened
Those who overcome others have strength
Those who overcome themselves are powerful
Those who know contentment are wealthy
Those who proceed vigorously have willpower
Those who do not lose their base endure
Those who die but do not perish have longevity**

The one who understands other people is merely knowledgeable or intelligent; the one who understands oneself is truly wise and enlightened. Wisdom is above intelligence, just as knowledge is above ignorance.

The one who overcomes other people has external strength; the one who can overcome oneself possesses authentic inner power. External strength never lasts. True strength resides within and lasts forever.

The few who know the meaning of contentment and feel satisfied with what they have are truly wealthy. Wealth is not measured by dollar amounts. One can possess millions and still be tormented by feelings of inadequacy.

Tao cultivators go forth in life with vigor and energy. They understand that vitality is the fuel for excellence and achievements, so they never overlook the importance of the body. By practicing physical disciplines with willpower and determination, they develop their vigor and energy in a natural and healthy way.

The one who does not lose sight of spiritual basis can really withstand the test of time. As we progress in the path of cultivation, it is a certainty that we will be tested. Those who lack a strong foundation will not be able to handle the challenge.

The one who passes away, but does not fade from memory, is the one who possesses true longevity. A noble goal for Tao cultivators is to live a life that is rich with meaning and full of the joy of helping others. Such a life lives on forever in the hearts of people, fondly remembered and sorely missed.

34

**The great Tao is like a flood
It can flow to the left or to the right
The myriad things depend on it for life, but it never stops
It achieves its work, but does not take credit
It clothes and feeds myriad things, but does not rule over them
Ever desiring nothing
It can be named insignificant
Myriad things return to it but it does not rule over them
It can be named great
Even in the end, it does not regard itself as great
That is how it can achieve its greatness**

The great Tao is like a torrential flood. It flows everywhere like water. Left, right, up, down, over, under - there is no place it cannot go. It is the principle that permeates all of existence.

All living things depend on the Tao, because the Tao is the life force of the universe. It nurtures everyone and denies no one. It never stops, never pauses in its all-pervasive movement to drive life, growth, and evolution. The Tao moves forward and onward continuously.

Although the Tao is the ultimate cause of the miracle we call life, it accomplishes all of its work

without needing to take credit, praise itself, or demand worship.

The nurturing aspect of the Tao protects and sustains all living things, but it does so without regarding itself as the lord of creation or ruler of the universe. It gives life to all creatures without elevating itself to a position of superiority.

The Tao is, after all, a transcendental force rather than a human-like entity. As such, it does not necessarily possess emotions. Thus, the Tao cannot be said to desire anything.

In a way, the Tao seems insignificant because it stays in the background. Its workings are subtle and imperceptible - easy for most people to overlook.

Even though all living things come from the Tao and must eventually return to it, it has no desire to dominate over them. It simply does what it does without requiring anything extra.

In a way, the Tao is great precisely because of its seeming insignificance. Even though it is often hidden from view and does not draw attention to itself, it is nevertheless the most fundamental force of reality. Many people are not aware of the Tao, and yet none of us can exist without it.

Thus, the Tao is obscure and great at the same time.

In a similar way, the Tao is able to achieve its miraculous and often unnoticed greatness precisely because it does not regard itself as great. When everything is said and done, the true character of the Tao - its complete indifference to self-glorification or domination over all - inspires in us a sense of awe that is far beyond anything one can get out of fear-based theology.

35

Hold the great image

The world will come

They come without harm, in harmonious peace

Music and food, passing travelers stop

The Tao that is spoken out of the mouth

Is bland and without flavor

Look at it, it cannot be seen

Listen to it, it cannot be heard

Use it, it cannot be exhausted

When we hold the great image of the Tao, the world will come into a state of harmonious peace.

Rough Draft of notes

Holding to the Great Form

All pass away.

They pass away unharmed, resting in Great Peace.

It is for food and music that the passing traveler stops.

When the Tao appears from its opening

It is so subtle, it has no taste.

Look at it, you cannot see it.

Listen, you cannot hear it.

Use it

You cannot exhaust it.

Apprehend the inimitable conception, you attract the world; coming it receives no harm, but is tranquil, peaceful, satisfied.

Like transient guests, music and dainties pass away.

The Tao entering the mouth is insipid and without flavor; when looked at it evades sight; when listened for it escapes the ear - (yet) its operations are interminable.

**If one wishes to shrink it
 One must first expand it
 If one wishes to weaken it
 One must first strengthen it
 If one wishes to discard it
 One must first promote it
 If one wishes to seize it
 One must first give it
 This is called subtle clarity
 The soft and weak overcomes the tough and strong
 Fish cannot leave the depths
 The sharp instruments of the state
 Cannot be shown to the people**

If we wish to reduce something, to make something smaller, we must first expand it. After it is stretched out, it will naturally shrink back down to size.

Similarly, if we wish to weaken something, we must first strengthen it. The seed of weakness invariably exists in the greatest of strengths.

In order for something to be discarded or abandoned, it is first promoted. The world is full of examples of things that are hyped up and then thrown away and forgotten without a second thought.

In order to get something, we must first give it. For instance, if we wish to be treated kindly, we must start by treating others with kindness. This works because the Tao process is circular; the principle underlying all interactions is one of dynamic, universal energy exchange.

We say that these illuminated insights are subtle, because they seem to be the very opposite of our habitual thought patterns. To understand them is to become enlightened in the subtle workings of the Tao.

That which is gentle, soft and weak seems to yield to that which possesses toughness, strength and aggressiveness, but the yielding is deceptive, for in the end the soft overcomes the hard.

It is the nature of the Tao to remain hidden. Just as the fish does not leave the depths and a country does not display its weapons and inner workings to the people, a sage remains deeply immersed in the Tao and does not utilize his or her insights against people, who are more shallow.

**The Tao is constant in non-action
 Yet there is nothing it does not do
 If the sovereign can hold on to this
 All things shall transform themselves
 Transformed, yet wishing to achieve
 I shall restrain them with the simplicity of the nameless
 The simplicity of the nameless
 They shall be without desire
 Without desire, using stillness
 The world shall steady itself**

The Tao is the eternal, unchanging principle of effortless achievements. Within the workings of the Tao there is no strife and no struggle.

The Tao is both eternally devoid of action and the ultimate cause of all actions. The Tao makes no attempt to achieve, and yet nothing is beyond its powers to achieve. The Tao doesn't try to do

anything; it simply does everything.

If a ruler (anything from the leader of a nation to the master of one's own self) is able to hold on to this principle and embody it, then everything around him or her (people, circumstances, relationships) will naturally transform themselves into alignment with him or her.

Once transformed in this manner and aligned with the ruler, the people may want to move ahead with action which, if unchecked, can lead to chaos. Similarly, those who become allies in our cause may do more harm than good out of zeal, or a strong desire to take some sort of action. Our own thoughts and emotions, once aligned with a personal goal, may also get away from us out of sheer enthusiasm.

In these situations, we can restore balance by applying the concept of p'u, or the principle of plainness and simplicity. The fundamental nature of the nameless Tao is plain and simple. This total absence of contrivance and complexity, if understood, can lead to a lessening of the urge to overact. This moderating effect can in turn lead to stillness.

This stillness, quietness and tranquility will bring everything and everyone back into balance. Thus the environment becomes naturally settled and peaceful - in tune with the Tao.

38

**High virtue is not virtuous
Therefore it has virtue
Low virtue never loses virtue
Therefore it has no virtue
High virtue takes no contrived action
And acts without agenda
Low virtue takes contrived action
And acts with agenda
High benevolence takes contrived action
And acts without agenda
High righteousness takes contrived action
And acts with agenda
High etiquette takes contrived action
And upon encountering no response
Uses arms to pull others
Therefore, the Tao is lost, and then virtue
Virtue is lost, and then benevolence
Benevolence is lost, and then righteousness
Righteousness is lost, and then etiquette
Those who have etiquette
Are a thin shell of loyalty and sincerity
And the beginning of chaos
Those with foreknowledge
Are the flowers of the Tao
And the beginning of ignorance
Therefore the great person:
Abides in substance, and does not dwell on the thin shell
Abides in the real, and does not dwell on the flower
Thus they discard that and take this**

Those who possess the higher form of virtue are not intentionally virtuous. Their actions are natural and unforced. This is why we say they have true virtue.

There are also those who possess a lower kind of virtue. They never lose sight of virtue because they have to constantly remind themselves to be virtuous. This is why we say they have no true virtue.

Those who possess the higher form of virtue do not act with contrivance. Their actions are without ulterior motives. They act out of virtue because it is natural, not because they want to "look good" doing it.

Those with the lower form of virtue are the opposite. When they act in ways that seem virtuous, they do so for a specific personal agenda - perhaps improving their image, assuaging guilty feelings, etc.

Those who possess a higher form of benevolence are a bit different. They contrive to act in benevolent ways, but because they do so out of love and compassion for others, their actions are free of personal agenda.

Those who possess the higher form of righteousness are similar to those who possess the lower form of virtue in that they also take contrived actions. They do so out of a powerful sense of self-righteousness, and because they feel so strongly justified in themselves, their actions always reflect their own motives.

Those who possess the higher form of etiquette are yet another step down. They act with contrived politeness and propriety. They fall back on protocol and rules to mask their true intentions, and if they fail to elicit from others the response they are looking for, they will use physical means to force their views upon others aggressively.

From these observations, the sages conclude that when people lose the naturalness of the Tao, they resort to virtue. Virtuous practices allow people to approximate the goodness that flow naturally from the Tao.

If people lose their virtues, then the next best thing would be benevolence. If people can still hold on to the mindset of love, compassion and kindness, then they can at least treat one another in a way that is gentle and humane.

What if people lose their benevolence too? Then they will have no choice but to resort to righteousness. Their actions can no longer be guided by love, compassion and kindness. Instead, they will act, choose and decide based on correctness or a sense of justice. Everything becomes more muddled because right and wrong can often be so subjective.

Finally, what if people can no longer rely on righteousness? Then etiquette is all that's left. Following etiquette, customs and propriety may or may not be right, benevolent, or virtuous... but at least there is something to follow.

This sort of etiquette is artificial and disingenuous. Those who practice it are little more than thin shells without substance, pretending to be loyal and sincere while possessing neither quality. Such people are the source of chaos, discord and strife.

In a similar way, people who possess knowledge without righteousness, benevolence or virtue are also thin shells lacking substance. Like flowers, they give a pleasing appearance but possess none of the satisfying goodness of fruits. That's what we mean when we call them the flowers of the Tao. Such people may project a knowledgeable appearance, but are in fact ignorant in basic, fundamental ways.

To summarize, the truly great person would be the antithesis of the above. That is, they focus on substance instead of the thin veneer of superficiality. Their emphasis is on the real inner self, and not on the facade of external appearance. They discard the fakery of etiquette and knowledge, and reach for benevolence, justice, virtues... and finally the Tao.

39

Those that attained oneness since ancient times:

The sky attained oneness and thus clarity

The earth attained oneness and thus tranquility

The gods attained oneness and thus divinity

The valley attained oneness and thus abundance

The myriad things attained oneness and thus life

The rulers attained oneness and became the standard for the world

These are all from oneness

The sky, lacking clarity, would break apart

**The earth, lacking tranquility, would erupt
The gods, lacking divinity, would vanish
The valley, lacking abundance, would wither
Myriad things, lacking life, would be extinct
The rulers, lacking standard, would be toppled
Therefore, the honored uses the lowly as basis
The higher uses the lower as foundation
Thus the rulers call themselves alone, bereft, and unworthy
Is this not using the lowly as basis? Is it not so?
Therefore, the ultimate honor is no honor
Do not wish to be shiny like jade
Be dull like rocks**

The Tao is the central principle at the core of everything between Heaven and Earth. "Oneness" is where the Tao resides; it can also be a synonym for the Tao. This oneness manifests itself in many different ways: clarity, tranquility, divinity, life, and more.

Oneness manifests clarity in Heaven, tranquility on Earth, divinity in gods, and abundant life in all living things. In the same way, when we connect with the Tao described by Lao Tzu, we gain clarity in the mind, tranquility in the heart, divine power in spirituality, and abundant energy to live life to the fullest. Those who wish to lead must have this oneness in order to establish the standard of leadership.

Conversely, when we lack that connection, our experience is quite the opposite. We struggle with confusion in the mind; we feel unsettled and ill at ease; the spiritual strength we enjoyed before has become an empty void; we are tired, listless, and unable to stir ourselves into action. Whatever leadership we may want to establish collapses with nothing to hold it up.

How can we gain this oneness? How can we lead with the Tao, if called upon to lead? The clues are everywhere. Nature shows us that the high must be built upon the low. Tall trees grew from short saplings; in a mountain, its lower half supports the higher half, and most of the mountain supports its majestic peak. It is the same in life: the highest honor must be built upon low-profile, sincere humility.

This is why the sages never wish to shine brightly like expensive jewelry. Instead, they prefer to be more like plain rocks, with only steadfast, solid consistency, and no dazzling brilliance whatsoever. This is also why the rulers of ancient China tended to use the lowliest terms to refer to themselves. Over time, the practice lost its meaning, but its original intent was very much congruent with the Tao.

Notes

The concept of establishing a personal connection to the Tao, and thereby attain the power and energy of oneness is one that can cause much confusion. Isn't the Tao already in everything? How can one connect to it if one is never disconnected from it in the first place?

The Tao that we are inseparably part of is the all-encompassing Tao. It contains everything, with no distinctions whatsoever. In human beings, it is represented as the ambivalent, indeterminate state before any choices are made. In that state, the potential for every possible outcome exists - fulfilling, satisfying outcomes as well as disastrous, miserable outcomes.

The Tao of which Lao Tzu speaks is a particular path through this wealth of options. This path is quite specific. It is the path of silence, calmness, kindness and humility. It is not the path of cacophony, agitation, cruelty and arrogance. Both paths are part of the overall Tao that includes everything, but Lao Tzu points to one of them as the path that will best lead us to happiness and fulfillment.

40

**The returning is the movement of the Tao
The weak is the utilization of the Tao
The myriad things of the world are born of being
Being is born of non-being**

That which reverses course, reflects back, or returns to its point of origin characterizes the cyclical motions of the Tao. Because the Tao process underlies everything in existence, we observe its cycles reflected everywhere in the universe.

That which exhibits weakness, a soft touch, or a yielding nature characterizes the function and utilization of the Tao. This is because the Tao drives life forward endlessly, and the living is always pliant and flexible while death is invariably stiff and unyielding.

The above applies to the mind as well. An awareness that is in tune with the Tao is open to possibilities and adaptable to new ways of thinking. In contrast, a mind that stubbornly clings to preconceptions and automatically rejects anything different is, in a real sense, already dead.

41

**Higher people hear of the Tao
They diligently practice it
Average people hear of the Tao
They sometimes keep it and sometimes lose it
Lower people hear of the Tao
They laugh loudly at it
If they do not laugh, it would not be the Tao
Therefore a proverb has the following:
The clear Tao appears unclear
The advancing Tao appears to retreat
The smooth Tao appears uneven
High virtue appears like a valley
Great integrity appears like disgrace
Encompassing virtue appears insufficient
Building virtue appears inactive
True substance appears inconstant
The great square has no corners
The great vessel is late in completion
The great music is imperceptible in sound
The great image has no form
The Tao is hidden and nameless
Yet it is only the Tao
That excels in giving and completing everything**

But "not laughing" in itself is not sufficient to be called the Tao, and therefore it is said:

The sparkling Tao seems dark

Advancing in the Tao seems like regression.

Settling into the Tao seems rough.

True virtue is like a valley.

The immaculate seems humble.

Extensive virtue seems insufficient.

Established virtue seems deceptive.

The face of reality seems to change.
The great square has no corners.
Great ability takes a long time to perfect.
Great sound is hard to hear.
The great form has no shape.
The Tao is hidden and nameless.
This is exactly why the Tao is good at developing and perfecting.
The true student hears of the Tao; he is diligent and practices it.
The average student hears of it; sometimes he appears to be attentive, then again he is inattentive.
The half hearted student hears of it; he loudly derides it. If it did not provoke ridicule it would not be worthy the name-Tao.
Again there are those whose only care is phraseology.
The brilliancy of the Tao is as obscurity; the advance of the Tao is as a retreat; the equality of the Tao is as inequality; the higher energy is as cosmic space; the greatest purity is as uncleanness; the widest virtue is as if insufficient; established virtue is as if furtive; the truest essence is as imperfection; the most perfect square is cornerless; the largest vessel is last completed; the loudest sound has fewest tones; the grandest conception is formless.
The Tao is concealed and nameless, yet it is the Tao alone which excels in imparting and completing.

42

**Tao produces one
One produces two
Two produce three
Three produce myriad things
Myriad things, backed by yin and embracing yang
Achieve harmony by integrating their energy
What the people dislike
Are alone, bereft, and unworthy
But the rulers call themselves with these terms
So with all things
Appear to take loss but benefit
Or receive benefit but lose
What the ancients taught
I will also teach
The violent one cannot have a natural death
I will use this as the principal of teachings**

What people dislike are abandonment, loneliness and being unworthy
And yet kings and lords name themselves with such terms
Therefore
That which people hate to think of themselves as "orphan," "lowly," and "unworthy"
Yet the kings call themselves by these names
Some lose and yet gain,
Others gain and yet lose.
That which is taught by the people
I also teach:
"The forceful do not choose their place of death."
I regard this as the father of all teachings.
That which men hate is to be kithless, friendless and considered unworthy, but princes and dukes thus style themselves.

From this it would appear that advantages are disadvantageous, and disadvantages are advantageous.

I teach that which others have taught.

The violent and the fierce do not live out their years.

I shall be chief among the teachers.

43

**The softest things of the world
Override the hardest things of the world
That which has no substance
Enters into that which has no openings
From this I know the benefits of non-attached actions
The teaching without words
The benefits of actions without attachment
Are rarely matched in the world**

Our observation of nature shows us that the softest things have power over the hardest things in the world. Consider a horseman riding a powerful, galloping steed. The rider cannot compare to the horse in terms of physical strength, but there is no question who is controlling whom.

Water seeps into and dissolves rocks; electricity flows through a block of metal. This is how the Tao, which lacks substance, can permeate all things - even if they appear to be solid, without any cracks or openings.

I can extrapolate from this to understand life. The Tao acts in a wu wei manner and effortlessly achieves the miracle of life. I, too, can act without attachment in affairs of the world to achieve great benefits effortlessly.

The most effective teaching is conveyed through personal examples rather than preachy words. The most effective results are achieved through acting without any attachments to specific outcomes.

This is the way of the Tao. Its power and effectiveness are unmatched in the world. At the same time, it is also rarely understood by most people.

Notes

Other points to reinforce this concept:

- 1) When one grows old, the teeth fall out, but the tongue remains.
- 2) The pliant grass survives a fierce storm while the unyielding tree is uprooted.

44

**Fame or the self, which is dearer?
The self or wealth, which is greater?
Gain or loss, which is more painful?
Thus excessive love must lead to great spending
Excessive hoarding must lead to heavy loss
Knowing contentment avoids disgrace
Knowing when to stop avoids danger
Thus one can endure indefinitely**

Which do you hold more dear, fame or your true self?

Which do you value more, your true self or material possessions?

Which is more painful, gain or loss?

Therefore we always pay a great price for excessive love

And suffer deep loss for great accumulation.
Knowing what is enough, you will not be humiliated.
Knowing where to stop, you will not be imperiled
And can be long-lasting.
Gain or loss, which is worse?
Excessive love implies excessive outlay. Immoderate accumulation implies heavy loss.
Who knows contentment meets no shame. Who knows when to stop incurs no danger. Such long
endure.

45

**Great perfection seems flawed
Its function is without failure
Great fullness seems empty
Its function is without exhaustion
Great straightness seems bent
Great skill seems inept
Great eloquence seems inarticulate
Movement overcomes cold
Stillness overcomes heat
Clear quietness is the standard of the world**

That which is absolutely perfect and complete seems flawed, just as the Tao can seem imperfect or incomplete to human beings, despite being the essence of great perfection. The utilization, or functioning, of the great perfection of Tao is
That which is absolutely filled seems empty
That which is perfectly straight seems bent, or crooked.
Pure silence and clear stillness should be the standard, or model, for the world to set everything right, yet functions without a hitch.
Great fullness seems empty, yet functions without exhaustion.
Great straightness seems crooked,
Great skill seems clumsy,
Great eloquence seems stammering.
Excitement overcomes cold, stillness overcomes heat.
Clarity and stillness set everything right.
The greatest attainment is as though incomplete; but its utility remains unimpaired.
The greatest fullness is as a void; but its utility is inexhaustible.
The greatest uprightness is as crookedness; the greatest cleverness as clumsiness; the greatest eloquence as reticence.
Motion overcomes cold; stillness conquers heat.
Purity and stillness are the world's standards.

46

**When the world has the Tao
Fast horses are retired to fertilize the grounds
When the world lacks the Tao
Warhorses must give birth on the battlefield
There is no crime greater than greed
No disaster greater than discontentment
No fault greater than avarice**

**Thus the satisfaction of contentment
Is the lasting satisfaction**

When the world follows the Tao, harmony prevails. People know contentment and there is peace between nations. Since there is no war, fast horses no longer have a military function, so they are taken off the army and redirected to till farmlands in order to fertilize them for crops.

When the world does not follow the Tao, strife prevails. People bicker among themselves and nations clash endlessly. Because of constant warfare, all the horses are drafted into battle, so that even pregnant mares end up having to give birth on the battlefield.

The driving force behind warfare and conflicts is excessive desire at the expense of others. That is why there is no greater crime than greed, no greater disaster than not knowing when one has enough, and no greater fault than avarice, or covetousness.

From all this we can see that the satisfaction we can derive from the feeling of contentment - at any level of material possession - is the true and lasting source of bliss and peace of mind. It is the self-sufficiency of those who follow the Tao.

47

**Without going out the door, know the world
Without peering out the window, see the Heavenly Tao
The further one goes
The less one knows
Therefore the sage
Knows without going
Names without seeing
Achieves without striving**

True Tao practitioners do not search frantically in the material plane for spiritual enlightenment that will allow them to understand and be at peace with the world. They find this enlightenment by looking within.

True Tao practitioners do not try to comprehend the limitless Tao of the cosmos by the limited view of a window. Instead, they see the Heavenly Tao through the infinite perception of their inner vision.

The more one attempts to know the Tao by searching in the material world, the less one will know it. The Tao is not confined to any particular place.

In the same way, the sages are the masters of wisdom no matter where they happen to be. They do not need to travel to a particular place to gain this mastery. The clarity they possess is not dependent on what they can or cannot see.

Thus, the sages are able to achieve whatever they wish easily, smoothly, gracefully and efficiently, without any strife or effort that can only get in the way.

48

**Pursue knowledge, daily gain
Pursue Tao, daily loss
Loss and more loss
Until one reaches non-action
With non-action, there is nothing one cannot do
Take the world by constantly applying non-interference
The one who interferes is not qualified to take the world**

When we pursue academic study, each day we gain book knowledge, which leads to more complexity and ever-increasing desires. The more we know, the more things we want. When we pursue the Tao, each day we reduce, detach, discard and simplify. We lose more and more complexity every day. As a result, our desires will also decrease. A simple and uncluttered life leads to peace and contentment.

This process of reduction and simplification continues, until we reach wu wei - the state that is free of striving and without any unnecessary effort.

With the principle of wu wei - achievement without strife and with effortless grace - there is nothing we cannot accomplish. The impossible becomes possible; the difficult becomes easy. We do less and accomplish more.

Using this principle, we allow all things to progress naturally and minimize our meddling interference. This is the most effective way for us to achieve our goals and objectives in the world.

Those who do not understand this aspect of the Tao cannot let things be. They insist upon asserting their manipulative influence. Their lack of understand will lead to the expenditure of excessive resources, time and energy, but not the results proportional to their effort.

49

**The sages have no constant mind
They take the mind of the people as their mind
Those who are good, I am good to them
Those who are not good, I am also good to them
Thus the virtue of goodness
Those who believe, I believe them
Those who do not believe, I also believe them
Thus the virtue of belief
The sages live in the world
They cautiously merge their mind for the world
The people all pay attention with their ears and eyes
The sages care for them as children**

Tao sages are not closed minded or dogmatic. They do not have inflexible, fixed ideas that can never change. They do not assume that they are always right, so when their opinions differ from those of the people, they will examine alternative perspectives carefully. If the people's ideas have merit, the sages are happy to adopt them as their own.

The compassion of the sages is truly universal. They treat people well, whether or not they are deserving of kindness, because the sages do not prejudge them. They also have enduring faith in the basic decency of humanity. They trust everyone, whether or not a person is trustworthy. In short, the sages expect goodness from people and get it, because people cannot help but raise their own standards to live up to the goodness that the sages see in them.

50

**Coming into life, entering death
The followers of life, three in ten
The followers of death, three in ten
Those whose lives are moved toward death
Also three in ten
Why? Because they live lives of excess
I've heard of those who are good at cultivating life
Traveling on the road, they do not encounter rhinos or tigers**

**Entering into an army, they are not harmed by weapons
Rhinos have nowhere to thrust their horns
Tigers have nowhere to clasp their claws
Soldiers have nowhere to lodge their blades
Why? Because they have no place for death**

In the process of living - from birth, when we come into this world, to death, when we depart - we observe that most people can be grouped into several categories.

Three persons out of ten can be described as followers of life. They seek to live a life of longevity and safety, so they have their focus on getting by from day to day. They lead cautious lives with little risk or challenge. Their existence tends to be uneventful, mundane and colorless.

The complete opposite to the above would be what we call the followers of death. These are the people with self-destructive tendencies. They rush headlong into any situation recklessly, throwing caution to the winds. They put their own health and safety at risk unnecessarily. We observe that there are also three persons out of ten who fit this description.

The third category consists of people who start out pursuing life, but end up pursuing death.

Like the above two categories, there are roughly three persons in ten who belong to this group. How can such people start with life but end with death? Usually, they start out wishing to live life to the fullest, so they sample all the pleasures of the material world. But it is easy to overindulge when they do so, and soon their excessive lifestyles begin to take a heavy toll on their health and peace of mind. Thus, overindulgence leads them toward death.

Nine persons out of ten fit in one of the three categories above: fearful living, dangerous living, or excessive living. The rare exception, the one-in-ten minority, is the type of person who can transcend the predictable patterns that most people fall into.

We've heard of people like this, who are good at cultivating life. They enjoy living in moderation; they do not shrink from the unfamiliar; at the same time, they are also not foolhardy. They are the skillful players - not spectators - in the game of life. They are fully engaged and fully committed in their interactions with others and the world.

Because of the way they live, they do not encounter dangerous beasts representing the hazards of daily existence as they travel the road of life. When they wade into the battlefield of social competition, they are not harmed by the many weapons wielded by soldiers, representing personal attacks.

Their impeccable conduct leaves no room for others to hurt them with vicious rumors, innuendoes or insinuations. It is as if the wild rhinoceros of underhanded, back-stabbing tactics cannot find a place to thrust its deadly horn.

They feel no need to defend their point of view, nor to convince or persuade others of the correctness of their perspective. Thus, the tigers of blame, criticism and petty bickering have no target upon which to use their lethal claws.

When destructive force comes their way, they do not attempt to counter it head-on with equal or greater force. Instead, they expend minimal energy and redirect it away from themselves. Thus, the swords of negativity are deflected and cannot touch them.

How can they deal with life with such ease? It isn't so much that they possess toughness, so that slings and arrows bounce off them and outrageous fortune cannot hurt them. Rather, theirs is the ability to transcend fear, risk, and excess in their approach to life. Their mastery of living simply leaves no room for anything that is negative or destructive.

Notes

Quite a few translations render "three in ten" as one-third. This is not correct. If that is what Lao Tzu wanted to express, he would simply say "one in three," which would rule out any possibility of confusion.

The fourth category, the rare one person out of ten, is not specifically stated, only implied. As a result, many interpretations miss it completely. Now that you have seen this translation and know what you're looking for, try comparing it with other translations and you should be able to see it more clearly than before.

51

**Tao produces them
Virtue raises them
Things shape them
Forces perfect them
Therefore all things respect the Tao and value virtue
The respect for Tao, the value of virtue
Not due to command but to constant nature
Thus Tao produces them
Virtue raises them
Grows them, educates them
Perfects them, matures them
Nurtures them, protects them
Produces but does not possess
Acts but does not flaunt
Nurtures but does not dominate
This is called mystic virtue**

The Tao is the source of creation. The Tao gives birth to all living things. Virtue raises all living things. In other words, all living things grow and develop by virtue of the life force within them. Their virtue is their inherent power of life, which is an essential part of the Tao.

The tangible aspects of the environment shape all living things. The physical environment Therefore, there are none of the myriad things who do not venerate the Tao or esteem its virtue.

This veneration of the Tao and esteeming of its virtue is something they do naturally, without being forced.

Therefore, Tao gives birth.

Its virtue rears, develops, raises, adjusts and disciplines,

Nourishes, covers and protects,

Produces but does not possess,

Acts without expectation,

Leads without forcing.

This is called "Mysterious Virtue."

When the Tao produces and its energy nourishes,

nature forms and natural forces establish. On this account there is nothing that does not honor the Tao and reverence its energy. This honor and reverence are spontaneous, not the result of a mandate.

So the Tao produces. Its energy nourishes, increases, feeds, establishes, matures, controls, broods over.

It produces, but keeps nothing for itself; acts, but does not depend on its action; increases, but does not insist on having its own way. This indeed is the mystery of energy.

52

**The world has a beginning
We regard it as the mother of the world
Having its mother
We can know her children
Knowing her children
Still holding on to the mother**

**Live without danger all through life
Close the mouth
Shut the doors
Live without toil all through life
Open the mouth
Meddle in the affairs
Live without salvation all through life
Seeing details is called clarity
Holding on to the soft is called strength
Utilize the light
Return to the clarity
Leaving no disasters for the self
This is called following constancy**

53

**If I have a little knowledge
Walking on the great Tao
I fear only to deviate from it
The great Tao is broad and plain
But people like the side paths
The courts are corrupt
The fields are barren
The warehouses are empty
Officials wear fineries
Carry sharp swords
Fill up on drinks and food
Acquire excessive wealth
This is called robbery
It is not the Tao!**

54

**That which is well established cannot be uprooted
That which is strongly held cannot be taken
The descendants will commemorate it forever**

**Cultivate it in yourself, its virtue shall be true
Cultivate it in the family, its virtue shall be abundant
Cultivate it in the community, its virtue shall be lasting
Cultivate it in the country, its virtue shall be prosperous
Cultivate it in the world, its virtue shall be widespread**

**Therefore observe others with yourself
Observe other families with your family
Observe other communities with your community
Observe other countries with your country
Observe the world with the world
With what do I know the world?**

With this

**The well-established cannot be uprooted.
The well-grasped does not slip away.
Generation after generation carries out the ancestor worship without break.**

**Cultivate it in yourself and virtue will be real.
Cultivate it in the family and virtue will overflow.
Cultivate it in the town and virtue will be great.
Cultivate it in the country and virtue will abundant.
Cultivate it in the world and virtue will be everywhere.**

**Therefore, take yourself and observe yourself.
Take the family and observe the family.
Take the town and observe the town.
Take the country and observe the country.
Take the world and observe the world.
How do I know the world as it is?**

By this.

Who plants well will not have his work uprooted; who embraces well will not lose what he holds;
the offerings of his sons and grandsons will never end.
Who thus regulates himself has virtue which is genuine; who thus regulates his household has virtue which overflows; who thus regulates his neighborhood has virtue which excels; who thus regulates the state has virtue which abounds; who thus regulates the world has virtue which is universal.

Therefore let every man prove himself; let each household, neighborhood, and state do the same; let the world also follow the same course.
How do I know that it must be thus with the world? By this same (which has been just said).

55

**Those who hold an abundance of virtue
Are similar to newborn infants
Poisonous insects do not sting them
Wild beasts do not claw them
Birds of prey do not attack them
Their bones are weak, tendons are soft
But their grasp is firm
They do not know of sexual union but can manifest arousal
Due to the optimum of essence
They can cry the whole day and yet not be hoarse
Due to the optimum of harmony
Knowing harmony is said to be constancy
Knowing constancy is said to be clarity
Excessive vitality is said to be inauspicious
Mind overusing energy is said to be aggressive
Things become strong and then grow old
This is called contrary to the Tao
That which is contrary to the Tao will soon perish**

Tao cultivators wish to return to a purer and simpler state of mind. It is a state full of bliss and grace. We have all experienced it as infants, but have forgotten as we grew up and became more and more affected by the material world.

Infants are protected from danger. Someone who has cultivated much virtue and thus become more child-like is likewise protected. Just as infants are protected by their loving parents, virtuous cultivators are protected by the all-nurturing mother, the Tao. By following the Tao, they cannot be stung by poisonous insects of malicious gossip, clawed by the wild beasts of fear and anger, or attacked by the vicious birds of greed and envy.

Such virtuous cultivators may appear soft and yielding, and yet they have a firm handle on their goals and objectives. They are flexible in their approach, and unwavering in their determination. They live life with energy and vitality. They possess the optimum essence of health, so that every day is exciting, fun, and creative. Just as babies cry all day without getting hoarse, they can concentrate on difficult tasks for an extended period of time without getting tired.

Their energy works in perfect harmony with their surroundings. This harmonious interaction arises from their constant purpose and sense of mission. They understand the meaning of life - why they are here and what they are here to do - and this clarity of vision powers their every thought and action.

They can endure the test of time because they never overdo anything. They do not cultivate physical vitality to excess, nor do they overtax the mind. If life is a race, then they are marathon runners, not sprinters. Sprinters may be able to surge forward in an explosive burst of speed, but within minutes their strength is depleted. Soon after, they collapse in a heap of exhaustion. It is inevitable and contrary to the lasting and enduring Tao of the true cultivators.

Notes

The ancient sages spoke of sexuality in an open and direct manner because they saw it as part of nature, and not something about which to feel shame or guilt. They see nothing "filthy" or "disgusting" about it. Instead, they acknowledge and utilize its vast creative powers.

56

Those who know do not talk

Those who talk do not know

Close the mouth

Shut the doors

Blunt the sharpness

Unravel the knots

Dim the glare

Mix the dust

This is called mystic oneness

They cannot obtain this and be closer

They cannot obtain this and be distant

They cannot obtain this and be benefited

They cannot obtain this and be harmed

They cannot obtain this and be valued

They cannot obtain this and be degraded

Therefore, they become honored by the world

The truly wise understand the Tao, so they know that actions speak louder than words. Rather than to talk endlessly about what they should do or how they should be, they put their time and effort into the actual doing and being.

On the other hand, those who prattle on and on only demonstrate that they know little about the Tao. They spend so much time talking about what they think they know that they end up not putting any of it into actual practice. Without real-life applications, the Tao means nothing.

Tao cultivators close openings and doors - the passages that lead to, or allow in, the many temptations and distractions of the material world. They realize that the sensory thrills of such distractions are short-lived and ultimately illusory, so they prefer to stick to the real and practical.

When interacting with others, they are gentle and compassionate, because caustic and abrasive words can form a sharp edge that hurts people. Their gentle approach unravels the complexities of personal interactions, so they can enjoy a simple, direct connection with fellow human beings that is mutually enriching.

They are also humble and full of self-effacing humor, because those who like to show off their mental brilliance end up alienating people with the blinding glare of their arrogance.

True Tao cultivators do not try to set themselves apart from the rest of humanity. They do not go into hermitage far away from civilization. Instead, they are fully immersed in the dust of the material world where they can really put their spiritual cultivation to the test.

All of the above are aspects of what we call "Mystic Oneness." It is a crucial element in any spiritual path.

Those who achieve true understanding of Mystic Oneness (whether they call it by that name or not) are the ones who can be fully involved with life in the material world... and yet transcend beyond it. One cannot influence them by getting close to them or treating them in a cold and distant manner. They are unmoved by the promise of benefits or threats of injury. It is equally useless to flatter them, feed their ego, or attempt to pummel them into submission by degrading or condemning them.

Such people are truly exceptional, and that is why they will invariably become honored by the entire world.

Notes

If the above descriptions are too vague or abstract, think of Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama. These are concrete, real-life examples of human beings who have attained the level of Mystic Oneness. Read the interpretation above with these exceptional individuals in mind, and you will find that this chapter is an incredibly accurate and exact description of their true character.

57

Govern a country with upright integrity

Deploy the military with surprise tactics

Take the world with non-interference

How do I know this is so?

With the following:

When there are many restrictions in the world

The people become more impoverished

When people have many sharp weapons

The country becomes more chaotic

When people have many clever tricks

More strange things occur

The more laws are posted

The more robbers and thieves there are

Therefore the sage says:

I take minimal action, and the people transform themselves

I prefer quiet, and the people right themselves

I do not interfere, and the people enrich themselves

I have no desires, and the people simplify themselves

Ruling a country and using the military are two sides of the coin, and require two different approaches. Using clever tactics to surprise and confuse the enemy is extremely advantageous in that victory can be quickly achieved with minimal loss of troops. Ruling a country is just the opposite. You wouldn't want to use clever tactics to surprise and confuse your own people. Instead, you want to treat them with straightforward honesty, and communicate in a way that is clear and easy to understand.

The ruler who meddles always ends up with poor results. Therefore, wise rulers refrain from interference. They don't try to change people - it is an impossible and thankless task. Instead, they let nature take its course. Their role is to provide gentle guidance.

Throughout history, sages have studied human society and made careful observations. They note that the more rules and regulations there are, the poorer people become. This in turn weakens the ruler's power base - exactly the opposite of what the ruler tried to achieve with rules and regulations in the first place.

In such a restrictive and impoverished environment, many people turn to crime as a way to survive. They take up weapons to steal or rob; violence and chaos increase as a result. They also become increasingly tricky in attempts to get around restrictions or exploit loop holes. Their cunning will often yield surprising and even bizarre results.

The above is why the sage would advise the emperor as follows:

If I were you, I would not take actions with any attachments or expectations of some specific outcome. This lack of contrivance will naturally lead the people toward self-transformation. I would clear my mind and quiet the internal chatter before attending to the affairs of the people. My calmness and serenity can't help but have an effect on people so that they will wish to straighten things out themselves.

I would interfere as little as possible. Without interference, people can freely express their enterprising nature. Trade and commerce blossom, and before too long the people will be wealthy by their own efforts.

I would demonstrate by example my own relinquishing of excess desires. When people see how joyously my life becomes when it is totally free of clutter and the blind pursuit of material things, they too will want to practice simplicity in everything they do.

58

When governing is lackluster

The people are simple and honest

When governing is scrutinizing

The people are shrewd and crafty

Misfortune is what fortune depends upon

Fortune is where misfortune hides beneath

Who knows their ultimate end?

They have no determined outcome

Rightness reverts to become strange

Goodness reverts to become wicked

The confusion of people

Has lasted many long days

Therefore the sages are:

Righteous without being scathing

Incorruptible without being piercing

Straightforward without being ruthless

Illuminated without being flashy

From the perspective of Tao sages, the ideal way to govern is one that rules without excessive interference in people's lives. A government that follows this does not put a spotlight on itself, but the peace and freedom it provides allow the people to live the simple and honest life.

The opposite to this would be a government that is severe, one that scrutinizes the people's

every move. Such a government may appear to be very capable and brutally effective, but because it burdens the people with restrictions and intrudes upon their privacy, it creates an environment where people are forced to become ever more evasive, resorting to trickery to hide their activities.

Therefore, it is hard to say what is good fortune and what is bad. A ruler may think it's a good thing to be able to spy on people, without realizing that this leads to ever more complications and alienation. What seems like a good idea can turn into a disaster and vice versa. Who can predict how things will ultimately turn out?

It is because worldly affairs are unpredictable, and can suddenly change without notice, that it can be very confusing for anyone to know what to do. This is why sages say the best idea to follow the Tao and not try to analyze every little detail. Logical, rational analyses can, and often does, yield the wrong conclusion, but the true Tao will never lead you astray.

Specifically, the Tao would guide you as follows:

1. Be forthright, correct, and just in your actions, but do not become self-righteous and condemn those who fail to live up to your standards in a scathing way.
2. Be honest in your dealings, resist the temptation of bribes, and maintain the integrity of your honor. However, do not seek to impose the same discipline upon others in a piercing way.
3. Be direct and straightforward in your communication. Say what you mean and mean what you say, but keep in mind that this does not mean being unfeeling and cold-blooded. Be strict with yourself but forgiving with others.
4. Be enlightened, see things clearly for what they are, not what you wish them to be. You can have a light that illuminates those around you, without turning it on them and blind them with its glare.

59

In governing people and serving Heaven

There is nothing like conservation

Only with conservation is it called submitting early

Submitting early is called emphasis on accumulating virtues

Accumulating virtues means there is nothing one cannot overcome

When there is nothing that one cannot overcome

One's limits are unknown

The limitations being unknown, one can possess sovereignty

With this mother principle of power, one can be everlasting

This is called deep roots and firm foundation

The Tao of longevity and lasting vision

When it comes to serving the natural laws of Heaven, managing others as well as yourself, there is nothing like the principle of conservation - the principle of valuing and using efficiently your time, energy, mind and spirit.

The best way to conserve your inner resources is to surrender to the flow of the Tao. It is in your best interest to give up rebelling and moving against the flow as soon as possible. The sooner you stop wasting time and energy in useless debates and intellectualizations, the sooner you can start accumulating virtues - positive things and life-affirming values - in your life.

When you accumulate virtues by directing your time, energy, mind and spirit toward worthwhile cultivation, there are no obstacles you cannot overcome. The focus that is possible when you consciously conserve and direct your inner resources makes you powerful spiritually. It allows you to become, quite literally, an unlimited individual.

Once you move beyond the limits that hamper most people, you gain power over yourself, as well as a natural authority that people respond to. You are able to influence them effortlessly because their respect for you flows naturally. This is the mother principle of true authority.

Unlike the transient power achieved through force or domination, it is a positive force that lasts.

With this lasting power, you'll have a firm foundation upon which to build harmonious relationships with others. This positive force takes root deeply in the hearts of people and also in yourself. It is the Tao of longevity - a vision of everlasting harmony and leadership.

60

Ruling a large country is like cooking a small fish
Using the Tao to manage the world
Its demons have no power
Not only do its demons have no power
Its gods do not harm people
Not only do its gods not harm people
The sages also do not harm people
They both do no harm to one another
So virtue merges and returns

Governing a great country is like cooking a small fish. If you use too much heat, you will overcook it; if you keep turning the fish over and over, it will fall apart. Similarly, if a ruler constantly meddles in the affairs of the people with excessive rules and regulations, the country becomes chaotic and everyone suffers.

When the Tao has arrived and is present in the world, peace and harmony prevail so that the demons of the world lose the power to exert their negative influence. Similarly, when the Tao is present in your heart, your inner demons have no power over you.

It is not that the demons are rendered powerless by the prevailing peace of the Tao, but that their powers have no harmful effect on people. Similarly, a true sage isn't someone who harbors absolutely no negativity in the heart, but someone who sees that negativity clearly so that it cannot exert a harmful influence on life.

The gods of the world also keep to their proper places and do not disrupt the people's lives.

When we apply this concept to practical, everyday cultivation, it means the wisdom of the Tao prevents one from taking foolish actions out of positive intentions - actions that, although well-intended, still end up making things more complicated and more difficult.

Not only do the gods refrain from harming people out of misguided benevolence, the sages also refrain from meddling in people's lives. Acting in congruence with the Tao, the sages relax, let things be, and simply enjoy the process.

This gives us a world where gods and demons do no harm, whether to one another or anyone else. The rulers and the people also coexist peacefully. The goodness of this worldly manifestation lets the virtue and inherent power in everyone merge together and return to the Tao.

Notes

In this chapter as well as other chapters of the Tao Te Ching, governing a country serves as a metaphor for running one's life. Thus, we can also apply "cooking a small fish" to practical, everyday Tao cultivation.

Just as constantly changing rules and regulations disrupt people's lives, in governing your own life you also need to be careful not to second-guess yourself too much. People who succeed tend to make their decisions quickly and change their minds slowly, if at all. Conversely, people who fail in life are the ones who decide slowly but change their minds at the drop of a hat.

Once you cultivate the Tao to a certain point and get in touch with your inner self, you learn to trust and rely on the power of your intuition. It is capable of leading you to the correct decision in the blink of an eye. By contrast, dwelling on too much information has a way of leading to analysis paralysis rather than better decisions.

Next time you have a hunch or a gut feeling, go with it. The more you use your intuition, the more powerful and accurate it will become.

61

**The large country is like the lowest river
The converging point of the world
The receptive female of the world
The female always overcomes the male with serenity
Using serenity as the lower position
Thus if the large country is lower than the small country
Then it can take the small country
If the small country is lower than the large country
Then it can be taken by the large country
Thus one uses the lower position to take
The other uses the lower position to be taken
The large country only wishes to gather and protect people
The small country only wishes to join and serve people
So that both obtain what they wish
The larger one should assume the lower position**

In this chapter Lao Tzu points out that the virtue of humility applies not only to individuals and personal interactions, but also to diplomacy and international relations. In fact, the microcosm of the personal reflects the macrocosm of the national, so principles that work in one level operate equally well in the other.

Thus, we can see this chapter not only as sage advice to sovereign states, but also to all of us. In the context of everyday living, the large country would be someone who has more power, while the small country would be someone with less. Because everything is relative, we can oftentimes be called upon to play either role. For instance, a mid-level manager can be a small country to senior executives, and at the same time be a large country to the rank and file.

The large country may be quite powerful and has a lot more resources than small countries, but if it does not understand or practice the virtue of humility, it will quickly devolve from a well-respected world leader to a despised empire. History shows clearly that empires come and go, and when an empire falls, the smaller countries that used to cower at its feet will suddenly rise up against it.

When we apply this idea to the individual level, we see the wisdom of treating people well on one's way up - because it is indeed true that one will see all of them again on one's way down.

62

**The Tao is the wonder of all things
The treasure of the kind person
The protection of the unkind person
Admirable words can win the public's respect
Admirable actions can improve people
Those who are unkind
How can they be abandoned?
Therefore, when crowning the Emperor
And install the three ministers
Although there is the offering of jade before four horses
None of it can compare to being seated in this Tao
Why did the ancients value this Tao so much?
Is it not said that those who seek will find,**

**And those with guilt will not be faulted?
Therefore, it is the greatest value in the world**

Of all the myriad things in existence, the Tao is the most wondrous and valuable. Good, kind people understand this and treat it as a cherished treasure. Those who do not understand the Tao may not regard it as anything to value, but the Tao still provides for all the necessities they need to stay alive. Water, air, the sun... everything comes from the protective embrace of the Tao. In following the Tao, the good person attains spiritual refinement, which can then be expressed through spoken or written words. These words are uplifting and admirable, so that when they are revealed to the public, they inspire people.

Good people not only express spiritual truths through words, but also demonstrate these truths in everyday actions. Their honor, integrity and compassion serve as great examples for others. Those who have not achieved this level of refinement are not capable of inspiring words or actions. And yet, everyone has the potential to become enlightened. Because this is so, the Tao cannot possibly abandon them.

The highest and most important ceremony in ancient China was the crowning of the Emperor and the installation of the Emperor's three ministers. In order to emphasize its significance, the ceremony including offerings of jade and horses. The jade used in the ceremony was extremely rare, large and valuable; the horses were a team of four, each steed the fastest and finest in all of China.

As valuable as these offerings were, the Tao surpassed them all. No material thing could compare to sitting down with an open mind to discuss, explain and get into the Tao. When people have attained an understanding that suddenly resolves their perplexity and liberates them from ignorance, they too will understand that the Tao is truly priceless.

Why did the ancients cherish the Tao so much? It was not because the Tao brought them riches or material comfort. Rather, it was because the Tao helped those who searched for meaning in finding the answer to the ultimate question of life. For those who did not know enough to search, the Tao would not find fault with them. Instead, it allowed them all the time they needed to work through their issues. With infinite patience, the Tao knew that one day, they too would embark on a search of their own. This is why we say the Tao is the greatest treasure of all. The coronation of any ruler from any time in history would pale by comparison.

63

Act without action

Manage without meddling

Taste without tasting

Great, small, many, few

Respond to hatred with virtue

Plan difficult tasks through the simplest tasks

Achieve large tasks through the smallest tasks

The difficult tasks of the world

Must be handled through the simple tasks

The large tasks of the world

Must be handled through the small tasks

Therefore, sages never attempt great deeds all through life

Thus they can achieve greatness

One who makes promises lightly must deserve little trust

One who sees many easy tasks must encounter much difficulty

Therefore, sages regard things as difficult

So they never encounter difficulties all through life

The sages take proactive actions without any attachments or expectations of specific outcomes. They manage processes and affairs around them without trying to manipulate them. They get a sense (a taste) of the situation without becoming so involved and engrossed that they lose their objectivity, and thus impair their judgment and ability to act.

Whether tasks are great, small, many or few, the sages approach them the same way. They also treat everyone with the same degree of gentle kindness, so that even if someone attacks them out of anger or hatred, they would not fight fire with fire. Instead, they would respond with compassion, against which there is no defense.

The sages are masters at achieving large and difficult tasks. They make it look so easy. How do they do it? What is their secret?

The sages break tasks down to their constituent parts. If a task is difficult, they start with its easiest part. If a task is large, they start with its smallest component. These small and simple tasks require little time and effort, and when they are complete, the success inherent in their completion generates positive energy. Sages would then use this energy and leverage the success to catapult them toward the next smallest or easiest task. Each greater success generates greater energy, greater feeling of satisfaction, and greater ability to handle the next challenge. This is how sages achieve great and difficult tasks with seeming ease. Their secret is simply that they never tackle such tasks head-on. To do so would be foolhardy and counterproductive. Someone who makes promises quickly is, in all likelihood, someone who breaks the same promises regularly. Therefore, sages would be very reluctant to make overly optimistic projections in regards to a task at hand. Someone who thinks everything is easy is naive and inexperienced. Therefore sages regard all tasks as either challenging or potentially challenging. Their attitude in approach a task is always cautious and conservative. Whereas many people promise too much and deliver too little, sages promise little but deliver beyond expectations.

64

**When it is peaceful, it is easy to maintain
When it shows no signs, it is easy to plan
When it is fragile, it is easy to break
When it is small, it is easy to scatter
Act on it when it has not yet begun
Treat it when it is not yet chaotic
A tree thick enough to embrace
Grows from the tiny sapling
A tower of nine levels
Starts from the dirt heap
A journey of a thousand miles
Begins beneath the feet
The one who meddles will fail
The one who grasps will lose
Therefore, sages do not meddle and thus do not fail
They do not grasp and thus do not lose
People, in handling affairs
Often come close to completion and fail
If they are as careful in the end as the beginning
Then they would have no failure
Therefore, sages desire not to desire
They do not value goods that are hard to acquire
They learn to unlearn
To redeem the fault of the people**

**To assist the nature of all things
Without daring to meddle**

It is relatively easy to maintain the situation when everything is peaceful and quiet. When the possibility for chaos is small or nearly non-existent, it is a simple task to keep it in check. Generally speaking, it is always easier to act on something effectively when it is small. Take care of an issue as early as possible, before it really becomes an issue. Nip a potential problem in the bud so it doesn't get the chance to grow into something serious.

This same principle extends to many aspects of life. The mightiest trees started as a small and delicate shoot, barely noticeable in the ground. The tallest building we have had to be built from the ground up. There was a time when it was nothing more than a pile of dirt brought to the site in preparation for construction to begin.

The greatest, most epic journey one can undertake still must begin where you stand. Similarly, great deeds can have a small, indeed humble, beginning. A vast accumulation of knowledge starts somewhere, with the turning of one page in a particular book. When we keep this great wisdom in mind, it becomes easier for us to overcome inertia and take that first step.

Notes

The ancient Chinese measurement of distance, li, is loosely translated as "mile." One li is about half a kilometer, and roughly a third of a mile.

Many people know the expression, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." However, most of them probably have no idea that it originally came from this chapter of the Tao Te Ching. Some are aware that it's Chinese in origin, but mistakenly attribute it to Confucius. So now you know something they do not.

Another interesting thing to note is that the popular expression is in fact a mistranslation. The original contains no character for "one" or "step." Nor does it imply the taking of that first step. What it says is that the little piece of ground beneath your feet is the starting point of even the longest journeys. That's all it says. The taking of that first step is certainly a legitimate interpretation and amplification of this passage, but it definitely does not qualify as a translation.

65

**Those of ancient times who were adept at the Tao
Used it not to make people brighter
But to keep them simple
The difficulty in governing people
Is due their excessive cleverness
Therefore, using cleverness to govern the state
Is being a thief of the state
Not using cleverness to govern the state
Is being a blessing of the state
Know that these two are both standards
Always knowing these standards
Is called Mystic Virtue
Mystic Virtue is so profound, so far-reaching
It goes opposite to material things
Then it reaches great congruence**

The sage kings of ancient China were masterful in applying the Tao. They did not use it to make people more clever and more knowledgeable. Instead, they used it to guide people toward simplicity.

These sages understood very well that cleverness and knowledge would bring with them greater desires, deceit, and devious tricks. This would lead to complexities and chaos, thus making

things difficult not only for them, but also for the people.

They came to the conclusion long ago that using guile, manipulation, and contrivance to govern would do great harm to the country - really not so different than stealing from it like a thief. On the other hand, not using these tricks and guiding the people toward simplicity would lead to benefits for all, and would therefore be a great blessing to the country as a whole.

Both of these approaches - shrewd cunning versus straightforward plainness - are standards, and it is important to know both. The ancient masters made it a point to understand Machiavellian methods thoroughly, while embracing upright, honest simplicity in actual practice. This mindset of never losing sight of both is known as Mystic Virtue.

The power of Mystic Virtue is beyond measure. It is both profound in its implications and far-reaching in its effects. It runs counter to the tendency to pursue material things, and opposite the typical person's desire for short-term gains. We see it as achieving a state of great congruence, because Mystic Virtue follows nature and is therefore perfectly congruent with the Tao.

Notes

Your life is a sovereign state in its own right, and you are the ruler of this state. If, like many people, you run your life with a measure of clever duplicity and contrived craftiness, you will also make everything more complex and difficult to manage. A complicated life filled with tension and stress is one where the joy has been taken away - by yourself. You would then be the thief who robs your own life of happiness.

Lao Tzu advises you to cultivate Mystic Virtue instead. That is, be fully aware of all the deceptive tricks and meddlesome cunning that can manifest in your life, but at the same time hold on to P'u, the ultimate principle of simplicity and plainness. This will be a great blessing in your life, and as you continue living this way - in total congruence with the Tao - you will feel profound and far-reaching effects of Mystic Virtue in every aspect of living, resulting in a life filled with joy and peace of mind.

66

**Rivers and oceans can be the kings of a hundred valleys
Because of their goodness in staying low
So they can be the kings of a hundred valleys
Thus if sages wish to be over people
They must speak humbly to them
If they wish to be in front of people
They must place themselves behind them
Thus the sages are positioned above
But the people do not feel burdened
They are positioned in front
But the people do not feel harmed
Thus the world is glad to push them forward without resentment
Because they do not contend
So the world cannot contend with them**

Rivers and oceans receive everything from the streams and rivulets of a hundred valleys. It is as if they are the rulers of all these valleys, receiving their tributes and offerings into the royal treasury.

The reason that rivers and oceans have dominion over the valleys is simple: It is their nature to occupy the lowest position. All the streams and rivulets of the valleys naturally flow into them. Tao sages emulate nature. So when they observe the above, they realize that the principle applies equally well to human beings. If they wish to have influence over other people, they must occupy the lowest position like rivers and oceans. In other words, they must possess true humility and speak humbly to everyone.

Similarly, if the sages wish to lead people and be in front of them, they must place themselves behind them out of the same sense of humility. Because the sages are self-effacing and wish only to serve the greater good, people thrust them forward into positions of leadership.

As leaders, sages utilize the Tao rather than force or domination. People serve and assist them voluntarily, without coercion or pressure. Therefore, although the position of a sage ends up being above the followers, people do not feel burdened or oppressed. Although the sage is ahead of the masses, people do not feel threatened or harmed.

This Tao leadership builds relationships and promotes harmony, so people are happy to follow the sage to the ends of the earth. They do not resent the power wielded by the sages. In fact, they push the sages forward and urge that they accept the the mantle of power.

This is a very different concept from the conventional "might makes right" paradigm, where one seizes power by force and bullies others with it. The sages are the exact opposite. They have no need to seize anything or fight against anyone. Because of this, no one fights with them. Instead, the people support Tao leadership from the heart, and of their own free will!

67

**Everyone in the world calls my Tao great
As if it is beyond compare
It is only because of its greatness
That it seems beyond compare
If it can be compared
It would already be insignificant long ago
I have three treasures
I hold on to them and protect them
The first is called compassion
The second is called conservation
The third is called not daring to be ahead in the world
Compassionate, thus able to have courage
Conserving, thus able to reach widely
Not daring to be ahead in the world
Thus able to assume leadership
Now if one has courage but discards compassion
Reaches widely but discards conservation
Goes ahead but discards being behind
Then death!
If one fights with compassion, then victory
With defense, then security
Heaven shall save them
And with compassion guard them**

The reason people call the Tao great is because there is nothing quite like it. The Tao is an infinite concept that has no form, shape, substance, limit or boundaries. If it were finite, then no matter how big it is, there will always be something far bigger that dwarfs it into insignificance. Tao cultivators have three treasures that they cherish. The first is compassion - a love and kindness toward all things. The second is conservation - knowing when and how to avoid wasting one's time and energy, and direct them in a meaningful way, in accordance with one's purpose in life. The third is humility - the awareness that seeing oneself as being above or ahead of other people can only lead to failure.

By having compassion, one gains courage. True courage doesn't come from macho posturing or false bravado. Rather, it comes from love and commitment to something greater than oneself.

By having the mindset of conservation, one understands how to allocate and direct one's efforts to best effect, and therefore reach the most people and have the widest impact.

By having humility, one can connect with the Tao of leadership. Leaders who lead best do not focus on themselves. They have no wish to be the center of attention and prefer to let others shine. They direct their attention to what needs to be done, and do not need to take credit or remind others of their accomplishments.

All three treasures are important and must work together. Courage without compassion would be nothing more than brutality. To reach widely without conserving one's resources will quickly lead to exhaustion. Forgetting the lesson of humility, becoming arrogant, and letting the ego run wild are the beginning stage of self-delusion. These negative consequences can only lead to failure and doom.

Those who hold on to the three treasures can achieve extraordinary feats. Warriors who fight with compassion in their hearts achieve victory, because love gives them the strength they need. If they fight to defend loved ones or a cherished cause, they achieve security and protection. Because they follow the Tao, Heaven itself will come to their aid, events will seem to conspire in rendering assistance at just the right time, as if they are safeguarded by divine powers. All manners of resources and allies will appear and rally to their cause, in unexpected ways that no one could foresee. Anyone who witnesses this process at work will know that, indeed, the Tao is great beyond compare.

68

**The great generals are not warlike
The great warriors do not get angry
Those who are good at defeating enemies do not engage them
Those who are good at managing people lower themselves
It is called the virtue of non-contention
It is called the power of managing people
It is called being harmonious with heaven
The ultimate principle of the ancients**

Those who excel in the art of command do not wage war lightly. The truly great generals and strategists do not show aggression or put their military power on display.

Those who excel in battles do not lose themselves to anger. By being calm and collected, they increase their effectiveness in action.

Those who are truly good at winning do not need to engage their enemies in physical combat. They can achieve victory with a minimum of fighting, or no fighting at all.

Those who are truly good at management are humble. Because they are not arrogant in assuming that they are more capable than everyone else, they are able to delegate authority and empower others to fully utilize their talents.

All of the above are examples of the virtue we call non-contention. It is a virtue that applies not only to military leadership, but also to our social interactions. It is a powerful way to manage our personal relationships with other people.

We follow this virtue because it harmoniously matches the heavenly laws of nature. Nature is non-contentious. In a thunderstorm there is tremendous power - but no hatred, anger, or arrogance. When the ancient sages noted this, they made non-contention their ultimate principle.

69

**In using the military, there is a saying:
I dare not be the host, but prefer to be the guest
I dare not advance an inch, but prefer to withdraw a foot
This is called marching in formation without formation
Raising arms without arms**

**Grappling enemies without enemies
Holding weapons without weapons
There is no greater disaster than to underestimate the enemy
Underestimating the enemy almost made me lose my treasures
So when evenly matched armies meet
The side that is compassionate shall win**

In military strategy as well as life strategy, we have a saying that goes like this:

"I dare not be the host - the aggressor that initiates the conflict. I prefer to be the guest - the cautious defender.

"I dare not move forward into a fight, even by an inch. I prefer to move back a foot, to let my opponent overextend and thus lose balance."

With such a strategy, you are actually marching in formation - moving purposefully with a plan - but it appears as if you have no formation.

You are actually using your arms - taking action - but it appears as if you have no arms.

You are actually grappling with the enemy - coming to grips with your opponent - but it appears as if you have no enemies.

You are actually holding a weapon - wielding an effective tool - but it appears as if you have no weapons.

The worst thing you can do in warfare is to underestimate your opponent. The worst thing you can do in life is to underestimate your challenges. In either case, it can cause you to charge forth recklessly. When I did that, I almost lost my treasures (compassion, conservation, and humility). From this principle, we can see that when evenly matched armies or individuals clash, the side that approaches the conflict with compassion instead of aggression will end up with a truly meaningful victory.

Notes

Many people believe that overwhelming force wins respect. This belief forms the basis of the "shock and awe" military strategy. History shows that such strategies simply do not work. Aggression succeeds only in planting the seeds of subsequent retaliation. It is wisdom and restraint that win respect and admiration, not force.

Judo and Aikido are based on the concepts described in this chapter more than 2,500 years ago.

A master of these arts may appear to be yielding and retreating, and yet is devastatingly effective in combat.

Tao sages apply the same concepts to life. Acting from compassion, they realize that it is more important to be kind than to be right. In an argument, why not let the others "win"?

70

**My words are easy to understand, easy to practice
The world cannot understand, cannot practice
My words have basis
My actions have principle
People do not understand this
Therefore they do not understand me
Those who understand me are few
Thus I am highly valued
Therefore the sage wears plain clothes but holds jade**

The concepts I talk about are easy to understand and easy to put into practice, but most people in the world cannot understand them or put them into practice

The concepts I talk about are based on the source of spiritual truth. The actions that I put into practice are based on an overall, ruling principle. People do not understand this unified nature of

the Tao, so they fail to understand me.

Those who do understand me are relatively few in number. They are the rare and exceptional individuals. This only increases the value of my words and actions.

The sages - those who really understand and are consistent in thoughts and action - excel quietly, invisibly, unknown to most and misunderstood by those around them. It is as if they wear plain clothes while holding precious jade within. In other words, they assume an unremarkable external appearance and hold spiritual treasures deep in the heart.

71

**To know that you do not know is highest
To not know but think you know is flawed
Only when one recognizes the fault as a fault
Can one be without fault
The sages are without fault
Because they recognize the fault as a fault
That is why they are without fault**

To know that you do not know - to recognize your own ignorance - is best, because it motivates you to continue seeking answers and keeps you from becoming presumptuous and arrogant. The opposite of this is to be ignorant but assume that you possess knowledge. This is a flaw that many of us have. It even seems like the less you know, the more you think you know.

It is only when we see a problem clearly, and recognize that we need to do something about it, that we can begin taking steps to remove it and eventually be without it.

The sages are human too, and make mistakes just like everyone else. What makes them different is that they look at themselves with the clarity of detachment, whereas most of us are blind to our own faults.

Because they are naturally humble, sages do not automatically assume they must be correct.

When they recognize that they have made a mistake or manifested a problem, they take active steps to address the issue.

People who know that they do not know and take steps to learn will eventually acquire the knowledge they need. Similarly, sages who monitor themselves, recognize their own faults and take steps to correct themselves will ultimately be free of the faults.

Notes

The Chinese character bing occurs eight times in this chapter. Many translators translate it as "disease" or "illness." This is the dictionary definition as well as the common, modern usage, but in this case it doesn't quite fit. Being sick comes close to the original meaning but doesn't really hit the mark.

When Lao Tzu uses bing, he is specifically referencing human errors and character flaws - being sick or defective in some aspect of one's thinking. This context still exists in modern Chinese. For instance, when we say mao bing, we are talking specifically about a fault or a problem.

Plug "disease" into the translation and interpretation above and the chapter will seem a bit strange. Use "problem" or "fault" instead for bing and suddenly it will seem as if a veil has been lifted, and the meaning of the chapter becomes crystal clear.

This particular issue makes this chapter a good test of translation quality. If your translation renders bing in the context of disease or illness, it may be a sign that the translator knows modern Chinese but not ancient Chinese.

72

**When people no longer fear force
They bring about greater force**

**Do not limit their place
Do not reject their livelihood
Because the ruler does not reject them
Therefore they do not reject the ruler
Therefore the sages:
Know themselves but do not glorify themselves
Respect themselves but do not praise themselves
Thus they discard that and take this**

When people no longer fear the dominating force of authority, they will bring about greater force against the authority in an uprising. Thus the wise ruler would not attempt to limit the people in their living space or their thoughts. Nor would the wise ruler deny the people their means of livelihood. If the ruler does not oppress the people in these ways, the people also will not reject the leadership. Therefore, when interacting with people, the sages are accepting and humble. They possess the clarity of self-knowledge, so they have no need to put themselves on a pedestal to seek external validation. They possess the confidence of self-respect, so they have no need to praise themselves and highlight their own achievements. Thus, the sages discard arrogance and pomposity while embracing self-knowledge and self-respect.

73

**The bold in daring will be killed
The bold in not daring will survive
Of these two, one may benefit, the other may harm
The one hated by heaven - who knows the reason?
Even the sages still find this difficult
The Tao of heaven:
Does not contend and yet excels in winning
Does not speak and yet excels in responding
Is not summoned and yet comes on its own
Is unhurried and yet excels in planning
The heavenly net is vast
Loose, and yet does not let anything slip through**

Those who are bold and forward in being reckless tend to take unnecessary risks. Sooner or later, these risks catch up with them and cause their demise. Those who are resolute in being cautious tend to be much more sensible. They advance while managing their risk exposure, so they can conserve their resources while continuing to thrive. We can see that these two approaches yield very different results. The careful resolve may bring benefits, while the reckless charge may bring harm. It seems as if heaven dislikes those who are rash and thoughtless, and punish them accordingly. It is as if it has a preference for courageous rationality. We do not know why this should be the case. Even the sages still have a difficult time explaining it, because they have always known the Tao to be impartial and unbiased. Natural forces, being without human emotions, do not have likes or dislikes. Perhaps it is all due to the nature of the heavenly Tao. For instance, we can see that the Tao contends with no one, and yet invariably wins out in the end. Water flows around an obstructing rock without challenging it or fighting it, but in time it is certain that the water will reduce the

rock to nothing and wash it away.

The Tao does not speak as humans do, and yet it is infinitely responsive. For every action we impose, nature responds with an equal and opposite reaction. The response of the Tao is swift and certain.

We cannot summon the Tao, but no matter what we do, the Tao comes of its own accord.

Whether good or bad, the Tao manifests itself in all of our endeavors. Good deeds bring positive karma; malice invokes negative karmic consequences.

The Tao process proceeds at a natural pace. The Tao is never rushed or frantic, and yet its infinite organizing power coordinates every event in the cosmos regardless of scale or distance. The universe is a pageantry of unimaginable complexity and precision, all choreographed by Tao, the ultimate planner.

The Tao can be likened to a net that stretches across the universe. All things exist within the meshes of its natural laws. This matrix of existence is loose and relaxed, and yet takes everything into account and does not leave anything out.

Notes

The final, unsaid element of this chapter is that those who possess courageous resolve but advance with caution are congruent with the Tao, and that is why they seem to be favored by the heavenly powers.

Note that this chapter makes an interesting distinction between courage and daring. Courage means being resolute, dauntless and firm; daring means throwing caution to the winds, full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes. One is an inner quality born of conviction, the other is an external display of bravado.

Those who possess this inner quality are similar to the Tao in the following ways:

1. Because they are unadventurous, they do not struggle against others, just as the Tao contends against no one. But despite this seemingly yielding nature, they consistently achieve their objectives in the long run.
2. They are quiet and unassuming, just as the Tao does not speak. However, they remain ever responsive to changing conditions out of their sense of caution. When circumstances change, they are ready to alter their approach to better aim for a moving target.
3. They are also fully present in all of their activities, just as the Tao is present in all things. They bring mindfulness to their work. By being totally aware in each moment of life, they enhance and deepen everything they do.
4. They are composed and prepared, just as the Tao plans and coordinates its myriad movements in a relaxed and unhurried way. They see how flowers bloom when the season is right and not a moment sooner, so they also take their time in thoughtful planning. By being well-prepared, they are able to act with composure and maximize their chances of success... when the time is right, and not a moment sooner.

74

People do not fear death

How can they be threatened with death?

If people are made to constantly fear death

Then those who act unlawfully

I can capture and kill them

Who would dare?

There exists a master executioner that kills

If we substitute for the master executioner to kill

It is like substituting for the great carpenter to cut

Those who substitute for the great carpenter to cut

It is rare that they do not hurt their own hands

People seem to have no fear of death, so how can they be scared by the threat of execution? Wouldn't it be futile for us to use death as a deterrent? If, for the sake of argument, we say that people have a constant fear of death, and we capture and kill anyone who acts in a strange and unlawful manner, then who would dare to be an outlaw? (But since there are still many outlaws, it does look as if the death penalty - capital punishment - is not very effective!)

There is a master executioner who is always present. Call it Karma, or Nature, or the Law of Reciprocity. This executioner is perfectly impartial and never fails to dispense the appropriate punishment, including death.

There is no need for human beings to assume the role of this master executioner, to enact what they perceive to be justice. Trying to do so is similar to a novice trying to cut wood like an expert carpenter.

When novices clumsily pretend to be masters of wood cutting, it would be rare for them to not accidentally cut their own hands. Similarly, those who think they can kill on behalf of the master executioner would likely end up harming themselves.

(Thus, a society that avidly supports capital punishment hurts itself. Aside from the observation that the death penalty doesn't seem effective, we should also consider the possibility that innocents may be executed by mistake - and certainly those who are killed can no longer make amends and repay their debt to society.)

Notes

The concept of the "master executioner" in this chapter is a continuation of the "heavenly net" concept from the previous chapter. They are different ways to describe the same karmic mechanism that seems to pervade reality.

At first glance, this chapter appears to be directed at the ruler. Whenever we see this in the Tao Te Ching, we know that the teaching operates on multiple levels. Not only is it a social commentary, but it is also a recommendation on how we can conduct our lives.

The central idea is that the negative approach is rarely effective. The use of the death penalty does not necessarily improve society. If we execute everyone on death row today, we would feel no safer tomorrow. The more we resort to killing as a response to our frustration and anger with violence, the more violent society becomes.

Similarly, the use of threats and punishment is far less effective than positive reinforcement in the Tao of interpersonal relationships. Thus, sages do not criticize or accuse. Instead, they guide and nurture through sincere praise and approval.

The lesson also applies to the ruling of one's inner kingdom. While it is important for us to recognize our past mistakes, it is futile for us to dwell on them and beat ourselves up. Blaming ourselves will not move us closer to our goals. Proactive, positive actions will do a far better job of that.

75

**The people's hunger
Is due to the excess of their ruler's taxation
So they starve
The people's difficulty in being governed
Is due to the meddling of their ruler
So they are difficult to govern
The people's disregard for death
Is due to the glut in their ruler's pursuit of life
So they disregard death
Therefore those who do not strive for living
Are better than those who value living**

When people are hungry - when their basic survival needs are in question - it is because the ruler overzealously imposes ever increasing taxes, leaving very little for them to sustain themselves. As a result, the people starve.

When people are difficult to control - when they are openly rebellious and refuse to obey orders - it is because the ruler constantly meddles in their livelihood with more and more restrictive rules. In reaction, the people become defiant against authority.

When people disregard death - when they no longer care if they live or die - it is because the ruler pursues an extravagant lifestyle, indulging in ever more luxuries while the people suffer hardship. Seeing this, the people brave death to rise against the ruler.

Therefore, we can see from the above that a ruler who does not obsessively focus on "the good life" would be much better than the ruler who values the mindless pursuit of luxurious living.

Under such a wise ruler, the people do not starve (their basic needs are met), they are not difficult to govern (they gladly follow wise leadership), and they have no reckless disregard for death (their own lives are worth living).

Notes

The last two lines in this chapter are particularly difficult to translate, and they can be difficult to understand even when translated correctly. It helps to keep in mind that every line in this chapter expresses one consistent concept. Once you grasp the concept, everything should fall neatly into place.

Once again, we see that what appears to be advice for the emperor is in fact the Tao of better living for all of us.

The overall theme in this chapter is about how we deal with the material world. It points out that the excessive pursuit and indulgence in materialistic things will end up costing us in various ways.

Oftentimes we overtax ourselves when we overindulge. The bloated feeling after eating too much at the buffet, and the hangover after drinking too much at a wild party - are both examples. When we overtax ourselves, we can neglect our basic spiritual needs. Overextended and mentally exhausted, we tend to overlook the need to feed the soul with uplifting and inspirational sustenance.

When we stray from the simplicity of wu wei and meddle in everything around us, life becomes more and more difficult to manage. Our excessive interference results in unintended side effects and makes things more complicated.

For instance, if we meddle in the affairs of friends, we often end up alienating them. They do not appreciate our interference, so the relationship becomes strained and increasingly distant.

This chapter also tells us that when the mind is overly greedy in pursuing materialistic indulgences, the spirit suffers. Life becomes an endless series of sensory stimulations, devoid of meaning and purpose. It no longer seems worthwhile, thus causing one to question: Why bother? Why go on living? Why not just end it all?

To see vivid examples of this, we only have to turn our attention to celebrity suicides. These are people who seem to have it all materially, and yet are impoverished spiritually. They see little point in life, and no reason to live - in other words, they feel a complete disregard for death.

76

While alive, the body is soft and pliant

When dead, it is hard and rigid

All living things, grass and trees,

While alive, are soft and supple

When dead, become dry and brittle

Thus that which is hard and stiff

Is the follower of death

That which is soft and yielding

Is the follower of life

**Therefore, an inflexible army will not win
A strong tree will be cut down
The big and forceful occupy a lowly position
While the soft and pliant occupy a higher place**

Life is characterized by softness and pliancy, while death is characterized by stiffness and rigidity. We can see this simply by looking around. Living plants and animals all exhibit flexibility and suppleness. When they are dead, their lifeless forms invariably lose all moisture, and therefore all flexibility and suppleness as well.

We can generalize from this observation and link death to that which is hard and unyielding. Life would be linked to that which is pliable and thus capable of growth and adaptation. This applies not only to flora and fauna but also to all aspects of human existence.

For instance, an army that cannot adapt to the ever-changing conditions on the battle field will soon find itself outmaneuvered and defeated by an enemy that is more nimble and flexible. A tree that grows hard and strong makes excellent timber, and so will quickly find itself chopped down and put to use. Both are great examples where rigidity leads to death.

Therefore, that which is forceful and aggressive may seem to have the upper hand, but in fact occupies a lower position of disadvantage. Conversely, being yielding and flexible may be perceived as a weakness, but is in fact a great strength that occupies a higher position leading to victory and success.

Notes

As mentioned above, this Tao principle pervades all aspects of life. That is why the hard sell never yields long-term success. Salesmen who study "closing techniques" and apply pressure to seal a deal are not the ones with the best results, the most satisfied customers, and repeat business.

Master practitioners of the soft sale - the salesmen who apply no pressure, but only provide attention, service, and assistance to customers, and thereby win their trust. Once the trust has been earned, no techniques are necessary to close the transaction. That trust may also lead to repeat business as well as referrals.

**The Tao of heaven
Is like drawing a bow
Lower than that which is high
Raise that which is low
Reduce that which is excessive
Add to that which is insufficient
The Tao of heaven
Reduces the excessive
And adds to the insufficient
The Tao of people is not so
Reducing the insufficient
In order to offer to the excessive
Who can offer their excess to the world?
Only those who have the Tao
Therefore sages act without conceit
Achieve without claiming credit
They do not wish to display their virtue**

The workings of the Tao can be compared to archery - specifically to the act of drawing the bow to fire off an arrow.

If the arrow is pointing too high, the archer must lower the aim. If the aim isn't high enough, the archer must compensate by tilting up.

The amount of strength that goes into pulling back the bowstring has to be just right. If it's too much, the arrow will overshoot the target, so one has to reduce any excessive force.

On the other hand, if the archer fires off the arrow with insufficient force, it will fall short of the target. In order for the arrow to fly true, the archer must put more strength into the bow and draw back further.

This is similar to natural laws in that the Tao also acts in a balanced way. It tends to reduce whatever is too much, and add to that which is not enough. Thus, everything in the world is constantly moving toward equilibrium.

(For instance, a pot of hot water, if left alone, will gradually cool off. Just as certainly, ice cubes will melt and become cold water that will, over time, approach room temperature. This is the way of the heavenly Tao.)

The way of people isn't quite like that. People often act in ways opposite to the balancing principle of the Tao. They cut down that which is already lacking and give to that which already has too much.

(We can see an aspect of this by noting that all over the world, it is the rule rather than the exception that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.)

Who are the ones that can see this clearly and choose not to follow the herd? Only those who have the Tao. Whenever they have too much of something, they offer the surplus to those who do not have enough.

In this way, the Tao sages act in accordance with nature and give in the same way that nature does - without having expectations, claiming credit, or feeling that they are somehow superior for having given.

Just like the Tao, they contribute and nurture others without needing to show off. It makes no difference to them if people never find out about the good that they have done. Having the Tao is its own reason and justification.

Notes

The lines "Lower that which is high / Raise that which is low" can also be interpreted as what happens to the bow when the archer pulls back: the top of the bow lowers and the bottom goes up.

The same line of thought leads to the idea that the next two lines "Reduce that which is excessive / Add to that which is insufficient" refer to the process of adjusting the length of the bowstring when making the bow.

We have chosen the classical interpretation that refers to aiming instead, because it is clear from the first line that the simile is all about the process of drawing open the bow (to fire an arrow) rather than the process of crafting a bow. All four lines refer to aiming: the archer adjusts the vertical angle of the arrow as well as the amount of force invested in it.

In this chapter Lao Tzu offers a penetrating insight into human nature: rather than moving toward balance, people often go contrary to the Tao in unbalancing their lives even more.

For instance, note what happens when people overindulge. They do not reduce the indulgence as they should. Instead, they feed it even more. This is how addictions begin.

Also note how people jump on bandwagons when it comes to beliefs, attitudes, trends and fads.

Rather than to think for themselves, they jump on the bandwagon because so many other people are already on it.

**Nothing in the world is softer or weaker than water
Yet nothing is better at overcoming the hard and strong
This is because nothing can replace it**

**That the weak overcomes the strong
And the soft overcomes the hard
Everybody in the world knows
But cannot put into practice
Therefore sages say:
The one who accepts the humiliation of the state
Is called its master
The one who accepts the misfortune of the state
Becomes king of the world
The truth seems like the opposite**

Water appears to be the weakest and softest thing in the world. It always conforms to the shape of its container. Pour it into a bottle, it's a bottle; pour it into a cup, it's a cup. Water is the ultimate symbol of the yielding and flexible aspect of the Tao.

At the same time, there is also nothing better than water at dissolving the hardest and most unyielding rocks. We only have to look around to see how water has carved ravines and canyons out of mountains all over the world. Water is the universal solvent. Nothing can replace it. This observation of water teaches us that despite a yielding, humble appearance, the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard. This is a principle that we can all understand, but somehow cannot put into practice in real life. We still have a tendency to meet force with force. When someone yells at us, we yell back louder; when someone trespasses against us, we retaliate in full measure... plus interest!

Thus, the sages teach us that those who have the strength to accept humiliation are extremely rare. Such individuals possess the power embodied in water - seemingly soft and weak, and yet able to overcome the hard and strong. If they apply this power to society, they would achieve complete mastery of leadership at the national level.

Such individuals also have the ability to accept misfortunes. Like water, they have the depth of character to contain adversities and difficulties. If they apply this ability to handle negativity at the national level, they would achieve preeminence on a global scale.

Thus, by embracing the seemingly weak and soft, one gains personal power. This is a truth that, at first glance, would appear to be contrary to our expectations!

79

**After settling a great dispute
There must be remaining resentments
How can this be considered good?
Therefore the sage holds the left part of the contract
But does not demand payment from the other person
Those who have virtue hold the contract
Those without virtue hold the collections
The Heavenly Tao has no favorites
It constantly gives to the kind people**

It doesn't matter how we say "no hard feelings," after a bitter dispute, there's bound to be ill-will and negative feelings. This cannot be a good thing.

Sages don't get into disputes in the first place because they give to others without expecting anything in return. It is as if they hold the left half of the lending agreement - the lender's copy - but do not use it to extract loan payments from the borrower.

Those who possess virtue are like the sages. Metaphorically speaking, they also hold the left half of the lending agreement. They give; they do not take.

Those who lack virtue are like the tax collectors. It is as if they hold the collections notice over other people. They take from everyone and give to no one.

Given this is the case, how can it be that generous souls prosper while misers seem to be forever pinching pennies? Shouldn't those who only take end up with more than those who only give? It is not because the Tao plays favorites and treats giving people better. It is because the karmic principle - the Law of Cause and Effect - ensures that those who give in accordance with the Tao will always receive abundantly.

Notes

When the ancient Chinese people began building their civilization some five thousand years ago, they found themselves in need of a way to keep track of debts.

The method had to somehow be proof against forgery, so less trustworthy individuals wouldn't borrow funds and then deny it or claim a smaller amount. Also, this was back in the days before the invention of paper, so that made the problem even more difficult.

What they came up with was clever. Lender and borrower would get a piece of wood or tree bark, and carve the record of their transaction and agreement on it. Then, this contract would be split apart in the middle. The left part goes to the lender; the right to the borrower.

Thus, the left side of the contract is the lender's proof that he has a right to demand payments.

When the loan has been paid, the lender gives the left side to the borrower, thus making the contract whole.

Because the tear in the wood or bark is uneven, it serves as the perfect and natural way to authenticate. A forged left side will never be able to match the right side - a brilliant solution.

The Tao of Giving

Someone who gives in accordance with the Tao observes the following guidelines:

- 1) Appropriate amount. Tao cultivators would not give so much that they damage their own ability to continue giving in the future. The important thing is to be like a small stream that keeps flowing, as opposed to an upended barrel that splashes water everywhere and has no more to give.
- 2) Detachment. Tao cultivators give with no expectations or attachments. They give only for the sake of giving, not to win recognition or showcase their generosity.
- 3) Based on need. Tao cultivators look for opportunities where giving would make the most significant difference for someone in need. In a snowstorm, they would deliver coal to someone who has trouble staying warm. This may not be very expensive to do, but it has meaning for the recipient that is priceless.
- 4) Not necessarily tangible. Tao cultivators recognize that material things and monetary values are not the only ways to give. They are also ready to give an encouraging word, a cheery greeting, a smile, a blessing, a pat on the back, a helping hand, recognition, forgiveness, courtesy, praise.... The world is full of wonderful ways to give.

80

Small country, few people

Let them have many weapons but not use them

Let the people regard death seriously

And not migrate far away

Although they have boats and chariots

They have no need to take them

Although they have armors and weapons

They have no need to display them

Let the people return to tying knots and using them

Savor their food, admire their clothes

Content in their homes, happy in their customs

Neighboring countries see one another

Hear the sounds of roosters and dogs from one another

**The people, until they grow old and die
Do not go back and forth with one another**

The ideal place is a small country with few people in it. This place is free of conflict and strife. Even though they have hundreds of military instruments, they don't need to use them. The people treat life-and-death issues with serious regard, and do not need to risk their lives in a dangerous migration to faraway places.

Peace prevails in such a place, so even though the people have boats and chariots, they have no need to use them to get away from this country. Similarly, even though they are no pacifists and possess armors and weapons, they have no need to show aggression by putting them on display. The people live simply and return to the old way of life. They make full use of simple solutions, such as tying knots to record events. Their food is not elaborate, but they find it delicious; their clothes are not extravagant, and yet beautiful in their elegant simplicity. Their homes are not luxurious, but they feel content, safe and comfortable in them. Their customs are down-to-earth, and yet they find them sincere, direct, and joyful.

This country and its neighbors are not far apart. They are within visual range of one another, as well as hearing range. While in one country, one can hear the dogs and roosters of a neighboring country.

Despite the close distance between them, there is no friction among these countries. The people of the region grow old and die without ever getting into petty squabbles with one another. Because they are content and peaceful, they simply do not engage in back-and-forth deception, contention and retribution with their neighbors.

81

True words are not beautiful

Beautiful words are not true

Those who are good do not debate

Those who debate are not good.

Those who know are not broad of knowledge

Those who are broad of knowledge do not know

Sages do not accumulate

The more they assist others, the more they possess

The more they give to others, the more they gain

The Tao of heaven

Benefits and does not harm

The Tao of sages

Assists and does not contend

Sincere words, spoken honestly, may be blunt and direct. People who wish to avoid the truth will not find them pleasant.

Soothing, flowery words that appeal to vanity are not truthful. Such words distort reality in order to deceive or manipulate.

Those who are good in the art of living recognize the futility of arguments, and therefore wisely refrain from engaging in debates. Sages who possess Te let actions reveal their virtues; they have no need to explain themselves with words.

Conversely, someone who is overly argumentative - and thus constantly debates against others - is a person lacking the skill to live a life free of anger and stress. We should also beware of those who constantly explain themselves with glib words, for they do not possess real virtue.

Those who possess true mastery of knowledge have no wish to acquire shallow learning in a broad spectrum of subjects. Someone who really knows, understands that the great Tao lives in the heart. There is no need to search for the Tao all over the place.

Conversely, if someone claims to know something about everything, then chances are excellent that this person has little mastery of any one subject. Being obsessed with a wide variety of book

knowledge is a sign of someone who has not yet found the Tao within.

Sages have no need to accumulate worldly knowledge or goods, because they find contentment and abundance in helping and giving. The more they render assistance, the more fulfillment they possess; the more they give to people, the more blessings and wisdom they acquire.

Sages recognize that the positive, uplifting Tao of heaven benefits all living things and does not harm them. In emulating this, sages also seek to benefit others by helping them, and refrain from harming them with contention.

Notes

The first two lines, True words are not beautiful / Beautiful words are not true, can be misused.

Sometimes, people who want to criticize others out of malice may use them as justification.

The difference between such people and sages is in terms of intention. When sages speak plainly and truthfully, they do so out of the intention to assist or benefit others - sages have no wish to harm other people with words, or initiate an argument with them.

Oftentimes we think we are helping friends by arguing with them (to "make them see"), but because this brings contention into the relationship, it is usually more harmful than helpful.

People are hardly at their best when a debate causes them to become defensive and unyielding.

Another important point related to the first two lines is that sages do not give insincere praise.

Saying what people want to hear (beautiful words) may make them feel comfortable in the short term, but if such words distort or conceal reality, they can only lead to harm in the long run.