

# *Tao Te Ching*

Also by Carol Deppe

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# *Tao Te Ching*

**A Window to the Tao  
through the Words of  
Lao Tzu**

**Carol Deppe**

Fertile Valley Publishing  
Corvallis, Oregon

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for my sister

Janice Wilson

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## Introduction

*Tao Te Ching* dates to about 400 B.C.E. and is traditionally held to have been written by the Chinese Sage Lao Tzu. *Tao Te Ching* is at the foundation of both philosophical and religious Taoism, and is part of the core of all Chinese religion and philosophy. *Tao Te Ching* has been translated more frequently than any other book except the Bible.

In English, *Tao Te Ching*, pronounced approximately “Dow Deh Jeeng,” is sometimes referred to as *The Book of the Way*. The Chinese title is so famous, however, and the words *Tao* and *Te* so untranslatable, that we usually call even English versions by the Chinese title, *Tao Te Ching*.

*Tao* includes the concepts of way, path, to walk, art, science, force, power, God, and to express/speak/tell. *Te* contains the concepts of Self, character, essence, integrity, and virtue. *Te* may be thought of as the way *Tao* expresses itself in things and people. *Ching* means “classic” or “classic book.” What *Tao*

*Te Ching* is about is the universe, life, and how to live.

The original ancient Chinese *Tao Te Ching* was apparently an oral work. It was meant to be recited out loud, meant to be memorized. So is this adaptation. In this adaptation, the text of *Tao Te Ching* has been rearranged and reworked to make it easy to remember and memorize in English. The verse numbers do not correspond to those of other versions. (The earliest copies of *Tao Te Ching* are one long poem with few divisions. The verse divisions were added later, and are somewhat arbitrary.)

*Tao Te Ching* is presented here in four versions that differ only by whether *Sage/Master* is translated as *Sage* or *Master*, and by whether the pronouns associated with the Sage/Master are masculine or feminine. Chinese pronouns do not have gender, and Taoist tradition includes both male and female Sages and Masters. So all versions are legitimate. *Tao Te Ching* is a window to the Tao. Each of these four versions are slightly different windows. Choose the window through which you can see most clearly.

This adaptation of *Tao Te Ching* is primarily for English speaking people who grew up in the milieu of Western culture. Western philosophy, like all philosophies, has certain weaknesses and limitations. Western philosophy tends to be essentially hierarchical and dualistic. It conceives of everything in terms of discrete classes of ranked and competing opposites: creator or created, real or apparent, objective or subjective, logical or emotional, good or bad, right or wrong, soul or body, male or female, man or nature. In each case the categories are discrete, that is, everything is assumed to fall cleanly into one class or the other. And in every case the first category is considered to be superior to the second, and in conflict with it.

Within the traditional Western philosophical framework, humans and nature are inherently separate, opposed, and in conflict. Conquering nature seems right and proper. Exploiting maximally seems not only useful but a moral obligation. To be fully human seems to require destroying, controlling, or even eliminating nature entirely. Western philosophy provides little basis for thinking in

terms of cooperating with or preserving nature, or with exercising restraint so as to protect the environment. Today we need a different frame of reference.

The dualistic frame of reference excels at classifying, categorizing, and excluding. In a dualistic framework everyone has to fall into one race or another. As soon as two races are named, one has to be better. It seems natural for them to be in conflict. It seems natural that one should dominate. Many of us today do not concur with these assumptions.

Dualism promotes war. Our nation or group is better. Theirs is inferior. Our ways are right, theirs wrong. It seems natural that we should dominate and subjugate others. In an age in which the consequences of wars are so devastating, we might prefer a frame of reference that does not incite or justify so many.

Western philosophy lends itself to hierarchies and authoritarianism. God is greater than man is greater than woman. King is greater than lord is greater than peasant. The master is inherently superior to the servant. The boss is inherently superior to the em-

ployee. Any rise from servant to master, employee to boss, uneducated to educated, or poor to wealthy violates the basic assumptions and seems to threaten the natural order. Democracy has no place in the dualistic framework. The philosophical basis of America is at odds with the basic Western intellectual framework we inherited.

The dualistic frame of reference is a particular problem for women. Within it, either male must be superior to female and dominate her, or the reverse. Many of us, women and men, don't like either choice. We want other options.

*Tao Te Ching* is non-dualistic. It speaks of oneness, wholeness, continuum, inclusion, cooperation, complementation. In *Tao Te Ching* everything is connected. In *Tao Te Ching*, the world is a sacred vessel, more easily harmed than improved or controlled. *Tao Te Ching* speaks of practicing restraint, achieving balance, and learning to know how little we know. In *Tao Te Ching* there is female and male, part of each thing and person, part of the natural order of things, essential and complementary. In *Tao Te*

*Ching*, humans and nature are continuous with each other, cooperating naturally, all part of the pattern.

*Tao Te Ching* is a powerful vision of an entirely different frame of reference.

Part I

*Tao Te Ching*





## Chapter 1

# *Tao Te Ching*

## Version A

(Sage, she)

1. The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. Unnamable is the essence. Naming is the beginning of ten thousand particular things. Named are the manifestations. Nameless is the Mystery.

2. Whenever there is beauty there is ugliness. Whenever there is good there is bad. Long and short complete each other. High and low support each other. Difficult and easy need each other. Sound and silence fulfill each other. Front and back follow each other. Form and space shape each other. Life and death give birth to each other. Manifestations and Mystery come from the same source.

3. The Sage is one with the Tao. She acts without forcing. She teaches by showing. Things come and she lets them come. Things go and she lets them go. She gives birth without possessing, achieves without expecting, creates without taking credit, works without needing praise. She completes her work, then forgets it. Her work lasts forever.

4. The Tao is like a fertile valley, filled with creativity, Gateway of the Female, roots of Heaven and Earth.

5. The Tao is like a well, empty but inexhaustible—dark, enduring, deep—ancestor of ten thousand things. However much you use it, you never have to fill it. However much you use it, you never use it up.

6. Edge without sharpness, knot without tangle, hole without emptiness, door without opening. Soft glare. Clear fog. Submerged, indistinct, motherless, older than the gods.

7. Thirty spokes, a rim, and a hub make a wheel. The hole in the center moves the cart. Clay molds into a pot. The emptiness inside holds the food. Roof, walls, and floor frame a house. The space within is where we live. Existence gives the form. Nonexistence gives the meaning.

8. Look for it and you can't see it. Listen for it and you can't hear it. Reach for it and you can't touch it. Grasp at it and you can't hold it. Approach it and it has no beginning. Follow it and it has no end.

9. When the superior hear about the Tao, they immediately endeavor to practice it. When the average hear about the Tao, they try it part way. When the lesser hear about the Tao, they laugh. That's why they are lesser, and the Tao is the Tao.

10. Seek, and with this you will find. If you have committed wrongs, with this you will escape.

11. For the good, their treasure. For the bad, their refuge.

12. The Tao is impartial. It gives birth to both good and evil. The Sage is impartial. She uses whatever life sends her.

13. Heaven covers. Earth supports. Heaven and Earth endure.

14. In living, honor the land. In thinking, be deep. In speaking be truthful. In working, be skillful. In dealing with others, be compassionate. In giving, be generous. In ruling be fair. In acting, be timely.

15. The ten thousand things are female on one side and male on the other. Using both creates vitality. Balancing both creates harmony.

16. Know the male but hold to the female. Know the white but hold to the black. Know the peaks but hold to the valleys. Know complexity but hold to simplicity. Know sound but hold to silence. Know action but hold to stillness. Know knowledge but hold to innocence. Know the manifestations but hold to the mystery.

17. Activity counters cold. Tranquility counters heat.

18. The Tao is the Great Mother. The ten thousand things are all her children. Know the Mother and you will know the children. Know the children and you will know the Mother.

19. First we name. Then we describe. Then we compare. Then we set one first, another last. As soon as we start to name it's time to stop.

20. Fill yourself with utmost emptiness. Embrace internal tranquility. The ten thousand things, see how they arise and flow around you—each one coming into being, growing, adapting, changing, fulfilling, then returning to the source—as you sit in stillness in the center, watching.

21. Be aware, observe, notice. Appreciate the small. Find flavor in the delicate.

22. Live wood is soft and tender. Dead wood is hard and strong. The live leaf is supple. The dead leaf is brittle. The army that isn't flexible never wins a battle. The tree that survives the storm is the one that bends in the wind.

23. Yield and prevail. If you can bend, you can be preserved unbroken. If you can flex, you can be kept straight. If you can be emptied, you can be filled. If you can be worn out, you can be renewed. Those with little can receive much. Those with much can be confused.

24. The Tao is like water. Water takes the lowest way. It flows around obstacles. It has no projections, but it penetrates that which has no crevices. It's the softest of all things, but it grinds rock. It resists nothing, but is irresistible. It asks for nothing, but nourishes everything. It strives for nothing, but transforms everything.

25. One who is one with the Tao is like a newborn boy-child. His body is soft and pliant but his grasp is strong. He doesn't yet know the union of male and female, but his organ stands up. He can scream all day without getting hoarse or sleep utterly peacefully. He does just what he should be doing at each moment. He is completely natural.

26. The Sage is cautious, like one who fords a river in winter—careful, like one restrained in speaking—formal, like a host—courteous, like a guest—generous, like a fertile valley—plain, like uncarved wood—natural, like a tree in the wilderness—calm and serene, like a still pool of deep water.

27. Be detached. Work with joy, without caring for the achievement. Travel with joy, without focusing on the destination.

28. On disaster good fortune perches. Beneath good fortune disaster crouches. Straight becomes crooked, which becomes straight again. Good gives rise to evil, which gives rise to good again. There is no beginning or ending.

29. The bright way may seem dark. The straight way may seem crooked. The smooth way may seem rough. The way forward may seem to go backward. True love may seem heartless. True integrity may seem dishonest. True fullness may seem empty. And even the eternal may seem to change.

30. Sincere words may not be beautiful. Beautiful words may not be sincere. The wise may not be learned. The learned may not be wise. The good may not be rich. The rich may not be good. Those who know may not speak. Those who speak may not know.



31. Success is as treacherous as failure. Praise is as useless as blame. Fortune, fame, and favor are as dangerous as disgrace. High status and position can bring you great affliction.

32. You can lose by gaining. You can gain by losing.

33. Trapped in desires, you see only your desires. Trapped in desires, you see surfaces. Free from desires, you see the subtleties. Free from desires, you experience the mystery.

34. Look to achievement for satisfaction and you will never be satisfied. Look to riches for contentment and you will never be content. Look to possessions for happiness and you will never be happy. Look to position for security and you will never be secure. Appreciate what you have. Rejoice in how things are. You lack nothing when you realize—there is nothing lacking.

35. The Sage practices non-knowing. She knows that she does not know what is good and what is evil. So she cleanses her mind of desire for particular ends, and accepts everything, and lets everything happen, and takes joy in everything, and uses everything that comes her way.

36. To know that you know not is sanity. To know not that you know not is sickness. The Sage is her own healer. She cures herself of false knowing.

37. The Sage heals the people. She teaches them non-knowing. When people think they know, they can't be guided. When people know that they don't know, they can find their own way.

38. The Sage desires not to desire. She values what is everywhere. She learns what to unlearn. She returns to what the masses pass by.

39. The Sage puts herself last and is first, puts herself below and is above, gives up personal desires and finds her desires all satisfied, gives up self-interest and finds her interests realized, let's go of everything and is one with everything, empties herself completely and is completely fulfilled.

40. In seeking knowledge, day by day something is added. In following Tao, day by day something is dropped. Day by day you do less and less deliberately. Day by day you don't do more and more. You do less and less and don't do more and more, until everything happens spontaneously. Then you act without acting, and do without doing, and achieve without forcing. And nothing is done. And nothing is left undone.

41. Muddy water, when still, gradually becomes clear. Be still. Let your mud settle and your mind clear. Wait quietly until the right action comes naturally.

42. Grasp at something and lose it. Act with purpose and defeat the purpose.

43. The soldier who goes out ready to die comes back with life and victory. The soldier who goes out caring mostly for living dies and is forgotten.

44. Heaven favors—who knows what or why? Bravery may lead to death and loss. Caution may lead to life and victory. Without fighting you can be good at winning. Without speaking you can be good at responding. Without deliberateness you can be good at planning. No one summons the Tao. It comes on its own. Heaven's net is vast and cast wide, and nothing slips through.

45. The Sage doesn't act on the ten thousand things. She simply helps them be themselves. The Sage doesn't try to change the people. She simply shows them who they are. She leads them back to where they came from. She leads them back to what they have always known.

46. The Sage doesn't speak. She acts. The Sage doesn't teach. She shows. When the Sage rules, people hardly know she is there. When the Sage's work is done, people say, "Look! We did this! All by ourselves!"

47. The Sage is impartial. She is good to the good. She is good to the bad. Such is true good.

48. The good teach. The bad are the raw material. Cherish the teacher and the raw material.

49. Insincere words can be bought and sold. Empty deeds can be used as gifts. Things we see as bad—should they ever be rejected? People we see as bad—should they ever be abandoned?

50. The Sage knows the tally, but doesn't call for the rewards or punishments. Those with virtue can do the accounting. Those without virtue collect the taxes.

51. The Sage accepts everyone as children of the Tao, and treats everyone with compassion, generosity, and understanding.

52. The world says I am great, but strange. If I weren't strange, I couldn't be great. If I were like everyone else, I would be insignificant.

53. Something there is that formed out of Chaos—pure and deep and still—standing alone, unchanging—Mother of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name. I only 'call' it "Tao."

54. I have three treasures I hold and cherish: compassion, frugality, and not needing to be ahead of all under heaven. Compassion gives me courage. Frugality allows generosity. Not needing to be ahead lets me lead the people.

55. Other people are noisy and exuberant. I am silent—like something that has not yet given any sign—like a baby who has not yet smiled. Other people have many possessions. I have nothing. Other people know where they're going and what they're doing. I am ignorant. Other people judge things and make many fine distinctions. I find everything subtle and complex. Other people act with purpose. I drift and float. Formless am I—like the ocean—shapeless, unmoving, unresting. I suck from the breast of the Mother.

56. Heaven covers everything. Can you be as generous? Earth supports everything. Can you be as tolerant?

57. Can you play the part of the female? Can you accept, allow, adapt, flex, bend, change? Can you use everything that comes your way?

58. Can you be natural and spontaneous? Can you be like a new-born babe?

59. Can you love the people? Can you teach and lead and serve them? Can you love them without trying to change them? Can you lead them and leave them free?

60. Can you embrace the One? Can you cleanse and polish and purify the bright mirror of your soul? Can you concentrate and focus your breath and energy? Can you step outside yourself and understand all within the four reaches?

61. Give birth without owning. Love without possessing. Teach without making dependent. Lead without trying to control. Act by helping things happen naturally. Guide by helping things grow naturally. Empty yourself, and let the Tao fill you and move through you and use you as part of the pattern.



62. The Tao takes no action. Yet everything happens. If leaders could hold to it, the world would transform spontaneously. If, after the transformation, some wanted to take action, I would calm them with nameless simplicity.

63. If I had just the smallest speck of wisdom, I could walk on the Great Way, and the only fear I would have would be of going astray. The Great Way is straight and smooth and easy to follow. But people delight in the crooked and rough and difficult.

64. My words are easy to understand and easy to put into practice. But few understand, and few put them into practice.

65. If everyone understood, what use would I be? It's because few understand that I can be of great value.

66. A few will stop to hear about the Tao. Everyone will stop for food or music.

67. The light rests on the heavy. The mountain grows from the valley. The noble is rooted in the common. Clear water floats over mud. The Sage knows her roots. She loves, understands, and honors ordinary people.

68. In expression, to be brief is natural. A whirlwind doesn't last all morning. A cloud-burst doesn't last all day.

69. Boasting and bragging are extra food and unnecessary baggage. They impede traveling on the Way.

70. Self-praise is no praise. When you describe an imaginary carriage, dream as you wish, embellish as you want, enumerate all the features as you will—there is still no carriage.

71. A jade necklace shines brightly, displays itself for everyone, jingles constantly. The Sage is not like the jade. She just rumbles occasionally—like a rock.

72. The Sage gives herself to others, then is even greater. The Sage uses what she has for others, then has even more. The Tao nurtures everything and harms nothing. The Sage helps all and hurts none.

73. The Sage gives, but she doesn't give her Self away. The Sage serves, but she serves her Self first. The best commander isn't killed or captured. How could the armies prevail without the commander?

74. The Sage travels all day without ever losing sight of her baggage. When she is safely within a walled-in hostel, then she relaxes and transcends all cares.

75. Look for virtue and success, and you find them everywhere. Look for failure and loss, and they constantly befall you.

76. Use the Way as the means, and the end will be one with the Way. Follow the Way and the Way will be straight before you.

77. Too much light causes blindness. Too much sound causes deafness. Too much indulgence in physical pleasures causes distraction and dissipation. Having too many possessions impedes traveling on the Way.

78. The Sage holds to the center. She dwells in the substance, not in the surface, in the fruit, not in the flower, in reality, not in appearances, in the essence, not in the ornament.

79. Fill your cup too full and it will spill. Sharpen your knife too much and it will blunt. Acquire too much and you will be unable to protect it. Climb too high and you will be unable to maintain it. Too much pride brings on its own disaster. Too much study leads to exhaustion. More words mean less. Walk too far and you will pass your destination.

80. The skillful carver does little cutting. The skillful traveler leaves few tracks and traces. The skillful binding takes few knots, but does not come undone. The skillful speaker uses few words.

81. The Sage is sharp, but doesn't cut. The Sage is pointed, but doesn't pierce. The Sage is straightforward, but not unrestrained. The Sage is bright, but doesn't dazzle.

82. The greatest mistake is desiring too much. The greatest sorrow is not knowing when you have enough. The greatest fault is needing to compete. The greatest defect is not knowing when to stop.

83. Stop trouble before it starts. Make order before there is chaos. Deal with the small before it is large. Deal with the few before they are many. Begin the difficult while it is easy. Approach the great work through a series of small tasks. The largest evergreen grows from a tiny seedling. The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

84. If you rush into action, you may stumble. If you stand on tiptoe you do not stand stable. Failure comes most often near completion. Be as careful at the end as the beginning.

85. One who is one with the Tao acts without acting. One who is less with the Tao acts with purpose. The greatest self is not self-conscious. The lesser self is always aware of itself. The greatest integrity is spontaneous. The lesser integrity is deliberate. The greatest virtue is unaware of virtue. The lesser virtue never loses sight of virtue.

86. To know others is knowledge. To know Self is wisdom. To control others shows power. To control Self is to be truly powerful. To know when you have enough is to be rich. To know when to act is to act appropriately. To know when to hold your place is to endure. To live at one with the Tao is to live forever.

87. You can't get too close to the Sage. You can't shun her. You can't help her. You can't harm her. You can't ennoble her. You can't debase her. She is already the noblest thing under heaven.

88. The best leader is invisible. The next best is loved and praised. The next is feared. The worst is ridiculed.

89. The best warrior isn't warlike. The best fighter isn't aggressive. The best commander avoids combat. The best ruler serves the people.

90. Ruling a large state is like frying a small fish. Cook it too much and you ruin it. Poke at it too much and it falls apart.

91. When government is weak and invisible, people are open and honest. When government is powerful and interfering, people are secretive and devious.

92. Too many taxes and the people starve. Too many rules and regulations and the people chafe and fret. When there is too much reward for success or too little room for succeeding, people will compete desperately. When goods are priced too high or wages too low, people will steal. When they are constantly shown good things they cannot have, people will rebel.

93. When mansions are kept very clean, and rich people wear fine clothes, and carry sharp swords, and gorge themselves on expensive foods, and have luxurious possessions—while the fields of the poor are full of weeds, and in the villages, the granaries are empty—this is thievery! This is not the Way!

94. When the Way is lost, there is virtue. When virtue is lost there is humanity. When humanity is lost there is righteousness. When righteousness is lost, there is propriety. Propriety is the beginning of chaos. When people don't respond, it rolls up its sleeves and uses force.



95. Killing people in place of the master executioner is like cutting wood in place of the head carpenter. Cut wood in place of the head carpenter, and you are likely to cut your own hands.

96. When a nation loses the Way, weapons abound, and warhorses are stabled in the suburbs.

97. Weapons are instruments of ill omen. They should never be made into things of beauty. To worship weapons is to glorify in killing.

98. Don't deal in violence. Violence rebounds. Don't glorify in war. Use weapons only when there is no other choice. After war the famines come. Where armies go, thorns and brambles grow.

99. The world is a sacred vessel. You can't improve it. Act on it to improve it and you ruin it. Try to control it and you come to ruin.

100. The Way of Heaven is like the flexing of a bow. The high is drawn down. The low is brought up. When the string is pulled, all the parts move.

101. You don't need to leave home in order to see the world. You don't have to look out your window in order to find the way. The harder you search the less you find. The farther you go the less you see.

102. The Sage sees without looking, finds without searching, and arrives without going anywhere.

103. Build your foundation upon it. What is firmly founded cannot be torn down. Embrace it. What is embraced tightly will be held. Cultivate it in yourself. Nurture it in your family. Practice it in your city. Express it in your state. Spread it throughout the universe. Let it overflow.

104. Square without corners, vessel without walls, soundless tone, formless image—that is the shape of the Tao. Accept, allow, adapt, flex, bend, change—that is the method of the Tao. Create, complete, fulfill, reverse, return, renew—that is the movement of the Tao.

105. Every particular thing is a manifestation of the Tao. The Tao gives rise to all things. The Tao fulfills them. To the Tao they return. That is why everything venerates the Tao. That is why we find the Tao when we look inside ourselves.

106. There is a time for living and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for reaping, a time for motion and a time for stillness, a time for working and a time for rest.

107. The Tao gives birth to all things, nourishes them, shelters them, cares for them, comforts them, and in the end, receives them back into itself.



## Chapter 2

# *Tao Te Ching*

## Version B

(Master, she)

1. The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. Unnamable is the essence. Naming is the beginning of ten thousand particular things. Named are the manifestations. Nameless is the mystery.

2. Whenever there is beauty there is ugliness. Whenever there is good there is bad. Long and short complete each other. High and low support each other. Difficult and easy need each other. Sound and silence fulfill each other. Front and back follow each other. Form and space shape each other. Life and death give birth to each other. Manifestations and Mystery come from the same source.

3. The Master is one with the Tao. She acts without forcing. She teaches by showing. Things come and she lets them come. Things go and she lets them go. She gives birth without possessing, achieves without expecting, creates without taking credit, works without needing praise. She completes her work, then forgets it. Her work lasts forever.

4. The Tao is like a fertile valley, filled with creativity, Gateway of the Female, roots of Heaven and Earth.

5. The Tao is like a well, empty but inexhaustible—dark, enduring, deep—ancestor of ten thousand things. However much you use it, you never have to fill it. However much you use it, you never use it up.

6. Edge without sharpness, knot without tangle, hole without emptiness, door without opening. Soft glare. Clear fog. Submerged, indistinct, motherless, older than the gods.

7. Thirty spokes, a rim, and a hub make a wheel. The hole in the center moves the cart. Clay molds into a pot. The emptiness inside holds the food. Roof, walls, and floor frame a house. The space within is where we live. Existence gives the form. Nonexistence gives the meaning.

8. Look for it and you can't see it. Listen for it and you can't hear it. Reach for it and you can't touch it. Grasp at it and you can't hold it. Approach it and it has no beginning. Follow it and it has no end.

9. When the superior hear about the Tao, they immediately endeavor to practice it. When the average hear about the Tao, they try it part way. When the lesser hear about the Tao, they laugh. That's why they are lesser, and the Tao is the Tao.

10. Seek, and with this you will find. If you have committed wrongs, with this you will escape.

11. For the good, their treasure. For the bad, their refuge.

12. The Tao is impartial. It gives birth to both good and evil. The Master is impartial. She uses whatever life sends her.

13. Heaven covers. Earth supports. Heaven and Earth endure.

14. In living, honor the land. In thinking, be deep. In speaking be truthful. In working, be skillful. In dealing with others, be compassionate. In giving, be generous. In ruling be fair. In acting, be timely.

15. The ten thousand things are female on one side and male on the other. Using both creates vitality. Balancing both creates harmony.



16. Know the male but hold to the female. Know the white but hold to the black. Know the peaks but hold to the valleys. Know complexity but hold to simplicity. Know sound but hold to silence. Know action but hold to stillness. Know knowledge but hold to innocence. Know the manifestations but hold to the mystery.

17. Activity counters cold. Tranquility counters heat.

18. The Tao is the Great Mother. The ten thousand things are all her children. Know the Mother and you will know the children. Know the children and you will know the Mother.

19. First we name. Then we describe. Then we compare. Then we set one first, another last. As soon as we start to name it's time to stop.

20. Fill yourself with utmost emptiness. Embrace internal tranquility. The ten thousand things, see how they arise and flow around you—each one coming into being, growing, adapting, changing, fulfilling, then returning to the source—as you sit in stillness in the center, watching.

21. Be aware, observe, notice. Appreciate the small. Find flavor in the delicate.

22. Live wood is soft and tender. Dead wood is hard and strong. The live leaf is supple. The dead leaf is brittle. The army that isn't flexible never wins a battle. The tree that survives the storm is the one that bends in the wind.

23. Yield and prevail. If you can bend, you can be preserved unbroken. If you can flex, you can be kept straight. If you can be emptied, you can be filled. If you can be worn out, you can be renewed. Those with little can receive much. Those with much can be confused.

24. The Tao is like water. Water takes the lowest way. It flows around obstacles. It has no projections, but it penetrates that which has no crevices. It's the softest of all things, but it grinds rock. It resists nothing, but is irresistible. It asks for nothing, but nourishes everything. It strives for nothing, but transforms everything.

25. One who is one with the Tao is like a newborn boy-child. His body is soft and pliant but his grasp is strong. He doesn't yet know the union of male and female, but his organ stands up. He can scream all day without getting hoarse or sleep utterly peacefully. He does just what he should be doing at each moment. He is completely natural.

26. The Master is cautious, like one who fords a river in winter—careful, like one restrained in speaking—formal, like a host—courteous, like a guest—generous, like a fertile valley—plain, like uncarved wood—natural, like a tree in the wilderness—calm and serene, like a still pool of deep water.

27. Be detached. Work with joy, without caring for the achievement. Travel with joy, without focusing on the destination.

28. On disaster good fortune perches. Beneath good fortune disaster crouches. Straight becomes crooked, which becomes straight again. Good gives rise to evil, which gives rise to good again. There is no beginning or ending.

29. The bright way may seem dark. The straight way may seem crooked. The smooth way may seem rough. The way forward may seem to go backward. True love may seem heartless. True integrity may seem dishonest. True fullness may seem empty. And even the eternal may seem to change.

30. Sincere words may not be beautiful. Beautiful words may not be sincere. The wise may not be learned. The learned may not be wise. The good may not be rich. The rich may not be good. Those who know may not speak. Those who speak may not know.

31. Success is as treacherous as failure. Praise is as useless as blame. Fortune, fame, and favor are as dangerous as disgrace. High status and position can bring you great affliction.

32. You can lose by gaining. You can gain by losing.

33. Trapped in desires, you see only your desires. Trapped in desires, you see surfaces. Free from desires, you see the subtleties. Free from desires, you experience the mystery.

34. Look to achievement for satisfaction and you will never be satisfied. Look to riches for contentment and you will never be content. Look to possessions for happiness and you will never be happy. Look to position for security and you will never be secure. Appreciate what you have. Rejoice in how things are. You lack nothing when you realize—there is nothing lacking.

35. The Master practices non-knowing. She knows that she does not know what is good and what is evil. So she cleanses her mind of desire for particular ends, and accepts everything, and lets everything happen, and takes joy in everything, and uses everything that comes her way.

36. To know that you know not is sanity. To know not that you know not is sickness. The Master is her own healer. She cures herself of false knowing.

37. The Master heals the people. She teaches them non-knowing. When people think they know, they can't be guided. When people know that they don't know, they can find their own way.

38. The Master desires not to desire. She values what is everywhere. She learns what to unlearn. She returns to what the masses pass by.

39. The Master puts herself last and is first, puts herself below and is above, gives up personal desires and finds her desires all satisfied, gives up self-interest and finds her interests realized, let's go of everything and is one with everything, empties herself completely and is completely fulfilled.

40. In seeking knowledge, day by day something is added. In following Tao, day by day something is dropped. Day by day you do less and less deliberately. Day by day you don't do more and more. You do less and less and don't do more and more, until everything happens spontaneously. Then you act without acting, and do without doing, and achieve without forcing. And nothing is done. And nothing is left undone.

41. Muddy water, when still, gradually becomes clear. Be still. Let your mud settle and your mind clear. Wait quietly until the right action comes naturally.

42. Grasp at something and lose it. Act with purpose and defeat the purpose.

43. The soldier who goes out ready to die comes back with life and victory. The soldier who goes out caring mostly for living dies and is forgotten.

44. Heaven favors—who knows what or why? Bravery may lead to death and loss. Caution may lead to life and victory. Without fighting you can be good at winning. Without speaking you can be good at responding. Without deliberateness you can be good at planning. No one summons the Tao. It comes on its own. Heaven's net is vast and cast wide, and nothing slips through.

45. The Master doesn't act on the ten thousand things. She simply helps them be themselves. The Master doesn't try to change the people. She simply shows them who they are. She leads them back to where they came from. She leads them back to what they have always known.



46. The Master doesn't speak. She acts. The Master doesn't teach. She shows. When the Master rules, the people hardly know she is there. When the Master's work is done, the people say, "Look! We did this! All by ourselves!"

47. The Master is impartial. She is good to the good. She is good to the bad. Such is true good.

48. The good teach. The bad are the raw material. Cherish the teacher and the raw material.

49. Insincere words can be bought and sold. Empty deeds can be used as gifts. Things we see as bad—should they ever be rejected? People we see as bad—should they ever be abandoned?

50. The Master knows the tally, but doesn't call for the rewards or punishments. Those with virtue can do the accounting. Those without virtue collect the taxes.

51. The Master accepts everyone as children of the Tao, and treats everyone with compassion, generosity, and understanding.

52. The world says I am great, but strange. If I weren't strange, I couldn't be great. If I were like everyone else, I would be insignificant.

53. Something there is that formed out of Chaos—pure and deep and still—standing alone, unchanging—Mother of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name. I only 'call' it "Tao."

54. I have three treasures I hold and cherish: compassion, frugality, and not needing to be ahead of all under heaven. Compassion gives me courage. Frugality allows generosity. Not needing to be ahead lets me lead the people.

55. Other people are noisy and exuberant. I am silent—like something that has not yet given any sign—like a baby who has not yet smiled. Other people have many possessions. I have nothing. Other people know where they're going and what they're doing. I am ignorant. Other people judge things and make many fine distinctions. I find everything subtle and complex. Other people act with purpose. I drift and float. Formless am I—like the ocean—shapeless, unmoving, unresting. I suck from the breast of the Mother.

56. Heaven covers everything. Can you be as generous? Earth supports everything. Can you be as tolerant?

57. Can you play the part of the female? Can you accept, allow, adapt, flex, bend, change? Can you use everything that comes your way?

58. Can you be natural and spontaneous? Can you be like a new-born babe?

59. Can you love the people? Can you teach and lead and serve them? Can you love them without trying to change them? Can you lead them and leave them free?

60. Can you embrace the One? Can you cleanse and polish and purify the bright mirror of your soul? Can you concentrate and focus your breath and energy? Can you step outside yourself and understand all within the four reaches?

61. Give birth without owning. Love without possessing. Teach without making dependent. Lead without trying to control. Act by helping things happen naturally. Guide by helping things grow naturally. Empty yourself, and let the Tao fill you and move through you and use you as part of the pattern.

62. The Tao takes no action. Yet everything happens. If leaders could hold to it, the world would transform spontaneously. If, after the transformation, some wanted to take action, I would calm them with nameless simplicity.

63. If I had just the smallest speck of wisdom, I could walk on the Great Way, and the only fear I would have would be of going astray. The Great Way is straight and smooth and easy to follow. But people delight in the crooked and rough and difficult.

64. My words are easy to understand and easy to put into practice. But few understand, and few put them into practice.

65. If everyone understood, what use would I be? It's because few understand that I can be of great value.

66. A few will stop to hear about the Tao. Everyone will stop for food or music.

67. The light rests on the heavy. The mountain grows from the valley. The noble is rooted in the common. Clear water floats over mud. The Master knows her roots. She loves, understands, and honors ordinary people.

68. In expression, to be brief is natural. A whirlwind doesn't last all morning. A cloud-burst doesn't last all day.

69. Boasting and bragging are extra food and unnecessary baggage. They impede traveling on the Way.

70. Self-praise is no praise. When you describe an imaginary carriage, dream as you wish, embellish as you want, enumerate all the features as you will—there is still no carriage.

71. A jade necklace shines brightly, displays itself for everyone, jingles constantly. The Master is not like the jade. She just rumbles occasionally—like a rock.

72. The Master gives herself to others, then is even greater. The Master uses what she has for others, then has even more. The Tao nurtures everything and harms nothing. The Master helps all and hurts none.

73. The Master gives, but she doesn't give her Self away. The Master serves, but she serves her Self first. The best commander isn't killed or captured. How could the armies prevail without the commander?

74. The Master travels all day without ever losing sight of her baggage. When she is safely within a walled-in hostel, then she relaxes and transcends all cares.

75. Look for virtue and success, and you find them everywhere. Look for failure and loss, and they constantly befall you.

76. Use the Way as the means, and the end will be one with the Way. Follow the Way and the Way will be straight before you.

77. Too much light causes blindness. Too much sound causes deafness. Too much indulgence in physical pleasures causes distraction and dissipation. Having too many possessions impedes traveling on the Way.

78. The Master holds to the center. She dwells in the substance, not in the surface, in the fruit, not in the flower, in reality, not in appearances, in the essence, not in the ornament.

79. Fill your cup too full and it will spill. Sharpen your knife too much and it will blunt. Acquire too much and you will be unable to protect it. Climb too high and you will be unable to maintain it. Too much pride brings on its own disaster. Too much study leads to exhaustion. More words mean less. Walk too far and you will pass your destination.

80. The skillful carver does little cutting. The skillful traveler leaves few tracks and traces. The skillful binding takes few knots, but does not come undone. The skillful speaker uses few words.



81. The Master is sharp, but doesn't cut. The Master is pointed, but doesn't pierce. The Master is straightforward, but not unrestrained. The Master is bright, but doesn't dazzle.

82. The greatest mistake is desiring too much. The greatest sorrow is not knowing when you have enough. The greatest fault is needing to compete. The greatest defect is not knowing when to stop.

83. Stop trouble before it starts. Make order before there is chaos. Deal with the small before it is large. Deal with the few before they are many. Begin the difficult while it is easy. Approach the great work through a series of small tasks. The largest evergreen grows from a tiny seedling. The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

84. If you rush into action, you may stumble. If you stand on tiptoe you do not stand stable. Failure comes most often near completion. Be as careful at the end as the beginning.

85. One who is one with the Tao acts without acting. One who is less with the Tao acts with purpose. The greatest Self is not self-conscious. The lesser Self is always aware of itself. The greatest integrity is spontaneous. The lesser integrity is deliberate. The greatest virtue is unaware of virtue. The lesser virtue never loses sight of virtue.

86. To know others is knowledge. To know Self is wisdom. To control others shows power. To control Self is to be truly powerful. To know when you have enough is to be rich. To know when to act is to act appropriately. To know when to hold your place is to endure. To live at one with the Tao is to live forever.

87. You can't get too close to the Master. You can't shun her. You can't help her. You can't harm her. You can't ennoble her. You can't debase her. She is already the noblest thing under heaven.

88. The best leader is invisible. The next best is loved and praised. The next is feared. The worst is ridiculed.

89. The best warrior isn't warlike. The best fighter isn't aggressive. The best commander avoids combat. The best ruler serves the people.

90. Ruling a large state is like frying a small fish. Cook it too much and you ruin it. Poke at it too much and it falls apart.

91. When government is weak and invisible, people are open and honest. When government is powerful and interfering, people are secretive and devious.

92. Too many taxes and the people starve. Too many rules and regulations and the people chafe and fret. When there is too much reward for success or too little room for succeeding, people will compete desperately. When goods are priced too high or wages too low, people will steal. When they are constantly shown good things they cannot have, people will rebel.

93. When mansions are kept very clean, and rich people wear fine clothes, and carry sharp swords, and gorge themselves on expensive foods, and have luxurious possessions—while the fields of the poor are full of weeds, and in the villages, the granaries are empty—this is thievery! This is not the Way!

94. When the Way is lost, there is virtue. When virtue is lost there is humanity. When humanity is lost there is righteousness. When righteousness is lost, there is propriety. Propriety is the beginning of chaos. When people don't respond, it rolls up its sleeves and uses force.

95. Killing people in place of the master executioner is like cutting wood in place of the head carpenter. Cut wood in place of the head carpenter, and you are likely to cut your own hands.

96. When a nation loses the Way, weapons abound, and warhorses are stabled in the suburbs.

97. Weapons are instruments of ill omen. They should never be made into things of beauty. To worship weapons is to glorify in killing.

98. Don't deal in violence. Violence rebounds. Don't glorify in war. Use weapons only when there is no other choice. After war the famines come. Where armies go, thorns and brambles grow.

99. The world is a sacred vessel. You can't improve it. Act on it to improve it and you ruin it. Try to control it and you come to ruin.

100. The Way of Heaven is like the flexing of a bow. The high is drawn down. The low is brought up. When the string is pulled, all the parts move.

101. You don't need to leave home in order to see the world. You don't have to look out your window in order to find the way. The harder you search the less you find. The farther you go the less you see.

102. The Master sees without looking, finds without searching, and arrives without going anywhere.

103. Build your foundation upon it. What is firmly founded cannot be torn down. Embrace it. What is embraced tightly will be held. Cultivate it in yourself. Nurture it in your family. Practice it in your city. Express it in your state. Spread it throughout the universe. Let it overflow.

104. Square without corners, vessel without walls, soundless tone, formless image—that is the shape of the Tao. Accept, allow, adapt, flex, bend, change—that is the method of the Tao. Create, complete, fulfill, reverse, return, renew—that is the movement of the Tao.

105. Every particular thing is a manifestation of the Tao. The Tao gives rise to all things. The Tao fulfills them. To the Tao they return. That is why everything venerates the Tao. That is why we find the Tao when we look inside ourselves.

106. There is a time for living and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for reaping, a time for motion and a time for stillness, a time for working and a time for rest.

107. The Tao gives birth to all things, nourishes them, shelters them, cares for them, comforts them, and in the end, receives them back into itself.





## Chapter 3

# *Tao Te Ching*

## Version C

(Sage, he)

1. The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. Unnamable is the essence. Naming is the beginning of ten thousand particular things. Named are the manifestations. Nameless is the Mystery.

2. Whenever there is beauty there is ugliness. Whenever there is good there is bad. Long and short complete each other. High and low support each other. Difficult and easy need each other. Sound and silence fulfill each other. Front and back follow each other. Form and space shape each other. Life and death give birth to each other. Manifestations and Mystery come from the same source.

3. The Sage is one with the Tao. He acts without forcing. He teaches by showing. Things come and he lets them come. Things go and he lets them go. He gives birth without possessing, achieves without expecting, creates without taking credit, works without needing praise. He completes his work, then forgets it. His work lasts forever.

4. The Tao is like a fertile valley, filled with creativity, Gateway of the Female, roots of Heaven and Earth.

5. The Tao is like a well, empty but inexhaustible—dark, enduring, deep—ancestor of ten thousand things. However much you use it, you never have to fill it. However much you use it, you never use it up.

6. Edge without sharpness, knot without tangle, hole without emptiness, door without opening. Soft glare. Clear fog. Submerged, indistinct, motherless, older than the gods.

7. Thirty spokes, a rim, and a hub make a wheel. The hole in the center moves the cart. Clay molds into a pot. The emptiness inside holds the food. Roof, walls, and floor frame a house. The space within is where we live. Existence gives the form. Nonexistence gives the meaning.

8. Look for it and you can't see it. Listen for it and you can't hear it. Reach for it and you can't touch it. Grasp at it and you can't hold it. Approach it and it has no beginning. Follow it and it has no end.

9. When the superior hear about the Tao, they immediately endeavor to practice it. When the average hear about the Tao, they try it part way. When the lesser hear about the Tao, they laugh. That's why they are lesser, and the Tao is the Tao.

10. Seek, and with this you will find. If you have committed wrongs, with this you will escape.

11. For the good, their treasure. For the bad, their refuge.

12. The Tao is impartial. It gives birth to both good and evil. The Sage is impartial. He uses whatever life sends him.

13. Heaven covers. Earth supports. Heaven and Earth endure.

14. In living, honor the land. In thinking, be deep. In speaking be truthful. In working, be skillful. In dealing with others, be compassionate. In giving, be generous. In ruling be fair. In acting, be timely.

15. The ten thousand things are female on one side and male on the other. Using both creates vitality. Balancing both creates harmony.

16. Know the male but hold to the female. Know the white but hold to the black. Know the peaks but hold to the valleys. Know complexity but hold to simplicity. Know sound but hold to silence. Know action but hold to stillness. Know knowledge but hold to innocence. Know the manifestations but hold to the mystery.

17. Activity counters cold. Tranquility counters heat.

18. The Tao is the Great Mother. The ten thousand things are all her children. Know the Mother and you will know the children. Know the children and you will know the Mother.

19. First we name. Then we describe. Then we compare. Then we set one first, another last. As soon as we start to name it's time to stop.

20. Fill yourself with utmost emptiness. Embrace internal tranquility. The ten thousand things, see how they arise and flow around you—each one coming into being, growing, adapting, changing, fulfilling, then returning to the source—as you sit in stillness in the center, watching.

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81. The Sage is sharp, but doesn't cut. The Sage is pointed, but doesn't pierce. The Sage is straightforward, but not unrestrained. The Sage is bright, but doesn't dazzle.

82. The greatest mistake is desiring too much. The greatest sorrow is not knowing when you have enough. The greatest fault is needing to compete. The greatest defect is not knowing when to stop.

83. Stop trouble before it starts. Make order before there is chaos. Deal with the small before it is large. Deal with the few before they are many. Begin the difficult while it is easy. Approach the great work through a series of small tasks. The largest evergreen grows from a tiny seedling. The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

84. If you rush into action, you may stumble. If you stand on tiptoe you do not stand stable. Failure comes most often near completion. Be as careful at the end as the beginning.

85. One who is one with the Tao acts without acting. One who is less with the Tao acts with purpose. The greatest Self is not self-conscious. The lesser Self is always aware of itself. The greatest integrity is spontaneous. The lesser integrity is deliberate. The greatest virtue is unaware of virtue. The lesser virtue never loses sight of virtue.

86. To know others is knowledge. To know Self is wisdom. To control others shows power. To control Self is to be truly powerful. To know when you have enough is to be rich. To know when to act is to act appropriately. To know when to hold your place is to endure. To live at one with the Tao is to live forever.

87. You can't get too close to the Sage. You can't shun him. You can't help him. You can't harm him. You can't ennoble him. You can't debase him. He is already the noblest thing under heaven.

88. The best leader is invisible. The next best is loved and praised. The next is feared. The worst is ridiculed.

89. The best warrior isn't warlike. The best fighter isn't aggressive. The best commander avoids combat. The best ruler serves the people.

90. Ruling a large state is like frying a small fish. Cook it too much and you ruin it. Poke at it too much and it falls apart.

91. When government is weak and invisible, people are open and honest. When government is powerful and interfering, people are secretive and devious.

92. Too many taxes and the people starve. Too many rules and regulations and the people chafe and fret. When there is too much reward for success or too little room for succeeding, people will compete desperately. When goods are priced too high or wages too low, people will steal. When they are constantly shown good things they cannot have, people will rebel.

93. When mansions are kept very clean, and rich people wear fine clothes, and carry sharp swords, and gorge themselves on expensive foods, and have luxurious possessions—while the fields of the poor are full of weeds, and in the villages, the granaries are empty—this is thievery! This is not the Way!

94. When the Way is lost, there is virtue. When virtue is lost there is humanity. When humanity is lost there is righteousness. When righteousness is lost, there is propriety. Propriety is the beginning of chaos. When people don't respond, it rolls up its sleeves and uses force.



95. Killing people in place of the master executioner is like cutting wood in place of the head carpenter. Cut wood in place of the head carpenter, and you are likely to cut your own hands.

96. When a nation loses the Way, weapons abound, and warhorses are stabled in the suburbs.

97. Weapons are instruments of ill omen. They should never be made into things of beauty. To worship weapons is to glorify in killing.

98. Don't deal in violence. Violence rebounds. Don't glorify in war. Use weapons only when there is no other choice. After war the famines come. Where armies go, thorns and brambles grow.

99. The world is a sacred vessel. You can't improve it. Act on it to improve it and you ruin it. Try to control it and you come to ruin.

100. The Way of Heaven is like the flexing of a bow. The high is drawn down. The low is brought up. When the string is pulled, all the parts move.

101. You don't need to leave home in order to see the world. You don't have to look out your window in order to find the way. The harder you search the less you find. The farther you go the less you see.

102. The Sage sees without looking, finds without searching, and arrives without going anywhere.

103. Build your foundation upon it. What is firmly founded cannot be torn down. Embrace it. What is embraced tightly will be held. Cultivate it in yourself. Nurture it in your family. Practice it in your city. Express it in your state. Spread it throughout the universe. Let it overflow.

104. Square without corners, vessel without walls, soundless tone, formless image—that is the shape of the Tao. Accept, allow, adapt, flex, bend, change—that is the method of the Tao. Create, complete, fulfill, reverse, return, renew—that is the movement of the Tao.

105. Every particular thing is a manifestation of the Tao. The Tao gives rise to all things. The Tao fulfills them. To the Tao they return. That is why everything venerates the Tao. That is why we find the Tao when we look inside ourselves.

106. There is a time for living and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for reaping, a time for motion and a time for stillness, a time for working and a time for rest.

107. The Tao gives birth to all things, nourishes them, shelters them, cares for them, comforts them, and in the end, receives them back into itself.



## Chapter 4

# *Tao Te Ching*

## Version D

(Master, he)

1. The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. Unnamable is the essence. Naming is the beginning of ten thousand particular things. Named are the manifestations. Nameless is the Mystery.

2. Whenever there is beauty there is ugliness. Whenever there is good there is bad. Long and short complete each other. High and low support each other. Difficult and easy need each other. Sound and silence fulfill each other. Front and back follow each other. Form and space shape each other. Life and death give birth to each other. Manifestations and Mystery come from the same source.

3. The Master is one with the Tao. He acts without forcing. He teaches by showing. Things come and he lets them come. Things go and he lets them go. He gives birth without possessing, achieves without expecting, creates without taking credit, works without needing praise. He completes his work, then forgets it. His work lasts forever.

4. The Tao is like a fertile valley, filled with creativity, Gateway of the Female, roots of Heaven and Earth.

5. The Tao is like a well, empty but inexhaustible—dark, enduring, deep—ancestor of ten thousand things. However much you use it, you never have to fill it. However much you use it, you never use it up.

6. Edge without sharpness, knot without tangle, hole without emptiness, door without opening. Soft glare. Clear fog. Submerged, indistinct, motherless, older than the gods.

7. Thirty spokes, a rim, and a hub make a wheel. The hole in the center moves the cart. Clay molds into a pot. The emptiness inside holds the food. Roof, walls, and floor frame a house. The space within is where we live. Existence gives the form. Nonexistence gives the meaning.

8. Look for it and you can't see it. Listen for it and you can't hear it. Reach for it and you can't touch it. Grasp at it and you can't hold it. Approach it and it has no beginning. Follow it and it has no end.

9. When the superior hear about the Tao, they immediately endeavor to practice it. When the average hear about the Tao, they try it part way. When the lesser hear about the Tao, they laugh. That's why they are lesser, and the Tao is the Tao.

10. Seek, and with this you will find. If you have committed wrongs, with this you will escape.

11. For the good, their treasure. For the bad, their refuge.

12. The Tao is impartial. It gives birth to both good and evil. The Master is impartial. He uses whatever life sends him.

13. Heaven covers. Earth supports. Heaven and Earth endure.

14. In living, honor the land. In thinking, be deep. In speaking be truthful. In working, be skillful. In dealing with others, be compassionate. In giving, be generous. In ruling be fair. In acting, be timely.

15. The ten thousand things are female on one side and male on the other. Using both creates vitality. Balancing both creates harmony.



16. Know the male but hold to the female. Know the white but hold to the black. Know the peaks but hold to the valleys. Know complexity but hold to simplicity. Know sound but hold to silence. Know action but hold to stillness. Know knowledge but hold to innocence. Know the manifestations but hold to the mystery.

17. Activity counters cold. Tranquility counters heat.

18. The Tao is the Great Mother. The ten thousand things are all her children. Know the Mother and you will know the children. Know the children and you will know the Mother.

19. First we name. Then we describe. Then we compare. Then we set one first, another last. As soon as we start to name it's time to stop.

20. Fill yourself with utmost emptiness. Embrace internal tranquility. The ten thousand things, see how they arise and flow around you—each one coming into being, growing, adapting, changing, fulfilling, then returning to the source—as you sit in stillness in the center, watching.

21. Be aware, observe, notice. Appreciate the small. Find flavor in the delicate.

22. Live wood is soft and tender. Dead wood is hard and strong. The live leaf is supple. The dead leaf is brittle. The army that isn't flexible never wins a battle. The tree that survives the storm is the one that bends in the wind.

23. Yield and prevail. If you can bend, you can be preserved unbroken. If you can flex, you can be kept straight. If you can be emptied, you can be filled. If you can be worn out, you can be renewed. Those with little can receive much. Those with much can be confused.

24. The Tao is like water. Water takes the lowest way. It flows around obstacles. It has no projections but it penetrates that which has no crevices. It's the softest of all things, but it grinds rock. It resists nothing, but is irresistible. It asks for nothing, but nourishes everything. It strives for nothing, but transforms everything.

25. One who is one with the Tao is like a newborn boy-child. His body is soft and pliant but his grasp is strong. He doesn't yet know the union of male and female, but his organ stands up. He can scream all day without getting hoarse or sleep utterly peacefully. He does just what he should be doing at each moment. He is completely natural.

26. The Master is cautious, like one who fords a river in winter—careful, like one restrained in speaking—formal, like a host—courteous, like a guest—generous, like a fertile valley—plain, like uncarved wood—natural, like a tree in the wilderness—calm and serene, like a still pool of deep water.

27. Be detached. Work with joy, without caring for the achievement. Travel with joy, without focusing on the destination.

28. On disaster good fortune perches. Beneath good fortune disaster crouches. Straight becomes crooked, which becomes straight again. Good gives rise to evil, which gives rise to good again. There is no beginning or ending.

29. The bright way may seem dark. The straight way may seem crooked. The smooth way may seem rough. The way forward may seem to go backward. True love may seem heartless. True integrity may seem dishonest. True fullness may seem empty. And even the eternal may seem to change.

30. Sincere words may not be beautiful. Beautiful words may not be sincere. The wise may not be learned. The learned may not be wise. The good may not be rich. The rich may not be good. Those who know may not speak. Those who speak may not know.

31. Success is as treacherous as failure. Praise is as useless as blame. Fortune, fame, and favor are as dangerous as disgrace. High status and position can bring you great affliction.

32. You can lose by gaining. You can gain by losing.

33. Trapped in desires, you see only your desires. Trapped in desires, you see surfaces. Free from desires, you see the subtleties. Free from desires, you experience the mystery.

34. Look to achievement for satisfaction and you will never be satisfied. Look to riches for contentment and you will never be content. Look to possessions for happiness and you will never be happy. Look to position for security and you will never be secure. Appreciate what you have. Rejoice in how things are. You lack nothing when you realize—there is nothing lacking.

35. The Master practices non-knowing. He knows that he does not know what is good and what is evil. So he cleanses his mind of desire for particular ends, and accepts everything, and lets everything happen, and takes joy in everything, and uses everything that comes his way.

36. To know that you know not is sanity. To know not that you know not is sickness. The Master is his own healer. He cures himself of false knowing.

37. The Master heals the people. He teaches them non-knowing. When people think they know, they can't be guided. When people know that they don't know, they can find their own way.

38. The Master desires not to desire. He values what is everywhere. He learns what to unlearn. He returns to what the masses pass by.

39. The Master puts himself last and is first, puts himself below and is above, gives up personal desires and finds his desires all satisfied, gives up self-interest and finds his interests realized, let's go of everything and is one with everything, empties himself completely and is completely fulfilled.

40. In seeking knowledge, day by day something is added. In following Tao, day by day something is dropped. Day by day you do less and less deliberately. Day by day you don't do more and more. You do less and less and don't do more and more, until everything happens spontaneously. Then you act without acting, and do without doing, and achieve without forcing. And nothing is done. And nothing is left undone.

41. Muddy water, when still, gradually becomes clear. Be still. Let your mud settle and your mind clear. Wait quietly until the right action comes naturally.

42. Grasp at something and lose it. Act with purpose and defeat the purpose.

43. The soldier who goes out ready to die comes back with life and victory. The soldier who goes out caring mostly for living dies and is forgotten.

44. Heaven favors—who knows what or why? Bravery may lead to death and loss. Caution may lead to life and victory. Without fighting you can be good at winning. Without speaking you can be good at responding. Without deliberateness you can be good at planning. No one summons the Tao. It comes on its own. Heaven's net is vast and cast wide, and nothing slips through.

45. The Master doesn't act on the ten thousand things. He simply helps them be themselves. The Master doesn't try to change the people. He simply shows them who they are. He leads them back to where they came from. He leads them back to what they have always known.



46. The Master doesn't speak. He acts. The Master doesn't teach. He shows. When the Master rules, people hardly know he is there. When the Master's work is done, people say, "Look! We did this! All by ourselves!"

47. The Master is impartial. He is good to the good. He is good to the bad. Such is true good.

48. The good teach. The bad are the raw material. Cherish the teacher and the raw material.

49. Insincere words can be bought and sold. Empty deeds can be used as gifts. Things we see as bad—should they ever be rejected? People we see as bad—should they ever be abandoned?

50. The Master knows the tally, but doesn't call for the rewards or punishments. Those with virtue can do the accounting. Those without virtue collect the taxes.

51. The Master accepts everyone as children of the Tao, and treats everyone with compassion, generosity, and understanding.

52. The world says I am great, but strange. If I weren't strange, I couldn't be great. If I were like everyone else, I would be insignificant.

53. Something there is that formed out of Chaos—pure and deep and still—standing alone, unchanging—Mother of Heaven and Earth. I do not know its name. I only 'call' it "Tao."

54. I have three treasures I hold and cherish: compassion, frugality, and not needing to be ahead of all under heaven. Compassion gives me courage. Frugality allows generosity. Not needing to be ahead lets me lead the people.

55. Other people are noisy and exuberant. I am silent—like something that has not yet given any sign—like a baby who has not yet smiled. Other people have many possessions. I have nothing. Other people know where they're going and what they're doing. I am ignorant. Other people judge things and make many fine distinctions. I find everything subtle and complex. Other people act with purpose. I drift and float. Formless am I—like the ocean—shapeless, unmoving, unresting. I suck from the breast of the Mother.

56. Heaven covers everything. Can you be as generous? Earth supports everything. Can you be as tolerant?

57. Can you play the part of the female? Can you accept, allow, adapt, flex, bend, change? Can you use everything that comes your way?

58. Can you be natural and spontaneous? Can you be like a new-born babe?

59. Can you love the people? Can you teach and lead and serve them? Can you love them without trying to change them? Can you lead them and leave them free?

60. Can you embrace the One? Can you cleanse and polish and purify the bright mirror of your soul? Can you concentrate and focus your breath and energy? Can you step outside yourself and understand all within the four reaches?

61. Give birth without owning. Love without possessing. Teach without making dependent. Lead without trying to control. Act by helping things happen naturally. Guide by helping things grow naturally. Empty yourself, and let the Tao fill you and move through you and use you as part of the pattern.

62. The Tao takes no action. Yet everything happens. If leaders could hold to it, the world would transform spontaneously. If, after the transformation, some wanted to take action, I would calm them with nameless simplicity.

63. If I had just the smallest speck of wisdom, I could walk on the Great Way, and the only fear I would have would be of going astray. The Great Way is straight and smooth and easy to follow. But people delight in the crooked and rough and difficult.

64. My words are easy to understand and easy to put into practice. But few understand, and few put them into practice.

65. If everyone understood, what use would I be? It's because few understand that I can be of great value.

66. A few will stop to hear about the Tao. Everyone will stop for food or music.

67. The light rests on the heavy. The mountain grows from the valley. The noble is rooted in the common. Clear water floats over mud. The Master knows his roots. He loves, understands, and honors ordinary people.

68. In expression, to be brief is natural. A whirlwind doesn't last all morning. A cloud-burst doesn't last all day.

69. Boasting and bragging are extra food and unnecessary baggage. They impede traveling on the Way.

70. Self-praise is no praise. When you describe an imaginary carriage, dream as you wish, embellish as you want, enumerate all the features as you will—there is still no carriage.

71. A jade necklace shines brightly, displays itself for everyone, jingles constantly. The Master is not like the jade. He just rumbles occasionally—like a rock.

72. The Master gives himself to others, then is even greater. The Master uses what he has for others, then has even more. The Tao nurtures everything and harms nothing. The Master helps all and hurts none.

73. The Master gives, but he doesn't give his Self away. The Master serves, but he serves his Self first. The best commander isn't killed or captured. How could the armies prevail without the commander?

74. The Master travels all day without ever losing sight of his baggage. When he is safely within a walled-in hostel, then he relaxes and transcends all cares.

75. Look for virtue and success, and you find them everywhere. Look for failure and loss, and they constantly befall you.

76. Use the Way as the means, and the end will be one with the Way. Follow the Way and the Way will be straight before you.

77. Too much light causes blindness. Too much sound causes deafness. Too much indulgence in physical pleasures causes distraction and dissipation. Having too many possessions impedes traveling on the Way.

78. The Master holds to the center. He dwells in the substance, not in the surface, in the fruit, not in the flower, in reality, not in appearances, in the essence, not in the ornament.

79. Fill your cup too full and it will spill. Sharpen your knife too much and it will blunt. Acquire too much and you will be unable to protect it. Climb too high and you will be unable to maintain it. Too much pride brings on its own disaster. Too much study leads to exhaustion. More words mean less. Walk too far and you will pass your destination.

80. The skillful carver does little cutting. The skillful traveler leaves few tracks and traces. The skillful binding takes few knots, but does not come undone. The skillful speaker uses few words.



81. The Master is sharp, but doesn't cut. The Master is pointed, but doesn't pierce. The Master is straightforward, but not unrestrained. The Master is bright, but doesn't dazzle.

82. The greatest mistake is desiring too much. The greatest sorrow is not knowing when you have enough. The greatest fault is needing to compete. The greatest defect is not knowing when to stop.

83. Stop trouble before it starts. Make order before there is chaos. Deal with the small before it is large. Deal with the few before they are many. Begin the difficult while it is easy. Approach the great work through a series of small tasks. The largest evergreen grows from a tiny seedling. The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

84. If you rush into action, you may stumble. If you stand on tiptoe you do not stand stable. Failure comes most often near completion. Be as careful at the end as the beginning.

85. One who is one with the Tao acts without acting. One who is less with the Tao acts with purpose. The greatest Self is not self-conscious. The lesser Self is always aware of itself. The greatest integrity is spontaneous. The lesser integrity is deliberate. The greatest virtue is unaware of virtue. The lesser virtue never loses sight of virtue.

86. To know others is knowledge. To know Self is wisdom. To control others shows power. To control Self is to be truly powerful. To know when you have enough is to be rich. To know when to act is to act appropriately. To know when to hold your place is to endure. To live at one with the Tao is to live forever.

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90. Ruling a large state is like frying a small fish. Cook it too much and you ruin it. Poke at it too much and it falls apart.

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93. When mansions are kept very clean, and rich people wear fine clothes, and carry sharp swords, and gorge themselves on expensive foods, and have luxurious possessions—while the fields of the poor are full of weeds, and in the villages, the granaries are empty—this is thievery! This is not the Way!

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97. Weapons are instruments of ill omen. They should never be made into things of beauty. To worship weapons is to glorify in killing.

98. Don't deal in violence. Violence rebounds. Don't glorify in war. Use weapons only when there is no other choice. After war the famines come. Where armies go, thorns and brambles grow.

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101. You don't need to leave home in order to see the world. You don't have to look out your window in order to find the way. The harder you search the less you find. The farther you go the less you see.

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103. Build your foundation upon it. What is firmly founded cannot be torn down. Embrace it. What is embraced tightly will be held. Cultivate it in yourself. Nurture it in your family. Practice it in your city. Express it in your state. Spread it throughout the universe. Let it overflow.

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105. Every particular thing is a manifestation of the Tao. The Tao gives rise to all things. The Tao fulfills them. To the Tao they return. That is why everything venerates the Tao. That is why we find the Tao when we look inside ourselves.

106. There is a time for living and a time for dying, a time for planting and a time for reaping, a time for motion and a time for stillness, a time for working and a time for rest.

107. The Tao gives birth to all things, nourishes them, shelters them, cares for them, comforts them, and in the end, receives them back into itself.





Part II

About *Tao Te Ching*



## Chapter 5

### Translating *Tao Te Ching*

The first line of the first verse of *Tao Te Ching* actually says “The Tao that can be taoed is not the unchanging Tao.” Given all the possible meanings of *Tao*, legitimate translations include “The way that can be walked is not the unchanging way,” “The force that can be used is not the real force,” and many other possibilities, as well as “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.” Ancient Chinese text is in symbols that never translated directly into Chinese speech. That is, a reader of the ancient Chinese text would have been looking at a string of concept-indicators that would not have told him or her what specific words to use. The reader would have had to create his or her own verbal rendition. This would have worked fine if the reader already knew *Tao Te Ching* from having first heard it. Then the written version would have consti-

tuted a set of memory cues for recalling what had first been learned orally. When the reading came to be done by others who had never heard the oral version, things must have become very much more problematic. Then the reader would have to invent a spoken version using solely the written cues. It has been said that *Tao Te Ching* does not translate directly into any language, including ancient Chinese, and never did. This is only the beginning of the problems with 'translating' *Tao Te Ching*.

Ancient Chinese did not generally conjugate verbs. There were no tenses. It is up to the translator to decide whether the action is in the past, present, or future. There is little or no grammar. It is not necessarily obvious whether any given word is a noun, verb, adverb, or adjective. There is little or no punctuation, so it is often unclear where one sentence stops and another starts. In addition, the subjects are often implied rather than stated. Pronouns are implied, or, at best, are he/she/it. In some passages there is not even agreement among translators on whether the subject is the Tao (it) or the

Sage/Master (he/she) or you (the reader). The fact that subjects and objects are not always stated separately creates additional problems. In one passage, for example, a word can be translated as either *bowl* or *bow*. Some translators speak of pulling a bow too taut, others tell us about filling a bowl too full. In English, such a disagreement would be easily resolved because the subject and verb would be stated explicitly and separately, thus creating useful redundancy. The rest of the sentence would be about either drawing (a bow) or filling (a bowl). However, filling a bowl too full and drawing a bow too taut are essentially the same concept. In many such cases of ambiguity, though, different choices in translating a single word change the subject, verb, action, concept, and implications.

Traditionally, *Tao Te Ching* is divided into eighty-one verses. The earliest copies don't have those divisions, however. They were added later, probably by someone who felt that the number eighty-one was mystically significant. The points of division are somewhat arbitrary, often dividing material clearly

intended to go together or combining material that clearly represents separate topics.

Worse yet, there is strong internal evidence to suggest that *Tao Te Ching* underwent massive, accidental reorganization. The original order of lines and subjects was probably dramatically different from the standard order that appears in most versions of *Tao Te Ching* today. Many ancient Chinese texts were written on rolls of bamboo strips fastened together with strings. The strings often rotted, releasing the strips and thus destroying the order of the lines. A later curator or copier would then have to guess the order of the strips in order to refasten them or to make a new copy. Strips could migrate from one position to another in the roll. Where several books were stored together, strips or sections of strips could even migrate from one roll to another, thus disappearing from the book to which they belonged and introducing totally extraneous material into some other book.

I think all known copies of *Tao Te Ching* descended from a single copy written on bamboo strips that at some point underwent

catastrophic rearrangement. I think passages from a Legalist text migrated into the beginning of *Tao Te Ching*, and passages from at least two other unrelated texts migrated into the end. Legalist philosophy is similar to the Western philosophy of Machiavelli. Both recognize no moral or ethical principle other than the wishes of those in power. This philosophy is completely at odds with the view the rest of *Tao Te Ching* takes with respect to the proper relationship between rulers and ruled. In this adaptation, I have omitted passages I consider to be spurious intrusions. These included three Legalist passages, a Tiller passage, and a few extraneous lines that appear to be later religious Taoist additions.

In this catastrophe of accidental reorganization, I think the original ending of *Tao Te Ching* was completely destroyed. I believe about half of those lines were lost (either because the bamboo strips themselves rotted or because they migrated into other books). The rest of the lines of the original ending were, I believe, scattered almost at random throughout the rest of the roll. The result is

that *Tao Te Ching* in its standard form has no ending at all. It just peters out. Fortunately, while there is little redundancy within sentences in *Tao Te Ching*, there is much redundancy within the work as a whole. *Tao Te Ching* gives us myriad repeating, overlapping, intersecting images. We can often understand passages even when much is displaced or missing. In this adaptation, I gathered up all the scattered lines and bound them back into the strong ending I envision the *Tao Te Ching* had originally.

There are also many passages in *Tao Te Ching* where a critical image is just a short distance away from where it needs to be. I think these cases represent smaller rearrangements where a strip or a small section of strips migrated just a rank or two or three in the roll. So, more than two thousand years later, I notice that exactly the image I need to understand a passage, when it is missing, is often close at hand—a verse or two or three away, sitting there not fitting with anything where it is—ready to move back to where it belongs.



*Tao Te Ching* contains a mix of the sublime and transcendent interspersed with much lower-grade explanatory material. In some cases it is obvious that later commentary got accidentally or purposely added to the text itself. In addition, there is often lower-grade material included right after sections where a piece was moved within the text. Apparently, when the strings rotted and the bamboo strips were refastened in the wrong positions, new editorial additions would then tend to happen in order to cover up or correct for the fact that the text didn't make sense in the new order. In many cases the explanatory material doesn't actually explain anything at all. It merely attempts to cover up the discontinuity. In some cases it is obvious that the person who made the addition was actually missing the point entirely. In many other cases he tried to explain too much. Exact words cannot tell the Tao. But ambiguous words can invite us to leap beyond words to the pure, wordless concepts. Any attempt to render such ambiguous words exactly is counterproductive. Where many translations seek clarity, in this adaptation I

often sought not clarity, but appropriate ambiguity. I tried to find English words that covered the full range of ambiguity of the word-symbols of *Tao Te Ching*. And in this adaptation of *Tao Te Ching*, I cut all the superfluous or counterproductive explanations and commentary.

English versions of *Tao Te Ching* range from scholarly to interpretative. The scholarly versions must render the words as accurately as possible—spurious material, mistakes, dislocations and all. This impairs their usefulness as spiritual inspiration. The interpretive versions are more concerned with beauty, inspiration, relevance, and meaning for readers today. The scholarly versions are written by people who are scholars of ancient Chinese. Scholars of ancient Chinese are not necessarily Taoists, however. Many of the interpretive versions are written by authors who don't know Chinese, but instead draw on the translations of those who do, and who bring to the work their own personal empathy for the philosophy itself. (The Stephen Mitchell *Tao Te Ching*, a popular Chris-

tian/Zen interpretation, is an example. The more recent version by Ursula LeGuin is another.) I don't know Chinese, ancient or otherwise. This adaptation is solidly within the interpretive tradition. I am a philosophical Taoist, however. This is a philosophical Taoist interpretation of a philosophical Taoist work.

The problem today is not in getting from the ancient Chinese to a literal English version. That is indeed a task for scholars of ancient Chinese. There are already multiple scholarly translations available. The bottleneck is in getting from literal English to an English version that is lucid, powerful, and useful today. In addition, given all the problems inherent in the situation, every translation, including the most scholarly versions, is highly interpretive. Translating *Tao Te Ching* from ancient Chinese symbols to modern English is not like translating words in one language, ancient or modern, into words of another. It is much more like 'translating' a picture to a poem. Furthermore, the original picture had holes and rearrangements in it, and all we have is copies of copies of copies,

each generation corrected and added to by people of various degrees of understanding.

There is really no such thing as a translation of *Tao Te Ching*. All modern versions of *Tao Te Ching* are always a combination of the original with the essence and interpretation of the modern author. For this reason, it's useful to read versions by different authors.

The original *Tao Te Ching* was an oral work, meant to be recited out loud, meant to be memorized. So is this *Tao Te Ching*. I have reorganized and reworked the core text so related material is together. I've cut spurious material. I've ignored the artificial chapter breaks. I've tried to make each verse memorable and able to stand alone. I've also tried to give the overall work an organization that allows it to be easily memorized in its entirety.

*Tao Te Ching* reaches a new dimension in its ability to influence and guide us when we commit it to memory. We recite it to ourselves on arising in the morning and getting ready for the day, when doing chores, when stalled in traffic or stuck in a long line somewhere,

when walking or hiking or exercising, whenever and wherever we need a little more calm and sanity and wisdom, when falling asleep at the end of day. Committed to memory, *Tao Te Ching* is always there when we need it. Each time we recite it we focus on different passages. Each time we recite it, we discover new meaning.



## Chapter 6

### The Ma-wang-tui Silk Texts

The standard text of *Tao Te Ching* is a received text. That is, what we have are copies of copies of copies transmitted down through the generations. All English versions of *Tao Te Ching* before the 1980s are based upon the received text. This adaptation of *Tao Te Ching*, however, draws primarily on the Henricks translation of the Ma-wang-tui silk texts (*Lao Tzu Te-Tao Ching: A New Translation Based on the Recently Discovered Ma-wang-tui Texts*, by Robert G. Henricks).

The Ma-wang-tui silk texts were discovered in 1973 in the village of Ma-wang-tui, Hunan Province, South Central China. In Ma-wang-tui, on April 4, 168 B.C.E., the son of Li Ts'ang was buried in a tomb with a rich array of grave goods. Among these goods, inscribed on silk, were two copies of a work in two parts, labeled simply *Te* and *Tao*. They correspond to the second and first half of the

standard text of *Tao Te Ching*. (The Ma-wang-tui silk texts are not divided into 81 verses. Translations of the Ma-wang-tui texts are usually divided into 81 verses anyway, for comparison with translations of the received text.) From internal evidence, it is clear that one of the two Ma-wang-tui copies was made during the reign of the founding Han emperor, Liu Pang (206-194 B.C.E.) The other was made some time before that. They are thus at least five hundred years older than any other known (complete) texts of *Tao Te Ching*.

The Ma-wang-tui texts include some lines that were missing from all known copies of the received text. However, they are missing some lines that are clearly legitimate, that we have in the received texts. I think there are still some things missing or incorrect in all available texts, that we will not know unless or until there are further archeological discoveries.

The two copies of the Ma-wang-tui silk texts themselves are different. Whole lines are omitted from one or the other, words are left out or altered, the word 'not' is sometimes



omitted, and so on. Copying was done by hand by human beings who made mistakes. Each copier would notice some real as well as other imagined mistakes in the version serving as source, and make changes and corrections, some of which were wrong.

While all versions of both the received text and the Ma-wang-tui contain omissions and errors, fortunately they often have different omissions and errors. For this reason, this adaptation draws on both the Ma-wang-tui and the received text instead of just on the earlier Ma-wang-tui. I depended most heavily on the Ma-wang-tui text, however. It is somewhat more complete. And one of the Ma-wang-tui copies actually has punctuation equivalent to periods and commas. But much more important, in the Ma-wang-tui the spurious material and dislocations are mostly still awkward and obvious. In the received text they have been much more nicely smoothed out and integrated, and thus are much more difficult or even impossible to identify.



## Chapter 7

### Male and Female in *Tao Te Ching*

*Tao Te Ching* overflows with potently female sexual and generative imagery. The Tao itself is presented as basically female. There are numerous references to the Tao as a mother or as giving birth to things. There are none to it as a father or as siring anything. *Tao Te Ching* transcends gender, however. “The ten thousand things are female on one side and male on the other. Using both creates vitality. Balancing both creates harmony.” The ten thousand things are all the things and creatures of the world, we humans among them. “Know the male, but hold to the female,” *Tao Te Ching* tells us. All of us, male or female, should know the male but hold to the female.

Older English translations of *Tao Te Ching* and even many modern versions tend to be highly influenced by traditional Western male

perceptions. The female imagery is often omitted, weakened, watered down, or interpreted as something else. Whenever the translator needs to expand or change the images to convey the meaning, traditional Western masculine imagery is chosen. Even the explicitly female terms are sometimes changed into explicitly male ones. ("Giving birth" becomes "siring," for example.) The Chinese word *jen*, meaning a human being of either sex, is always translated as *man*. The plural becomes *men* instead of *people*. Chinese has no gendered pronouns. The Chinese *he/she/it* is translated *he* or *it*. The Sage/Master, an enlightened person of either sex, gets turned into a man by the choice of masculine pronouns in English.

For some readers, masculine pronouns in English genuinely do refer to human beings of both sexes, and to use any other pronouns seems strange and distracting. For others, especially many women, the choice of masculine pronouns for the Sage/Master seems to exclude women from both text and audience. It subtly implies that only men can be enlightened or aspire to enlightenment.

Women Taoist Masters and Sages have always been a part of Taoist tradition, however. It is fully legitimate to envision the Sage/Master as either male or female. I think the best choice of pronouns for any individual reader is the one that most helps him or her to listen to, learn from, and try to emulate the Sage/Master.

Some translations avoid the gender problem by heavy use of passive voice. That choice has liabilities. Active constructions are usually more powerful and readable. Some translators take the approach of speaking of wise people instead of the Sage/Master. However, the Sage/Master is an inspiring image of what it looks like when the Tao is fully realized through a human being. The image of the Sage/Master is lost when one speaks instead of a wise person or of wise people. The Sage/Master isn't just an ordinary person, a bit wiser than the rest of us. The Sage/Master is an enlightened being. To preserve the power of the Sage/Master image, we usually need active voice in English. This means we need gendered pronouns. And I

think the choice of gender for those pronouns matters profoundly for some readers.

In addition, both *Master* and *Sage* are emotionally loaded words. Many people find one compelling and the other completely unpalatable. So whether *Sage/Master* is translated *Master* or *Sage* also matters profoundly to many.

This book presents four versions of *Tao Te Ching* that differ only by whether *Sage/Master* is translated *Master* or *Sage*, and by the gender of the associated pronouns. All versions are legitimate. Use the version that speaks most powerfully to you.

## Chapter 8

### Who Wrote *Tao Te Ching*?

Taoist tradition holds that *Tao Te Ching* was created and written down about 500 B.C.E. by Lao Tzu, an older contemporary of Confucius. A biography of Lao Tzu is given in the *Shih chi*, the earliest general Chinese history, which was written by Ssu-ma Ch'ien in about 90 B.C.E. *Lao Tzu* only means *Old Master*, however. Neither *Lao* (old) or *Tzu* (Master) were proper names.

According to the biography in the *Shih chi*, Lao Tzu was Li Erh, the historian in charge of the royal archives in Chou, in the state of Ch'u. *Li* was his family name. *Erh* ("ear," implying learned) was his given name. In addition, posthumously he was perhaps called Tan ("long-eared," or wise). Passages very similar to parts of *Tao Te Ching* appear in written works of 400–200 B.C.E. under "Lao Tzu said..." or "Lao Tan said...." Appar-

ently the most learned of that era knew much about what was in *Tao Te Ching* and attributed it to a specific person. But they apparently did not know of any book form of the work.

Two major stories are recorded about Lao Tzu in the *Shih chi*. One story relates how Confucius went to Chou to learn about the rites from Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu dealt with Confucius harshly, telling him that the rites were unimportant, merely words, and words of people whose very bones had rotted away. Then Lao Tzu reprimanded Confucius, telling him that he should cleanse himself of his arrogance, lustfulness, ambition, and desire to ingratiate. "That's all I'll say to you," Lao Tzu supposedly said, dismissing Confucius peremptorily. Confucius went off telling people that when he met Lao Tzu he had met a dragon, a being beyond his ability to deal with or understand. (So says the Taoist but not the Confucian tradition.) At the time of the meeting, Lao Tzu would have been in his eighties and Confucius in his thirties.

The other story about Lao Tzu that appears in *Shih chi* is about Lao Tzu's leaving



Chou and writing his book. According to the story, Lao Tzu taught about Tao and Te, and lived most of his life in Chou. However, when Chou declined, Lao Tzu departed to the West. When he reached the Hanku Pass on his way out of Chou, the Keeper of the Pass said, "Since you are retiring and leaving, would you write down your wisdom in a book for me?" Lao Tzu wrote a book of 5,000 characters in two parts about Tao and Te, and then left and was not heard of again.

Religious Taoist tradition maintains that *Tao Te Ching* had a single author, Lao Tzu, who was Li Ehr Tan. Most modern scholars, however, challenge this view, and feel that *Tao Te Ching* is the work of multiple authors. There is no rigorous evidence for the existence of a Lao Tzu who wrote *Tao Te Ching*. If there was a Lao Tzu who wrote *Tao Te Ching*, it's quite possible he did it somewhat later than 500 B.C.E. If there was a single author who wrote *Tao Te Ching*, he may or may not have ever been called Lao Tzu or Li Ehr or Lao Tan. These names may have become associated with *Tao Te Ching* after the fact.

*Tao Te Ching*, before it came to be considered and named a *ching*, a classic, was called the *Lao Tzu*. Many ancient Chinese books were named after their presumed authors. *Chuang Tzu*, for example, by Chuang Chou, is called by that name to this day. When *Tao Te Ching* was first called the *Lao Tzu*, however, was hundreds of years after the supposed life of Lao Tzu. The earliest copies of *Tao Te Ching* do not mention Lao Tzu or Li Ehr. At some point, *The Book about Tao and Te* was titled *Lao Tzu*, meaning, essentially, "The Wisdom of the Old Master." But this title may not have referred to a specific person. Attribution of authorship in ancient China was often more symbolic than historical anyway. One way of looking at it is that if *Tao Te Ching* had primarily a single author, then *Tao Te Ching* certainly was written by Lao Tzu, the Old Master, by definition—whoever the Old Master was.

Most modern scholars believe that *Tao Te Ching* is an anthology of orally-composed work of many people. Victor H. Mair, a prominent scholar of ancient Chinese documents, thinks that *Tao Te Ching* represents a

period of oral creativity lasting from about 650 to 350 B.C.E. *Tao Te Ching* was probably transmitted orally for a number of generations before being written down, Mair says. He argues that the form of the text is typical of something originally created and transmitted orally. In addition, many of the mistakes in the Ma-wang-tui texts indicate that the person who first wrote it down was much more sure of how the words sounded than how they were written.

A good guess is that *Tao Te Ching* was created orally, transmitted orally for some time, then compiled and written down during the last half of the third century B.C.E. It is apparent that various people added their thoughts, interpretations, explanations, and mistakes right into the text at every stage as the poem was recited, compiled, written, and copied through the ages.

I believe that the essential core of *Tao Te Ching* was composed by a single person, however, who produced a work of transcendental insight and beauty. I do not believe he wrote his work down, though. I imagine that he created his work orally, and that it went

through a number of generations as an oral work before it was compiled and written down by others.

I am inclined to take the essence of the oral tradition literally, and imagine that the transcendental core of *Tao Te Ching* is the work of Lao Tzu, who was Li Ehr, the archivist of Chou. The tradition holds that he was of humble origin, but became widely known for wisdom and learning. Many of the verses in *Tao Te Ching* are such that they would have been composed only by someone of common origin, and someone who did not wield governing or military power. Yet other verses reflect the fact that the author was considered by others to be a Sage. The poignant and powerful set of verses written in first person and addressing us directly (verses 52 through 65)—an extremely unusual form for this era—display great confidence as well as the loneliness and alienation of the seer. These verses even show us his attempts at understanding, accepting, and adjusting to his role.

In addition, a unique and powerful personality seems to shine through *Tao Te*

*Ching*. We see a being who is compassionate, generous, non-controlling, forgiving, and understanding, and who has a serious irreverent streak, a serious rebellious streak, and a distinctive sense of humor. There is no doubt that *Tao Te Ching* has been adulterated and changed through the millennia. But often when we listen, we can still hear a voice that sounds like a bell that rings in pure tones—a voice I came to think of as the original voice of Lao Tzu.

Finally, throughout *Tao Te Ching* we see the practical wisdom of a wise person who was a part of his world. The modern stereotypical image of Taoists is that of monks or hermits living on mountain tops, withdrawn from the affairs of humanity. The withdrawn and cloistered practitioner is certainly a part of modern religious Taoist tradition, but that tradition came later. It is not inherent to philosophical Taoism or *Tao Te Ching*. There is nothing about withdrawing from the world in *Tao Te Ching*, nothing to suggest its author was withdrawn, and nothing suggesting such a course to us.

If Lao Tzu was an archivist, it is not surprising that *Tao Te Ching* is about how to live while fully engaged. Being an archivist was probably some combination of civil servant, museum director, collections curator, scholar, and librarian. The job would have lent itself marvelously to accumulating, studying, and transmitting information. Yet, it was just an ordinary civil service job, and it undoubtedly required a basic ability to get along with people.

In imagining a single author for the transcendental core *Tao Te Ching*, I do not imagine that he invented all the ideas, concepts, or sayings in *Tao Te Ching*. Many of them are known to have existed in some form a thousand or more years earlier than the earliest possible dates given for the life of Lao Tzu. In addition, more literal versions of *Tao Te Ching* include explicit references to the fact that certain sections are not the invention of the current author (references such as "The ancients said," for example). Much of the work of any great writer, however, is restatement and reworking of the ideas and themes of others. Lao Tzu may have invented few of

the ideas. Rather, he probably found many of them in the thoughts and works of others, and reshaped and reformed and compiled and wove them into a more powerful, more memorable, more magnificent whole.

Whoever Lao Tzu was, however, it is clear that he was *not* a recluse or a hermit or monastic. The work he left us does not require being a saint or withdrawing from the world. Nor must we have a special education, birth to a special class, or the huge amounts of time available only to the unemployed rich. *Tao Te Ching* is for everyone. And it is for everyday.

Was the author of *Tao Te Ching* even a man? So much of the wisdom of *Tao Te Ching* is of a kind traditionally associated with women. In addition, the Tao itself is clearly conceived of as basically female, and is referred to explicitly as the Great Mother, for example. Further, *Tao Te Ching* exhorts us to be more female (in a traditional sense of female) in many ways—to more fully actualize the female within ourselves. One might argue from this that the real author might have been a

woman. Perhaps Li Ehr, if he existed, was just getting credit for his wife's work. Or perhaps the work passed from an unknown woman author to her children, relatives, or neighbors, and spread anonymously from there. (Li Ehr, if he existed, might have simply popularized or transmitted the work more widely, not composed it.)

I suspect the encouragement toward and emphasis upon the female in *Tao Te Ching* was in part an attempt on the author's part to correct an imbalance in ancient Chinese society, which was profoundly male-oriented. Had ancient Chinese society been overly female-oriented, I think the author of *Tao Te Ching* would have attempted to correct the situation by encouraging us to be more male. *Tao Te Ching* is not so much exhorting us to be more female as merely encouraging us to be properly well-rounded, versatile, and balanced. I don't think that the essence of *Tao Te Ching* commands us to believe in either a male or female author. The work transcends gender. If written by a man, it was by a man who had a strong and fully realized woman in him. If written by a



woman, it was by a woman who also contained a man.

Whoever he or she was, however—whether the Li Ehr of tradition or some other man or woman—it is fully appropriate to call this person Lao Tzu—The Old Master.



**Appendix A**

**Memorizing Cues**

**(Sage)**

1. The Tao that can be told
2. Whenever there is beauty
3. The Sage is one with the Tao.
4. The Tao is like a fertile valley
5. The Tao is like a well
6. Edge without sharpness
7. Thirty spokes
8. Look for it and you can't see it.
9. When the superior hear about the Tao
10. Seek
11. For the good
12. The Tao is impartial.

13. Heaven covers.
14. In living, honor the land.
15. The ten thousand things
16. Know the male but hold to the female.
17. Activity counters cold.
18. The Tao is the Great Mother.
19. First we name.
20. Fill yourself with utmost emptiness.
21. Be aware
22. Live wood is soft and tender.
23. Yield and prevail.
24. The Sage is one with the Tao.
25. One who is one with the Tao
26. The Sage is cautious
27. Be detached.
28. On disaster good fortune perches.
29. The bright way may seem dark.
30. Sincere words may not be beautiful.

31. Success is as treacherous as failure.
32. You can lose by gaining.
33. Trapped in desires
34. Look to achievement for satisfaction
35. The Sage practices non-knowing.
36. To know that you know not is sanity.
37. The Sage heals the people.
38. The Sage desires not to desire.
39. The Sage puts herself last and is first
40. In seeking knowledge
41. Muddy water
42. Grasp at something
43. The soldier who goes out
44. Heaven favors
45. The Sage doesn't act
46. The Sage doesn't speak.
47. The Sage is impartial.
48. The good teach.

49. Insincere words
50. The Sage knows the tally
51. The Sage accepts everyone
52. The world says I am great
53. Something there is
54. I have three treasures
55. Other people are noisy and exuberant.
56. Heaven covers everything.
57. Can you play the part of the female?
58. Can you be natural and spontaneous?
59. Can you love the people?
60. Can you embrace the One?
61. Give birth without owning.
62. The Tao takes no action.
63. If I had just the smallest speck of wisdom
64. My words
65. If everyone understood
66. A few will stop

67. The light rests on the heavy.
68. In expression
69. Boasting and bragging
70. Self-praise
71. A jade necklace
72. The Sage gives
73. The Sage gives, but
74. The Sage travels all day
75. Look for virtue and success
76. Use the Way as the means
77. Too much light causes blindness.
78. The Sage holds to the Center.
79. Fill your cup too full and it will spill.
80. The skillful carver does little cutting.
81. The Sage is sharp, but doesn't cut.
82. The greatest mistake
83. Stop trouble before it starts.
84. If you rush into action

85. One who is one with the Tao
86. To know others is knowledge.
87. You can't get too close to the Sage.
88. The best leader
89. The best warrior
90. Ruling a large state
91. When government
92. Too many taxes
93. When mansions are kept very clean
94. When the Way is lost, there is virtue.
95. Killing people
96. When a nation loses the Way
97. Weapons
98. Don't deal in violence.
99. The world is a sacred vessel.
100. The Way of Heaven
101. You don't need to leave home
102. The Sage sees without looking



103. Build your foundation upon it.
104. Square without corners
105. Every particular thing
106. There is a time
107. The Tao gives birth to all things



**Appendix B**

**Memorizing Cues**

**(Master)**

1. The Tao that can be told
2. Whenever there is beauty
3. The Master is one with the Tao.
4. The Tao is like a fertile valley
5. The Tao is like a well
6. Edge without sharpness
7. Thirty spokes
8. Look for it and you can't see it.
9. When the superior hear about the Tao
10. Seek
11. For the good
12. The Tao is impartial.

13. Heaven covers.
14. In living, honor the land.
15. The ten thousand things
16. Know the male but hold to the female.
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18. The Tao is the Great Mother.
19. First we name.
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27. Be detached.
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40. In seeking knowledge
41. Muddy water
42. Grasp at something
43. The soldier who goes out
44. Heaven favors
45. The Master doesn't act
46. The Master doesn't speak.
47. The Master is impartial.
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69. Boasting and bragging
70. Self-praise
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83. Stop trouble before it starts.
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89. The best warrior
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91. When government
92. Too many taxes
93. When mansions are kept very clean
94. When the Way is lost, there is virtue.
95. Killing people
96. When a nation loses the Way
97. Weapons
98. Don't deal in violence.
99. The world is a sacred vessel.
100. The Way of Heaven
101. You don't need to leave home
102. The Master sees without looking



103. Build your foundation upon it.
104. Square without corners
105. Every particular thing
106. There is a time
107. The Tao gives birth to all things



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through the Words of Lao Tzu*

**Carol Deppe**

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