

The Living Dao:
The Art and Way of Living
A Rich & Truthful Life

translated
with annotations
by

Lok Sang HO
Lingnan University

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Acknowledgements

I am indebted to all the earlier translators of Laozi, many of whom had translated in a beautiful language and had succeeded in conveying much of the essence of Laozi's teachings. I am particularly indebted to Prof. James Hsiung of New York University, Prof. Yew-kwang Ng of Monash University, and Prof. Laurence Wong of Lingnan University for reading through my manuscript and offering very useful suggestions and advice.

Naturally, different translators had interpreted Laozi differently in places. I am lucky in that I have the benefit of referring to all these different interpretations, dwelling on them, and in the end unlocking many puzzles that had remained in many of the existing translations.

My task is simple: to preserve the meaning of Laozi, to write in plain language, and to let the world know that Daodejing is a practical, down-to-earth guide for any one who aspires to live a rich, peaceful life in harmony with nature and others.

*Lok Sang Ho
Hong Kong*

September 1, 2002

The Living Dao is Living

Because

**It is not bound by the text of this or that
version of Laozi.**

**Names are but names.
Languages are only languages.**

**The translator seeks the truth,
the way of living,
that will bring peace to the mind and the world.**

**In this he is confident
he is one with Laozi.**

Preface

Joseph Conrad, in his famous Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, wrote that the role of the artist is no different from that of the thinker or that of the scientist. Like the latter, he is after the Truth, but whereas the scientist seeks the truth about the physical world, the artist seeks the Truth about the human mind. “The artist appeals to that part of our being which is not dependent on wisdom: to that in us which is a gift and not an acquisition...” Conrad believes this Truth is universal, and that it lies within each of us. He spoke of “the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.” By this he testifies to the universality of human nature. But certainly there is more to human nature than the hopes and fears and the joys and sorrows that he talked about. Thus the aim of art lies “not in the clear logic of a triumphant conclusion; it is not in the unveiling of one of those heartless secrets which are called the Laws of Nature. It is not less great, but only more difficult.”

In the same way, Laozi (often spelled as Lao-Tzu), who wrote the *Daodejing*, tried to describe the indescribable. The truth about the human mind, and about the universal mind, cannot be sought from without. It must be sought from within us. This understanding is a gift, and is not acquired. Indeed, those who try to seek that truth from without are bound to fail. Indeed, we need to unlearn to rediscover the gift. From this perspective it is amazing how much in common there is in Laozi and in Conrad. And it is just as amazing how much common ground there is in the teaching of the Buddha and in that of Laozi.

Laozi used words sparingly, truthful to his belief that words easily become superfluous. People may be misled by words to think in crooked ways. This is also exactly the message of Zen(or “Chan”) Buddhism¹. He would rather use words that trigger the reflective mind. As his subject is really indescribable, he would use symbols. The proliferation of symbolism in the Daodejing is remarkable. “The Valley Spirit”(谷神) is a case in point. In Chinese, the valley provides the image of having a capacity to accept criticisms and alien views. There is the expression “xuhai ruo gu”(虚懷若谷), which means literally “humble and receptive like the valley.” The mystical female is another example of symbolism. The door of the mystical female, which chapter 6 called the “root of heaven and earth,” stands for the source of abundance. Laozi tells us that humility is the origin of creative ideas and a rich life.

The images in Laozi are very effective, but they require imagination. Unfortunately, imagination can go wild, and often times, translators and readers are bewildered by the mystical use of language.

To understand Laozi, we have to understand that he offers a practical way of life, not a mystical recipe to immortality. Paradoxically, however, this practical way of life offers a glimpse to the eternal world. Watch Conrad’s closing remarks in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: “behold—all the truth of life is there: a moment of vision, a sigh, a smile—and the return to an eternal rest.” Compare this language “a sigh, a smile” with the famous episode when the Buddha communicated with one of his disciples. He took up a flower, smiled, and the understanding about life was instantaneously and spontaneously communicated to and realized by that disciple. Then of course there is that famous verse from William Blake: “To see a

¹ Zen is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese word “chan,”(禪) which is itself the transliteration of the Sanskrit term dhyana.

world in a grain of sand and a heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour.” Truthfulness is eternal.

Consider Laozi’s Chapter 70, in which he says “What I say is easy to understand and easy to practice yet few people under heaven understand and practice it.” Compare this with the opening sentence in Chinese Zen (Third Patriarch) Master Sengcan’s(僧燦) *Song of the Truthful Mind*(信心銘) which reads “The supreme way is not difficult, so long as people refrain from preferences.”(至道無難，唯嫌揀擇) The importance of the undiscriminating mind is clear in Chapter 49: “If people are good, I shall be good to them. If people are not good, I shall also be good to them. This way I am really good. If people are truthful, I shall be truthful to them. If people are not truthful, I shall also be truthful to them. This way I am really truthful.” The Sage’s mind is uncalculating and free from all pretences like an infant’s. Again quoting from Sengcan “All tendencies to go to one extreme or to the other arise from the calculating mind.”(一切二邊，良由斟酌。)

What is, then, this practical way of life that Laozi recommends? It is a life in unison with nature. To be with nature is to forget about the narrow self that limits our potential for development. If something is done, one who follows the Dao would not say: “It is me who achieved it.” One would not take any credit because, in the first place, there is no concept of me or I as a separate, independent existence. Moreover, one would only be doing things that one’s inner nature calls upon and enables one to do.

To be with nature one will realize a subtle joy, and this joy is not something to be reaped in the next world. Some people think that Daoist philosophy is “out of the world” but it is really very much “of the world.” In Chapter 80, Laozi saw a world in which people enjoy their foods and beautiful dresses, live happily in peace, and take delight in their traditions.

Consider Chapter 59, in which Laozi says, “To rule over men or to serve heaven nothing works as well as following the farmer’s example. The farmer does his preparatory work early. To be like him, one must pay attention to the accumulation of virtue. That way one can overcome all difficulties. That way one’s ability knows no limit. That way one can sustain a nation.” Chapter 64 advises: “People often fail in their tasks when they are about to accomplish them. If only they take the same care in the end as they do in the beginning, they will avoid many failures.” These are of course very practical, and certainly this-worldly, words of advice.

Because Laozi used his words so sparingly, and because the Chinese language is such that one word can carry multiple meanings, it is easy to be misled. But Laozi never worried about this problem, because after all the insight has to come from within. So he is sure that those who sincerely seek the truth will see the truth (“The door will open up to whoever knocks,” as Jesus says). Still, we should avoid jumping to conclusions. For example, the word 靜 is often translated into quietness. But it also means 靜止 “still,” “undisturbed,” or “rest.” There is reason to believe that Laozi referred to stillness more than to quietness here, since quietness comes from without and stillness of the mind comes from within. Keenly aware of the enlightenment that comes from within, Conrad also talked about the “eternal rest.” Both Laozi and the Buddha talked about seeing reality as it is when the mind is not disturbed.² Another confused and confusing word is 王 as used in Chapter 25. 王 is commonly translated into king. But in the context Laozi really meant the man who follows the Dao. A king who does not follow the Dao cannot be great. This should be very clear from the last line in Chapter 25, in which he says: “The (great)

² There is a famous episode wherein the sixth patriarch of Zen Buddhism, Hui-neng, upon hearing two observers debate over whether it was the wind that was moving or the flag flying in the wind that was moving, pointed out that the observers were themselves confused, their minds having been moved by what was observed.

man emulates the (great) Earth. The (great) earth emulates the (great) Heaven, The (great) heaven emulates the (great) Dao. The (great) Dao emulates the (great) Nature.”

The Daodejing is difficult to read because the language sometimes breaks grammatical rules in order to read smoothly. For example, in Chapter 13, the phrase 大患若身 should be understood as 身若大患. In Chapter 4, 象帝之先 should be read as 象先之帝. Sometimes, in favor of brevity, Laozi deliberately left out some words. But in the context what he really means should be clear. Disappointingly, some translators took it literally and often missed the context. This is the case with Chapter 52, in which he advises that as long as we understand that we are the sons and daughters of nature and do our role to respect nature and the good earth as we would respect our mother, we will not run into disaster. He then says that blocking the passages and shutting the doors we would be fine while clearing the passages and opening the doors we would be doomed. What he really means from the context is that if we respect nature we will not run into disaster, even if the passages are blocked, but if we forget our role as sons and daughters of nature we would run into trouble.

Laozi wants to address the common human weaknesses. He says things that seem extreme, with the attention of shocking readers into self-reflection. Chapter 12 and Chapter 65 are cases in point. In Chapter 12, he tells us that “Just as the five colors that we see can blind us, so the five sounds that we hear can deafen us, and the five tastes can dull our sense of taste.” In my translation I added the word “can” to make it sound less extreme. It is likely that the original language sounds extreme because Laozi wanted brevity and/or a shocking effect to make people think.

In Chapter 65 Laozi says, “The ruler who rules with his acquired knowledge is likely to hurt the nation. The ruler who rules not with his acquired knowledge is likely to benefit the nation.” Certainly we cannot agree that all acquired knowledge is bad for a nation. But the fact is that many people think that they are very clever,

and that they can use their knowledge to make great strides. Laozi warns against that kind of arrogance. The word “likely” is not in the text of Daodejing. But it is clear that he does not really condemn education and knowledge acquisition(See Chapter 71, for example). After all he wrote using words that he had learnt as a child. So putting in the word “likely” should preserve his real meaning and help avoid misunderstanding. It is in this spirit that I conducted my translation. Whenever I added words that are not in the original text, however, I would put in a footnote and explain.

For the convenience of the reader I have taken the liberty to add a small title to each of the “chapters” to capture the essence of message. It is my fervent hope that Laozi’s message be put across to as many people as possible. I can say that Laozi did not write the Daodejing as a Chinese, but as a member of the human race. I hope that readers will see the Daodejing not as a sample of Chinese philosophy, but as an exploration to the meaning and value of life itself from someone whose inner reflections are unusually sharp and downright honest.

November13, 2001, Lingnan University, Hong Kong

Book One: The Book of the Way(Daojing)³

1. The Nameless Eternal Dao

道可道，非常道。名可名，非常名。

無名天地之始；有名萬物之母。

故常無，欲以觀其妙；常有，欲以觀其徼。

此兩者同出而異名，同謂之玄。玄之又玄，衆妙之門。

Ways that can be spelled out.
Cannot be the eternal way.⁴
Names that can be named
Must change with time and place.⁵

Emptiness is the origin of heaven and earth;
Existence is the mother of everything that had a birth.⁶

Appreciate Emptiness, that we may see the nature of the Dao's versatility;
Appreciate Existence, that we may see the extent of the Dao's possibilities.

These two, Emptiness and Existence, came from the same source.
Though they bear different names, they serve the same mystical cause.

A mystery within a mystery,
Such is the gateway to all versatility.⁷

³ The version excavated in the Han Tomb Number 3 of Mawangdui, Changsha in 1973 had the De-jing arranged ahead of the Dao-jing, which is contrary to the popular, better-known arrangement. However, Dao(the natural Way) is more basic than De(virtue), as suggested in Chapter 51 道生之，德畜之，物形之，器成之。 Also, the beginning chapter of the Dejing(Chapter 38) clearly says: “The man who has lost the Dao finds refuge in being virtuous,”(失道而后德)furthering underscoring that Dao is fundamental. For this reason, this translation retains the precedence of the Daojing over the Dejing.

⁴ The eternal way can be appreciated only by inner reflection and can be lived only by practice.

⁵ Laozi warns us against falling into the trap of language. The eternal way does not belong to anyone or any religion. The Christian, the Muslim, the Buddhist, even someone who does not espouse any religion can practice it and call it the Christian way of life, the Muslim way of life, or the Buddhist way of life without affecting its essence.

⁶ These lines may be punctuated differently to produce different meanings. One rather common way is 無名，天地之始；有名，萬物之母。 This translates readily into “The Nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth; the named is the mother of all things.”(cf. Lin Yu Tang) The alternative way of punctuating, which some translators(such as Gu Zhengkun(1995)) subscribed to, is: 無，名天地之始；有，名萬物之母。 A direct translation of this would be: “Emptiness is named the beginning of heaven and earth; Existence is named the mother of all things.” My translation is a variant of this version.

⁷ In this chapter Laozi warns against the pitfalls of using names and labels. Names and labels are the product of human intelligence which has limits. People inevitably associate all kinds of unintended meanings to names and labels. Soon language becomes a barrier to communication rather than an aid to communication. The name of God, for example, has divided mankind and has produced horrendous suffering. Actually all names are the product of men's creation and need not have any intrinsic meaning. The Buddha warned against the use of labels when he says “The Buddha's teachings so known are the same as non-Buddhist teachings. They are called the Buddha's teachings.”(所謂佛法，即非佛法，是名佛法).

Many translators take the implicit punctuation to be: “常無欲，以觀其妙；常有欲，以觀其徼” In

2. Relativity and the Meaning of Existence

天下皆知美之爲美，斯惡已；皆知善之爲善，斯不善矣。
有無相生，難易相成，長短相形，高下相傾，音聲相和，前後相隨。
是以聖人處無爲之事，行不言之教；
萬物作焉而不辭，生而不有，爲而不恃，功成而不居。
夫唯不居，是以不去。

People under heaven
see beauty in what they call “beauty.”
that way they know of the “ugly.”

Similarly people see good in what they call “good,”
That way they know of the “bad.”

Existence and Emptiness are concepts
that make sense by comparison.
Similarly, long lends meaning to short, and high to low.
Harmony is produced when sounds combine in unison.
Because the fore goes, so the back follows.

Thus the Sage would not act as if he could act on his will.
He teaches the unspoken teaching.
No word is ever spoken, yet living things thrive.
No ownership is claimed, though Nature begets all creation.
Humility is maintained even as achievement is made⁸.
No credit is claimed even as work is done.
Because no credit is claimed, so no credit is ever lost.⁹

light of Laozi’s espousal of “scanty desires”(少私寡欲, Chapter 19) and his belief that not being content with what one has and craving to possess are the source of many ills(禍莫大於不知足, 咎莫大於欲得 Chapter 46), I adopted Gu(1995)’s interpretation, resulting in “常無，欲以觀其妙; 常有，欲以觀其微。” 妙 is very difficult to translate. It is rich in meanings, encompassing the meanings of versatile, exquisite, subtle, and mystical. The word is used both in Buddhist and Daoist scriptures. In Buddhism a typical use of the word is in 真空妙有, which can be directly translated as “real emptiness and mystical existence.” Emptiness as used in Buddhism(空)corresponds with nonexistence as used in Daoism(無).

⁸ Humility is fundamental to all religions. In Islam, no one should be worshipped as God. God is regarded the source of all creation, but God never dictates anyone’s life and allows all to live a free life. Even its prophets are all believed to have lived a humble life.

⁹ The discussion about relativity is also important in Buddhism. The famous Buddhist statement, 諸法因緣生，諸法因緣滅--just as all phenomena arise from main and subsidiary causes, so they also vanish from main and subsidiary causes-- is in the same spirit. The Buddhist concept of emptiness 空 refers to the fact that none of the things and concepts that we know have an independent existence. Everything in the phenomenal world is transient and depends on the working of the main and the subsidiary factors(因 and 緣)in order to come about or to survive. The wise man, fully understanding this, simply does his work and claims no credit and possesses nothing, for there is nothing to possess.

3. The Art of Government

不尚賢，使民不爭；不貴難得之貨，使民不為盜；不見可欲，使民心不亂。
是以聖人之治，虛其心，實其腹；弱其志，強其骨。
常使民無知無欲。使夫智者不敢為也，為無為，則無不治。

The wise ruler treats able men
the same as he would treat others.
In so doing he avoids strife.
He plays down precious goods.
In so doing he discourages the
emergence of thieves.
He makes an effort to stem the
emergence of objects of desire.
In so doing he ensures that his citizens' minds
Will not be thrown into disarray.

Thus the Sage's governance
Satisfies the real needs of people,
While emptying their minds of desires;
Builds up the inner strengths (bones) of people
While weakening their vain ambitions.¹⁰

He would preserve the natural simplicity
of his citizens' minds and reduce their desires.
In so doing the clever people will learn
that their contrivance will not work.
Because the Sage does nothing but following
the law of nature
Nothing will deviate from their natural and orderly places.

¹⁰ What are real needs and what are vain desires is a controversial subject. But it should not be. Our inner voice should be able to tell what we really need. Will we listen? All the sages through the ages have been telling the same story. The biblical story about Adam and Eve conveys exactly the same message. The Bible says that God had provided Adam and Eve with everything they needed. They could live happily forever. However, they were not satisfied, and were “tempted” to eat the “forbidden fruit.” According to the Bible, man has inherited the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. In point of fact, we do not realize that we ARE LIVING in Paradise. The earth is so abundantly supplied with everything we need that we could have no wars, no famines, and no shortages. Yet we fight among ourselves and are not satisfied with what we have. Our suffering is our own making because *we all want to eat the forbidden fruit*—a figure of speech for our susceptibility to vain desires. Since the ability to withstand temptation comes from within us—not from without, mind training to restore “stillness of the mind” is extremely important.

4. The Character and the Benefits of the Dao

道沖而用之或不盈。淵兮，似萬物之宗。

挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵。

湛兮，似或存。

吾不知誰之子，象帝之先。

The Way (Dao) is like water that simmers slowly,
Perpetually emitting its energy without boiling over.

It is like a deep, deep pool in the mountains,
Unfathomable yet could well harbor the origin of all life forms.

It can blunt sharp angles,
Resolve disputes,
Soften light that otherwise dazzles,
Re-establish concordance where there is discord.
Unfathomable, who would know its existence?

Today I know of no child of anyone
Who resembles our ancient forefathers.¹¹
(Who followed the Dao).

¹¹ Many translations take this passage as saying that the Dao itself is like no child of anyone, and that it is like the ancestor of all of forefathers. There is little point in arguing which translation is correct. Laozi certainly will agree that few of his contemporaries maintain the adherence to the Dao that the ancient masters are known for. He certainly will also agree that the Dao is like no child of anyone. But the latter seems so obvious that a man of few words as he is probably will not utter such a message.

5. The Impartial Laws of Nature

天地不仁，以萬物爲芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓爲芻狗。
天地之間，其猶橐籥乎？虛而不屈，動而愈出。
多言數窮，不如守中。

Heaven and earth are unkind.
They treat everything like the straw dogs used in sacrifice.
The Sages too are unkind.
In their eyes everyone is no different from a straw dog.¹²

Within the bounds of Heaven and Earth,
There is plenty of space,
Much like there is space within a bellows.
Hollow but unyielding is this space.
The more you work on it,
The more air comes out.

Words are superfluous and soon reach their limits.
It is far better to adhere to
impartiality and the middle way.

¹² These passages emphasize equanimity, and bears strong resemblance to the Buddhist teaching of equanimity. The 金剛經 says “The enlightenment of Buddha is about equanimity. There is no distinction between the high and the low(是法平等, 無有高下).” Buddhist teachings also have it that the mind, the Buddha, and the sentient beings are in essence no different from one another. Only the erring mind makes distinctions.

6. Humility As the Basis of a Rich Life

谷神不死，是謂玄牝。
玄牝之門，是謂天地根。
綿綿若存，用之不勤。

The receptive, humble spirit
("the valley spirit") lives on.¹³
It is known as the Mystical Female.
The doorway of the Mystical Female is known as
the root of heaven and earth¹⁴.
From it, imperceptibly yet relentless,
Runs the energy.

¹³ The original text has two versions. The valley spirit 谷神 is sometimes, indeed in most earlier versions, written as the bath spirit 浴神. The latter does not seem to make much sense. However, since valleys are often places where rivers and streams flow, 浴 may still mean valley in ancient China.

¹⁴ As suggested in the Preface, valley is a common Chinese figure of speech for a receptive and humble mind. With humility we can learn so much and can realize a rich life. That is why humility is the mother of all beautiful things in life. The opposite of humility is arrogance. Laozi teaches us to be humble and to learn from nature and not to be arrogant and fight against nature.

7. Selflessness as a Way of Life

天長地久。天地所以能長且久者，以其不自生，故能長生。
是以聖人后其身而身先，外其身而身存。
不以其無私邪？故能成其私。

Heaven and earth last.
It is so because they do not give birth to themselves¹⁵.

Similarly the last thing in the Sage's mind
is to propagate his body.
Paradoxically, that is why his body advances.
The body to the Sage is like any external object.
For this very reason his body perpetuates.
Is it not true that because he is selfless,
That he realizes his true self?¹⁶

¹⁵ 生 can mean live and can mean giving birth. In this context giving birth makes better sense. Scientifically, all mortals need reproduction in order to maintain the species. Laozi is saying the converse, namely, that anything that reproduces itself must be a mortal, and that something that does not need to reproduce itself is likely to last a long time.

¹⁶ This Chapter is particularly important for our understanding of Laozi's Dao and historical Taoist practices. Historical Taoist priests are known to seek a long life through both the use of waidan(external elixir) and neidan(internal elixir). Many of these priests had served emperors giving them advice on how to live a long life. This Chapter shows that seeking a long life is against the teaching of Laozi. We should respect life, preserve life, live a full life, but not seek immortality of our body.

8. Undiscriminating Benevolence

上善若水。水善利萬物而不爭，居衆人之所惡，故几于道。
居善地，心善淵，與善仁，言善信，政善治，事善能，動善時。
夫唯不爭，故無尤。

The superior good man is like water.
Just as water enlivens all living creatures and
never contests with them,
dwelling in places disdained by others,¹⁷
So the superior good man is prepared to situate himself where
nobody wants.
In this way he is close to the Dao.

To live on the good earth,
To cherish good thoughts,
To do a good turn to others,
To speak the good truth,
To let good governance find its right place,
To put the good ability to work,¹⁸
To set in motion the good times,

Such is the way to live without contesting with others.
Such is the man free from complaints and anguish.

¹⁷ The story in the Bible wherein Jesus divided five biscuits and two fish among a big gathering , filling the needs of everyone, symbolizes the doctrine of non-contest and non-rivalry.

¹⁸ The meaning of this chapter is relatively clear, except in regard to this second paragraph. I interpret all the first words in each three-word phrase as transitive verbs, even though sometimes they are more often used as nouns or adjectives. 動善時 in other translations is often interpreted as “choose the right moment in each action.”

9. Knowing When to Stop

持而盈之，不如其已。
揣而銳之，不可長保。
金玉滿堂，莫之能守。
富貴而驕，自遺其咎。
功遂身退，天之道。

Holding a full load of what you desire in your hands
Is not as wise as putting it down.
Sharpening a knife edge to the extreme,
And it may chip off in use.
To have a house full of gold and jade,
And you will only invite thieves.
To succumb to conceit and arrogance upon getting wealth and status,
In the end you will regret it.
Retire once a task has been accomplished
And you are in consonance with Heaven's Way.¹⁹

¹⁹ This Chapter preaches the virtues of moderation. Again, it is parallel to the teachings of Buddhism and the I-Ching. The teaching about retiring when the job has been done is particularly close to the teaching of the I-Ching, which warns against flying excessively high and falling in regret(亢龍有悔.)

10. Mind Training

載營魄抱一，能無離乎？

專氣致柔，能如嬰兒乎？

修除玄覽，能無疵乎？

愛民治國，能無智(爲)乎？

天門開闔，能無雌乎？

明白四達，能無知乎？

生之、畜之，生而不有，長而不宰。是爲玄德。

Can you concentrate your mind and soul,
and not lapse a minute?
Can you keep your breath soft and smooth,
just as an infant would?
Can you cleanse the eye of your mind,
and keep it free from a speck of dust?
Can you love your citizens and govern your country,
selflessly and according to the Dao?
If you were asked to guard the Gate of Heaven,
would you be totally impartial²⁰?
Can you understand the four dimensions of the universe²¹,
and be free from self-guided reasoning?

To give birth to life, and
To nurture it, yet claiming no ownership;
To act, yet without being arrogant,
To bring up life, yet not determining its destiny:
That is the Mystical Virtue.

²⁰ The original text mentioned Heaven's Gate and implored readers not to be feminine in guarding Heaven's Gate. Given the context, "not being feminine"(無雌) is now interpreted as "being impartial." The word 雌 in Chinese often carries undesirable connotations. The saying 信口雌黃 may be relevant here. This means improvising a statement arbitrarily with little reference or respect to facts. 雌黃 is a kind of ink used in correcting a text in a script. Laozi, of course, very much respects the female sex but often uses the word 牝 in these contexts. It may be noted that while 無雌 appears in several old versions of Daodejing, other versions read 爲雌 and some translators translated the sentence as taking the female role at Heaven's Gate.

²¹ Literally from the original, "the four reaches."

11. The Enlightened Spirit of Not Clinging

三十輻共一轂，當其無，有車之用。
埴埴以爲器，當其無，有器之用。
鑿戶牖以爲室，當其無，有室之用。
故有之以爲利，無之以爲用。

Thirty spokes make a wheel.
Forget about the spokes,
And we have the use of the wheel.

Working clay in the right way can produce a bowl.
Forget about the clay,
And we have the use of the bowl.

Carve a room off the side of a hill,
Forget about the hill,
And we have the use of the room.

We lay our hands on all kinds of materials for our advantage.
Yet we do not possess any of these materials
when we actually use their services.²²

²² Consider the parallel with Buddhism yet again. Buddhism preaches not clinging or holding on to anything. Again the 金剛經 says: “Like a raft to use for crossing the river, having crossed the river one should leave it alone. In the same way even Buddha’s teachings would have a time to be given up. Other things should not burden us.”(如筏喻者，法尚應捨，何況非法。)

12. Emancipation from the Enslavement of the Senses

五色令人目盲；五音令人耳聾；五味令人口爽；
馳騁畋獵，令人心發狂；難得之貨，令人行妨。
是以聖人為腹不為目，故去彼取此。

Just as the five colors that we see can blind us,
So the five sounds that we hear can deafen us,
And the five tastes that we taste can dull our sense of taste²³.

As we hunt and chase after a moving target, our minds go wild.
So goods that are difficult to get
become hurdles in our life journey.

For this reason the Sage seeks to fill only the true needs (“the needs of the stomach”)
Rather than to satisfy his senses (“the needs of the eyes”).
He gives up the one,
And gains the other.

²³ See the Preface.

13. Selflessness Brings Inner Peace

寵辱若驚，貴大患若身。

何謂寵辱若驚？寵為下，得之若驚，失之若驚，是謂寵辱若驚。

何謂貴大患若身？吾所以有大患者，為吾有身，及吾無身，吾有何患？

故貴以身為天下，若可寄天下；愛以身為天下，若可托天下。

When the emperor bestows his favors,
one feels wary;
When the emperor unleashes his anguish,
one also feels wary.
In the same light we should be wary of our body²⁴.

Why is it that favor, or anguish from the emperor
makes us wary?
Because we are under him, it is natural
that we are wary when we gain or lose his favor.

Why is it that we should be wary of our bodies?
If we own our body, it is natural
that we are wary if something should happen to our bodies.
If we disown our bodies, there will be nothing to fear!²⁵

We should give our bodies up to the world,
As if they could be entrusted to all under heaven.
Love is based on giving our bodies up to the world,
As if they could be entrusted to all under heaven.

²⁴ Here 大患若身 should be interpreted as 身若大患.

²⁵ Compare this to the Buddhist Heart Sutra(心經), which says “Seeing that each of the five essences, the physical body as well as the receptive essence, the thinking essence, the acting essence, and the discriminating essence is empty, one can transcend all sufferings.”(照見五蘊皆空，度一切苦厄)

14. The Ancient Path

視之不見，名曰夷；聽之不聞，名曰希；搏之不得，名曰微。
此三者，不可致詰，故混而爲一。
其上不皎，其下不昧，繩繩兮不可名，復歸于無物。
是謂無狀之狀，無物之象，是謂惚恍。
迎之不見其首，隨之不見其後。
執古之道，以御今之有。
能知古始，是謂道紀。

When we cast our eyes upon it
yet cannot see it,
We call it yi (literally “flat”, “peaceful”, or “delighted”)
When we turn our ears to it
yet cannot hear it,
We call it xi (literally “rarefied”)
When we stretch our hands to reach it
yet cannot touch it,
We call it wei (literally “infinitesimally small”)
Since we cannot distinguish these three,
we equate them as one.

Its upper side does not dazzle like strong light.
Its under side does not dim like darkness.
It is beyond description,
And easily confused as nothing.
Its shape is shapeless.
Its appearance is that of nothing,
We call it the “as if.”
When we greet it, we cannot see its face.
When we follow it, we cannot see its back.
(Since reality is impossible to track down)
I should only follow the Path walked by the ancient Sages.
That is how I can deal with situations of the now.
Knowing to follow the way of the ancient masters,
Can already be called following the Way.²⁶

²⁶ This passage calls to mind a parable taught by Buddha. There he told of a man lost in the heart of a forest suddenly discovering a path left by people in the ancient times. The man followed the path and finally reached an old, beautiful town. Then he declared: “Similarly I have discovered the path left by holy people from ancient times.” The idea of this chapter is to describe the intractableness of the Dao if we are to grasp it “originally.” Taking advantage of the experience and insight of the ancient sages brings one closer to the Dao within a much shorter time than if one were to discover it oneself. (See Shan Hu (1989))

15. The Early Masters

古之善爲道者，微妙玄通，深不可識。

夫唯不可識，故強爲之容：

豫兮，若冬涉川；猶兮，若畏四鄰；

儼兮，其若客；渙兮，其若凌釋；

敦兮，其若朴；曠兮，其若谷；

混兮，其若濁。<澹兮，其若海。颺兮，其若無止。>

孰能濁以靜之徐清？孰能安以久動之徐生？

保此道者，不欲盈。夫唯不盈，故能蔽而新成。

The masters of the Dao in ancient times
had mystical, versatile, and unfathomable understanding.
As it is unfathomable,
Only a proximate description is possible.

They are prepared at all times,
as if taking on a river journey in winter.
They are alert and watchful,
as if they were wary of the surroundings.
They are respectful,
as if they were the guests of someone.
They are accommodating,
as if they were ice about to melt.
They are unpretentious,
as if they were the embodiment of simplicity.
They are open-minded,
as if they were a hollow valley.
They are murky,
as if they were a muddy stream,
They are unsettled,
as if they were an open sea²⁷;
They never stopped,
as if they were the winds of the earth.

Is there anyone who can be like
a murky stream cleaning up when given a rest?
Is there anyone who can be like
calm air gathering motion and becoming alive again?
The man who shuns full gratification of their desires,
is the man who has this ability.
He can rejuvenate.²⁸

²⁷ Some translators translated 澹兮其若海 as “quiet and calm like the great sea”(Gu, 1995). This translation is problematic as the open sea is certainly not quiet and calm. While the word 澹 can mean plain and not colorful, it is also used to describe the unsettled appearance of water. One may wonder why Laozi in this chapter described the ancient path-seeker this way. The description, however, befits the path-seeker, though it may not be appropriate for accomplished people like the Buddha or other Sages.

²⁸ These lines describe the man who follows the path and keeps improving his insight and spiritual knowledge. “Unsettled” and “murky” stand in sharp contrast with “calm,” “still,” and “clear.”(Chapter 16). The wise man who treads the Dao knows that he is unsettled and that his mind

16. Rediscover the Eternal

致虛極，守靜篤。萬物并作，吾以觀其復。

夫物芸芸，各復歸其根。

歸根曰靜，靜曰復命。

復命曰常，知常曰明。

不知常，妄作凶。

知常容，容乃公，公乃王，王乃天，天乃道，道乃久，歿身不殆。

Be after the Truthfulness of Emptiness;
Stick to the absolute stillness of the mind.
You will see all the living things around you in a new light.
You will observe their real, original faces.

All things under heaven with their diversity
shall fall back to their proper places and
shall rediscover their origins.
Going back to one's origin is the same as stilling the mind.
It can also be known as the Rediscovery of Life²⁹.
The Life Rediscovered is the Eternal.
Knowing the Eternal is true understanding.

One who does not know the Eternal³⁰
foolishly creates all kinds of ills for oneself.
One who knows the Eternal is accommodating and receptive.
Being accommodating and receptive is giving up possessiveness.
Giving up possessiveness, one becomes kingly and enlightened.
To be kingly and enlightened is heavenly;
To be heavenly is to follow the Dao.
Following the Dao one will become immortal.
Such a man will never die even though his body passes away.

is murky, so that he can rejuvenate and improve. That is why being prepared for the long journey is so important. Compare this with Chapter 59, who pleads that people should follow the farmer's example and be ready early.

²⁹ Compare this with the Buddhist doctrine of "seeing the Buddha nature"(見性).

³⁰ The "Eternal" obviously is fundamental to all the great religions. In Buddhism, the Eternal(常) is the first of the four qualities that a path-seeker should aspire for. The others are true happiness, true self, and true purity(樂、我、淨). In most other religions the Eternal is called God. But the Eternal is really Nameless. In the Old Testament, God told Moses on Mount Sinai: "I Am That I Am." The fact is that the Eternal is beyond description and beyond all names. The main thing about knowing the Eternal is not knowing its name but laying down our egoistic instincts in our daily lives so we will be receptive to the inner calls from within us. It is such reflections that set us free and make us happy.

17. The Unseasoned Mind Knows the Eternal

太上，下知有之；其次，親而譽之；其次，畏之；其次，侮之。
信不足焉，有不信焉。
悠兮，其貴言。
功成事遂，百姓皆謂：「我自然」。

The Supreme stays with the one who is least clever.
Others, who merely pays tribute to the Supreme verbally,
stay further away from the Supreme.
Still others, who fear the Supreme,
are more distant from the Supreme.
Still others, who live in defilement of the Supreme,
are the worst.
There are people who believe inadequately.
There are people who do not believe at all.

Take things easy and spare your words.
When what needs done gets done
People will say “How natural and easy it is!”³¹

³¹ This chapter has been subject to diverse interpretations. Gu(1995) translated the first line as “The best ruler is unknown to his subjects.” The original has two alternative versions: 太上，下知有之 (Literally, “The supreme, those with low knowledge have it.”) and 太上，不知有之 (Literally, “The Supreme, those with no knowledge have it” or “The Supreme, one does not know it exists.”) Gu’s interpretation is based on the second interpretation of the second version. This interpretation is doubtful. It is too much to call a ruler the Supreme, no matter how good he is. On the other hand Laozi has been consistent with his preaching the virtues of being humble and admitting one’s ignorance. In particular, he insists that our own inner knowledge is superior to acquired knowledge in helping us get close to the Eternal. We may also note that Laozi is honored by the Daoist faith as 太上老君 (literally, the Supreme Princely Lao).

18. Hypocrisy

大道廢，有仁義；
智慧出，有大偽；
六親不和，有孝慈；
國家昏亂，有忠臣。

When the Way has been abandoned,
The talk about kindness and fairness emerges.³²
When clever people abound,
Fraudulence and pretentiousness become commonplace.

When there is discord in the family,
People will learn to become better parents and better children.
When the country falls into disarray,
Ministers who faithfully serve the country arise.

³² A direct translation of the original, the Dao De Jing is: when the Dao has been abandoned the kind and the fair will appear. In Chinese, “the kind and the fair,” however, may be short for the talk (or the concept) about kind and fair or the people who are kind and fair. As the next footnote shows, translating the second line as “the talk about kindness and fairness emerges” appears to make better sense.

19. Live Naturally and Simply

絕聖棄智，民利百倍；
絕仁棄義，民復孝慈；
絕巧棄利，盜賊無有。
此三者以為文不足，
故令有所屬：見素抱朴，少思寡欲，絕學無憂。

When we stop talking about the Sages
and simply banish contrivance and clever reasoning
That is the time people will really benefit greatly.

When we stop talking about kindness and fairness³³
That is the time people rediscover their natural filial piety
and their parental instincts.

When people forget about their clever ways
and the pursuit of ease and comfort,
There will be no more thieves.

I cannot say adequately about these three things,
So I will add:
See simplicity;
Espouse simplicity;
Reduce your wild thoughts;
Reduce your desires.
When you have learnt how not to learn,³⁴
You will be free from worries.

³³ The original text, 絕仁棄義，民復孝慈, suggests that it is the talk about kindness 仁 and fairness 義 that Laozi condemned, and not the acts of kindness and fairness that he despises. This is background to my translation of the second line in the previous chapter.

³⁴ The direct translation would be “Cease learning, and you will be free from worries.” It is clear, however, that Laozi is not against all kinds of learning. He teaches people to get prepared, referring to farmers as a fine example to emulate (Chapter 59). If one does not learn something one cannot be prepared. Gu (1995) translated these lines as “Discard cultural knowledge, and worries will disappear.” But what is cultural knowledge? Cultural knowledge is a concept, a name. Learning how not to learn, on the other hand, is practical.

20. The Calculating Mind Versus the Truthful Mind

唯之與阿，相去几何？美之與惡，相去若何？
人之所畏，不可不畏。
荒兮，其未央哉！
眾人熙熙，如享太牢，如春登台。
我獨泊兮，其未兆；沌沌兮，如嬰兒之未孩；累累兮，若無所歸。
眾人皆有餘，而我獨若遺。我愚人之心也哉，沌沌兮！
俗人昭昭，我獨昏昏。
俗人察察，我獨悶悶。
淡兮，其若海，望兮，若無止。
眾人皆有以，而我獨頑似鄙。我獨異于人，而貴食母。

What is the difference between saying yes because you agree
and saying yes because you want to please?
What is the difference between good and evil?
When everybody avoids something,
Does it mean it must be avoided?
How ridiculous all this is!³⁵
This mode of thinking takes one far from the ultimate Truth!

The crowds are busily involved with their daily routines.
As if they are attending a feast,
or walking up a beautiful terrace in Spring.
I alone am deserted.
The future seems unknown,
Just as an infant's future is unknown.

I appear to be tired in a directionless journey.
When everybody appears to have more than enough
I alone seem like someone who have lost everything.

Is my mind that of a fool?
People in their mundane worlds look bright.
I on the other hand look dull.
People in the mundane worlds look clever,
I on the other hand look boring.
My mind is unsettled like the open sea
and never restless like the wind.³⁶

Everyone has his properties and status.

³⁵ These lines chastise the discriminating mind and correspond with the Third Patriarch in Zen Buddhism in China Sengcan's "The path to the Supreme is not difficult. One must, however, discard the discriminating mind." (至道無難，唯嫌揀擇) The discriminating, and the calculating mind leads one to avoid what is regarded as unpleasant experiences, and that deprives the soul of the opportunity to grow to its full splendor. See also the Preface.

³⁶ Laozi sighs about the loneliness of someone who knows the Dao when the greater majority of humanity are absorbed in their daily routines hardly moving ahead in elevating their spiritual well-being.

I alone look poor and lonely.
I am different from the crowd.
I alone value drawing my nutrients from Mother³⁷.

21. The Mark of the Virtuous

孔德之容，惟道是從。
道之爲物，惟恍惟惚。惚兮恍兮，其中有象；
恍兮惚兮，其中有物；窈兮冥兮，其中有精；
其精甚真，其中有信。
自今及古，其名不去，以閱衆甫。吾何以知衆甫之狀哉？以此。

To tell the virtuous from all the others.
You only need one criterion:
does he follow the Dao?³⁸

The substance of the Dao is impalpable and intractable.
While it is impalpable and intractable,
It manifests itself in the phenomenal world,
And it is not without substance.

While it is shadowy and empty,
It shows itself in the spiritual realm.
The spiritual essence of the Dao is
both truthful and dependable.

From the ancient times till now
The name of the Dao has persisted,
And it has pleased the wise masters.
How do I know about these wise masters?
I use the criterion mentioned above.

³⁷ Actually everyone draws nutrients from Mother Earth and Mother Nature. The difference is that Laozi is aware of this and respects Mother while most of the others have abandoned Mother.

³⁸ This chapter has been translated in diverse ways. My translation of these few lines takes into consideration the last two lines, which to me seem to be quite clear. Gu(1995), however, translated them as “How do I know the initial state of all things? By means of the Dao.” Waley(1997) translated them as “How do I know that the many warriors are so? Through this.” Tay(1997), citing others, believes that 甫 in the original is interchangeable with 父, while 閱 may mean “producing” (出), or concordance(順). Thus the lines may mean: “The same path, namely the Dao, has produced all the wise masters.” I take 閱 as interchangeable with 悅. The essence of the passage is not affected if I replaced “pleased” with “produced.” I also take the last two lines in this chapter as corresponding to the first two lines.

22. The Enlightened Way of Life

「曲則全，枉則直，窪則盈，敝則新，少則得，多則惑。」

是以聖人抱一為天下式。

不自見，故明；不自是，故彰；不自伐，故有功；不自矜，故長。

夫唯不爭，故天下莫能與之爭。

古之所謂「曲則全」者，豈虛言哉！誠全而歸之。

When something is bent, it is ready to be put straight;
When someone is wronged, one is ready to be redressed;
When a container is empty, it is ready to be filled;
When something gets old, it is ready to be renewed;
When you have just a little, you are ready to get more;
When you have got a lot, you are ready to be confused.

For this reason the Sage espouses one universal formula.³⁹
Do not be prejudiced by your own views, and you will see;
Do not think that you are right, and you will know the truth;
Do not boast about your achievements, and you will achieve;
Do not be self-contented; and you will grow.
Because (in-seeking growth) one never need to struggle
or to contest with others,
One will never need to fear that one's achievements will be
contested away by others.

The ancient saying that “When something is bent it is
ready to be straightened” certainly is not idle talk.
To be whole, just follow the one formula.

³⁹ All of the next few lines teach the virtues of humility. If one would not bend, one could not be whole. This chapter corresponds with the earlier chapter about “the receptive, humble spirit(the valley spirit).”(Chapter 6).

23. The Dao Will Not Fail the Serious Seeker

希言自然。故飄風不終朝，驟雨不終日。
孰為此者？天地。天地尚不能久，而況于人乎？
故從事于道者，同于道；德者，同于德；失者，同于失。
同于道者，道亦樂得之；
同于德者，德亦樂得之；
同于失者，失亦樂得之。
信不足焉，有不信焉。

To live with sparse words is to live with nature.

Occasional winds and showers will not last through the day.

Who is responsible for this result?

Heaven and earth.

Even heaven and earth take breaks.

So certainly should men.

(Why should anyone then talk too much?)

(Rather than just talk)⁴⁰

Those who follow the way will find the way.

Those who live virtuously will have a virtuous life.

Those who live not seeking the way will lose the way.

For those who seek the way, the way will seek them out.

For those who seek virtue, virtue will seek them out.

For those who do not find the way,

The way will not find them either.

Some people do not believe adequately.

Some people do not believe at all.⁴¹

⁴⁰ The bracketed lines are not in the original.

⁴¹ This chapter will sound familiar to those who know the New Testament, in which Jesus says “Knock, and the door will be opened for you.” Jesus also often referred to people who had little faith or who did not believe at all. This chapter also advises that empty words produce no reward. Only those who are truthful and who actually live a humble life and who respect nature and life will benefit.

24. Excesses Deviate from the Dao

企者不立；跨者不行；

自見者不明；自是者不彰；

自伐者無功；自矜者不長。

其在道也，曰餘食贅行，物或惡之，故有道者不居。

He who stands on tip-toe cannot really stand.

He who takes big strides cannot really walk.

He who sees only through his own point of view cannot see clearly.

He who thinks he is always right will not see the truth.

He who boasts of his own achievements will achieve nothing,

He who is self-contented will not grow.

Such people to the Dao are like those who eat too much or do too much,
They will be fed up with what they eat or what they do⁴².

Hence those who follow the Dao will not fall into the “too much” mode.

⁴² Here is another instance of word order reversal. The word 物 in 物或惡之 according to this interpretation becomes the object, not the subject. Most translators do not take it this way and offer a somewhat different translation. An example is Gu(1995), whose translation reads: “So disgusting that a man of Tao never behaves like that.” Waley’s translation reads: “no creature but will reject them in disgust.”

25. The Dao Emulates the Great Nature

有物混成，先天地生。

寂兮寥兮，獨立而不改，周行而不殆，可以為天地母。

吾不知其名，字之曰道，強為之名曰大。

大曰逝，逝曰遠，遠曰反。

故道大，天大，地大，人亦大。

域中有四大，而人居其一焉。

人法地，地法天，天法道，道法自然。

In the beginning, before the formation of heaven and earth,
Something had already existed amid the confusion.
This lonely existence was totally independent of anything else,
And it would not change,
It only moved in its own way tirelessly.
Only it could have been the mother of heaven and earth.
I do not know its name,
I would just call it “the Dao.”
I could also call it “the great something.”
This great something has now about disappeared
from the world as we know it.
It has been getting more and more remote from us.
It has become more and more contrary from the
world as we know it.⁴³

The Dao is great,
Heaven is great,
Earth is great,
The man who knows the Dao (the Way) is great.
In the domain we know there are four “greats.”
The man who knows the Dao is one of them.

The great man emulates the great Earth.
The great earth emulates the great Heaven,
The great heaven emulates the great Dao.
The great Dao emulates the great Nature.

⁴³ These lines have been unnecessarily mystified by some translators. Gu(1995) had them translated thus: “The Great is moving forward without stopping, extending to the remotest distance, and then returning to where it was.” Waley(1997)’s translation reads: “(Great) means passing on, and passing on means going far away, and going far away means returning.”

26. Keeping One's Weight

重為輕根，靜為躁君。
是以君子終日行不離輜重。
雖有榮觀，燕處超然。
奈何萬乘之主，而以身輕天下？
輕則失根，躁則失君。

We keep our weight, so we will not lose our roots.
We keep our serenity, so we will not lose our poise.⁴⁴
For these reasons when the Sage travels all day,
he does not part from his heavy luggage wagon⁴⁵.
He sits quietly, untouched by the magnificent views.
What a pity it is then to see the lord of ten thousand chariots
losing his weight in front of his people!
If one loses one's weight, one also loses one's base.
If one loses one's serenity, one also loses one's poise.

⁴⁴ Laozi advises that keeping one's weight can treat problems related to "not having taken a deep root," and keeping still can treat problems related to restlessness. How would one keep one's weight and not be moved by one's own emotions and peoples' words of praise or insult? One needs to have faith in the Dao—in the virtues of humility and down-to-earth preparations(example of the farmer). The Buddha is said to have the virtue of not being moved by the "eight winds," namely profit, loss, damage, honor, praise, jeers, unpleasant feelings, and pleasant feelings.

⁴⁵ Laozi stresses the necessity to keep one's base 本, and then one will not be easily swayed by circumstances. The necessity to keep one's base is important for everyone, but even more so for those with power or those in the leadership of a country.

27. The Perfect Man

善行無轍跡；善言無瑕謫；
善數不用籌策；善閉無闔楗而不可開；善結無繩約而不可解。

是以聖人常善救人，故無棄人；
常善救物，故無棄物。是謂神明。
故善人者，不善人之師；
不善人者，善人之資。
不貴其師，不愛其資，雖智大迷。是謂要妙。

Perfect deeds leave no tracks behind it⁴⁶.
Perfect speech leaves no flaws to find fault with.
Those adept in counting do not require counting chips.
Those adept in sealing require no door latches,
yet what is sealed cannot be opened.
Those adept in tying need produce no knots,
yet the strings cannot be untied.

The Sage who is adept in saving people will abandon no one⁴⁷.
He is adept in saving creatures and will abandon no creature.
This is known as the Tradition of the Light.

The perfect man is the teacher of the imperfect.
The imperfect man is the assets of the perfect.
Those who do not value their teachers,
And those who do not take good care of their own assets,
However clever they are, they are really lost.
This is a key point that is often not understood.

⁴⁶ The Buddha teaches that even as one performs good deeds one should not hold the view that one is performing good deeds(不著相).

⁴⁷ Compare this with one of the four vows made by Buddhists: “Endless are the number of sentient beings. Yet I vow to save all of them.”(眾生無邊誓願度)

28. Great But Humble

知其雄，守其雌，為天下溪。
為天下溪，常德不離。
常德不離，復歸于嬰兒。
知其榮，守其辱，為天下谷。
為天下谷，常德乃足。
常德乃足，復歸于朴。
知其白，守其黑，為天下式。
為天下式，常德不忒。
常德不忒，復歸于無極。
朴散則為器，聖人用之，則為官長。故大制無割。

Keep one's place however humble, while knowing one's
real strength⁴⁸.
Stay low, like the rivers that gather water from the higher grounds.
Be that lowly river:
Depart not from the eternal virtue,
Emulate the unpretentiousness of infants.

Keep one's color, though it be black,
while knowing about the white.
Be an example for the world.

Be an example for the world,
Do not disgrace the eternal virtue,
Emulate the Eternal.

Take the blames from the world without complaint,
Yet never forgetting the need for honor,
Be the lowly valley of the world⁴⁹.
This way, the eternal virtue is fulfilled.
And simplicity is restored.

Simplicity is valuable.
From simple substances we have all our useful tools.
When simple men are used by the Sages,
They become great statesmen.

Great people never go out of their way to make themselves great,
Just as the great artists will not do superfluous things
to draw the attention of others.

⁴⁸ The direct translation is “Know the male, yet cleave to the female.”(adapted from Waley) This and similar translations mystify Laozi's teachings. As earlier suggested, the juxtaposition of 雌 and 雄 often do not mean male and female, unlike the words 牝 and 牡. Rather they stand for weak as opposed to strong, and submissive as opposed to dominant.

⁴⁹ This passage renders support to the interpretation of the “valley spirit” in Chapter 6 as the spirit of humility.

29. Guard Against Vain Ambitions and Excesses

將欲取天下而爲之，吾見其不得已。
天下神器，不可爲也。爲者敗之，執者失之。
物，或行或隨，或噓或吹，或強或羸，或挫或隳。
是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰。

Someone who sets out to win the world and
contrives to make his way will never make it.
The world is holy, and is beyond contrivance and possession.
He who contrives to win will only lose.
He who only aspires to possess will be dispossessed.
The Sage never contrives to do anything and so he fails in nothing.
He never possesses anything and so he never loses anything.

Among the living things, some lead, while others follow.
Some sigh, while others shout.
Some display their strengths, while others show their weaknesses.
Some lend support, while others destroy⁵⁰.
In contrast, the Sage will discard the excessive, the
extravagant, and the extreme.

⁵⁰ The difference between these and the Dao is that most people hold the idea of acting, be these acts acts of support or destruction. The sages who follow the Dao do not hold any idea of acting.

30. Good Deeds Beget Good Results

以道佐人主者，不以兵強天下，其事好還：師之所居，荆棘生焉。
大軍之后，必有凶年。
善有果而已，不以取強。
果而勿矜，果而勿伐，果而勿驕，果而不得已，果而勿強。
物壯則老，是謂不道，不道早已。

The person who through the Dao helps a ruler
Will advise against using sheer military force to conquer the world.
Such military activity will invite its own counter-effects.
For where the military force goes,
 farmlands will give way to thorns and brambles.
In the wake of military conquest,
A year of misfortune inevitably follows.

Good results are the natural outcome of good deeds.⁵¹
They are not achieved by force or contrivance.
In the face of good results,
One must not indulge in conceit;
Nor must one boast about one's success;
Nor must one succumb to pride.
Remember that good results follow the natural law.
Good results are not brought about
 by forcing the course of events.

Anything that has seen the prime of its age
 will soon get old.⁵²
Going past the prime is going against the Dao.
Going against the Dao, one soon perishes.

⁵¹ This teaching is common among all the great religions. Jesus teaches that one reaps what one sows.

⁵² This obviously is merely a figure of speech and should not be taken literally as implying that natural aging is against the Dao. Alternatively, one may interpret the passage as advising against artificially or unnaturally making oneself strong, such as taking drugs that boost certain biological functions unnaturally, which may hasten the process of aging.

31. Do Not Glorify Military Victories

夫兵者，不祥之器。物或惡之，故有道者不居。
君子居則貴左，用兵則貴右，故兵者非君子之器。
不祥之器，不得已而用之，恬淡爲上。
勝而不美，而美之者，是樂殺人。
夫樂殺人者，則不可得志于天下矣。
吉事尚左，凶事尚右。偏將軍居左，上將軍居右，言以喪禮處之。
殺人之衆，以悲哀泣之，戰勝以喪禮處之。

Fine weapons are ominous objects
And are detested by all living things.
For this reason the man who follows the Dao
will stay away from them when possible.

The refined man respects life in his daily life.
(he “follows the left”).
If he should resort to military force, he unavoidably
destroys life (he “follows the right”)⁵³.

Weapons are ominous objects and are never
the instruments of a refined person.
If ever he cannot avoid using them,
he must not make a big thing out of it.
Even if he wins the war,
he must not glorify the victory.
He who glorifies military victories
takes pleasure in killing.
He who takes pleasure in killing
will not win the support of the world.

Auspicious events are symbolized by the left;
Ominous events are symbolized by the right.
The next-in-command should take the left seat;
The chief-in-command should take the right seat.
This is to say that a military victory should be
treated like a ceremony to honor the dead.
For those who kill, let us shed our tears upon them.
Upon winning a war, let us pay tribute to
those who die with the rites of mourning.

⁵³ The bracketed words are in the original text. The implied meanings are put here in unbracketed form. This talk about left and right is only to save words. Given the “legend” or key that is provided in the third paragraph, this objective is easily and simply achieved.

32. The Nameless Way

道常無名。朴雖小，天下莫能臣。
侯王若能守之，萬物將自賓。
天地相合，以降甘露，民莫之令而自均。
始制有名，名亦既有，夫亦將知止。
知止可以不殆。譬道之在天下，猶川谷之于江海。

The Dao has always been nameless and simple.
Though humble⁵⁴, it is never subservient to anyone under heaven.
Still, if kings and barons would follow the Dao steadfastly
All the living things on earth would benefit and pay them homage.

It is the interaction of heaven and earth
that brings rain to all the living things.
Heaven and earth are not at the command of anyone.
Yet all living things benefit from their actions.

Humans since the beginning of time
have established all kinds of traditions and have named names.
Should they then not know when to stop⁵⁵?
Those who know when to stop know no death.

Just as the rivers and valleys bring water to the sea,
So the Dao brings all living things to the Ultimate.

⁵⁴ The original word is “small.”

⁵⁵ Knowing where to stop is knowing the limitations of these traditions and names. How true it is that ignorant people unaware of the limitations of these human-created traditions and names fight among themselves and keep killing and destroying one another! A well-known historical disaster is the Crusade that ended up killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people of a different cultural background in the Middle East.

33. Real Strength and Endurance

知人者智，自知者明；勝人者有力，自勝者強。
知足者富。強行者有志。不失其所者久。死而不亡者壽。

He who knows others is wise,
He who knows himself is wiser.
He who conquers others is strong.
He who conquers himself is stronger⁵⁶.

He who knows what is adequate lives a rich life.
He who overcomes difficulties knows what he wants.
He who will not lose his place endures.
He who dies and yet lives lasts.

⁵⁶ “Wise” and “wiser” are my translations for the original words “wise”(智) and “illuminated”(明), while “strong” and “stronger” are my translations for the original words “have power(有力)” and “are strong(強).” These are simple words that convey the meanings more effectively.

34. The Great Dao

大道泛兮，其可左右。
萬物恃之以生而不辭，功成而不名有。
衣養萬物而不為主，可名于小；
萬物歸焉而不為主，可名為大。
以其終不自為大，故能成其大。

The Great Dao is all-encompassing.
Its influences pervade all directions.
All living things depend on it.
But the Dao works quietly.
It accomplishes yet makes no claims.
It provides clothing and nourishments
yet does not take command over anything.
Ever aspiring for non-existence,⁵⁷
It can be called little.
Providing a home to all the living things
yet claiming no ownership,
It can be called great.

Exactly because the Dao never takes itself as great,
It is truly great.

⁵⁷ This line is not recorded in some versions. A direct translation is “Ever desireless” but consistent with the earlier interpretation, I have adopted the present translation.

35. The Dao Does Not Attract Followers

執大象，天下往。往而不害，安平泰。

樂與餌，過客止。

道之出口，淡乎其無味，視之不足見，聽之不足聞，用之不足既。

He who holds the great sign
Attracts a great following.

He who helps the followers avoid harm
Enjoys great peace.

Music and good food can stop passers-by on their way.
The Dao, on the contrary, offers only a bland taste.
It can hardly be seen or heard.
Yet if one uses it, it is inexhaustible.

36. Refined Understanding

將欲歛之，必故張之；

將欲弱之，必故強之；

將欲廢之，必故興之；

將欲取之，必故與之。是謂微明。

柔弱勝剛強，魚不可脫于淵，國之利器不可以示人。

In order to fold, one must first unfold;
In order to weaken, one must first strengthen;
In order to banish, one must first establish;
In order to deprive, one must first provide.

The following is called refined understanding:
That the weak will outperform the strong⁵⁸.

Just as fish should stay inside their deep pools.
So the best gadgets and tools of a country
should not be displayed in front of others.

⁵⁸ This line should not be taken at face value. Given the lines that follow and the lines that precede this, what Laozi most likely meant is “Do not use sheer display of force to win. If you know where to bend and how to hide your strength, you are more likely to win.” This theory is demonstrated in Tai Chi Chuan(taijiquan)(太極拳), which is a martial art that never confronts the opponent with sheer direct force.

37. Stillness of the Mind and Refined Action

道無常無爲而無不爲，侯王若能守之，萬物將自化。
化而欲作，吾將鎮之以無名之朴。
無名之朴，夫亦將不欲。
不欲以靜，天地將自正。

The Dao neither contrives to do something
nor abstains from doing anything.

If only the kings and barons would follow the Dao,
all the living things would be transformed.

If the transformed living things
should contrive to do anything,
I would restrain them
with the natural simplicity of the Unnamed.
I would have them freed from desires.
Freedom from desires is achieved by stilling the mind.
Everything under heaven will then fall back into their natural places.

Book Two: The Book of Virtue (De-jing)

38. Refined Way of Life

上德不德，是以有德；下德不失德，是以無德。
上德無為而無以為；下德無為而有以為。
上仁為之而無以為；上義為之而有以為。
上禮為之而莫之應，則攘臂而扔之。
故失道而后德，失德而后仁，失仁而后義，失義而后禮。
夫禮者，忠信之薄，而亂之首。前識者，道之華，而愚之始。
是以大丈夫居其厚，不居其薄；居其實，不居其華。故去彼取此。

The refined virtuous never attempts to be virtuous.
For this reason they are truly virtuous.

The unrefined virtuous always adheres to what is virtuous.
For this reason they are not really virtuous.

The refined virtuous will not contrive to do anything
and do not act for gain.
The unrefined virtuous contrives to act
and does so for gain.

The refined kindly man lives a kindly life not for benefit.
The refined fair man acts fairly and does so for benefit.
The refined gentlemanly person acts gentlemanly
and expects to be so treated.
If he is not treated the way he expects,
he would push away and thrust aside his counterpart.

The man who has lost the Dao
finds refuge in being virtuous.⁵⁹
The man who has lost the virtuous way of life
finds refuge in being kindly.⁶⁰
The man who has lost the kindly way of life
finds refuge in being fair.⁶¹
The man who has lost the fair way of life
finds refuge in being gentlemanly.⁶²

Ceremony and gentlemanly behavior
is the result of the thinness of faith and trust,
and is the origin of many ills.

⁵⁹ This man has lost the natural instinct to be one with Nature. He conscientiously tries to make up for it by being virtuous.

⁶⁰ This man has lost the sincere though conscious aspiration to be virtuous. He tries to be kind to others in order to make up for the loss.

⁶¹ This man has lost the drive to be kind to others. He tries to be at least fair to others and expects to be fairly treated in return.

⁶² This man has no sense of fairness, kindness, virtue, or being one with Nature. He puts up a good show in order to earn others' respect and in order to be well treated.

Learning to tell what is “virtuous” and “fair”⁶³
is merely the showy flower(not the fruit) of the Dao.
It could be the beginning of folly.

The fully grown person chooses a life
that offers substance and satisfaction,
not one that is thin and superficial.

He knows what he opts for and what he gives up.

⁶³ Many translators take 前識者 literally to mean foreknowledge(D.C.Lau, 1963) or foresight(Gu, 1995). This interpretation appears to be out of place here. While 前 does mean fore and 識 may mean knowledge or discrimination based on knowledge(識別). I take the phrase to mean “knowledge of fairness and virtue as referred earlier on.”

39. The Universal Formula

昔之得一者：
天得一以清，地得一以寧，神得一以靈，
谷得一以盈，侯得一以為天下正。
其致之也。天無以清將恐裂；
地無以寧將恐廢；神無以靈將恐歇；
谷無以盈將恐竭；侯王無以貴高將恐蹶。
故貴以賤為本，高以下為基。
是以侯王自謂「孤」、「寡」、「不谷」。
此非以賤為本耶？非乎？故致數譽無譽。
是故不欲祿祿如玉，珞珞如石。

There is one universal formula that always works⁶⁴:
The sky had followed the universal formula,
and it became clear.
The earth had followed the universal formula,
and became calm and safe.
The gods follow the universal formula,
and they have become effective.
The valleys follow the universal formula,
and they now harbor copious vegetation and creatures.
The living things follow the universal formula,
and they live;
When barons and kings follow the universal formula,
they become the object of emulation by their peoples.
All these achievements are due to the universal formula.

If the sky were not clear it could be torn apart.
If the earth were not calm and safe
it could burst into chaos.
If the gods were not effective
they could wear out.
If the valleys were not copious
they could become empty.
If the living things could not live
they would be doomed.
If barons and kings could not keep their high and respected positions,
they could be toppled.

The noble must be based on the ignoble.
The highly positioned must be buttressed by the lowly.

Barons and kings call themselves
the “lonely one” the “widowed one”, or the “under provided one”.
Don't these practices demonstrate loud and clear

⁶⁴ The one formula is following the Law of Nature otherwise known as the Law of Cause and Effect and realizing that it is the combining of main and complementary factors (called yin[因] and yuan[緣] in Buddhism) in a particular fashion that has given rise to everything observed in the phenomenal world.

that it is through the lowly
that kings and barons hold their positions?

Merely counting the number of carriages
will not give you any carriage.
It is no use showing the shiny look of jade ⁶⁵
if the substance is merely an ordinary stone.

40. The Uncommon Dao

反者道之動；弱者道之用。
天下萬物生于有，有生于無。

The reverse of expectations is the Dao in action.
The weak in appearance is the Dao in application⁶⁶.

All living things⁶⁷ are born of interactions in the world of existence⁶⁸.
Interactions in the world of existence are born of emptiness or
non-existence⁶⁹.

⁶⁵ We have to be down-to-earth and obey the Law of Cause and Effect.

⁶⁶ “in appearance” is not in the original text. However, Laozi obviously means “weak in appearance.” True strength often appears to be weak. What looks strong often is actually weak.

⁶⁷ In the original, “all things” are in the text, not “all living things.” But in ancient China “tens of thousands of things”(萬物) often refers to all living things. For example, in the Iching, there is the sentence: “Heaven and earth found their places; all living things were nurtured and thrived”(天地位焉，萬物育焉)

⁶⁸ In the original, rather than “interactions in the world of existence” Laozi used the words “having” or “being” for brevity. In Buddhism, anything in the phenomenal world is called 有為法(the relative reality) and arises from the interactions between main and subsidiary factors and contrasts with 無為法(the absolute reality), which transcends actions and interactions.

⁶⁹ This latter statement is of course scientifically proven. Matter can be created and can be destroyed.

41. The Dao and Its Real and False-Followers

上士聞道，勤而行之；
中士聞道，若存若亡；
下士聞道，大笑之。不笑不足以爲道。
故建言有之：「明道若昧，進道若退，夷道若類，上德若谷；
大白若辱，廣德若不足，建德若偷，質真若渝；
大方無隅，大器免成，大音希聲，大象無形。」大器免成
道隱無名，夫唯道，善始且善成。

Superior men, hearing about the Dao,
Will work diligently under its guidance.
Mediocre men, hearing about the Dao,
Remembers and then forgets about it.

Inferior men, hearing about the Dao,
Laughs and jeers at it.
If people do not laugh or jeer at it,
It is unlikely to be the Dao.⁷⁰

Thus it is said:

Those whose mind shines with the Dao
Appear to be dull and stupid.

Those who make progress along the Dao
Appear to be falling behind.
Those who go astray
Appear to be following the Dao.

The truly virtuous are humble like a valley,⁷¹
The truly stainless souls appear sullied.
A man with many virtues
appears to be inadequate.
Those who are establishing their virtues
look like thieves.
The truthful look like good quality turned bad,
An infinite space will have no corners.
A man who is a great instrument never
aspires or strives to be such⁷².
A big voice sounds like it is soft.
A big symbol has no shape.

The Dao is hidden and nameless.
Yet nothing is better than the Dao
In lending support and helping people accomplish⁷³.

⁷⁰ That is why line 1 in Chapter 40 says: "The action of the Dao is contrary to common expectations."

⁷¹ This line provides a basis why I translated line 1 in Chapter 6 the way I did.

⁷² 大器免成 is according to the copy excavated at Mahuangdui. This contrasts with the more common version 大器晚成.

42. Harmony through the Dao

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。
萬物負陰而抱陽，沖氣以為和。
人之所惡，唯「孤」、「寡」、「不谷」。
而王公以為稱。
故，物或損之而益，或益之而損。
人之所教，我亦教之：
「強梁者不得其死」，吾將以為教父。

The Dao gives birth to the One.
The One gives birth to the Two(yin and yang).
The Two give birth to the Three(heaven, earth, and man)⁷⁴.
The Three give birth to all things as we know them.
All living things bear the female nature
And espouse the male nature.
In interacting with each other
these two natures result in a new harmony.

It is well known that people generally hate
to be lonely, widowed, or under-provided.
Yet kings and people who wield power
call themselves lonely, widowed, or under-provided.

Things may benefit people through imposing losses on them,
And may hurt them through bestowing apparent benefits.

I teach the same kind of people that others teach⁷⁵.
But by a single maxim that I teach, that
“Those who use sheer force to make their ways
Will not die a good death”
I should become the teacher of all teachers.

⁷³ Put it another way, since the Dao is nameless and need not be referred to as Dao, we can say that people have huge potential and can realize big accomplishments in their lives, as long as they live in a wise manner in consonance with nature and the Law.

⁷⁴ Walker(1995) and Gu(1995), among others, agree that the Two is yin and yang. Walker thought the three is “heaven, earth, and beings.” Gu did not explain. The reader may consider my variation or ponder alternative interpretations.

⁷⁵ Many translators translate these lines as “What others teach I also teach.” But that would undermine the difference of Laozi from others. Laozi repeatedly says throughout the entire Daodejing that the Dao is contrary to common expectations and beliefs.

43. The Benefits of Being Empty

天下之至柔，馳騁天下之至堅。
無有入無間。吾是以知無爲之有益。
不言之教，無爲之益，天下希及之。

The most gentle and the most flexible of the world
Certainly outperforms the strongest and the hardest.

What appears intangible and without substance
Can penetrate the narrowest gaps.
From this we can appreciate the benefits of not contriving.

The wordless teaching, and the benefits of not contriving⁷⁶,
Certainly find no match under heaven.

⁷⁶ Not contriving and being empty are like synonyms. The idea is to forget about the self, and to humbly follow the Law of Nature.

44. Knowing When to Stop

名與身孰親？身與貨孰多？得與亡孰病？
是故，甚愛必大費，多藏必厚亡。
知足不辱，知止不殆，可以長久。

Which is the dearer,
Fame or the body?

Which means more,
The body or wealth?

Which can be called an ill,
To gain or to lose?⁷⁷

Greater cost comes with greater craving.
Greater loss comes with greater accumulation.⁷⁸

He who knows what he needs
will attract no dishonor.
He who knows when to stop
will come to no grief.
Such people can have a lasting life.

⁷⁷ These questions would not really bother someone who follows the Dao. Such a person would not even raise any of these questions because he would have given up the calculating mind.

⁷⁸ Rather than calculating and trying to get the biggest gain, giving up the craving habit will bring greater gains than someone with a calculating mind can ever imagine.

45. Natural Stillness

大成若缺，其用不弊。

大盈若冲，其用不穷。

大直若屈，大巧若拙，大辩若讷。

躁胜寒，静胜热，清静为天下正。

The greatest accomplishment appears incomplete,
Yet it can meet the needs of the most demanding occasions.⁷⁹

The greatest fulfillment appears to be weak and restrained.
Yet its use is limitless.

What is most straight appears to be bent.
What is most dexterous appears to be clumsy.
The most skilled of debaters use words sparingly.

Motion overcomes cold.
Stillness overcomes hot.⁸⁰

Clearing up the muddiness of the mind
By allowing it to settle down to its natural stillness,
Will restore all things to their proper places.

⁷⁹ There are two versions in the original. One reads: 大成若缺，其用不弊。 The other reads: 大成若缺，其用大弊。 My translation follows the second version. A translation of the first version could read “A great accomplishment appears incomplete, yet it never fails.”

⁸⁰ Scientifically these two lines are valid. The implication of these lines is to live the middle way: not too cold, and not too hot, and the middle way is achieved by keeping a clear mind.

46. Knowing One's True Needs

天下有道，却走馬以糞。
天下無道，戎馬生于郊。
禍莫大于不知足；咎莫大于欲得。
故知足之足，常足矣。

When things under heaven follow the Dao,
Horses will roam freely,
and their droppings will be found anywhere.
When things under heaven have departed from the Dao,
The horses will be reared in special stables away from the city.

No wrong is greater than having objects to crave for.
No disaster is greater than not knowing one's true needs.
No greater ill is invited than by craving to possess.
Thus, the satisfaction from knowing one's true needs
and asking for no more is eternal.

47. The Truth Lies Within

不出戶，知天下；不窺牖，見天道。
其出彌遠，其知彌少。
是以聖人不行而知，不見而明，不為而成。

Without stepping out of the door,
One can know the universal truth that pervades the universe.
Without peeping through the window,
One can see the Dao of Nature.
He who goes to a distant land
in search of the Truth
Will only distant himself from the Truth.⁸¹

The Sage knows it all without traveling afar.
He is illuminated without seeing with his physical eyes.
He accomplishes without ever contriving to accomplish.

⁸¹ Literally: "He who travels a longer distance knows a lesser amount." The line, however, should not be taken literally, since he who travels longer distance certainly sees more and hears more about the outside world. But he is also likely to know less about the Truth, which requires insight and reflection.

48. How to Win the Hearts of People

為學日益，為道日損。
損之又損，以至於無為。
無為而無不為。
取天下常以無事。及其有事，不足以取天下。

The more we learn⁸²,
The more things are plowed into our minds;
The more we follow the Dao,
The more things are taken out of our minds.

As we take more and more things out of our mind,
We finally arrive at the state of losing the sense of contriving and action.
At that point we be in the state of non-action.
At that point all actions will be done in the state of non-action.⁸³

To win the hearts of all under heaven,
We must always leave people alone.⁸⁴

If we do not leave them alone,
We will not win their adherence.

⁸² “Learn” here has a specific meaning, which includes acquiring a calculating, discriminating, and dishonest mind, a mind that distinguishes one’s self as distinct from that of others. Certainly we all need to learn to be truthful and straight again.

⁸³ This is so because we will be one with Nature and because there is no self as a distinct entity that does things.

⁸⁴ We leave people alone because the freedom to live autonomously is important and valued for its own sake. Another aspect to this recommendation, of course, is that laissez-faire and non-intervention are often compatible with the common good. There is no doubt that Laozi believes in the working of the invisible hand. In this respect Laozi predated Adam Smith by some 2000 years. Chapter 57 has the lines: “I stay aloof, and people become well off of their own accord.”(我無事，而民自富。)

49. The Mind of Equanimity

聖人無常心，以百姓心爲心。
善者吾善之，不善者吾亦善之，得善。
信者吾信之，不信者吾亦信之，得信。
聖人在天下，歛歛焉，爲天下渾其心，聖人皆孩之。

The Sage does not have a fixed mind different from that of others.⁸⁵
He takes the mind of any of his people as his own mind.⁸⁶

If people are good, I shall be good to them.
If people are not good, I shall also be good to them.
This way I am really good.

If people are truthful, I shall be truthful to them.
If people are not truthful, I shall also be truthful to them.
This way I am really truthful.⁸⁷

The Sage keeps an indiscriminating mind
for the sake of all under heaven.
While people use their eyes and ears to discriminate,
The Sage's mind is always unsuspecting and innocent
like an infant's.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ “different from that of others” is not in the original text. This is added to make the meaning more explicit.

⁸⁶ The Sage who tries to serve the country must put himself in the shoes of everybody else. This corresponds with the “representative individual” paradigm discussed in Ho(2000).

⁸⁷ The word 信 in the original can mean “believe” or “be truthful.” The translation, which some translators subscribed to, to the effect that “I believe in the truthful man as well as the liar” is obviously a misleading and erroneous one. Others took 信 to mean “faith.” I believe this is another misleading interpretation.

⁸⁸ Interestingly, Jesus also asks people to preserve this innocence.

50. The Natural Right to Live

出生入死。

生之後，十有三；死之後，十有三；

人之生動之死地，亦十有三。

夫何故？以其生生之厚。

蓋聞善攝生者，陵行不過兕虎，入軍不被甲兵。

兕無所投其角，虎無所措其爪，兵無所容其刃。

夫何故？以其無死地。

Anyone who is born dies.
If 13 people are born
All 13 people will eventually die.
From birth to life,
From life to death,
The great earth will afford the places to live and to die
for exactly 13.
Why is this so?
It is because the mind cherishes the belief
that living is a privilege and not a natural right⁸⁹.

I have heard that those who are good at conserving and preserving life
Seldom meet tigers and horned animals when they move around.
If they should join the military forces,
They would not have the need to combat.
Horned animals will have no way to cast their horns on their bodies,
Nor will tigers find a place to lay their claws.
Even soldiers' swords will not hurt them.⁹⁰

Why is this so?
Because such people will never die.

⁸⁹ 厚 in 生生之厚 is the same as 厚 in 厚待, which means treating someone so well that it is like a special privilege. The first 生 is “conjuring the thought”—the thought that living is a privilege(生之厚). Yet living should be a right and not a privilege. Because people, particularly those in power, tend to make others feel that being able to live is a privilege, death becomes inevitable. Laozi believes that someone who lives with true respect for life and true respect for the right of other living things to live will not die.

⁹⁰ These lines are indeed somewhat mystical, but underscore Laozi's belief that life is sacred and should be beyond mutilation, debasement, or destruction by anyone.

51. The Dao and the Virtue

道生之，德畜之，物形之，器成之。
是以萬物莫不尊道而貴德。
道之尊，德之貴，夫莫之命而常自然。
故道生之，德畜之。
長之育之，亭之毒之，養之覆之，
生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰，是謂玄德。

The Dao gives them birth.
The Virtue rears them.
They get their shapes from substance.
They become what they are from the working of various forces.
For these reasons all living things pay homage to the Dao,
And respect the Virtue.

The stately status of the Dao and that of the Virtue
Are such that they are at the command of no one,
And are always in their natural states.

The Dao gives birth;
The Virtue rears them;
Raises and nourishes them;
Brings them up and lets them down;
Claims no ownership even though it brings them to life.
The Dao accomplishes but is never arrogant;
It lets them grow but never dictates their fates.
This is known as the Mystical Virtue.

52. Guard and Stay With Mother Nature

天下有始，以爲天下母。
既得其母，以知其子。
既知其子，復守其母，沒身不殆。
塞其兌，閉其門，終身不勤。
啓其兌，濟其事，終身不救。
見小曰明，守柔曰強。
用其光，復歸其明，無遺身殃，是爲習常。

Everything under heaven has a beginning.
That beginning we take as our mother.
Now that we know our mother,
We can begin to know our role as sons(and daughters).

Since we know our role as sons(and daughters),
We must guard and stay with our mother,
This way, even if our bodies perish,
We will never die.

Let the passages be blocked.
Let the doors be closed.
(So long as we stay with our mother,)
Till the end of life no worry need bother us.

(If we do the contrary,)
Then even though the roads are opened up,
And help is available,
Till the end of our lives we will still be doomed.

To be able to see the small things is to be illuminated;
To adhere to the principle of flexibility and
suppleness is to be strong.⁹¹
Let people use their own light
to illuminate and restore their understanding.
Let them leave nothing to regret about when their bodies perish.
This is called the gradual realization of the Eternal.

⁹¹ These lines give support to the interpretation that “The weak overcomes the strong” in Chapter 78 really means “What appears weak may overcome what appears strong.”

53. Arrogance at the Dao

使我介然有知，行于大道，唯施是畏。
大道甚夷，而民好徑。
朝甚除，田甚蕪，倉甚虛，
服文采，帶利劍，厭飲食，
財貨有餘，是爲盜竽。非道也哉！

What makes me know what I know,
And adhere to the Dao
Is the fear of departing from it.⁹²
The Dao is level and straight.
Yet people prefer to go on their devious paths.

When the court is busy with granting honors to its dignitaries,
And not caring for the fields that are overgrown by weeds,
While the granaries are empty;
When the officers of the nation dress themselves up beautifully,
And carry sharp swords with an air of superiority and power;
While excessive dining and drinking
 go hand in hand with excessive consumption and waste,
You know this is arrogance at the Dao.
This is certainly not the Dao.

⁹² Gu(1995) translated these lines as “If I have acquired a little knowledge, I will be afraid of going astray.” This interpretation is surprisingly rather common. However, considering the next couple of lines, which says that people like to take devious paths, my interpretation appears to make better sense. Because I am afraid of getting lost, I stick to the Dao.

54. Live and Work Respectfully

善建者不拔，善抱者不脫，子孫以祭祀不輟。

修之于身，其德乃真；

修之于家，其德乃餘；

修之于鄉，其德乃長；

修之于邦，其德乃丰；

修之于天下，其德乃普。

故以身觀身，以家觀家，以鄉觀鄉，以邦觀邦，以天下觀天下。

吾何以知天下然哉？以此。

Those skilled in building will build sturdy buildings.

Those skilled in hugging will hug fast.

Because they are serious and excel in what they do⁹³
they are remembered and honored by all their descendents.

He who applies the same seriousness⁹⁴ to serve his own body⁹⁵ has true virtue.

He who applies the same seriousness to serve his family
has virtue beyond himself.

He who applies the same seriousness to serve his village
has virtue that grows further afield.

He who applies the same seriousness to serve the nation
has virtue that is profuse.

He who applies to same seriousness to serve all under heaven,
has virtue that pervades the world.

Thus we see our body as our body is;

See our family as our family is;

We see our village as our village is;

See our nation as our nation is;

And we see everything under heaven as everything is.

How may we know the nature of everything under heaven?

With this (same and serious attitude).

⁹³ The original text simply says “for this reason.”

⁹⁴ The original text simply says “applies this.”

⁹⁵ The word “body” is used generally to refer to one’s personality. The phrase 修身, which literally means grooming and cultivating the body, is a common phrase that refers to cultivating a perfect personality.

55. Be Receptive Like an Infant; Be Congruent with the Eternal

含「德」之厚，比于赤子。

毒虫不螫，猛兽不据，攫鸟不搏。骨弱筋柔而握固。

未知牝牡之合而腹作，精之至也。

终日号而不嘎，和之至也。

知和曰常，知常曰明，益生曰祥，心使气曰强。

物壮则老，谓之不道，不道早已。

To be receptive to the benefit of the Virtue,
Like an infant is receptive to the mother,
One would be spared of the stings and bites
from bees, scorpions, and snakes;
One would be spared of being harmed
by fierce beasts;
And of being clawed by the predatory birds.

To be so receptive,
Then even if one has weak bones and soft sinews
One can grip things firmly.

People do not realize that
the union of the male and female with moderation⁹⁶
Represents energy at its height; and that
Being together all day sounding natural calls
and not losing voice through screaming
Represents harmony at its best.

To know the harmony of the universe is
be congruent with the Eternal;
To know the Eternal is to be illuminated.
To preserve and to promote life is to bring good fortune;
To let the mind take command of the life-breath is to be strong.

Any living thing that indulges in excesses soon gets old.⁹⁷
Indulging in excesses is against the Dao.
Going against the Dao, one soon dies.

⁹⁶ These couple of lines are most confusing to translators. A lot of the translations do not make much sense. 腹作 in the original is a rather uncommon phrase. But 腹 literally may mean “peel off” or “reduced by cutting away.” 作 is activity. Together the phrase means moderation. This interpretation makes good sense in the context.

⁹⁷ The original 物壯則老 literally means “a living thing at its prime soon gets old.” But natural aging cannot be against the Dao. What Laozi criticizes is using unnatural means to grow strong or being arrogant with one’s youth or strength.

56. Inner Peace and the Mystical Union

知者不言，言者不知。

塞其兌，閉其門，挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵，是謂玄同。

故不可得而親，不可得而疏；

不可得而利，不可得而害；

不可得而貴，不可得而賤。

故為天下貴。

Those who know do not speak much.
Those who speak much do not know.⁹⁸

Block the passage of exchange with the outside world.
Close the doors;
Blunt the protruding points;
Absolve the disputes;
Tone down the dazzling light;
Receive outside stimuli with an equanimous mind.
This is called the mystical union.⁹⁹

With a non-possessive mind¹⁰⁰ we get together;
With a non-possessive mind we separate.
With a non-possessive mind we experience what seems advantageous to us;
With a non-possessive mind we experience what seems disadvantageous;
With a non-possessive mind we experience high positions;
With a non-possessive mind we experience low positions.
This way we achieve the most valuable under heaven.

⁹⁸ Literally, “Those who are wise do not speak; those who speak are not wise.” The word “much” is added in each of these clauses to revive Laozi’s obvious true meaning.

⁹⁹ 同 in the original phrase 玄同 means “identify,” “unify,” “integrate,” or “equalize.”

¹⁰⁰ 不可得 simply means “cannot be possessed.” My interpretation differs markedly from those of other translators(Gu, 1995, Waley, 1997), many of whom think Laozi was describing a wise and virtuous man as one we cannot befriend or estrange with, benefit or harm, honor or debase. This alternative interpretation would be counter to Laozi’s character as a teacher offering practical advice.

57. The Laissez Faire Government

以正治國，以奇用兵，以無事取天下。

吾何以知其然哉？

以此：天下多忌諱，而民彌貧；

人多利器，國家滋昏；

人多伎巧，奇物滋起；

法令滋彰，盜賊多有。

故聖人云：「我無爲，而民自化；我好靜，而民自正；

我無事，而民自富；我無欲，而民自朴。」

We rule a nation with the straight mind.
We deploy the military forces with surprises.
We win the hearts of all under heaven with non-intervention.
How do I know that this should be so, with this:

The more prohibitions that are imposed by the emperor¹⁰¹,
The poorer the people become.
The more clever products that people own,
The less clever the nation becomes.¹⁰²
The more people use their tricks and knacks,
The more odd products there are, and
The more rules and laws there are,
It is likely that there are the more thieves and bandits.

The Sage says: “I do not contrive, and people
automatically become cultured and well-mannered.
I keep still, and people automatically become straight;
I do not intervene, and people automatically become rich;
I do not crave, and people automatically lead a simple life.”

¹⁰¹ In modern language, “rules and regulations.” Too many rules and regulations may suffocate a nation’s businesses and result in poverty.

¹⁰² If people own a lot of clever products they may become arrogant, and the nation may lose its heart.

58. Good Life Under a Non-interventionist Government

其政悶悶，其民淳淳；其政察察，其民缺缺。

禍兮，福之所倚，福兮，禍之所伏。

孰知其極？其無正。正復爲奇，善復爲妖。

人之迷，其日固久！

是以聖人方而不割，廉而不剝，直而不肆，光而不耀。

When the government appears dull and boring,
The people enjoy a good and rich life.
When the government appears clever and innovative,
The people suffer a shortage.

What appears to be misfortune may pave the way for fortune.
What appears to be fortune may pave the way for misfortune.
Who knows the absolute?
The right that we know is often not right.
What is right may prove to be wrong.
What is good may prove to be bad.
Mankind has been lost in the maze since the old days.

The Sage has an open mind and is unpretentious¹⁰³.
He is incorruptible¹⁰⁴ and will not succumb to bribery¹⁰⁵.
He is straight but is not arrogant.
He shines but not dazzles¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰³ The word square(方) in Chinese also means open and unpretentious, such as the phrase(大方).

The word cut(割) refers to carpenters' making pretentious cuts to the wood to demonstrate their skill.

¹⁰⁴ The word 廉 is commonly used to describe a clean politician or bureaucrat not given to corruption.

¹⁰⁵ The word 剝 means literally creating a wound in the flesh with a knife. Succumbing to corruption is creating a wound in one's character or integrity.

¹⁰⁶ Waley(1997) gave the direct literal translation: "Therefore the Sage squares without cutting, shapes the corners without lopping, straightens without stretching, gives forth light without shining."

59. Be Prepared

治人、事天，莫若嗇。

夫為嗇，是謂早服，早服謂之重積德。

重積德則無不克。無不克則莫知其極。

莫知其極，可以有國。

有國之母，可以長久。是謂深根固柢，長生久視之道。

To rule over men or to serve heaven
Nothing works better than following the farmer's example.¹⁰⁷

The farmer does his preparatory work early.
To be like him, one must pay attention to the accumulation of virtue.
That way one can overcome all difficulties.
That way one's ability knows no limit.
That way one can sustain a nation.
Virtue being the mother of a nation,
With virtue the nation can last a long time.
With deep roots and secure trunks, one is
on the way to a long life and a long view.

¹⁰⁷ In the original, one word 嗇 was used to describe the example to follow. Unfortunately, in modern usage the word is always associated with 吝嗇, which means being stingy and frugal. This more common usage of the word does not, however, fit in with the rest of the chapter, and it is doubtful whether Laozi is preaching at all the virtues of frugality here. On the other hand, the more ancient usage of the word 嗇 is farmer. The meaning then is very clear.

60. Governing a Great Nation According to the Dao

治大國若烹小鮮。
以道蒞天下，其鬼不神。
非其鬼不神，其神不傷人。
非其神不傷人，聖人亦不傷人。
夫兩不相傷，故德交歸焉。

To govern a great nation
Is not much different from frying a small fish.

To govern a nation according to the Dao,
Even the demons will not show their influences.
Not that they have lost all their influences,
But their influences will do people no harm.
Not only do the influences of the evil spirits do people no harm.
The Sage will also do people no harm.
Since demons at one extreme,
through the Sage at the other extreme,
All do people no harm.
We can conclude that the Virtue has perfected its job.

61. No Hegemony in Foreign Relations

大國者下流，天下之牝，天下之交。
牝常以靜勝牡，以靜爲下。
故大國以下小國，則取小國；小國以下大國，則取大國。
故或下以取，或下而取。
大國不過欲兼畜人，小國不過欲入事人。
夫兩者各得所欲，大者宜爲下。

Big nations should be like a stream that flows low.
In relating to other nations under heaven.
They should be like a female animal.
Female animals often lie low and still.
By doing so they win over male animals.

Big nations that take on a lower profile than small nations
will win the adherence of small nations.¹⁰⁸
Small nations that take on a lower profile than big nations
will win the assistance from the big nations.
Big nations keep low and get what they want.
Small nations keep low and get what they want.
Big nations(with an abundance of land) want to have
a bigger population.
Small nations(with a shortage of land) want to have more jobs.

¹⁰⁸ In the original text, one word, “取” or “take” or “get” was used to describe the result of a nation taking on a low profile. Obviously 取小國 does not mean literally taking over the small nation. 取大國 does not mean literally taking over the big nation.

If big nations keep low, both the needs of big nations
and those of the small will be fulfilled.

62. The Dao as Treasure and Refuge

道者，萬物之與。善人之寶，不善人之所保。

美言可以市尊，美行可以加人。

人之不善，何棄之有？

故立天子，置三公，雖有拱璧以先駟馬，不如坐進此道。

古之所以貴此道者何？

不曰：求以得，有罪以免邪？故為天下貴。

The Dao is the deepest learning for all living things,
It is the good man's treasure
and the bad man's refuge.

Fine words attract respect;
Fine deeds make people look gallant.
(Because of such fine consequences that are expected)
even men who are bad
may not be stingy with fine words and good deeds!¹⁰⁹

On the occasion of the enthronement of the Emperor
or at the installation of three ministers of the state, therefore,
It is far better to follow the Dao (which certainly
will bring good fortune) than to have a jade
disc displayed, leading a chariot of four horses.

In the ancient times those people who value the Dao
do not do so for the consequences,
or in order to achieve atonement for their sins.
For this reason they are truly honored by all under heaven.

¹⁰⁹ This is to say that although the Dao should be followed for its own sake in disregard for the good consequences, it makes sense for people who just value the consequences to learn to follow the Dao. The bracketed clause is implied but not part of the original text. Compare with Gu's translation(1995): "With the Tao, beautiful words can buy respect; Beautiful deeds can be highly regarded. How can the bad man desert the Tao?" "With the Tao" is not in the text and in my view not even implied, since those who are with the Tao will have no need for beautiful words or beautiful deeds, as Chapter 81 so emphatically says. Walker's translation(1995) is consistent with the spirit of Daodejing, but, considering the next few lines, he may have twisted the meaning here. This is his version: "Beautiful words win some men honors; good deeds buy others acclaim. But the Tao values everyone, not just those who excel. What's the sense of discarding anyone?"

63. The Natural, Selfless Way of Life

為無為，事無事，味無味。

大小多少，報怨以德。

圖難于其易；為大于其細。

天下難事，必作于易；天下大事，必作于細。

是以聖人終不為大，故能成其大。

夫輕諾必寡信，多易必多難。是以聖人猶難之，故終無難矣。

Act in the state of non-action;
Work but do not work for gain;
Taste but do not taste for the taste¹¹⁰.

Never mind if it is big, small, many, or few,
Just repay injury with benevolence.

To do the difficult we start with the easy.
To do the great thing we start with the small.
All the difficult tasks under heaven must
begin with the easy parts.
All the great achievements under heaven must
begin with the small steps.
The Sage never sets out to do great things.
That way he accomplishes great results.

Those who make easy promises will not be trusted.
Those who say everything is easy
will often have difficulty accomplishing their tasks,
The Sage, on the other hand, takes on the easy tasks as
he takes on the difficult.¹¹¹
So in the end no difficulty will hold him up.

¹¹⁰ If we acted as if we were the agents of the natural law, so that we gave up the idea of *we* doing the things that we do and achieving the things that we achieve, we would be acting in the state of non-action. Compare this with the Christian and Islamic attitude of attributing all achievements to the grace of God, and the Buddhist philosophy of “not having an idea of achieving anything.”(無所得).

¹¹¹ The idea is trying the best to do a task and to work seriously, regardless of how easy or difficult it is.

64. Fortitude and Living One's Inner Nature

其安易持；其未兆易謀；其脆易泮；其微易散。
爲之于未有，治之于未亂。
合抱之木，生于毫末；九層之台，起于累土；千里之行，始于足下。
爲者敗之；執者失之。
是以聖人無爲，故無敗；無執，故無失。
民之從事，常于几成而敗之。慎終如始，則無敗事。
是以聖人欲不欲，不貴難得之貨，
學不學，復衆人之所過。
以輔萬物自然而不敢爲。

When the situation is peaceful and orderly,
Maintaining peace and order is not difficult;
When the situation has not yet developed to a
mature stage, planning to change the outcome is easy;
What is brittle is easy to break;
What is minute is easy to scatter.
We set out to work before problems emerge.
We put things in order before they get out of order.

A tree that is big enough for one to embrace around
it grew from a tiny seed.
A nine-story pagoda begins from a heap of earth.
A journey of a thousand miles (“li”) begins with the first step.

Those who work for gain in the end will be frustrated.
Those who hold on to something in the end will lose it.
The Sage never works for gain and so will never be frustrated.
He never holds on to anything so he never loses anything.

People often fail in their tasks when they are about
to accomplish them.
If only they take the same care in the end as they do in the beginning,
they will avoid many failures.¹¹²

The Sage desires to be free of desires, so he will not
value goods that most people value;
He learns to unlearn,
so he will value things that most people do not value¹¹³.
The Sage only hopes that all living things will live out their inner nature.
He will not dare to go against Nature.

¹¹² These lines show clearly the down-to-earth nature of Laozi's teachings. This chapter puts in such concrete terms and in such amazing and beautiful language a most practical dictum to guide our day-to-day life that it dispels once and for all the misunderstanding that Laozi is other-worldly.

¹¹³ The original text, 復衆人之所過, has been translated variously. In the context, it appears clear to me that 過 refers to 錯過 which is “missing something that is good.” 復 is rediscovering. The fact is we have often learnt to value things that we would not, by our own original nature, value; and we have instead learnt not to value things that we by our innate nature value. This is why we need to unlearn many things that we have learnt.

65. Be Wary of Acquired Knowledge

古之善爲道者，非以明民，將以愚之。
民之難治，以其智多。
故以智治國，國之賊；不以智治國，國之福。
知此兩者亦稽式。常知稽式，是謂玄德。
玄德深矣，遠矣，與物反矣，然後乃至大順。

In the ancient days the masters who succeed in following the Dao,
Rather than making people clever,
Would spare them from much acquired knowledge.

The reason why people may be difficult to rule over is that
they are too clever.

The ruler who rules with his acquired knowledge
is (likely) to hurt the nation.

The ruler who rules not with his acquired knowledge
is (likely) to benefit the nation.¹¹⁴

Knowing the difference between ruling with acquired knowledge and
ruling with original knowledge

Is close to following the right formula.

Being always mindful of following the formula is the mystical virtue.

The mystical virtue is deep,

far from the crowds,

and opposite to what people expect.

Exactly because it is the reverse of what people expect,
it achieves great concordance.

¹¹⁴ Arrogance and loss of humility, often cultivated unwittingly as one learns, plague both rulers and the ruled.

66. Rule with Humility

江海所以能爲百谷王者，以其善下之，故能爲百谷王。
是以聖人欲上民，必以言下之；欲先民，必以身後之。
是以聖人居上而民不重，居前而民不害。
是以天下樂推而不厭。以其不爭，故天下莫能與之爭。

The reason why the great rivers and the seas can claim
to be the kings of the hundred valleys
is that they lie low,
so the water in all valleys come to them.¹¹⁵

The Sage who wants to be on top of his people must use humble words.
He who wants to lead his people must follow his people.
For these reasons, though the Sage is on top of his people,
his people are not burdensome.
Although he is ahead of his people,
his people will do him no harm.
He wins the heart of his people and
is never abandoned by the people.
Because he never struggles with anyone for favor,
none under heaven can out-struggle him.

¹¹⁵ This and other passages to the same effect underscore the importance of keeping the “valley spirit”(Chapter 6).

67. The Three Treasures

天下皆謂我道大，似不肖。夫唯大，故似不肖。若肖，久矣其細也夫！
我有三寶，持而保之：一曰慈，二曰儉，三曰不敢為天下先。
慈，故能勇；儉，故能廣；不敢為天下先，故能成器長。
今舍慈且勇，舍儉且廣，舍后且先，死矣。
夫慈，以戰則勝，以守則固。天將救之，以慈衛之。

All under heaven say that my Dao though great seems to be useless.
Exactly because it is great it seems to be useless.
If it seemed to be useful, in all likelihood
it would be small, not great.

I have three treasures that I keep and adhere to always.
The first is compassion.
The second is thrift.
The third is humility¹¹⁶.

Because I am compassionate, I have courage.
Because I am thrifty, I am generous.
Because I am humble, my potential can be fully developed.

These days people have forgotten about compassion,
instead they are daring;
They have forgotten about thrift,
instead they are spendthrift;
They have forgotten about humility,
and they always want to be number one.
They are doomed.

He who fights a war with compassion will win the war.
He who defends with compassion will hold out against his enemy.
Heaven will help him and defend him with compassion.

¹¹⁶ The original is “not daring to be the first in the world”(不敢為天下先) and has been translated as “unwillingness to take the lead in the world.”Gu(1995) This is likely to be a misinterpretation. The spirit of the sentence lies in advising people of the virtues of humility. One can be the first without thinking that he is the first, for this reason one is truly the first. Compare this interpretation with Chapter 38: “The refined virtuous never attempts to be virtuous. For this reason they are truly virtuous.”

68. The Virtue of Non-struggle

善爲士者，不武。善戰者，不怒。善勝敵者，不與。
善用人者，爲之下。
是謂不爭之德，是謂用人之力，是謂配天，古之極。

He who can offer wise counsel will not display his wisdom¹¹⁷.
He who is a fine fighter will not lose temper.
He who is good in contests will not struggle with his contestants.
He who knows how to use people stays low and underneath them.
This is the virtue of non-struggle.
This is making use of others' full abilities.
This can be said to match heaven
And is really the best art handed down from the ancient days.

¹¹⁷ The first line in the original, 善爲士者不武, stands in contrast with the second line, 善戰者不怒, showing that 善爲士者(literally, those who are excellent in giving counsel) and 善戰者(literally, those who are excellent in fighting) are different. This makes the predicate of the first line odd, since 不武 literally means “not fighting.” The puzzle is solved if we understand 武 to mean “display” or “show one’s skills.” The usual word to mean display, however, is 舞 as in 舞文弄墨(displaying skills in writing). 武 and 舞 have the same pronunciation and so 武 is likely to have been used for 舞. An alternative source of this interpretation is derived from an ancient meaning of the character 武, which may mean “the footprint of an animal” which reveals the animal’s presence. My translation contrasts with Lin Yu Tang’s translation: “The brave soldier is not violent; The good fighter does not lose his temper.”

69. Humility and Adaptiveness in the Battlefield

用兵有言：「吾不敢為主，而為客；不敢進寸，而退尺。」
是謂行無行，攘無臂，扔無敵，執無兵。
禍莫大於輕敵，輕敵几喪吾寶。故抗兵相若，哀者勝矣。

Military strategists have this dictum:
“When I am not ready to take the role of the host (defend),
I will take the role of the guest (attack);
When I am not ready to advance an inch,
I will retreat a foot.”
This is known as moving but not having a pattern of moving;
Pushing away, but not showing the arms to push with;
Dispelling, but not having visible enemies to dispel;
Taking command, but having no armies to take command over.¹¹⁸

The greatest ill lies in slighting one’s opponents;
Slighting my opponent, I could easily lose my treasure.

When two armies of equal strength meet in combat,
It is the army that considers itself weak that will win.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Laozi here again refers to the benefits of being flexible and adapt to the circumstances. Water is really strong because it is flexible, though it appears to be weak.

¹¹⁹ Flexibility, humility, and being prepared are the virtues that will bring great benefits in one’s daily life and in the battlefield.

70. The Rarity of Dao Followers

吾言甚易知，甚易行。天下莫能知，莫能行。
言有宗，事有君。
夫唯無知，是以不我知。知我者希，則我者貴。
是以聖人被褐而懷玉。

What I say is easy to understand and easy to practice
Yet few people under heaven understand and practice it.
What I preach has a respectable ancestry,
What I do serves a lord well.¹²⁰
Yet few people are aware of this,
And therefore few understand me.
The fewer people know about me.
The rarer and the better positioned
are those who know and practice my teaching.
The Sage is like someone hiding a precious
jade piece underneath his clothes.

¹²⁰ Laozi explicitly tells his readers that his teachings are down-to-earth, practical, and of this world.

71. Rediscover What You Know in Your Nature

知不知，上，不知知，病。聖人不病，以其病病，是以不病。

One who knows what most people do not know is superior;
One who forgets what one by nature knows is sick.¹²¹

The Sage is free from this sickness.
Because he avoids the sickness, he is not sick.

72. Do Not Intimidate Others; Do Not Exalt Yourself

民不畏威，則大威至。無狎其所居，無厭其所生。
夫唯不厭，是以不厭。
是以聖人自知不自見，自愛不自貴。故去彼取此。

Truly reverence-inspiring
is he who displays nothing to intimidate his people.

Do not despise people for their humble residences;
Do not shun them for their modest births.
Because you do not despise and shun them,
They also will not despise and shun you.

The Sage knows himself and frees himself from prejudice.
He treasures and takes care of his own life but will not exalt himself.
He gives something up and gains something else.

¹²¹ A person, on seeing a man suffering from hunger, instinctively sees the suffering and empathizes with him. Another person comes by and says: "You are not him, so how can you tell if he is suffering?" This latter person has learnt the clever but crooked way of thinking and has forgotten his natural awareness and sensitivity. He is sick.

73. Heaven's Plans

勇于敢，則殺，勇于不敢，則活。

此兩者，或利或害。天之所惡，孰知其故？

天之道，不爭而善勝，不言而善應，不召而自來，姍然而善謀。

天網恢恢，疏而不失。

He who is brave enough to challenge the Dao perishes.

He who is brave enough to revere the Dao lives.

These two personalities, with their respective harms and benefits,
will invite favor or disfavor from heaven.

Does any one know the reason behind it?

The way of heaven, the Dao, is apt to win benefits
though it never struggles for any benefit.

He who follows the Dao, though he never asks for any favor,
receives the favor.

Results come of their own accord where results are due.

Without deliberating, heaven appears to have its plans.

Although its net appears to consist of course meshes,

No one can sneak through and escape the law.

74. Rely Not On the Death Penalty

民不畏死，奈何以死懼之？若使民常畏死，而為奇者，吾得執而殺之，孰敢？常有司殺者殺。夫代司殺者殺，是謂代大匠斫。夫代大匠斫者，希有不傷其手矣。

People may not be afraid of death.
Why should we intimidate them with the threat of death?
If people are generally afraid of death,
And we are able to seize the exceptions and to kill them,
Why would anyone still disregard the death penalty?¹²²

The Lord of Killing¹²³ does kill from time to time.
Yet anyone who kills in his place
is like someone who takes the place of the master carpenter
and uses his sharp tools.
It is unlikely that he can avoid hurting his own hands.

¹²² Laozi believes that intimidation to make people behave in a certain way is not in general a good policy. Policy makers should take away the motivation for people to “misbehave” rather than use deterrents to deter people from behaving in the undesired way. We know that people are prepared to die for what they believe as noble causes, and if they cannot get their sustenance through lawful activities they will risk their lives in unlawful activities in order to survive. Availing people of jobs so they can make a living, and giving them the right to live in their own communities will take away the need to commit crimes. Consider the suicidal terrorist attacks committed by various “radical people.” Consider the plight of many of the poor who have no means to live a basic life, and we can see the wisdom of these lines.

¹²³ 司殺者 is directly translated as “Minister responsible for killing.” Laozi is known to respect life to the extent that he does not believe any human being should take up this responsibility. So the phrase should refer to the law of nature which from time to time does take away peoples’ lives.

75. Government's Faults

民之飢，以其上食稅之多，是以飢。
民之不治，以其上之有爲，是以不治。
民之輕死，以其上求生之厚，是以輕死。
夫唯無以生爲者，是賢于貴生。

People are hungry.

That is because the government imposes too many taxes.

People are difficult to rule over.

That is because the government contrives and wants to do too much.

People do not think much of death.

That is because the government makes life a privilege
instead of treating it as a natural right.

Those who makes living an unconditional right are good
in that they pay due respect to life¹²⁴.

¹²⁴ Diverse translations of these lines exist. Walker(1995) took these lines to mean: “Those who enjoy life are wiser than those who employ life.” Gu(1995) took them to mean: “Those who make light of their own life are wiser than those who overvalue their life.” The original 無以生爲者，是賢于貴生 is directly translated into my current version by taking 于 as “in” rather than “than.” This appears to make good sense as both this and the previous chapter preach the virtues of the respect for life.

76. Strengths and Weaknesses

人之生也柔弱，其死也堅強。草木之生也柔脆，其死也枯槁。
故堅強者死之徒，柔弱者生之徒。
是以兵強則滅，木強則折，強大居下，柔弱居上。

People at birth are weak and supple.
People at death are strong and hard.
All living things including the trees and other
plants are supple and weak.
When they die, however, they all turn dry and hard.

Being hard and strong is the way of the dead.
Being soft and weak is the way of the alive.

Armed forces that show their strength will not win.
Trees that hold strong against the wind are likely
to be blown down.
To be strong is a disadvantage.
To be weak is an advantage.

77. The Way of Heaven

天之道，其猶張弓歟？
高者抑之，下者舉之，有餘者損之，不足者補之。
天之道，損有餘而補不足。
人之道，則不然：損不足以奉有餘。
孰能有餘以奉天下？唯有道者。
是以聖人爲而不恃，功成而不居，其不欲見賢。

The Dao of Heaven is like pulling a bow.
The top end comes down and the bottom end goes up.
It takes away from those with surplus to spare
and gives to those who are short.

The way of Heaven takes away from those with surplus to spare
and gives to those who are short.
The way of men is just the opposite.
It takes away from those who are short
and offers to those who have more than enough.

The Sage does his work but is not arrogant.
He accomplishes but will not dwell on his accomplishments.
He does not want to show off his accomplishments.

78. Water and the Paradoxes of Life

天下莫柔弱于水，而攻堅強者莫之能勝，以其無以易之。
弱之勝強，柔之勝剛，天下莫不知，莫能行。
是以聖人云：「受國之垢，是謂社稷主；受國不祥，是爲天下王。」
正言若反。

Nothing under heaven is weaker than water.
Yet nothing however proficient in attacking the strong can win over water.
The reason is that nothing can lay a handle on water.

The weak overcomes the strong;
The soft overcomes the hard.
All under heaven know about this dictum
but few people can put it into practice.

That is why the Sage says:
“Those who take what other people discard as garbage
is the lord of Society.
Those who love the nation when it is in the grip of misfortune
can claim to be the king.”
What is right often seems to be wrong.

79. Do Good Deeds; Blame No One

和大怨，必有餘怨，安可以爲善？
是以聖人執左契而不責于人。
有德司契，無德司徹。天道無親，恆與善人。

Trying to neutralize a wrong with another wrong will never work,
because there is bound to be some wrong left over.

To return grievance or wrong with benevolence is
the way to absolve a grievance.

The Sage only sees to it that what is agreed is carried out;
He will not lay the blame on anyone¹²⁵.
The virtuous one only enforces contracts.
The non-virtuous one imposes his will¹²⁶.

The Way of Heaven will not favor any one in particular,
But it will favor those who do good deeds.

¹²⁵ He is a neutral contract enforcer and does not take sides.

¹²⁶ These two lines are amazing. In the original, 徹 is used to describe what the non-virtuous rulers do. 徹 refers to a rule imposed by the emperor during the Zhou Dynasty governing how a plot of land was to be divided and farmed by different people. In this context the word is used as a figure of speech to refer to rules imposed from the top to be observed by people below.

80. A Peaceful, Rich, But Simple Life

小邦寡民。使有什伯之器而不用；使民重死而不遠徙。

雖有舟輿，無所乘之；雖有甲兵，無所陳之。

使民復結繩而用之。

甘其食，美其服，安其居，樂其俗。

鄰邦相望，雞犬之聲相聞，民至老死，不相往來。

For a small country with a small population,¹²⁷
Let there be no need to use labor-saving gadgets¹²⁸.
Let people love to die where they are born
and not want to migrate to a distant land.
Let there be no need to use boats for long trips.
Although the country has armed forces ready to protect the country,
Let there be no need to display the military strength.
Let the people find happiness in a simple life¹²⁹.

Let people enjoy their good foods and fine clothing.
Let them settle down peacefully and follow their traditions happily.
Let neighboring nations eye one another,
and hear the calls of poultry and dogs from the other nation.
Let their people find sufficiency in their own
lands.
Till their death let there be no need to interact¹³⁰.

¹²⁷ Laozi obviously cherishes the belief that “Small is beautiful.” But it will be wrong to take the first four words(小國寡民) here as recommending birth control to keep the population small, since Laozi will not interfere with how many children each family has.

¹²⁸ That is, let people follow their natural instincts to use their own labor in various simple tasks.

¹²⁹ There are many figures of speech here, and they should not be taken literally. The last line in the original reads: “so people will revive the use of using knots to communicate.” Certainly Laozi did not mean giving up the written language. After all, the Daodejing was written in language that was already well established. This chapter describes an ideal world of self-sufficiency where people find delight in the enjoyment of a simple life.

¹³⁰ People may think that Laozi does not approve of interacting. But this is not true, since to “follow their traditions happily” already implies some kind of interaction. Laozi would let people settle down to their own lifestyles. Since Laozi believes that then they would be so satisfied, that there would be no incentive and no need to travel.

81. Doing One's Duty

信言不美，美言不信。
善者不辯，辯者不善。
知者不博，博者不知。
聖人不積，既以爲人已愈有，既以與人已愈多。
天之道，利而不害；聖人之道，爲而不爭。

Truthful words may not be fine to hear.
Words that are fine to hear may not be truthful.

Good people will not want to argue
or to defend themselves by word of mouth.
Those who love to argue with others or to defend their beliefs
are likely to be not so good.

Those with insight need not be well versed in different things.
Those who are well versed in different kinds of knowledge may not really know.

The Sage does not set out to accumulate a fortune or merit.
Yet as he serves the people, he becomes richer;
and as he gives to people, he gets more.
The way of heaven is to benefit, not hurt.
The way of the Sage is to do his duty, and not to contest or struggle.

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Various versions of translations including the one by Lin Yu-tang referred to in the text are available from: <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/taoism/ttc-list.htm>