

Tao Te Ching

Introduction

This interpretation of the Tao Te Ching would not have been possible without two collections of character-by-character accounts of verbatim and common translations, one by Jonathan Star and C. J. Ming and one by Nina Correa. I am deeply grateful for their meticulous scholarship and generous work. I only attempted this interpretation after years of encouragement from my wife, Lisa, and my departed friend and sometimes interpretive guide, Qiguang Zhao.

Throughout, I have kept a few Chinese terms, often with a parenthetical note, for example, from Chapter 2, “the wise abide by effortless effort (*wu wei*).” I also have used parenthetical notes to explain pronouns as well as poetic phrases I want to keep but might confuse readers from the West, for an example of the latter, consider Chapter 60, “Govern the nation like cooking a small fish (with restraint).” I also expand on some phrases with bracketed text by adding more than was written in the Tao Te Ching, hoping the addition lends clarity, for example, from Chapter 11, “Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub. Because of the empty space [at its center], the wheel turns.”

Glossary of Chinese terms kept in this Interpretation

(Terms are listed in order of appearance in the *Tao Te Ching*.)

tao: a path, the way, nature’s way

wu wei: nonaction, not forcing, effortless effort

te: virtue, power, the nature of tao, integrity with tao

yin: the passive or receptive principle, often illustrated as feminine, darkness, or the valley

yang: the active or productive principle, often illustrated as masculine, light, or the mountain

qi: energy or breath, the result of interplay between yin and yang

pu: uncarved wood, simplicity, purity, unrealized potential, the natural

1

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the origin of heaven and
earth,
while naming is the origin of all
distinctions.
Ever without desire, we perceive tao's
essence.
Ever with desire, we perceive only its
[distinct] forms.
Essence and form arise from the same
source
but differ in how they are called forth.
This unity is said to be the mystery,
mystery within mystery, gateway to the
essence of all.

2

Everyone knows beauty,
but making it "beautiful" gives rise to
"ugly."
Everyone knows good,
but making it "good" gives rise to "bad."
Similarly, have and have not produce each
other.
Difficult and easy define each other.
Long and short contrast with each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Tone and melody conform to each other.
Front and back accompany each other.
Therefore, the wise abide by effortless
effort (wu wei) in their activities.
They teach without words.
All that arises, they neither reject nor
control.
They create but make no claim.
They take action but take no credit.
They complete their work and let it go.
Because they let go, they lose nothing.

3

If the extraordinary are not exalted,
people will not contend.
If rare goods are not prized,
people will not steal.
If attractions are not displayed,
people's hearts and minds will not be
troubled.
Thus, the guidance of the wise
clears the mind
and fills the center,
weakens ambition
and strengthens the bones.
Freeing the people of cunning and greed
ensures that those who scheme dare not
act.
Practice effortless effort (wu wei).
Then all is aligned.

4

Tao is empty,
yet put to use, it is not filled.
Fathomless! It seems to be the source of
everything,
dulling the sharp edges,
loosening the tangles,
harmonizing the enlightened with the
dust of the world.
Like deep water! It seems indistinct.
I do not know its origin.
It is older than god.

5

Heaven and earth neither cling nor reject,
regarding all as impermanent.
The wise neither cling nor reject,
regarding everyone as impermanent.
The space between heaven and earth,
it is like a bellows!
Empty, yet inexhaustible.
With every move, it yields more.
Too many words bring exhaustion,
unlike holding to the center.

6

The valley spirit that never dies,
call it the mystical womb.
Opening to the mystical womb
reveals the beginning of everything:
elusive, ethereal, subtly eternal.
Drawing upon it will never exhaust it.

7

Heaven is constant, earth is long-lasting.
The reason they can they be constant and
long-lasting:
They do not exist for themselves,
so they endure.
Thus, the wise do not put themselves first
and find themselves in front.
They let go of the self
and yet they remain.
Is it not because they lack self-interest
that they find themselves fulfilled?

8

The supreme good is like water,
good at benefitting all; it does not
contend.
It dwells in all people, [even] the lowest
and the loathed.
Thus, water resembles tao.
In dwelling, supremely serene deep
within.
In relating, supremely nurturing.
In speech, supremely transparent.
In governing, supremely harmonizing.
In work, supremely capable.
In action, supremely timed.
Thus, no contention,
no calamity.

9

Grasping and overburdening it,
not likely to stop in time.
Constantly honing and hammering it,
not able to endure or preserve.
Homes full of treasure,
nothing can protect.
Opulence, prestige, and self-importance:
What follows is misfortune.
Complete the task; then withdraw
oneself:
This is nature's way (tao).

10

Bearing, sustaining the essence of life,
who can embrace the whole without
separating?
Gathering the breath, softening,
who can become like a newborn infant?
Clearing, clarifying the mirror within,
who can reflect all as it is?
Nurturing people, leading the state,
who can do this without schemes?
The gates of heaven open and close,
who can be receptive [to both]?
Clearly seeing all,
who can impose no action (wu wei)?
Birthing them and nurturing them,
birthing but not possessing,
growing but not controlling—
This is called mystical integrity (te).

11

Thirty spokes converge upon a single hub.
Because of the empty space [at its center],
the wheel turns.

Fashion clay into a vessel;
the empty space within makes it useful.
Cut out doors and windows
to make a dwelling,
because the usefulness of a dwelling
depends upon [accessing] the empty
space [within].

Thus, the tangible create potential.
The intangible make it all work.

12

Too many colors blind the eye.
Too many tones deafen the ear.
Too many flavors dull the palate.
Too much hunting maddens the heart and
mind.

Treasuring material goods hinders our
progress.
For these reasons, the wise attend to the
deep within
instead of the superficial.
They let go of that (the superficial)
and abide in this (the deep within).

13

Favor and disfavor bring dread.
Great status troubles the self.
What means "Favor and disfavor bring
dread"?

Favor brings disfavor.
Obtaining favor brings dread [of change].
Losing favor brings dread [of no change].
This means favor and disfavor bring
dread.

What means "Great status troubles the
self"?

I have great troubles when I act for
myself.

When I am not self-absorbed,
what can be troubled?

Thus, they who honor the self to engage
the world
can be trusted with the world.
Thus, those who care for the self to
engage the world
can be trusted with the world.

14

Looking but not seeing,
we call it elusive.
Listening but not hearing,
we call it faint.
Reaching but not grasping,
we call it formless.
These three qualities cannot be
scrutinized,
because they merge and become one.
The observable is not bright;
the hidden is not dark.
Constant, infinite, beyond words,
it returns again and again to the void.
This is called the form without form,
beyond imagining.
This is called indistinct, elusive.
Facing it, we perceive no beginning.
Following it, we perceive no end.
Embracing the ancient tao
is mastery with today, here and now.
Attending to the ancient original is the
tradition of tao.

15

The ancients were great masters,
 venturing deep into the essential mystery
 too profound to understand.
 This is why we cannot understand them.
 This is why it takes great effort to
 describe them.
 They were attentive as though crossing a
 winter stream,
 alert as though danger were on all four
 sides,
 reverent like a guest,
 yielding like melting ice,
 simple like uncarved wood (pu),
 open like a valley,
 and mixed like muddy water.
 Like muddy water,
 those who can be still
 will gradually become clear.
 Those who can be serene amidst constant
 commotion
 will gradually come alive.
 Those who embrace this way (tao)
 do not yearn to be filled.
 This is why they seem empty.
 They could grow old without
 accomplishing more.

16

Access the ultimate spaciousness,
 maintain deepest peace;
 all as one will arise.
 From here we can discern the cycle:
 Truly everything flourishes;
 then it returns to its source.
 Returning to the source brings deepest
 peace.
 This is called returning to original nature.
 Returning to original nature attunes to
 the eternal.
 Understanding the eternal is
 enlightenment.
 Not understanding the eternal,
 such error brings suffering.
 Understanding the eternal,

we neither cling nor reject.
 Neither clinging nor rejecting is most
 noble,
 aligning with the divine,
 with tao,
 with the eternal:
 The self lets go, remaining whole.

17

The best leaders are barely known
 [because they trust people enough to
 neither intrude nor impose].
 The next best are those we love and
 praise.
 After them are those we fear.
 After them are those we despise.
 Those leaders who do not trust the
 people—
 why should we trust them?
 So quiet [are the best leaders].
 Why should we esteem their few words?
 [With their guidance] the people
 complete a task;
 everyone says, "We did it, naturally."

18

When tao is neglected,
 along come social conscience and
 righteousness.
 When intellect and knowledge appear,
 along comes great pretense.
 When the six relationships fall into
 disharmony,
 along comes praise of fidelity and selfless
 nurturance.
 When nation and clan are in chaos and
 strife,
 along come patriotic ministers.

19

Let go of spiritual pride, discard
cleverness;
everyone will benefit a hundredfold.
Let go of social conscience, discard
righteousness;
everyone will return to fidelity and
selfless nurturance.
Let go of clever schemes, discard
profiteering;
thieves will not appear.
These three lessons caution that the
superficial cannot suffice.
Discern the simple, embrace the natural
(pu).
Lessen self-interest, reduce desires.

20

Eliminate distinctions without sorrow.
The difference between “yeah” and
“nah”—how great is it?
The difference between “good” and
“bad”—how great is it?
What others fear, must I also fear?
Such confusion, alas, has no end!
Worldly people hustle about,
as though feasting at a great festival,
as though climbing a great tower.
I alone do not stir,
giving no sign,
as an infant who has not yet smiled.
Unhurried, I seem as though I have
nowhere to go.
Worldly people possess too much;
I alone let go.
I have a mind like a fool,
ungrasping, flowing.
Worldly people look bright;
I alone seem dim.
Worldly people are sharp and
discriminating;
I alone seem dull and make no
distinctions:
formless,
like deep water;

shapeless,
as if ever flowing.
Everyone else has ambitions;
I alone seem unthinking and unrefined.
I alone differ because I value nourishment
from the source.

21

Highest virtue (te)
follows only the way (tao).
The way, as a thing,
seems ever elusive and indistinct.
So indistinct, so elusive,
yet within it is form.
So elusive, so indistinct,
yet within it is substance.
So deep, so dark,
yet within it is essence.
Its essence is quite real;
within it put faith.
From the beginning to now,
its manifestations never leave,
so [we may] witness this source of all life.
How do I know it is the source of all life?
With this.

22

Yield to be whole.
Bend to be made true.
Empty to be filled.
Grow old to grow vital.
Let go to receive.
Overdo [any] and lose the way.
Thus, the wise embrace the primal unity
as an example for the world:
not looking for the self, thus attuned;
not focusing on the self, thus enlightened;
not attacking the self, thus empowered;
not boasting, thus able to grow;
not contending, thus able to flow without
conflict.
The ancients said, "Yield to be whole."
Are these hollow words?
Be true and whole to return to it (the
primal unity, tao).

23

Limited expression is natural:
fierce winds do not last through dawn;
torrential rains do not last the day.
What causes this?
Heaven and earth.
Even heaven and earth cannot last
forever.
So how can humanity?
Thus, engage the day aligned with the
way (tao).
Be one with the way.
Maintaining integrity (te), be one with
integrity.
Letting go, be one with letting go.
One with the way, we access joy.
One with integrity, we access joy.
One with letting go, we also access joy.

24

On tiptoes, we cannot stand firm.
Straddling, we cannot walk far.
Self-congratulatory, we cannot shine.
Self-righteous, we cannot excel.
Self-involved, we accomplish nothing.
Self-important, we cannot endure.
Those attuned to tao liken these to
too much food and wasted effort,
disdaining them.
Thus, to be attuned to tao, do not dwell in
them.

25

There is this thing, confusing, complete,
preceding the birth of heaven and earth.
So tranquil!
Formless! Standing alone, constant,
complete, all-encompassing, and
inexhaustible.
It could be the mother of the universe.
I do not know its name;
I call it tao (the way).
Reluctant to describe it, I call it great.
Great means ever-flowing.

Ever-flowing means far-reaching.
Far-reaching means returning.
Thus, tao is great,
Heaven is great,
Earth is great,
the noblest humanity is great.
Within the universe are these four great
ones,
and the noble dwell in the unity.
Humanity conforms to earth.
Earth conforms to heaven.
Heaven conforms to tao.
tao conforms to its own nature.

26

The substantial is rooted amid the
frivolous.
The serene masters the restless.
Thus, the wise never walk far
from substance and serenity.
Even when they encounter splendor,
they simply remain content.
How do great rulers
tread lightly in this world?
If frivolous, they lose substance.
If restless, they lose their roots.

27

Skillful travel leaves no trace.
 Masterful expression makes no mistake.
 The best planners do not use schemes.
 Good doors have no locks yet cannot be
 breached.
 Good knots use no rope yet cannot be
 undone.
 In this way, the wise always take good
 care of people,
 abandoning no one.
 Always attending to all,
 without abandoning any, is called
 enlightened practice.
 Thus, the principled person is the
 unprincipled person's example.
 The unprincipled person is the principled
 person's potential.
 They who do not attend to their mentors
 and they who do not attend to their
 potential,
 no matter how clever, are greatly
 confused.
 This is called an essential subtlety.

28

Know the masculine, keep to the
 feminine.
 Be the watercourse (low valley) of the
 world
 Being the watercourse of the world,
 lasting integrity (te) does not depart,
 returning to the state of the infant.
 Know the bright, keep to the dark.
 Be an example for the world.
 Being an example for the world,
 lasting integrity will not fail,
 reconnecting with the infinite.
 Know the glorious, keep to the humble;
 be the watercourse of the world.
 Being the watercourse of the world,
 lasting integrity will be enough to restore
 the natural (pu).
 Uncarved wood (pu) may be divided and
 made into tools.

The wise employ [the natural] for long-
 lasting leadership.
 Therefore, the greatest leaders do not
 divide.

29

They who want to take hold of the world
 and use force,
 I see that they cannot achieve their goals.
 The world is a sacred vessel
 that cannot be forced!
 They who try to force it ruin it.
 They who try to cling to it lose it.
 Sometimes lead, sometimes follow.
 Sometimes exhale, sometimes inhale.
 Sometimes be strong, sometimes be weak.
 Sometimes overcome, sometimes let be.
 Thus, the wise
 abandon excess,
 abandon extravagance,
 abandon arrogance.

30

Align with tao to guide great rulers,
 so they will not use military force.
 These actions (imposing force) will likely
 be returned.
 Where armies camp,
 briars and thorns arise.
 Where armies pass,
 the crops will surely fail.
 The great ones succeed then stop.
 They presume nothing and overcome
 those who force everything.
 They succeed without arrogance.
 They succeed without contempt.
 They succeed without pride.
 They succeed without possessing.
 They succeed without dominating.
 They who are excessive will exhaust
 themselves;
 that is not the way (tao).
 [That which is] misaligned with tao
 quickly declines.

31

Weapons are tools of misfortune.
 Everyone detests them.
 Thus, those aligned with tao do not live by
 them.
 The wise ruler favors and dwells in the
 left (the non-dominant hand).
 Those bearing weapons favor the right
 (the hand of dominance).
 Weapons are tools of misfortune.
 Wise rulers oppose them,
 using them only when unavoidable.
 Peaceful restraint is best.
 In victory, the wise find no glory.
 Those who glorify [victory] enjoy killing
 others.
 Those who enjoy killing others can never
 prosper.
 Prosperous events favor the left.
 Misfortune favors the right.
 The second-in-command occupies the left.
 The commander-in-chief occupies the
 right.
 This means these are their places in the
 funeral rite.
 So many killed,
 accordingly let us grieve them with
 sorrow and tears.
 After victory,
 accordingly, let us treat it as a funeral.

32

Tao is eternal, ineffable.
 Though its natural state (pu) is subtle,
 nothing in the world can command it.
 When rulers abide by it,
 all will honor them of their own accord;
 heaven and earth unite,
 bringing sweet rain,
 and of their own accord the people live in
 harmony.
 [But] with the first decree, labels arise
 (such as "good" and "bad").
 Once labels arise,
 we need to know restraint.

Knowing restraint protects from
 exhaustion.
 Thus, tao's presence in the world
 resembles streams flowing toward rivers,
 and rivers toward the sea.

33

Knowing others, cunning.
 Knowing self, wise.
 Overcoming others, mere physical might.
 Overcoming self, power within.
 Knowing contentment, abundance.
 Reaching steadily, a sign of inner resolve.
 Deeply rooted, we endure.
 Reaching our end, the ceaseless lives on.

34

Tao flows everywhere.
 It can go left or right.
 Every life relies on its selfless nurturance.
 It fulfills and moves on.
 It protects and nourishes all without
 overbearing.
 Ever beyond the conditioned mind,
 it could be called subtle.
 Everything returns to it,
 but it imposes no control,
 so it could be called great.
 Accordingly, they who never act great
 can realize their greatness.

35

Embrace the great image
 and the world will come to you.
 Approach [the world] without harming,
 content, serene, flourishing.
 Festive songs and fine food, those passing
 by will pause.
 Words about tao [however]
 seem flat and without flavor.
 Envisioning it is not enough to see.
 Listening for it is not enough to hear.
 Use it and it will never be exhausted.

36

If we want it to contract,
we need to let it expand.
If we want it to weaken,
we need to let it grow strong.
If we want it to drop,
we need to let it rise.
If we want to receive,
we need to give.
This is called subtle discernment.
The supple yields yet overcomes the rigid.
Fish cannot be plucked from deep water.
Thus, the rulers' instruments of
 advantage (yielding, depth)
cannot be displayed to the people.

37

Tao never exerts effort (wu wei),
yet nothing is left undone.
When leaders abide by tao,
everything will naturally flow.
If the flow is muddied by the conditioned
 mind,
these leaders will settle themselves with
 wordless simplicity (pu).
Wordless simplicity truly will free from
 conditioned thought.
Free of conditioned thought, leaders bring
 peace;
the world settles itself.

Some scholars of the Tao Te Ching
identify this as the point that
separates the section on tao (Chapters
1-37) from the section on te (Chapters
38-81).

38

The supremely virtuous (those who
 cultivate te)
make no show of it,
thus they have virtue (te).
Those with inferior virtue
obsess about it,
thus they lack true virtue.
Great virtue is effortless (wu wei)
and selfless.
Inferior virtue is effortful
and self-motivated.
Great humanity is effortful
and selfless.
Great righteousness is effortful
and self-motivated.
Great protocol is effortful,
and with those who do not comply,
it is forced upon them.
When tao is forgotten, we have virtue.
When virtue is forgotten, we have
 humanity.
When humanity is forgotten, we have
 righteousness.
When righteousness is forgotten, we have
 protocol.
Protocol is a mere husk of devotion and
 faith,
and it brings disorder;
Its presumption of the way (tao) is
 superficial and the beginning of folly.
The wise dwell in the deep, not the
 superficial.
Dwell not in the show but the substance.
Let go of that [show] and embrace this
 [substance].

39

The ancients aligned with tao.
 The sky aligns with tao and becomes clear.
 The earth aligns with tao and becomes peaceful.
 The spirit aligns with tao and becomes sacred.
 The valley aligns with tao and fills with abundance.
 Rulers who align with tao are the example for the world.
 The clouded sky, I fear it will split open.
 Earth without peace, I fear it will crumble.
 Spirit without sacredness, I fear it will wither.
 Valleys without abundance, I fear they will erode.
 Rulers no longer exemplary, I fear they will fall.
 Thus, the exemplars are rooted in humility [to tao];
 they make the lowly their foundation.
 This is why rulers call themselves orphaned, bereaved, unworthy.
 Is this not rooted in humility?
 Thus, the highest honor is free of honors.
 Rather than sparkle like jade,
 be lowly as a stone.

40

Returning is the movement of tao.
 Yielding is the method of tao.
 Everything arises from being.
 Being arises from nonbeing.

41

The exceptional who hear of tao (the way) practice with diligence.
 The earnest who hear of the way sometimes keep it and sometimes lose it.
 The ignorant who hear of the way laugh loudly at it.

If they do not laugh, it would not be the way.

Therefore, a proverb says this:
 "The clear way seems unclear.
 The advancing way seems to retreat.
 The easy way seems difficult.
 Highest virtue (te) seems [low] like a valley (a watercourse).
 Great purity seems disgraceful.
 Abundant virtue seems inadequate.
 Steadfast integrity seems frail.
 True substance seems insubstantial.
 The greatest square has no corners.
 The greatest vessel is slow to complete.
 The greatest music is seldom heard.
 The greatest form is without shape."
 Tao is hidden, ineffable.
 Yet this is why tao benefits and completes.

42

Tao gives birth to the one (the all-encompassing whole).
 The one gives birth to two (yin and yang).
 The two give birth to a third (qi).
 The three give birth to all things in the world.
 All things in the world carry yin (the receptive) and embrace yang (the active).
 In the middle, the vital energy (qi) brings harmony.
 The people disfavor the orphaned, bereaved, and unworthy,
 yet kings and lords claim such titles.
 [Why?] Because the diminished will likely advance,
 [whereas] the advancing will likely diminish.
 What others have taught,
 I also teach.
 The forceful and aggressive cannot die a natural death.
 I take this as essential to my teaching.

43

The most yielding in the world
overcomes the most rigid in the world.
Formless, it enters without crevice.
I thus understand effortless effort (wu
wei) and its benefits,
its wordless teachings.
Effortless effort succeeds;
few in the world achieve it.

44

Reputation or true self. Which is more
dear?
Personhood or material goods. Which is
more treasured?
Gain or loss. Which is more harmful?
The greater the attachment, the greater
the waste.
The more one hoards, the more one loses.
Knowing contentment suffers no
disgrace;
knowing restraint frees from peril:
the means for completion.

45

The most complete seems incomplete.
Its usefulness cannot be exhausted.
The most abundant seems empty.
Its usefulness cannot be depleted.
The most aligned seems askew.
The most skillful seems inept.
Agitation peaks, cold follows.
Stillness peaks, warmth follows.
The clear and tranquil guide the world.

46

When the world aligns with tao,
fast horses are used for farming.
When the world does not align with tao,
war horses are bred on the border.
No misfortune is greater than not
knowing contentment.

No curse is more cruel than every desire
fulfilled.
True contentment means always content.

47

Without stepping out the door,
we can know the whole world.
Without looking out the window,
we can see the way (tao) of the universe.
The further we venture out,
the less we realize.
Thus, the most wise do not venture out
and can understand,
do not look outward
and can see.
Without striving we can complete.

48

Seeking knowledge every day,
we accumulate.
Seeking the way (tao) every day,
we let go,
letting go again and again
until achieving effortless effort (wu wei).
With effortless effort, nothing is left
undone.
Those who embrace the world do not
overexert themselves.
Those who overexert themselves are
never content to embrace the world.

49

The hearts and minds of the wise are not fixed.
They make as their own the heart and mind of humanity.
The good, the wise are good to them.
The not so good, the wise are also good to them.
Great integrity (te) is always good.
The honest, the wise are honest with them.
The not so honest, the wise are also honest with them.
Great integrity is always honest.
The wise live in the world with deep harmony,
their hearts and minds engaging all like the ocean.
They regard all as their own children.

50

From life to death,
three in ten chase life,
three in ten chase death,
three in ten merely pass from life to death.
What is the reason [they barely live]?
Because they live to excess.
I hear some excel at nourishing life. (One in ten?)
Traveling, they are not concerned about rhinoceros or tiger.
On the battlefield they bear neither armor nor arms.
The rhinoceros has nowhere to sink its horn.
The tiger has nowhere to fix its claws.
The soldiers have nowhere to thrust their blades.
Why is this so?
Because the wise [excel at nourishing life and] have no room for death.

51

Tao gives birth to all things.
Integrity (te) nurtures them.
The material world shapes them.
Circumstances complete them.
Thus, all [natural] things in the world respect tao and honor integrity.
Respecting tao,
honoring integrity—
these are not commanded but arise naturally.
Tao gives birth to them;
Integrity nurtures them:
Birthing them and nurturing them,
sheltering them and growing them,
sustaining them and guarding them,
yet never possessing them or claiming them.
This is called mystical integrity.

52

All in the world has a beginning,
thus all in the world has a mother.
To understand the mother is to understand the children.
After recognizing the children, return to embrace the mother
and live without peril.
Close the mouth, shut the gates [to sensory desires]
and live without toil.
Open the mouth, meddle in activities,
and behold a life beyond saving.
Discerning the subtle is called enlightenment.
Holding to the gentle is called strength.
Use the enlightened, reconnect with the radiant,
and live without exposure to peril.
This is called the eternal practice.

53

If I understood the subtle,
I would follow the great way (tao),
fearing only that I might stray.
The great way is so navigable,
yet the people prefer byways:
The palace is grand,
yet the fields are overgrown with weeds,
the granaries are empty.
Wearing extravagant clothes,
carrying sharp weapons,
eating and drinking to excess,
hoarding wealth and possessions:
That is called the vanity of thieves,
surely that is not the great way.

54

What is planted well cannot be uprooted.
What is embraced well cannot be taken
away.
Generations will honor this without end.
Cultivating this in oneself, virtue (te)
becomes real.
Cultivating this in family, virtue
multiplies.
Cultivating this in community, virtue
endures.
Cultivating this in the state, virtue
prosperes.
Cultivating this in the world, virtue
reaches everywhere.
How do I understand the world is so?
Through this.

55

Possessing virtue (te) in full
resembles a newborn child.
The venomous creature will not sting.
The wild beast will not attack.
The bird of prey will not strike.
Though bones are soft and muscles pliant,
the grasp is firm.
Though unaware of sexual union,
arousal is strong,

the essence of life at its utmost.
A newborn wails yet does not grow
hoarse,
the balance [of breath] at its utmost.
To understand balance is to understand
the everlasting.
Understanding the everlasting is called
enlightenment.
Rising vitality is called a blessing.
Mastering the vital flow is called strength.
[When] things rise to an extreme, though,
then begins decline.
This [extreme] is not the way (tao).
Whatever is not the way soon ends.

56

Those who understand do not speak.
Those who speak do not understand.
Close the mouth.
Shut the gates [to sensory desires].
Dull the edges.
Loosen the tangles.
Soften the light.
Settle with the dust.
This is called the mystical union.
This cannot be attained while clinging or
rejecting,
when concerned about gain or loss,
while exalted or disgraced.
This (mystical union) is the world fully
honored.

57

When governing the nation, be forthright.
When at war, be confusing.

For mastery of the world, though, use no
schemes.

How do I know this is so?

The more prohibitions and taboos,
the more impoverished the people.

The sharper the nation's weapons,
the greater the chaos.

The more clever the schemes,
the more confusing the outcomes.

The more laws and rules,
the more criminals appear.

Thus, the wise practice effortless effort
(wu wei)

and the people transform themselves.

They nurture peace and become
forthright themselves.

Practice no schemes and the people
naturally prosper.

Practice contentment
and the people naturally grow pure (pu).

58

When the government is doubly subdued,
the people are doubly wholesome.

When the government is doubly intrusive,
the people are doubly destitute.

Within misfortune reside blessings.

Within blessings, alas, awaits misfortune.

Who knows the ultimate result?

It is not straightforward.

The straightforward in turn becomes
confusing,

the excellent becomes ominous.

The people have been confused [by this]
for a long time.

Thus, be like the great square, sharp but
without cutting,

angular but without imposing harm.

Be straight but do not overreach.

Be bright but do not dazzle.

59

In governing people and serving heaven,
it is best to be frugal.

Such restraint means quick recovery.

Quick recovery means a substantial
reserve of power (te).

A substantial reserve of power means
nothing cannot be overcome.

Nothing cannot be overcome means no
known limits.

Knowing no limits,

one can hold the nation.

Holding the nation like their mother,
those who govern will endure.

This means deep roots and a sturdy
foundation,

long life and lasting insight into the way
(tao).

60

Govern the nation like cooking a small
fish (with restraint).

Use tao to govern the world;
evil will not come to power.

Not that evil will be powerless,
but its power will cease to harm the
people.

Not only will its power be harmless to the
people,

but the wise also will never harm.

With neither causing harm,
virtue (te) unifies and restores.

61

A great nation is like a river delta,
where the world converges,
the mother of the world.
The mother, through tranquility,
overcomes the male.
Tranquility takes the lower position.
Thus, the great nation that puts itself
below the small nation,
takes hold of the small nation.
The small nation that lowers itself to the
great nation,
takes hold of the great nation.
Thus, one takes the lower position to take
hold;
one takes the lower position to be held.
The great nation wants nothing more
than to unite and nourish others.
The small nation wants nothing more
than to join and serve others.
For both great and small to be fulfilled,
the great must take the lower position.

62

A person of tao, all things flow toward
this sanctuary:
for the superior person, a jewel;
for the inferior person, a refuge.
Beautiful words may be exchanged,
but honorable actions must be bestowed.
Those who are inferior, why abandon
them?
When kings are enthroned or ministers
installed,
though they behold jade and are preceded
by four horses,
they cannot equal one who sits still and
offers this way (tao).
This is why ancients value tao.
Is it not said that they who seek will find
and they who transgress will be forgiven?
This is why the world cherishes it.

63

Engage effortless effort (wu wei).
Work without toil.
Taste without tasting.
Great or small, many or few—
respond to malice with integrity (te,
aligning with tao).
Plan for the difficult while it is easy.
Accomplish the great by attending to the
small.
The world's difficulties surely arise from
what is easy.
The world's great undertakings surely
arise from the small.
This is why the wise do not act great
yet enable great accomplishments.
Lightly promised, lacking truth.
Excessively easy, many difficulties.
This is why the wise attend to the difficult
yet complete without difficulty.

64

What is serene is easily held.
 What is yet to begin is easily righted.
 What is thin is easily dissolved.
 What is small is easily scattered.
 Work with things before they emerge.
 Bring order to them before they trouble.
 A tree as big as one's embrace
 grows from a small seed.
 A tower nine stories high
 arises from a pile of earth.
 A journey of a thousand [miles,
 kilometers]
 begins from where one stands.
 Force it and fail.
 Cling to it and lose it.
 Therefore, the wise force nothing (wu
 wei) and never fail.
 They do not cling, so they suffer no loss.
 People pursuing their ambitions
 often near success but ruin it.
 Be as careful at the end as in the
 beginning
 and it will not be ruined.
 Thus, the wise desire not to desire
 and do not treasure rare treasures.
 They learn to unlearn,
 returning the people to what they missed,
 helping all things return to their natural
 state
 without imposing force.

65

Ancients practicing the way (tao)
 did not enlighten people
 but preserved their simplicity.
 People are more difficult to govern
 the greater their guile.
 Thus, using guile to govern
 is a nation's ruin.
 Letting go of guile to govern a nation
 is a nation's blessing.
 Those who understand the ancient
 balance
 observe and model.

To constantly observe and model,
 this is called mystical integrity (te)
 Mystical integrity runs deep and distant,
 returning all things [to their source],
 realizing the great flow.

66

Because great rivers and seas take the
 lower position,
 hundreds of valleys are at their command.
 Therefore, wanting to guide the people,
 surely one must speak with humility.
 Wanting to lead the people,
 surely one must follow them.
 So, the wise can be above yet do not
 burden;
 they can be in front yet do not obstruct.
 This is why the world joyfully supports
 and never tires of them.
 Because the wise never oppose the world,
 no one in the world opposes them.

67

All the world says my teachings are
extraordinary but unusual.
Truly, because they are extraordinary,
they seem unusual.
If they were like the usual,
long ago these teachings would have
vanished.
I have three jewels
I preserve and protect.
The first, known as selfless nurturance.
The second, known as frugality.
The third, known as daring not to be first
in the world.
With selfless nurturance, one can be
courageous.
With frugality, one can be wide-reaching.
Daring not to be first in the world, one can
become a complete vessel.
If discarding selfless nurturance while
remaining courageous,
if discarding frugality while reaching
wide,
if discarding humility while leading,
death is certain.
Selfless nurturance in battle will
overcome;
in defense [it] will endure.
What heaven creates,
it protects with selfless nurturance.

68

The excellent warrior is not warlike.
The excellent combatant does not use
rage.
The excellent conqueror does not inflame.
The excellent leader is humble.
This is called the virtue (te) of not
contending.
This is called mastery with others.
This is called complying with heaven's
ultimate.

69

In warfare, there is a saying:
"Dare not aggress but defend.
Dare not advance an inch but retreat a
foot."
This is called movement without
marching,
preparing without provoking,
confronting without frontal assault,
taking the enemy without taking up arms.
No calamity is greater than making light
of an adversary.
Taking an adversary too lightly risks
losing my treasures (the three jewels
of Ch. 67).
Equally matched in battle,
the one who takes it gravely will win.

70

My words are easy to understand
and easy to practice,
but no one seems to understand them
or put them into practice.
These words have roots.
This practice has principle.
Those who do not understand this
do not understand me.
Who understand me are rare.
Who emulate me are most noble.
Thus, the wise wear simple clothes,
their treasure hidden within.

71

Understanding but not presuming is
superior.
Presuming but not understanding is
sickness.
Only when recognizing this as disease
can one be truly well.
The wise are at ease
because they recognize disease for what it
is;
this is why they are at ease.

72

When people no longer fear [outward]
authority,
a great and awesome [inward] authority
emerges.

Do not constrain how people live;
do not burden people's lives.

When people are not wearied,
they will not make weary.

Thus, the wise know themselves but do
not boast.

They cherish themselves but do not exalt
themselves.

They discard that (the outer) and choose
this (the inner).

73

Daring with passion brings death.

Courage with calm brings life.

Of these two, one brings benefit, one
brings harm.

What heaven disfavors, who knows why?
Heaven's way (tao) does not contend but
it overcomes.

It does not speak but responds well.

It is not summoned but naturally appears.

It is restrained but resourceful.

Heaven's net is vast, vast,
its openings spacious, but nothing is lost.

74

If people do not fear death,
why threaten them with it?

If people were made to fear death and
then committed crimes,
who would dare seize them and kill them?
There would always be an official
executioner.

Taking the place of an official executioner,
though,
this is like taking the place of a master
carpenter.

Taking the place of a master carpenter,
few escape injuring their own hands!

75

People are starving
when those above them take more than
their share;

this is why people starve.

People are difficult to govern
when those above them meddle too
much;

this is why people are difficult to govern.

People make light of death,
because those above them demand too
much of life;

this is why people make light of death.

They who demand nothing from life (the
content)
excel at fulfilling life.

76

At birth, a person is pliant and yielding.

In death, a person is rigid and unyielding.

Grass and trees, while alive, are pliant and
yielding.

When they die, they are brittle and dry.

Therefore, the rigid and unyielding are
companions of death.

The pliant and yielding are companions of
life.

Thus, armies that do not yield will suffer
terrible loss;

trees of hardest wood will suffer the axe.

Unyielding looks mighty but is inferior.

Yielding looks weak but is superior.

77

In the world, tao resembles drawing a
bow:

the highest lowers,

the lowest rises.

With excess, it lowers.

With deficiency, it raises

The world aligned with tao takes from
those who have more than enough,

giving to those who have too little.

The way of man is not like this,

taking from those who have too little,
giving to those who have more than
enough
Who can, having more than enough, give
to the world?
Only those of tao.
Thus, when the wise act, they make no
claim.
When they achieve, they take no credit.
They have no desire to display their
excellence.

78
Nothing in the world yields and
accommodates like water,
yet against the rigid and the forceful,
none can surpass it,
none can take its place.
The flexible overcomes the rigid,
the gentle overcomes the forceful,
All in the world are able to understand
this,
yet few practice it.
Thus, the wise say, "The one who guards
the nation's least
we enshrine as preserver of soil and grain
(foundation and nourishment?).
Who receives the nation's misfortune (the
all-embracing)
becomes a king of the world."
Correct words seem incorrect.

79
Settling a bitter dispute, surely some
bitterness will remain.
How can this be made better?
The wise honor their commitments
and make no claim on others.
Those who possess virtue (te) hold their
commitments.
Those without virtue hold their claims.
Heaven's way (tao) is impartial,
but it is always accessed by those of
virtue.

80
[Let there be] small nations of few people.
Let the people possess [labor-saving]
implements yet not need them.
Let the people take death seriously and
not venture far outward.
Though they may have boats and
carriages,
they will have no need to use them.
Though they may have armor and
weapons,
they will have no place to display them.
Let the people return to knotting cords
and using them [for simple
reckoning],
enjoying their food,
pleased with their clothes,
content with their homes,
finding joy in everyday life.
Neighboring nations can see each other,
so near they hear each other's roosters
crow and dogs bark.
[Let] the people die of old age, leaving
each other in peace.

81
True words are not perfect.
Perfect words are not true.
People of virtue do not quarrel.
People who quarrel lack virtue.
The knowing are not learned.
The learned are not knowing.
The wise do not hoard:
Working to benefit others, they are
fulfilled;
giving to benefit others, they receive
much.
Heaven's way (tao): Benefit and do not
harm.
The way of the wise: Engage and do not
contend.

(Trans. by D. Weis, 2015)

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