



Laozi

(Lao-Tzu [c.604-531 BC], illustration from 'Myths and Legends of China', by Edward T.C. Werner / Private Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library International)

“A thousand-mile journey begins with a single step.”

Overview



The Dao De Jing (also called Tao Te Ching) is by far the most important text of the immense Daoist canon, known as the Daozang. The significance of this text was recognized by both philosophical and religious schools within Daoism, each offering a great variety of interpretations of its content. Attributed to the legendary sage Laozi (also known as Lao-tzu), an older contemporary of Confucius, but probably compiled during the late fourth and third centuries BCE, the Dao De Jing expresses in a highly compressed style the basic religious, philosophical, and political beliefs of this ancient tradition centered on the concepts of the Dao (“the Way”) and De (“power” or “virtue”).

Interpreted as a religious text, the Dao De Jing contains teachings on the nature of the Absolute, human relations toward the Absolute, practical lessons for everyday life, the ideal of human existence (the ideal of a sage), and hints on immortality as the ultimate goal of a sage. Its succinct, aphoristic language and generous use of metaphors make it fertile ground for diverse interpretations, ranging from the reading of the text as a secret instruction manual for prolonging life to reading it as the earliest manifesto of environmentalism, particularly pertinent for today’s world. This richness of content combined with extreme economy of language make the Dao De Jing a unique document in the vast collection of religious scriptures, whose influence on arts, literature, and philosophy long surpassed the boundaries of any single religious tradition or geographical area. The more widely accepted pinyin system of transliteration of Chinese words is used here, while the older Wade-Giles system is used in the source document itself.

Context

The content of the Dao De Jing was influenced by the political and philosophical realities of the Warring States period in Chinese history (ca. 475–221 BCE). The author or authors of the text implicitly juxtapose their worldview with at least two other competing ideologies of the day,

Confucianism (influential from the fifth century BCE onward), and Legalism (influential from 400 to 200 BCE). Several passages in the text (chapters 18 and 19, for instance) downplay the importance of central Confucian virtues, such as benevolence and filial piety, and elsewhere the author expresses his doubts about the effectiveness of repressive laws for establishment of social order (as in chapter 57). The latter criticism is apparently aimed at the position of Legalists in ancient China, who, not unlike the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes many centuries later, held a rather pessimistic view of human nature, emphasizing the importance of centralized coercive power.

The political realities of the time period when the Dao De Jing was most likely composed were characterized by further fragmentation of China into a number of autonomous states, frequent wars, and social upheavals, which would last up to the time of unification of China under the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE). The character of a traveling sage, who would offer his advice and guidance to a local ruler in a time of trouble, is well known at least since the time of Confucius. Such employment was often short-lived and dangerous, but thanks to the profusion of independent and semi-independent states, one could always find a suitable patron. It is likely, then, that the Dao De Jing is at least partly the product of a certain school of political advisers, who would blend practical suggestions for state policy with a heavy dose of mysticism, deeply rooted in China’s indigenous religious traditions.

About the Author

According to orthodox Daoist tradition, the author of the Dao De Jing is Laozi, whose name literally means “Old Master” or, alternatively, “Old Child.” Our primary source of information about this obscure figure is the famous Chinese historian Sima Qian (ca. 145 or 135–87 BCE) who in his *Shi Ji*, or *Records of the Grand Historian*, introduces a short biography of Laozi. But even for Sima Qian, Laozi was already a semimythical person, and very few solid facts were known about him. The author places Laozi in late sixth century BCE, mentioning his occupation in the royal city of Lo-yang (Luoyang) as a state archivist or a librarian. He endorses the myth of Laozi’s conversations with Confu-

Time Line	
CA. 604 BCE	■ The legendary Laozi, claimed author of the Dao De Jing, is said to be born and lives until ca. 520 BCE.
CA. 551 BCE	■ Confucius is thought to be born and lives until ca. 479 BCE.
CA. 475 BCE	■ The Warring States period begins in China, ending in 221 BCE.
CA. 300 —200 BCE	■ The Dao De Jing is most likely created.
1972	■ The Mawangdui Silk Texts, containing the oldest nearly complete version of the Dao De Jing (dated ca. 190 BCE), is discovered.
1993	■ The Guodian Chu Slips, containing the oldest fragments of the Dao De Jing (about one-third of the standard text), dated prior to 300 BCE, is discovered.

cius and relates a story of how Laozi, frustrated with government corruption, left his position and rode an ox to the western frontier of China. Before leaving the country forever and after being pressed by the keeper of the Western Gates, Laozi put to writing his thoughts on various metaphysical and social issues into a collection of sayings that today is known as the Dao De Jing. Later sources, which appeared at the time of gradual deification of Laozi (Laojun or Lord Lao) in the second to fifth centuries CE, supply many more details of his life. Among the most curious are the stories of his conception by a shooting star, his having been born as an elderly man eighty-one years of age, his philosophical discussions with the Buddha in India after traveling west, his eventual return to China, and his later ascension into the sky.

Most contemporary scholars agree, however, that the earliest layers of the Dao De Jing could not have been written prior to the middle of the fourth century BCE, and the final version of the book was completed in the third century BCE. This leaves us with several possibilities regarding the identity of Laozi. First, if the name refers to a historical personage who lived during sixth and fifth centuries BCE, then he could not have been the author of the Dao De Jing in its present form. Second, if Laozi ever existed and indeed contributed to some of the sayings of the Dao De Jing, then we should place him much later on the time line. Finally, there was never a single person uniquely corresponding to

the author of the Dao De Jing, and the name Laozi (“Old Master”) is an abstraction, a later personification of “the elders”—the anonymous authors of a long oral tradition.

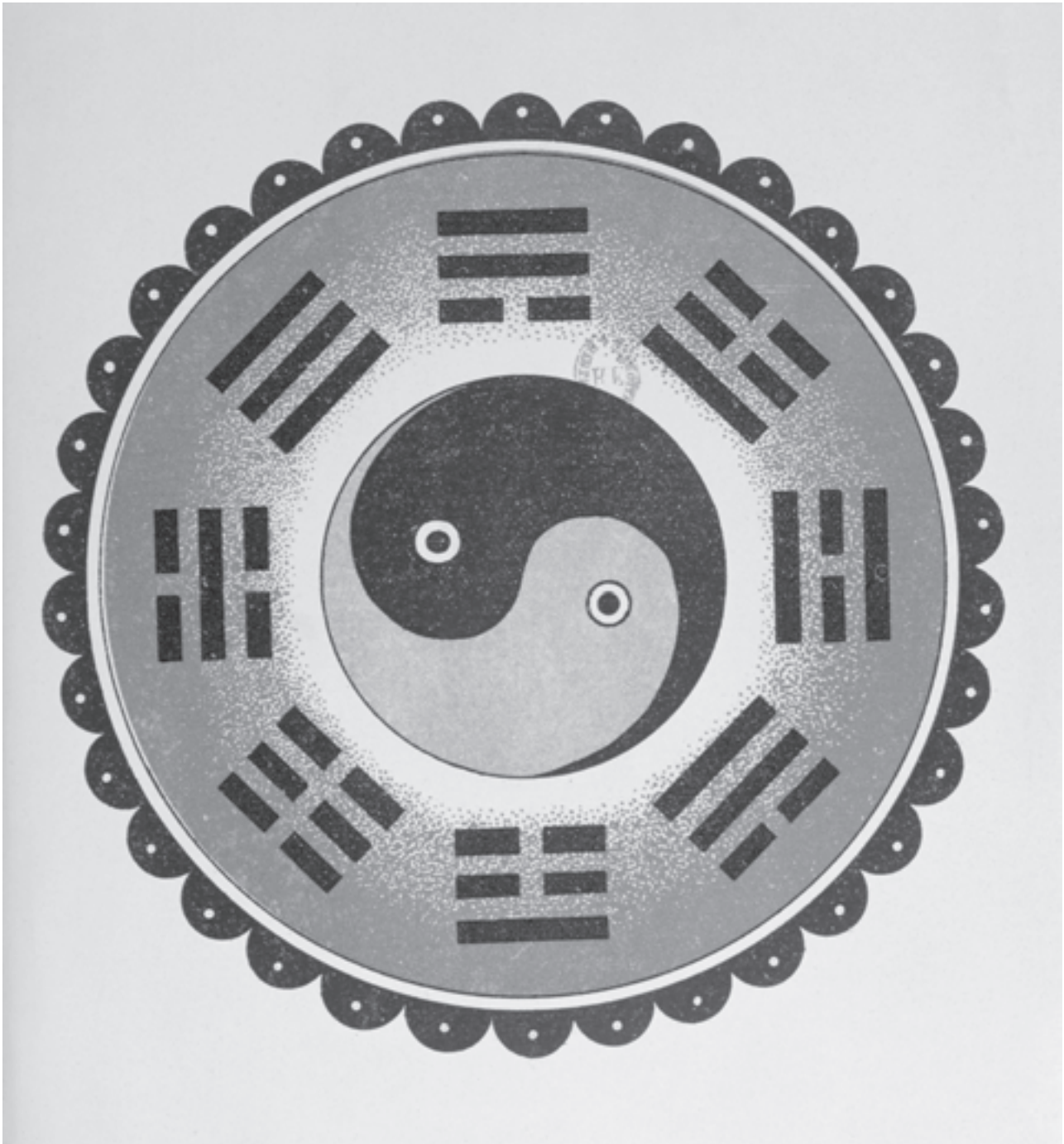
Explanation and Analysis of the Document

The present entry is a complete version of the Dao De Jing, traditionally consisting of eighty-one chapters, or paragraphs. In the original Chinese, the Dao De Jing is written with rhythmic prose and rhyming verses, features that are lost in most translations. The breakdown of the text into eighty-one verses is the product of the first centuries of the Common Era (the Han Dynasty) and is often arbitrary. The number 81 is of special significance to Chinese numerology—the number 9 stands for the yang principle, and 9×9 (81) yields a perfect or complete yang. The number of chapters is also likely connected with later legends about Laozi’s miraculous birth at the age of eighty-one. The earliest known full version of the Dao De Jing, the recently discovered copy of the text at the tombs of Mawangdui, dates to the year 190 BCE and has a different arrangement, with fewer paragraphs. Indeed, the Mawangdui version reverses the usual order of presentation, with the text corresponding to (our) chapters 38–81 coming before the first half of the book. Among the transmitted editions of the Dao De Jing, the three primary ones are named for early commentators: the scholar Yan Zun (fl. 80 BCE–10 CE), the legendary sage Heshang Gong (202–157 BCE), and the philosopher Wang Bi (226–249 CE). Most contemporary translations follow the edition of the Dao De Jing that dates to the third century CE (the Wang Bi version) and divide the text into two parts—Book I: The Book of Dao (Dao Jing) (chapters 1–37) and Book II: The Book of De (De Jing) (chapters 38–81).

♦ Book 1: The Book of Dao

Chapters 1–6: The opening chapters of the Dao De Jing introduce the Dao as the central notion of this important text. The initial difficulty presents itself in a form of a paradox in the first chapter—the Dao in its primeval form exceeds all linguistic categories, and we lose its essence the moment we try to capture it by means of a concept (a name). Yet the ineffable, transcendent, nameless Dao (later correlated with “Heaven’s Dao”) is contrasted here with the Dao of immanence, which admits naming and categorization as reflecting a more immediate principle of generation and is referred to as “the mother of ten thousand things.” Such descriptions of Dao as “the Valley Spirit,” “the Mysterious Female,” “the mother,” “Bottomless,” and “the Ancestor” refer to the Dao of immanence and emphasize its generative powers as well as “feminine” (yin) characteristics.

The selection continues by presenting the underlying dialectic in the way the Dao operates. The opposites in all aspects of existence (aesthetics, morals, physical properties of objects, and so on) depend on each other and are born from each other, which is illustrated by a series of seemingly paradoxical statements, such as “Recognize good and



Symbol representing the principles of yin and yang

(Taijitu, traditional symbol representing the principles of Yin and Yang [colour litho], Chinese School [20th Century] / Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris, France / Archives Charmet / The Bridgeman Art Library International)

evil is born; / Is and Isn't produce each other." An important character, the Sage, is introduced at this point, as the person who understands the inner workings of Dao and who is capable of drawing practical lessons from these abstract underlying principles. The most important practical lesson turns out to be the lesson of nonaction (*wu-wei*). Wu-wei is a crucial notion in the Daoist worldview and is variously translated as effortlessness, spontaneous action, nonag-

gression, or nonmeddlesome action. The ideal of *wu-wei* in the Dao De Jing and in later Daoist literature (for example, the Zhuangzi) connotes the attitude of passive reception of Dao's creative energy, without presumptuously imposing one's own order upon self, nature, or society. By adopting *wu-wei* as his guide, the Sage imitates the Dao itself and is later characterized in terms of softness, apparent weakness, and flexibility through his unassuming posture.

Essential Quotes

“Best to be like water, which benefits the ten thousand things and does not contend. It pools where humans disdain to dwell, close to the Tao. Live in a good place. Keep your mind deep. Treat others well. Stand by your word. Make fair rules. Do the right thing. Work when it’s time. Only do not contend, and you will not go wrong.”

“Tao engenders One, One engenders Two, Two engenders Three, Three engenders the ten thousand things. The ten thousand things carry shade and embrace sunlight. Shade and sunlight, yin and yang, breath blending into harmony. . . . We gain by losing, lose by gaining. What others teach, I also teach: ‘A violent man does not die a natural death.’”

“The more prohibitions and rules, the poorer people become. The sharper people’s weapons, the more they riot. . . . The more elaborate the laws, the more they commit crimes. Therefore the Sage says, I do nothing and people transform themselves. I enjoy serenity and people govern themselves. I cultivate emptiness and people become prosperous.”

“A tree too big to embrace is born from a slender shoot. A nine-story rises from a pile of earth. A thousand-mile journey begins with a single step.”

“Humans are born soft and weak. They die stiff and strong. The ten thousand plants and trees are born soft and tender, and die withered and sere. The stiff and strong are Death’s companions; the soft and weak are Life’s companions.”

Chapters 7–13: The next section is concerned with further exploring the lessons of the Dao and showing how the Sage puts into practice the qualities of the Dao that he is able to discern. Following the Dao, the Sage achieves prominence by withdrawing and secures his interest by denying the self. Concrete recommendations begin to appear in chapter 8, which can be taken as the earliest short summary of Daoist ethics. Simple moral rules like “Treat others well” and “Stand by your word” are contrasted with the vice of contention. Contention or, alternatively, competitiveness that leads to conflict is a recurrent antivalue in the Dao De Jing, and it can be seen as the normative antipode of the wu-wei ideal.

Two important metaphors appear for the first time in these chapters—the metaphors of water and infant. Certain char-

acteristics of water make it perhaps the most fitting metaphor for the Dao and for the Sage, who imitates Dao. Nurturing all living things, naturally flowing to low places, being soft and malleable and yet extremely powerful, having hidden depth beyond the surface—these are some of the features of water that most impressed the author of the Dao De Jing. Direct and indirect references to water appear often in the text. The second metaphor, the metaphor of an infant or a baby (or “baby in the womb,” in chapter 20), has a dual significance in the Dao De Jing. First, a baby is seen as a being with unlimited (because not yet dissipated) life force (vital energy, or qi), and, in this respect, the Sage must learn to become like a baby by constantly increasing his qi. Second, a baby represents the state of unlimited potentiality; it has not yet “hardened” into certain



form and may thus illustrate the nature of the Dao itself as the ultimate undifferentiated source of the “ten thousand things.”

The word *De* (chapter 10) in different translations is variously rendered as “mysterious quality,” “the Dao’s power,” or “virtue” or is simply left untranslated. It appears in the title and is arguably one of the most difficult notions to grasp. Here are several examples of how this concept functions throughout the text, which may indicate the range of its rich meaning: We are told that *De* flows from the Dao and that just like the Dao itself it is qualified as “great” (chapter 21). A person may be high or low in *De* (chapter 38). It is advisable to be filled with *De* “like a baby,” since it makes one invulnerable (chapter 55). Displaying one’s *De* is a proper response to hatred (chapter 63). *De* signifies the wisdom that is necessary for the actions of a Sage and a ruler (chapters 10 and 65). It is indeed difficult to find a single English equivalent that would suit all these contexts, but at the very least it connotes both an active power, emanating from the Dao, and a desirable human quality. It is the Dao’s power as it is concretely embodied in the individual. A person, then, is filled with *De* to the extent that he or she approaches the Dao’s character. The expression “dark Te [De]” at the end of chapter 10 refers to the *De*’s unknown, hidden, or mysterious aspect and is not a moral evaluation.

Emptiness is another important Daoist category and first appears in chapter 11 of the Dao De Jing. The importance of emptiness is illustrated by a wheel, a pot and a room—the usefulness of these objects essentially depends on the “unfilled” parts of the design, that is, on empty space between walls or spokes. The category of emptiness is conceptually connected with the notion of *wu-wei*. But whereas nonaction primarily qualifies human behavior, emptiness appears as the mark of the Dao in all existing things. The Dao lacks determination; it is not a particular *thing* but rather the absolute absence of a determinate form (“un-carved wood”), and herein is the source of its generative power. Later theorists would correlate Daoist emptiness with the Buddhist notion of *shunyata* (emptiness, vacuity).

Chapters 14–25: This selection starts with one of the more mystical descriptions of the Dao as the primeval beginning of the universe. The Dao has none of the ordinary attributes of physical objects; it is invisible, inaudible, and intangible. It enjoys ultimate unity and is described as “dark, wondrous, profound, penetrating” (chapter 15). It eludes human grasp, but at the same time it is found everywhere. Stillness, gentleness, and softness are the qualities of the ancient Sages, followers of the Dao. Dao cannot be actively pursued; rather, an attitude of quiet passive reception is the precondition for penetrating into this mystery: “Calm the muddy water / It becomes clear” (chapter 15). One is reminded that calming the water requires abstaining from any activity—a nonaction.

The doctrine of eternal reversion is at the root of the Daoist worldview, and we can see it mentioned in chapter 16 of the Dao De Jing: “The ten thousand things stir about; / I only watch for their going back. Things grow and grow, / But each goes back to its root.” There is an invariable law in things—activity turns into inactivity, and any movement that goes to its extreme of development necessarily becomes its opposite. “Go-

ing far means returning,” keenly observes the author (chapter 25), as if he has the spherical shape of our earth in mind. This dynamic movement from one opposite to another—inherent in Dao’s nature and exhibited in the natural order of things—excludes the notion of decline or deterioration. Things and qualities transform into their opposites: The interplay of the yin and yang forces is ever present, but the Sage sees an orderly pattern in this apparent chaos. Ultimately, death does not signify an end but is rather a moment of the cycle of eternal recurrence and is not to be feared: “Tao endures. / Your body dies. / There is no danger” (chapter 16). Indeed, as the author states later, “Reversal is Tao’s movement” (chapter 40).

Criticism of core Confucian values (chapters 18–20) provides an interesting background against which we can better appreciate the Daoist perspective. The author takes a deeper look and observes that a preoccupation with virtues (for example, benevolence and filial piety) is a symptom of a disorderly society where “the Great Tao[is] rejected.” It is important to observe that the moral ideal of Confucianism is contrasted here not with an alternative system of morality but with a preferred pre-moral state of being: “Banish benevolence, discard righteousness: / People will return to duty and compassion” (chapter 19). These chapters can also be interpreted as an attack on “civilization” in general.

The selection ends with the proclamation of the strict cosmic hierarchy: “Humans follow earth. / Earth follows heaven. / Heaven follows Tao. / Tao follows its own nature” (chapter 25). Following its own nature or spontaneity, the Dao has no external guiding principle and appears as the only unlimited reality in the universe. This self-sufficiency of Dao should not be understood in terms of its omnipotence (after all, the Dao is not a personal God); rather, it connotes its boundless raw potential, the full wealth of yet-unrealized possibilities.

Chapters 26–37: The remaining chapters of Book I reiterate themes mentioned earlier and also introduce a new topic, the theory of government, which is central to the second part of the Dao De Jing. Chapter 28 provides an important transition from the abstract metaphysics of the Dao to “applied” aspects of Daoist philosophy. The three slogans “Return to infancy,” “Return to the uncarved block,” and “Return to simplicity” are now aimed at the Sage “as high official,” that is, as a ruler of the land. It is noteworthy that the Sage as ruler is expected to maintain the yin character throughout, which is referred to in the text as “female,” “black,” and “the valley of the world.”

Unsurprisingly, the *wu-wei* attitude in private life is extended to government affairs as well. “The most fruitful outcome / Does not depend on force” (chapter 30) is the essence of the author’s pacifistic worldview. One should note, however, that rejection of violence and humility are justified in a utilitarian manner as the most efficient strategies for achieving one’s goals in the long run. On the other hand, “Those who rejoice in killing people / Cannot achieve their purpose in this world” (chapter 31).

◆ Book II: The Book of De

Chapters 38–56: Most modern editions start Book II of the Dao De Jing from chapter 38, even though the old-

est known version of the text (the Mawangdui version) places these final forty-four chapters before the first half of the text. The initial selection contains some of the most profound verses of the whole book, but only few leading themes can be accentuated here.

“Tao engenders One, / One engenders Two, / Two engenders Three, / Three engenders the ten thousand things” (chapter 42) is the essence of Daoist cosmology. The gradual differentiation proceeds from the “nameless” Dao to the Dao of immanence (the One), which is bifurcated into cosmic forces of yin and yang, then further divides into three realms (water, earth, heaven), and finally multiplies into all existing things. Religious Daoism takes as its goal the reversal of this primordial movement and, starting with the “ten thousand things,” seeks gradually to achieve the original unity in the Dao (chapter 56).

Chapter 47 advocates an intensive rather than an extensive model of knowledge. The familiar everydayness is where true wisdom is hidden. Since the Dao is present in all of nature as its underlying pattern of development, the Sage will be able to discern the Way by observing the most ordinary things (for example, water). “The further you travel, / The less you know” should not be understood as the author’s preference for a sedentary lifestyle or his dislike of foreign lands (after all, Laozi is known for his travels); rather, it is a warning against philosophical speculations that are too detached from common human experience.

The subsequent development of Daoist religion and its applied aspect, alchemy, with its quest for physical immortality, often found inspiration in the Dao De Jing, especially in chapters 50 and 55. Invulnerability, imperviousness to harm, having “no mortal spot”—these are the characteristics of a Daoist Sage, who manages to be “like a baby” and whose vital essence (qi) is complete. Enhancing and nurturing this life force (qi), either through specially prepared elixirs (external alchemy) or through intense meditation, physical exercises, and regulation of breathing (internal alchemy) became the main practical goal of later Daoism.

Chapters 57–81: This section of the text requires comparatively less interpretation. Recommendations for domestic and foreign governmental policies, methods of waging war and the ways of keeping the population in submission are typically not relevant topics for religion, although this practical theme might have been the main reason behind composing the book. Practical application of Daoist philosophy to politics is occasionally contrasted with Legalist methods of “prohibitions and rules” (chapter 57), and, in general, the quietist approach to worldly matters is juxtaposed to the active stand of Confucianism. One can find support in the text for the libertarian model of a government that does not intrude on the lives of citizens (chapters 58 and 75), an introduction of the ideal of a small, self-sufficient city-state with a bare minimum of technical sophistication (chapter 80), as well as a much more controversial advice for keeping people ignorant and dull lest they revolt against their rulers (chapter 65). The latter advice reiterates the point made at the very beginning of the book where the Sage is said to rule “by emptying hearts and filling bellies [of the people]” (chap-

ter 3). It is true, however, that most of these claims were interpreted metaphorically by later readers, and one can understand the “ignorance” and “emptiness of hearts” elevated here as the real wisdom of a Daoist Sage, wrongly perceived as ignorance by the Confucian literati.

This final selection also contains some of the most frequently quoted aphorisms as well the most memorable imagery of softness and apparent weakness triumphing over strength and stiffness. Water and infancy are again the primary examples here: “Nothing in the world is soft and weak as water. / But when attacking the hard and strong / nothing can conquer so easily” (chapter 78). A metaphysical conclusion drawn from observing the ordinary things (for example, a newborn) links softness with life and strength with death and is quite in line with the overall direction of Daoist philosophy, which prizes humbleness, social withdrawal, and nonaction above “active” virtues.

Audience

We do not know for sure who the intended audience of this treatise was, but we may make some conjectures based on the content of the Dao De Jing. Given the likely period of its compilation and the numerous recommendations regarding the proper way of conducting both foreign and domestic policy, we may surmise that the treatise was partly aimed at the regional warlords of the Warring States period in China, where it would have figured as a solution to the seemingly unending confrontation between states and the civil unrest within states. If this is the case, the treatise can be seen as an alternative to the Confucian and Legalist models of social justice. Needless to say, the text soon appealed to a much wider group of intellectuals, initially in China, but eventually in the rest of the world, and, if it failed to convert the rulers and to initiate a radical political reform, it surely left a lasting imprint on many other areas.

Impact

It is hard to overestimate the impact of this short treatise to Chinese and world cultures. For more than two thousand years after its compilation, the text’s influence was confined to East Asia, and translations of the Dao De Jing into European languages have become widely available only since the nineteenth century. In China a particular esoteric interpretation of the text played a role in the development of Daoist alchemy in the early centuries of the Common Era, justifying its quest for the elixir of immortality. Zhang Daoling (34–156 CE), the founder of Tianshi Dao, or the Heavenly Masters School, one of the major surviving Daoist religious sects, claimed to have received his spiritual authority directly from Laozi during one of the latter’s appearances on the earth. Naturally, the Dao De Jing became the primary scripture of that tradition. One can also find numerous examples of the Dao De Jing’s influence on Chinese poetry, literature, painting, and calligraphy.



The number of Laozi's readers increased tremendously in the past two hundred years, once first renderings of it appeared in Western languages. Christian missionaries in China were the first to encounter Daoism, and they were naturally attracted to the transcendent nature of the Dao (which they would interpret as God) as well as to the central virtues of Daoism, such as noncontention, humbleness, and nonaction. Both Western literature and philosophy of the past 150 years often found inspiration in this ancient text, and one can find quotes from the Dao De Jing in such writers as Lev Tolstoy and such philosophers as Martin Heidegger. It is also not unusual to encounter environmentalists appealing to Laozi's ideal of harmony between nature and humans and citing his advocacy of a simple lifestyle and what we would call a sustainable local economy. "A thousand-mile journey begins with a single step" is perhaps the most recognizable line from the Dao De Jing, with many people using it as an old proverb, not realizing its origin.

Today the Dao De Jing is the second most widely translated text in the world after the Bible, with at least 112 English translations available at the moment. The discovery of the ancient Mawangdui versions of the text in 1970s has renewed interest in this masterpiece and has given impetus to a number of new editions that take into account the specifics of the oldest known edition.

Further Reading

■ Books

Ames, Roger T. *The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought*. Albany: State University of New York, 1994.

Fowler, Jeaneane. *An Introduction to the Philosophy and Religion of Taoism*. Portland, Ore.: Sussex Academic Press, 2005.

Kohn, Livia. *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: Three Pines Press, 2001.

Robinet, Isabelle. *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Slingerland, Edward. *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as a Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Yutang, Lin. *The Wisdom of Lao-tse*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979.

■ Journals

Kirkland, J. Russell. "The Historical Contours of Taoism in China: Thoughts on Issues of Classification and Terminology." *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25 (1997): 57–82.

Olles, Volker. "Lord Lao's Mountain: From Celestial Master Daoism to Contemporary Daoist Practice." *Journal of Daoist Studies* 2 (2009): 109–136.

■ Web Sites

Center for Daoist Studies Web site.
<http://www.daoistcenter.org>

Das Tao Te King von Lao Tse Web site.
http://home.pages.at/onkellotus/TTK/_IndexTTK.html

—Andrei G. Zavaliy

Questions for Further Study

1. Respond to the point of view that Daoism as reflected in the Dao De Jing is not a religion but a philosophy of life.
2. Using Daoism and the Dao De Jing as an example, explain how certain types of religious beliefs can emerge as a response to social disorder and other historical circumstances.
3. Explain why the Dao De Jing is open to widely different translations and interpretations. What challenges does this present to the modern student of religion and to translators?
4. Describe ways in which you think Daoism might be having an impact on thinking in the Western world.
5. The Dao De Jing relies heavily on metaphors. Select one such metaphor and be prepared to explain its significance in the text.

DAO DE JING

1

Tao called Tao is not Tao.
Names can name no lasting name.
Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth.
Naming: the mother of ten thousand things.
Empty of desire, perceive mystery.
Filled with desire, perceive manifestations.
These have the same source, but different names.
Call them both deep—
Deep and again deep:
the gateway to all mystery.

2

Recognize beauty and ugliness is born.
Recognize good and evil is born.
Is and Isn't produce each other.
Hard depends on easy,
Long is tested by short,
High is determined by low,
Sound is harmonized by voice,
After is followed by before.
Therefore the Sage is devoted to non-action,
Moves without teaching,
Creates ten thousand things without instruction,
Lives but does not own,
Acts but does not presume,
Accomplishes without taking credit.
When no credit is taken,
Accomplishment endures.

3

Don't glorify heroes,
And people will not contend.
Don't treasure rare objects,
And no one will steal.
Don't display what people desire,
And their hearts will not be disturbed.
Therefore, the Sage rules
By emptying hearts and filling bellies,
By weakening ambitions and strengthening bones;
Leads people
Away from knowing and wanting;
Deters those who know too much

From going too far:
Practices non-action
And the natural order is not disrupted.

4

Tao is empty—
Its use never exhausted.
Bottomless—
The origin of all things.
It blunts sharp edges,
Unties knots, Softens glare,
Becomes one with the dusty world.
Deeply subsistent—
I don't know whose child it is.
It is older than the Ancestor.

5

Heaven and Earth are not kind:
The ten thousand things are straw dogs to them.
The Sage is not kind:
People are straw dogs to him.
Yet Heaven and Earth
And all the space between
Are like a bellows:
Empty but inexhaustible,
Always producing more.
Longwinded speech is exhausting.
Better to stay centered.

6

The Valley Spirit never dies.
It is called the Mysterious Female.
The entrance to the Mysterious Female
Is called the root of Heaven and Earth.
Endless flow
Of inexhaustible energy.

7

Heaven is long, Earth enduring.
Long and enduring
Because they do not exist for themselves.
Therefore the Sage



Document Text

Steps back, but is always in front,
Stays outside, but is always within.
No self-interest?
Self is fulfilled.

8

Best to be like water,
Which benefits the ten thousand things
And does not contend.
It pools where humans disdain to dwell,
Close to the Tao.
Live in a good place.
Keep your mind deep.
Treat others well.
Stand by your word.
Make fair rules.
Do the right thing.
Work when it's time.
Only do not contend,
And you will not go wrong.

9

Hold and fill it—
Not as good as stopping in time.
Measure and pound it—
It will not long survive.
When gold and jade fill the hall,
They cannot be guarded.
Riches and pride
Bequeath error.
Withdrawing when work is done:
Heaven's Tao.

10

Can you balance your life force
And embrace the One
Without separation?
Can you control your breath
Gently
Like a baby?
Can you clarify
Your dark vision
Without blemish?
Can you love people
And govern the country
Without knowledge?
Can you open and close
The gate of heaven
Without clinging to earth?

Can you brighten
The four directions
Without action?
Give birth and cultivate.
Give birth and do not possess.
Act without dependence.
Excel but do not rule.
This is called the dark Te.

11

Thirty spokes join one hub.
The wheel's use comes from emptiness.
Clay is fired to make a pot.
The pot's use comes from emptiness.
Windows and doors are cut to make a room.
The room's use comes from emptiness.
Therefore, Having leads to profit,
Not having leads to use.

12

Five colors darken the eyes.
Five tones darken the ears.
Five tastes jade the palate.
Hunting and racing madden the heart.
Exotic goods ensnarl human lives.
Therefore the Sage
Takes care of the belly, not the eye,
Chooses one, rejects the other.

13

Favour and disgrace are like fear.
Honour and distress are like the self.
What does this mean?
Favour debases us.
Afraid when we get it,
Afraid when we lose it.
The self embodies distress.
No self,
No distress.
Respect the world as your self:
The world can be your lodging.
Love the world as your self:
The world can be your trust.

14

Seeing but not seeing, we call it dim.
Listening but not hearing, we call it faint.
Groping but not touching, we call it subtle.

Document Text

These three cannot be fully grasped.
Therefore they become one.
Rising, it is not bright; setting it is not dark.
It moves all things back to where there is nothing
Meeting it there is no front,
Following it there is no back.
Live in the ancient Tao,
Master the existing present,
Understand the source of all things.
This is called the record of Tao.

15

The ancients who followed Tao:
Dark, wondrous, profound, penetrating.
Deep beyond knowing.
Because they cannot be known,
They can only be described.
Cautious,
Like crossing a winter stream.
Hesitant,
Like respecting one's neighbours.
Polite,
Like a guest.
Yielding,
Like ice about to melt;
Blank,
Like uncarved wood.
Open,
Like a valley.
Mixing freely,
Like muddy water.
Calm the muddy water,
It becomes clear.
Move the inert,
It comes to life.
Those who sustain Tao
Do not wish to be full.
Because they do not wish to be full
They can fade away
Without further effort.

16

Attain complete emptiness,
Hold fast to stillness.
The ten thousand things stir about;
I only watch for their going back.
Things grow and grow,
But each goes back to its root.
Going back to the root is stillness.
This means returning to what is.

Returning to what is
Means going back to the ordinary.
Understanding the ordinary:
Enlightenment.
Not understanding the ordinary:
Blindness creates evil.
Understanding the ordinary:
Mind opens.
Mind opening leads to compassion,
Compassion to nobility,
Nobility to heavenliness,
Heavenliness to Tao.
Tao endures.
Your body dies.
There is no danger.

17

Great rising and falling—
People only know it exists.
Next they see and praise.
Soon they fear.
Finally they despise.
Without fundamental trust
There is no trust at all.
Be careful in valuing words.
When the work is done,
Everyone says
We just acted naturally.

18

Great Tao rejected:
Benevolence and righteousness appear.
Learning and knowledge professed:
Great Hypocrites spring up.
Family relations forgotten:
Filial piety and affection arise.
The nation disordered:
Patriots come forth.

19

Banish learning, discard knowledge:
People will gain a hundredfold.
Banish benevolence, discard righteousness:
People will return to duty and compassion.
Banish skill, discard profit:
There will be no more thieves.
These three statements are not enough.
One more step is necessary.
Look at plain silk; hold uncarved wood.



The self dwindles; desires fade.

20

Banish learning, no more grief.
 Between Yes and No
 How much difference?
 Between good and evil
 How much difference?
 What others fear I must fear—
 How pointless!
 People are wreathed in smiles
 As if at a carnival banquet.
 I alone am passive, giving no sign,
 Like an infant who has not yet smiles.
 Forlorn as if I had no home.
 Others have enough and more,
 I alone am left out.
 I have the mind of a fool,
 Confused, confused.
 Others are bright and intelligent,
 I alone and dull, dull,
 Drifting on the ocean,
 Blown about endlessly.
 Others have plans,
 I alone am wayward and stubborn,
 I alone am different from others,
 Like a baby in the womb.

21

Great Te appears
 Flowing from Tao.
 Tao in action—
 Only vague and intangible.
 Intangible and vague,
 But within it are images.
 Vague and intangible;
 Within are entities.
 Shadowy and obscure;
 Within there is life,
 Life so real,
 That within it there is trust.
 From the beginning its name is not lost
 But reappears through multiple origins.
 How do I know these origins?
 Like this.

22

Crippled become whole,
 Crooked becomes straight,

Hollow becomes full,
 Worn becomes new,
 Little becomes more,
 Much becomes delusion.
 Therefore the Sages cling to the One
 And take care of this world;
 Do not display themselves
 And therefore shine.
 Do not assert themselves and therefore stand out.
 Do not praise themselves
 And therefore succeed.
 Do not contend
 And therefore no one under heaven
 Can contend with them.
 The old saying
 Crippled becomes whole
 Is not empty words.
 It becomes whole and returns.

23

Spare words; nature's way.
 Violent winds do not blow all morning.
 Sudden rain cannot pour all day.
 What causes these things? Heaven and Earth.
 If Heaven and Earth do not blow and pour for long,
 How much less should humans?
 Therefore in following Tao:
 Those on the way become the way,
 Those who gain become the gain,
 Those who lose become the loss.
 All within the Tao:
 The wayfarer, welcome upon the way,
 Those who gain, welcome within gain,
 Those who lose, welcome within loss.
 Without trust in this,
 There is no trust at all.

24

Upon tiptoe: no way to stand.
 Clambering: no way to walk.
 Self-display: no way to shine.
 Self-assertion: no way to succeed.
 Self-praise: no way to flourish.
 Complacency: no way to endure.
 According to Tao,
 Excessive food,
 Extraneous activity
 Inspire disgust.
 Therefore the follower of Tao
 Moves on.

Document Text

25

Something unformed and complete
Before heaven and Earth were born,
Solitary and silent,
Stands alone and unchanging.
Pervading all things without limit.
It is like the mother of all things under heaven,
But I don't know its name—
Better call it Tao.
Better call it great.
Great means passing on.
Passing on means going far.
Going far means returning.
Therefore Tao is great,
And heaven,
And earth,
And humans.
Four great things in the world.
Aren't humans one of them?
Humans follow earth.
Earth follows heaven.
Heaven follows Tao.
Tao follows its own nature.

26

Gravity is the root of lightness,
Stillness the master of passion.
The Sage travels all day
But does not leave the baggage-cart;
When surrounded by magnificent scenery
Remains calm and still.
When a lord of ten thousand chariots
Behaves lightly in this world,
Lightness loses its root,
Passion loses its master.

27

Good travelers leave no tracks.
Good words leave no trace.
Good counting needs no markers.
Good doors have no bolts
Yet cannot be forced.
Good knots have no rope
But cannot be untied.
In this way the Sage
Always helps people
And rejects none,
Always helps all beings,
And rejects none.

This is called practicing brightness.
Therefore the good person
Is the bad person's teacher,
And the bad person
Is the good person's resource.
Not to value the teacher,
Not to love the resource,
Causes great confusion even for the intelligent.
This is called the vital secret.

28

Know the male, maintain the female,
Become the channel of the world,
And Te will endure.
Return to infancy.
Know the white, sustain the black,
Become the pattern of the world,
And Te will not falter.
Return to the uncarved block.
Know honour, sustain disgrace,
Become the valley of the world,
And Te will prevail.
Return to simplicity.
Simplicity divided becomes utensils
That are used by the Sage as high official.
But great governing does not carve up.

29

Trying to control the world?
I see you won't succeed.
The world is a spiritual vessel
And cannot be controlled.
Those who control, fail.
Those who grasp, lose.
Some go forth, some are led,
Some weep, some blow flutes,
Some become strong, some superfluous,
Some oppress, some are destroyed.
Therefore the Sage
Casts off extremes,
Casts off excess,
Casts off Extravagance.

30

Use Tao to help rule people.
This world has no need for weapons,
Which soon turn on themselves.
Where armies camp, nettles grow.
After each war, years of famine.

Document Text

The most fruitful outcome
Does not depend on force,
But succeeds without arrogance
Without hostility
Without Pride
Without resistance
Without violence.
If these things prosper and grow old,
This is called not-Tao.
Not-Tao soon ends.

31

Fine weapons are ill-omened tools.
They are hated.
Therefore the old Tao ignores them.
At home, honour the left.
In war, honor the right.
Good omens honour the left.
Bad omens honour the right.
The lieutenant on the left,
The general on the right
As in funeral ceremonies.
Weapons are ill-omened,
Not proper instruments.
When their use can't be avoided,
Calm restraint is best.
Don't think they are beautiful.
Those who think they are beautiful
Rejoice in killing people.
Those who rejoice in killing people
Cannot achieve their purpose in this world.
When many people are killed
We feel sorrow and grief.
A great victory
Is a funeral ceremony.

32

Tao endures without a name.
Though simple and slight,
No one under heaven can master it.
If kings and lords could possess it,
All beings would become their guests.
Heaven and earth together
Would drip sweet dew
Equally on all people
Without regulation.
Begin to make order and names arise.
Names lead to more names—
And to knowing when to stop.
Tao's presence in this world

Is like valley streams
Flowing into rivers and seas.

33

Knowing others is intelligent.
Knowing yourself is enlightened.
Conquering others takes force.
Conquering yourself is true strength.
Knowing what is enough is wealth.
Forging ahead shows inner resolve.
Hold your ground and you will last long.
Die without perishing and your life will endure.

34

Great Tao overflows.
To the left
To the right.
All beings owe their life to it
And do not depart from it.
It acts without a name.
It clothes and nourishes all beings
But does not become their master.
Enduring without desires,
It may be called slight.
All beings return to it,
But it does not become their master.
It may be called immense.
By not making itself great,
It can do great things.

35

Hold the great elephant—
The great image—
And the world moves.
Moves without danger in safety and peace.
Music and sweets
Make passing guests pause.
But the Tao emerges
Flavourless and bland.
Look—you won't see it.
Listen—
You won't hear it.
Use it—
You will never use it up.

36

To collect, first scatter.
To Weaken, first strengthen.



Document Text

To abolish, first establish.
To conclude, first initiate.
This is called subtle illumination.
Soft and weak overcome stiff and strong.
Fish cannot escape the deep pool.
A country's sharpest weapons
Cannot be displayed.

37

Tao endures without a name,
Yet nothing is left undone.
If kings and lords could possess it,
All beings would transform themselves.
Transformed, they desire to create;
I quiet them through nameless simplicity.
Then there is no desire.
No desire is serenity,
And the world settles of itself.

38

High Te? No Te!
That's what Te is.
Low Te doesn't lack Te;
That's what Te is not.
Those highest in Te take no action
And don't need to act.
Those lowest in Te take action
And do need to act.
Those highest in benevolence take action
But don't need to act.
Those highest in righteousness take action
And do need to act.
Those highest in propriety take action
And if people don't reciprocate
Roll up their sleeves and throw them out.
Therefore
Lose Tao
And Te follows.
Lose Te
And benevolence follows.
Lose benevolence
And righteousness follows.
Lose righteousness
And propriety follows.
Propriety dilutes loyalty and sincerity:
Confusion begins.
Foreknowledge glorifies the Tao:
Stupidity sets in.
And so the ideal person dwells
In substance, not dilution,

In reality, not glory,
Accepts one, rejects the other.

39

Of old, these attained the One:
Heaven attaining the One
Became clear.
Earth attaining the One
Became stable.
Spirits attaining the One
Became sacred.
Valleys attaining the One
Became bountiful.
Myriad beings attaining the One
Became fertile.
Lords and kings attaining the One
Purified the world.
If Heaven were not clear
It might split.
If Earth were not stable
It might erupt.
If spirits were not sacred
They might fade.
If valleys were not bountiful
They might wither.
If myriad beings were not fertile,
They might perish.
If rulers and lords were not noble,
They might stumble.
Therefore,
Noble has humble as its root,
High has low as its foundation.
Rulers and lords call themselves
Poor and lonely orphans.
Isn't this using humility as a root?
They use many carriages
But have no carriage;
They do not desire to glisten like jade
But drop like a stone.

40

Reversal is Tao's movement.
Yielding is Tao's practice.
All things originate from being.
Being originates from non-being.

41

The great scholar hearing the Tao
Tries to practice it.



Document Text

The middling scholar hearing the Tao,
 Sometimes has it, sometimes not.
 The lesser scholar hearing the Tao
 Has a good laugh.
 Without that laughter
 It wouldn't be Tao.
 Therefore these sayings:
 The bright road seems dark,
 The road forward sees to retreat,
 The level road seems rough.
 Great Te seems hollow.
 Great purity seems sullied.
 Pervasive Te seems deficient.
 Established Te seems furtive.
 Simple truths seem to change.
 The great square has no corners.
 The great vessel is finished late.
 The great sound is scarcely voiced.
 The great image has no form.
 Tao hides, no name.
 Yet Tao alone gets things done.

42

Tao engenders One,
 One engenders Two,
 Two engenders Three,
 Three engenders the ten thousand things.
 The ten thousand things carry shade
 And embrace sunlight.
 Shade and sunlight, yin and yang,
 Breath blending into harmony.
 Humans hate
 To be alone, poor, and hungry.
 Yet kings and princes
 Use these words as titles.
 We gain by losing,
 Lose by gaining.
 What others teach, I also teach:
 "A violent man does not die a natural death."
 This is the basis of my teaching.

43

The softest thing in the world
 Rides roughshod over the strongest.
 No-thing enters no-space.
 This teaches me the benefits of no-action.
 Teaching without words
 Benefit without action—
 Few in this world can attain this.

44

Name or body: which is closer?
 Body or possessions: which means more?
 Gain or loss: which one hurts?
 Extreme love exacts a great price.
 Many possessions entail a heavy loss.
 Know what is enough—
 Abuse nothing.
 Know when to stop—Harm nothing.
 This is how to last for a long time.

45

Great accomplishment seems unfinished
 But its use is continuous.
 Great fullness seems empty
 But in use is inexhaustible.
 Great straightness seems bent,
 Great skill seems clumsy,
 Great eloquence seems mute.
 Exertion overcomes cold.
 Calm overcomes heat.
 Pure calm is the norm under heaven.

46

With Tao under heaven
 Stray horses fertilize the fields.
 Without Tao under heaven
 Warhorses are bred at the frontier.
 There is no greater calamity
 Than not knowing what is enough.
 There is no greater fault
 Than desire for success.
 Therefore,
 Knowing that enough is enough
 Is always
 Enough.

47

Without going out the door,
 Know the world.
 Without peeping through the window,
 See heaven's Tao.
 The further you travel,
 The less you know.
 This is why the Sage
 Knows without budging,
 Identifies without looking,
 Does without trying.

Document Text

48

Pursue knowledge, gain daily.
Pursue Tao, lose daily.
Lose and again lose,
Arrive at non-doing.
Non-doing—and nothing not done.
Take the entire world as nothing.
Make the least effort,
And the world escapes you.

49

The Sage has no set heart.
Ordinary people's hearts
Become the Sage's heart.
People who are good
I treat well.
People who are not good
I also treat well:
Te as goodness.
Trustworthy people
I trust. Untrustworthy people
I also trust.
Te as trust.
Sages create harmony under heaven
Blending their hearts with the world.
Ordinary people fix their eyes and ears upon them,
But Sages become the world's children.

50

Emerge into life, enter death,
Life is only the thirteen body parts.
Death is only the thirteen body parts.
Human life, moving towards death,
Is the same thirteen.
Why is this?
Because life gives life to substance.
You have heard of people
Good at holding on to life.
Walking overland they don't avoid
Rhinos and tigers.
In battle they don't arm themselves.
The rhino's horn find nothing to gore;
The tiger's claws find nothing to flay,
Weapons find nothing to pierce.
Why is this?
They have no mortal spot.

51

Tao bears them
Te nurses them
Events form them
Energy completes them.
Therefore the ten thousand beings
Honour Tao and respect Te.
Tao is honoured
Te is respected
Because they do not give orders
But endure in their own nature.
Therefore,
Tao bears them and Te nurses them,
Rears them,
Raises them,
Shelters them,
Nurtures them,
Supports them,
Protects them.
Bears them without owning them,
Helps them without coddling them,
Rears them without ruling them.
This is called original Te.

52

The world has a source: the world's mother.
Once you have the mother,
You know the children.
Once you know the children,
Return to the mother.
Your body dies.
There is no danger.
Block the passage,
Bolt the gate:
No strain
Until your life ends.
Open the passage,
Take charge of things
No relief
Until your life ends.
Seeing the small is called brightness
Maintaining gentleness is called strength.
Use this brightness to return to brightness.
Don't cling to your body's woes.
Then you can learn endurance.

53

Having some knowledge
When walking the Great Tao



Document Text

Only brings fear.
 The Great Tao is very smooth,
 But people like rough trails.
 The government is divided,
 Fields are overgrown,
 Granaries are empty.
 But the nobles' clothes are gorgeous,
 Their belts show off swords,
 And they are glutted with food and drink.
 Personal wealth is excessive.
 This is called thieves' endowment,
 But it is not Tao.

54

Well planted, not uprooted.
 Well embraced, never lost.
 Descendants will continue
 The ancestral rituals.
 Maintain oneself:
 Te becomes real.
 Maintain the family:
 Te becomes abundant.
 Maintain the community:
 Te becomes extensive.
 Maintain the country:
 Te becomes public.
 Maintain the world:
 Te becomes omnipresent.
 Therefore,
 Through self contemplate self,
 Through family contemplate family,
 Through community contemplate community,
 Through country contemplate country,
 Through world contemplate world.
 How do I know the world?
 Like this!

55

Be filled with Te,
 Like a baby:
 Wasps, scorpions and vipers
 Do not sting it.
 Fierce tigers do not stalk it.
 Birds of prey do not attack it.
 Bones weak, muscles soft,
 But its grasp is tight.
 It does not yet know
 Union of male and female,
 But its sex is formed,
 Its vital essence complete.

It can scream all day and not get hoarse,
 Its harmony is complete.
 Knowing harmony is called endurance.
 Knowing endurance is called illumination.
 Increasing life is called fortune.
 Mind controlling energy is called power.
 When beings prosper and grow old,
 Call them not-Tao.
 Not-Tao soon ends.

56

Those who know don't talk.
 Those who talk don't know.
 Block the passage
 Bolt the gate
 Blunt the sharp
 Untie the knot
 Blend with the light
 Become one with the dust

This is called original unity.
 It can't be embraced
 It can't be escaped,
 It can't be helped
 It can't be harmed,
 It can't be exalted
 It can't be despised,
 Therefore it is revered under Heaven.

57

Use the unexpected to govern the country,
 Use surprise to wage war,
 Use non-action to win the world.
 How do I know?
 Like this!
 The more prohibitions and rules,
 The poorer people become.
 The sharper people's weapons,
 The more they riot.
 The more skilled their techniques,
 The more grotesque their works.
 The more elaborate the laws,
 The more they commit crimes.
 Therefore the Sage says,
 I do nothing
 And people transform themselves.
 I enjoy serenity
 And people govern themselves.
 I cultivate emptiness
 And people become prosperous.

Document Text

I have no desires
And people simplify themselves.

58

If government is muted and muffled
People are cool and refreshed.
If government investigates and intrudes,
People are worn down and hopeless.
Bad fortune rests upon good fortune.
Good luck hides within bad luck.
Who knows how it will end?
If there is no principle
Principle reverts to disorder,
Good reverts to calamity,
People's confusion hardens and lingers on.
Therefore the Sage squares without cutting,
Corners without dividing,
Straightens without extending,
Shines without dazzling.

59

Governing people and serving heaven
Is like living off the land.
Living sparingly and responding quickly
Means accumulating Te.
There is nothing that cannot be overcome.
There is no limit.
You can become the country
And the country's mother, and nourish and extend it.
This is called deep roots, firm base.
This is the Tao of living long and seeing far.

60

Govern big countries
Like you cook a little fish.
When Tao harmonizes the world,
Demons lose their power.
Not that demons lose their power,
But their power does not harm people.
Not that their power does not harm people,
But the Sage does not harm people.
If neither does harm,
Then Te flows and returns.

61

A great nation flows down
To be the world's pool,
The female under heaven

In stillness
The female constantly overcomes the male,
In stillness
Takes the low place.
Therefore a great nation
Lowers itself
And wins over a small one.
A small nation keeps itself low
And wins over a great one.
Sometimes becoming low wins,
Sometimes staying low wins.
A great nation desires nothing more
Than to unite and protect people.
A small nation desires nothing more
Than to enter the service of people.
When both get what they wish
The great one should be low.

62

Tao is the mysterious center of all things,
A treasure for those who are good,
A refuge for those who are not.
Beautiful words can be traded,
Noble deeds can enhance reputations,
But if people lack them,
Why should they be rejected?
When the Son of Heaven is enthroned
And the Three Ministers installed,
Presenting jade discs
And four-horse chariots
Cannot compare to sitting still
And offering the Tao.
The ancients honoured this Tao.
Didn't they say:
Through it seekers find,
Through it the guilty escape?
This is why Tao is honoured under Heaven.

63

Act without acting.
Serve without serving.
Taste without tasting.
Big, little,
Many, few,
Repay hatred with Te.
Map difficult with easy
Approach great through narrow.
The most difficult things in the world
Must be accomplished through the easiest.
The greatest things in the world



Document Text

Must be accomplished through the smallest.
 Therefore the Sage
 Never attempts great things and so accomplishes
 them.
 Quick promises
 Mean little trust.
 Everything easy
 Means great difficulty.
 Thus for the Sage everything is difficult,
 And so in the end
 Nothing is difficult.

64

At rest is easy to hold.
 Not yet impossible is easy to plan.
 Brittle is easy to break.
 Fine is easy to scatter.
 Create before it exists.
 Lead before it goes astray.
 A tree too big to embrace
 Is born from a slender shoot.
 A nine-story rises from a pile of earth.
 A thousand-mile journey
 Begins with a single step.
 Act and you ruin it.
 Grasp and you lose it.
 Therefore the Sage
 Does not act
 And so does not ruin.
 Does not grasp
 And so does not lose.
 People commonly ruin their work
 When they are near success.
 Proceed at the end as at the beginning
 And your work won't be ruined.
 Therefore the Sage
 Desires no desires
 Prizes no prizes
 Studies no studies
 And returns
 To what others pass by.
 The Sage
 Helps all beings find their nature,
 But does not presume to act.

65

Taoist rulers of old
 Did not enlighten people
 But left them dull.
 People are difficult to govern

Because they are very clever.
 Therefore,
 Ruling through cleverness leads to rebellion.
 Not leading through cleverness
 Brings good fortune.
 Know these two things
 And understanding the enduring pattern.
 Understand the enduring pattern:
 This is called original Te.
 Original Te goes deep and far.
 All things reverse
 Return
 And reach the great headwaters.

66

Rivers and seas
 Can rule the hundred valleys
 Because they are good at lying low
 They are lords of the valleys.
 Therefore those who would be above
 Must speak as if they are below
 Those who would lead
 Must speak as if they are behind.
 In this way the Sage dwells above
 And the people are not burdened.
 Dwells in front
 And they are not hindered.
 Therefore the whole world
 Is delighted and unwearied.
 Since the Sage does not contend
 No one can contend with the Sage.

67

Everyone under heaven calls my Tao great,
 And unlike anything else.
 It is great only because
 It is unlike anything else.
 If it were like anything else
 It would stretch and become thin.
 I have three treasures to maintain and conserve:
 The first is compassion.
 The second is frugality.
 The third is not presuming
 To be first under heaven.
 Compassion leads to courage.
 Frugality allows generosity.
 Not presuming to be first
 Creates a lasting instrument.
 Nowadays, People reject compassion
 But want to be brave,

Document Text

Reject frugality
But want to be generous,
Reject humility
And want to come first.
This is death.

Compassion:
Attack with it and win.
Defend with it and stand firm.
Heaven aids and protects
Through compassion.

68

The accomplished person is not aggressive.
The good soldier is not hot-tempered.
The best conqueror does not engage the enemy.
The most effective leader takes the lowest place.
This is called the Te of not contending.
This is called the power of the leader.
This is called matching Heaven's ancient ideal.

69

There is a saying in the army:
I do not presume to be the master,
But become the guest.
I do not dare advance an inch,
But retreat a foot.
This is called moving without moving,
Rolling up sleeves without showing your arms,
Repelling without opposing,
Wielding without a weapon.
There is no disaster greater than
Contempt for the enemy.
Contempt for the enemy—
What a treasure is lost!
Therefore,
When the fighting gets hot,
Those who grieve will conquer.

70

My words are very easy to understand,
Very easy to practice.
No one under heaven can understand them,
No one can practice them.
Words have ancestors,
Deeds have masters.
If people don't understand this,
They don't understand me.
Few understand me,
And that is my value.

Therefore the Sage wears rough clothing
And carries Jade inside.

71

Know not-knowing: supreme.
Not know knowing: faulty
Only faulting faults is faultless.
The Sage is faultless
By faulting faults,
And so is without fault.

72

When people are not in awe of power,
Power becomes great.
Do not intrude into their homes,
Do not make their lives weary.
If you do not weary them,
They will not become weary of you.
Therefore the Sage
Has self-knowledge without self-display,
Self-love without personal pride,
Rejects one, accepts the other.

73

Courage to dare kills,
Courage not to dare saves.
One brings profit, one brings harm.
Of these two, one is good, and one is harmful.
Some are not favored by heaven.
Who knows why?
Even the wise consider it a difficult question.
Heaven hates what it hates—
Who knows why!
Even the Sage finds it difficult.
Heaven's Tao does not contend
But prevails,
Does not speak,
But responds,
Is not summoned,
But arrives,
Is utterly still,
But plans all actions.
Heaven's net is wide, wide,
Loose—
But nothing slips through.

74

If people do not fear death,



How dare you threaten them with death?
 But if people with a normal fear of death
 Are about to do something vicious,
 And I could seize and execute them,
 Who would dare?
 There is always an official executioner.
 Trying to take the executioner's place,
 Is like trying to replace a master woodworker—
 Few would not slice their own hands.

75

People are hungry.
 When rulers tax grain
 People are hungry.
 People are rebellious.
 When rulers are active
 People are rebellious.
 People ignore death.
 When searching only for life's bounty
 People ignore death.
 Only those who do not strive after life
 Truly respect life.

76

Humans are born soft and weak.
 They die stiff and strong.
 The ten thousand plants and trees
 Are born soft and tender,
 And die withered and sere.
 The stiff and strong
 Are Death's companions
 The soft and weak
 Are Life's companions.
 Therefore the strongest armies do not conquer,
 The greatest trees are cut down.
 The strong and great sink down.
 The soft and weak rise up.

77

Heaven's Tao
 Is a stretched bow,
 Pulling down on the top
 Pulling up on the bottom.
 If it's too much, cut.
 If it's not enough,
 Add on to it:
 Heaven's
 Tao.
 The Human Route

Is not like this,
 Depriving the poor,
 Offering to the rich.
 Who has a surplus
 And still offers it to the world?
 Only those with Tao.
 Therefore the Sage
 Acts and expects nothing,
 Accomplishes and does not linger,
 Has no desire to seem worthy.

78

Nothing in the world is soft and weak as water.
 But when attacking the hard and strong
 Nothing can conquer so easily.
 Weak overcomes strong,
 Soft overcomes hard.
 Everyone knows this,
 No one attains it.
 Therefore the Sage says:
 Accept a country's filth
 And become master of its sacred soil.
 Accepts country's ill fortune
 And become king under heaven.
 True words resemble their opposites.

79

Appease great hatred
 And hatred will remain.
 How can this be good?
 Therefore the Sage
 Holds the tally
 But does not judge people.
 Those who have Te
 Control the tally.
 Those who lack Te
 Collect their due.
 Heaven has no favourites
 But endures in good people.

80

Small country, few people—
 Hundreds of devices,
 But none are used.
 People ponder on death
 And don't travel far.
 They have carriages and boats,
 But no one goes on board;
 Weapons and armour,

Document Text

But no one brandishes them.
They use knotted cords for counting.
Sweet is their food,
Beautiful their clothes,
Peaceful their homes,
Delightful their customs.
Neighboring countries are so close
You can hear their chickens and dogs.
But people grow old and die
Without needing to come and go.

81

Sincere words are not pretty.
Pretty words are not sincere.

Good people do not quarrel.
Quarrelsome people are not good.
The wise are not learned.
The learned are not wise.
The Sage is not acquisitive—
Has enough
By doing for others,
Has even more
By giving to others.
Heaven's Tao Benefits and does not harm.
The Sage's Tao
Acts and does not contend.

Glossary

jade	a semiprecious gemstone, usually greenish
Sage	wise person
Tao	a variant of <i>dao</i> , or “the way”
Te	a variant of <i>de</i> , loosely translated as “virtue”
Valley Spirit	another name for the “mother,” the principle of generation and the feminine spirit