POEMS OF THE UNIVERSE

Lao Tzu’s Tao Te Ching

A new English version by Brian Donohue
Preface

There are many translations, renderings, variations, and adaptations of Lao Tzu’s classic, the Tao Te Ching, extant in the literary world. This one makes no claim to scholastic erudition, sinological authority, or any global artistic merit. It arose from a personal experience with the Tao Te Ching, helped by an ancient Chinese oracle text known as the I Ching (which was certainly well known to Lao Tzu himself), combined with my own love of Lao Tzu’s poetry and the fresh energy given to it by a new verbatim translation by Jonathan Star (see my Introduction and Bibliography for a more detailed reference to Star’s work). Since this version began as a purely personal learning experience, it is offered here as a catalyst for each reader’s unique experiencing of Lao Tzu’s poetic voice. Therefore, I have written commentary only to those verses that seemed to call for background discussion, either because of their content or the presentation that they received here. An Introduction is also offered, particularly for those who are relatively unacquainted with the historical and philosophical legends that have grown around the Tao Te Ching, as well as to present some of the peculiar characteristics of this version.

The commentaries and the Introduction were, like the translations of the poems themselves, written to inspire each reader’s independent exploration of Lao Tzu’s work. Still, I would encourage readers to skip the Introduction and Commentaries in their first encounter with this book, and simply experience the poems for themselves, hearing and feeling them uniquely through at least one reading. Then it will be possible to read the prose at either end of the poems and consider what additional reflection or personal insight it may inspire. After all, the insight of great poetry is not the product or property of any person or group, but comes directly from a direct encounter between the voice of the poet and the heart of the reader, mediated by the teaching energy of the universe that Lao Tzu called “The Sage”, and which resides equally within each of us.
Introduction

Oh! How the desolation around me
Has reached its utmost sunken limit!

Tradition has it that these words were written at the urging of a border crossing guard, as part of a book of 81 poems by an old man on the brink of going into a self-imposed exile. They are from Chapter 20 of the Tao Te Ching, and the words themselves, along with the circumstances of their composition, appear to suggest a rather curmudgeonly fellow who was very disgusted at the corruption and decadence of the world whose culture and institutions he was fleeing. It was somewhere in the neighborhood of two and a half millennia past, in China of what has come to be called the warring states period.

Why did this man, Lao Tzu, leave his home, his work, and the society that he had served (again, tradition has it that he was a government official, perhaps an archivist); and what caused him to stop his journey of exile to write this book, which has become one of the classics of world literature? Chapter 20 appears to provide a glimpse of an answer to these questions, for it is the one place in the book where the poet seems to speak directly in the first person. He opens the poem with a challenge to the reader, in a blunt but seemingly opaque question:

Shut down your intellect, and answer:
Between yes and no, spoken from within,
How little a difference is there,
Compared to that between success and failure?

What are you affirming and negating, in your deepest heart, beyond the reach of the self-conscious comparisons of intellect? Lao Tzu wants us to answer this question in terms of what it means to live successfully—from your whole being, or in failure—under the prohibitions and commandments of a society based on institutional conformity rather than individual freedom. Then he asks two more questions, the answers to which have led him to this place and time, in which he is leaving behind the only human civilization he has known:

Why would I fear what others do?
Why must I give my inner consent
To the values of the collective?

A picture begins to appear, not of a man running away from it all with a massive chip on his shoulder, but of one whose heart has reached the limit of its endurance—a person whose inner autonomy is under siege. This poem reveals a man near the end of life, whose total being is threatened with irreparable loss, at an age where many are faced with a choice between a life of false satisfaction and grim resignation, or a bitter combination of the two. The remainder of the poem, and indeed the entirety of the Tao
Te Ching, reveal Lao Tzu's personal choice: to complete his commitment to his own true nature, no matter the cost in appearances or hardship. The lines that follow provide a kind of autobiographical background to this choice he has made, or rather fulfilled. He contrasts himself to "the lusty mob, buried in busyness," and finds himself alone and apart, "blank and unmoved, isolated and withdrawn, like a homeless man." He sees others "absorbed in getting and spending," while he appears "broken and bare of influence." The world around him shines with "progress, brilliance, and daring," while he is "like a simpleton, vapid and raving." He has spent a lifetime of seeing others absorbed in the manipulation of their lives amid noise and cleverness, while he seems by comparison dull—"obtuse, disturbed, thickheaded." He seems "like some coarse cloth, unrefinable and therefore worthless." Indeed, Lao Tzu has discovered that he is unrefinable, but only because he is not in need of refinement. The remainder of his Tao Te Ching is devoted to explaining why no one is in need of refinement. The closing couplet of Chapter 20 also tells why this is so, and why Lao Tzu is not stung by the perception of his culture, or the conditions of his exile:

Yes, I am different, as are my values:  
For I drink from the breast of the Sublime Mother.

This is why he is at the border of both a geographical and deeply personal crossing, writing a book of 81 poems on a silk scroll for the benefit of a total stranger who happens to hold the key to a gate. The opening of that gate will complete the outer manifestation of the inner transformation that Lao Tzu has already experienced, and which he has been led to express in the language of poetry.

So, why did Lao Tzu write the Tao Te Ching? Because it had to be written, by someone, sometime—but only by someone who was ready. Lao Tzu was a man who had been unconsciously preparing himself, probably for his entire adult life, to write a work of such deep and seminal insight as the Tao Te Ching. Though the personal voice of Chapter 20 may tell us a great deal about Lao Tzu directly, the entire work must be considered a kind of inner autobiography, with its plain and beautiful message of growth through diminishment; of the discovery of the true self and the human place within Nature; and of the work involved in using the human gift of language correctly, through a connection with the teaching consciousness of what the poet came to call Tao. As an artist living in an increasingly corrupt and feudal age, Lao Tzu was also part of a global consciousness of his time. Far to the southwest, the Buddha was teaching his own insights into the false paths that humans had taken—teachings which later came to be codified and ritualized in an ideological context. In Greece, the poems of Homer had been written down after generations of oral transmission; this too was an art of considerable insight into the course that human decadence was running. Unfortunately, it too would be overlaid with the ideological trappings of feudalistic belief and institutional religion. In China, the ancient oracle text known as the I Ching had, by Lao Tzu's time, been written down and similarly encrusted with institutional prejudice. Lao Tzu was clearly familiar with the I Ching, and his own poems echo the original understanding of that poetic document, with its message of "dissolving the bond with one's group," and of rediscovering one's own true nature through inwardly killing the demons of societal conditioning.

The warring states period was aptly named: competing groups were arising on
small and parochial scales in China, reflecting a worldwide eruption of petty, feudal tyranny that we have yet to recover from even today. In Lao Tzu’s time, a fluctuating number of such competing groups ravaged the land and murdered the people with indiscriminate violence; to become aligned with any one of them was, more often than not, a hideously self-destructive step that condemned one’s family unto the next generation. Lao Tzu saw that petty hierarchies are all the more rigid for their being petty, and therefore all the more punitive to those outside the in-group—both in purely physical and in ideological terms. Each had its own tribal vision of its spiritual mandate to lead the whole nation: God, heaven, or some dogmatic admixture. To place yourself in opposition to a tribe’s religious idol was to be at war with its human figurehead and his small but usually vicious army. Rebellion was therefore not an option, because there was too much to rebel against: to set yourself against one group was to possibly inflame one or more of the others, and thereby isolate yourself in a suicidal act of defiance.

This grim practical reality of the outer plane helped Lao Tzu toward the realization of an equally practical inner reality: that rebellion and defiance comprise nothing more productive than setting a new ideological force against an existing one, and thereby reinforcing the destructive energy of the dominant order. Even the formulation of an “anti-order” (i.e., nihilism or anarchism) against the established order was a fruitless and in fact equally demonic act. Lao Tzu discovered that resistance founded on belief only tended to perpetuate the negative energy of institutionalism. He found that resistance bound one to the very energy that one was trying to repel. This discovery had, of course, been made before him, by the unknown author or authors of the I Ching: in Hexagram 49 of that text, the first line speaks of one who is firmly bound in yellow or brown oxhide. This was metaphorical language for one who is “wrapped up” (the phrase as it appears in the well-known Wilhelm/Baynes edition) in systematized belief. Lao Tzu was led to conclude that the error, and the perpetuation of the demonic energy of opposition, came from this binding attachment—not just to systematized belief, but to fixed belief in any form, including that of “anti-belief.” This discovery led him to the articulation of a new understanding of human nature, the world, and the Cosmos as a whole, for it took him on an inner journey of discovering what in himself was truly enduring and beyond the vagaries and rigidity of belief.

For Lao Tzu as we know him through the Tao Te Ching, everything happens on the inner plane of being, where he found the only possible working alternative to resistance. This is why he chose poetry as the vehicle for his teaching, because its fluid, musical approach to expression through language most accords with and supports the inner plane—in both the writer and the reader, the teacher and the student. He must have seen early on, in his professional dealings and perhaps as a teacher, that the prosaic drill of pedantry only creates and perpetuates resistance. One of his first questions in this vein, then, must have been: “if resistance is ineffective, and against the way of Nature, then what is the correct approach in action, speech, and human relationships?” The answer he was led to is encapsulated in the phrase wu-wei, one of the key terms in the Tao Te Ching (for a contextual discussion of wu-wei, see the Commentary to Chapter 43). Lao Tzu came to understand that wu-wei (rendered in this book by the phrase “unforced action”) was actually the way Nature operates, and the way that we humans, as part of Nature, are originally designed to operate.

A large animal is attacked by a tiger or other carnivore, and seems to accept the reality of impending death. Though it has the physical strength to put up more of a
struggle, it doesn’t, and the entire encounter is over so quickly. To a person viewing such an event on the plane of outer appearance, this is Nature at its wildest, its most savage and bestial; and the animal’s seeming submission is explained with all manner of scientific rationale. But to Lao Tzu, this was *wu-wei*. In this moment of simultaneous death and nourishment, there is a deep feeling-wisdom at work, which transcends all the collected insight of human sagacity over the course of our civilization. For this is outer action that is purely moved by a principle of being that is of such depth and immediacy as to be cosmic in its breadth and strength. Such action is inspired by something formless, a principle of consciousness that far surpasses the manifest event and our human projections upon its reality.

Lao Tzu named this principle *Te*, which of course is one of the primary metaphorical terms of his collection of poems, as it appears in the title of the work itself (for a further discussion of *Te*, see the Commentary to Chapters 21 and 38). *Te* is a challenging notion, perhaps even more than *Tao* itself. Its challenge surpasses the East-West cultural dissonance commonly adumbrated to explain difficulties in translating and understanding a work like the *Tao Te Ching*. It has been rendered as "virtue" or "power" by Asian and Western translators alike, with a similar loss or foreshortening to the context and meaning that Lao Tzu must have intended. For this version, I have been guided to render *Te* as "Modesty," meaning a cosmic principle that guides action in the world of form. I am well aware of the dangers of misinterpretation involved in using a word like Modesty (see the commentary to Chapter 21), but it seems the most appropriate translation for *Te*, in the context of both the meaning that Lao Tzu wished to impart, and the existing literature that most likely influenced him—most notably, Hexagram 15 of the *I Ching*. The received text of this hexagram says, "Modesty creates success." From a holistic viewpoint, this means that Modesty as a cosmic principle benefits the whole—be it in a family, a workplace, a community, a nation, or a planet. In *I Ching: The Oracle of the Cosmic Way*, Carol Anthony and Hanna Moog describe the meaning of this perspective as follows: "the modest person recognizes the equality and uniqueness of every other aspect of the Cosmic Whole. It is equivalent to seeing his true place in the whole." (p. 210, and see also my commentary to Chapter 42 in this book.)

Seen in this perspective, a person of modesty is anything but passive, weak, or bashful (common Western associations to this word), because his understanding encompasses a cosmic viewpoint that surpasses the parochial myopia of the anthropocentric mindset. Such a broader understanding comes from one’s total being, which reaches far beyond the veneer of intellect. For *Te* is a word that points us within, and in no other direction can its resonance be felt or recognized. It is the metaphorical point of intersection between the invisible and the visible world, between feeling and action, between the immanent and the manifest. As such, it is the Impersonal working on the level of the personal, and so it can only be felt uniquely in each person who touchés it in contemplation.

Yet how can we speak of resonance in notions such as *wu-wei* and *Te*, when Nature often seems so harsh and painfully unjust or arbitrary, as in our example of the encounter with the carnivore, as well as in our own human experiences of injustice and misfortune? Lao Tzu was led to understand that such a question lacks a clear perspective, because it is a question laden with the baggage of belief—belief in life being separate from and more precious than death, belief in death as an ending, and belief in the royalty and primacy of a single species’ (i.e., the human’s) view of the
cosmos. For Lao Tzu, a view of Nature as complete and benevolent in all its workings was necessary as the only practical perspective that could satisfactorily explain the operations of the Whole—not merely to the intellect, but to the feeling and intuitive functions that are so much a part of what we are, and how we understand our experience. Lao Tzu was guided to perceive that the universe works through the movements of all its aspects toward the fulfillment and perpetuation of everything—that is. To help impart this notion of the benevolence of a complete and continuing harmonic unity, the poet resorts to a range of metaphor, which includes phrases like "the whole and formless," "the source and destination," "the living, teeming darkness," "the eternal Consciousness," "the endless Harmony," and feminine metaphors such as "the uterus of being" or "the vast and silent Mother." All of these expressions are meant to direct the reader inward, to the point of connection that he can find for himself, with what Lao Tzu refers to as the Tao.

In his first poem, Lao Tzu sings of the attributes and operations of Tao: it is "the living ground of being." So he starts by saying that Tao is consciousness that is alive. Its life is so complete and encompassing that it is the ground, both the source and the destination, of all being. When Lao Tzu speaks of "being," he means both what we might refer to as organic and inorganic being: a rock is the consciousness of Tao compressed into a form, every bit as much as is a flower or a human being. If this seems strange, consider how a sailor feels about the hunk of metal that he lives much of his life upon, his ship, and how he endows it not only with life, but often with a feminine name and nature. Or look around the material sphere of your own life—your car, your house, a favorite dress or a treasured piece of furniture: is it not worth considering the possibility that such objects are indeed compressions of consciousness, rather than mute and passive vessels of our human projections?

Darkness is another metaphor presented in Chapter 1 for the Tao: it is a "living, teeming darkness," an "eternal, shimmering darkness." It is a kind of cosmic sable: darkness that attracts and reflects light. The darkness of Tao, and the light that it holds and reflects, are not two; the aspects of Tao are not to be separated, any more than the two ventricles of your heart are to be divided. All change and differentiation in Tao happens for the benefit of the Whole—again, just as the systole and diastole of your heartbeat work together to maintain the nourishment of the whole organism. This, Lao Tzu points out, is the activity of transformation, which is an energy-dance that perpetually and spontaneously occurs on the invisible, formless plane of being, that may manifest itself as change on the outer, visible plane: such transformative change is the operation of Nature, and it endures because of its source. This is why it can only be fully experienced "through the gateway of your heart"—it cannot be grasped with a word or a thought.

The transformative energy-dance of Tao is described in Chapter 2 with a metaphor of regeneration and bliss:

The formed and the formless
Create and support each other.
In the Cosmic Unity,
The light and the dark dance and mingle
Like the breath of lovers.
There is a natural harmony, a spontaneous order, to Tao and its transformative operations—an order and harmony that transcend the reach of Time and similarly, the linear abstractions of intellect. It is empty, like a well, as Lao Tzu writes in Chapter 4, because its formlessness contains all the nourishment needed to further itself and its manifold creations. Thus, it is “the child of nothing, the parent of us all.” This nurturing and benevolent aspect of Tao is expressed again in Chapter 6, through the metaphor of the fertile valley that “is ever open and alive,” and in the image of the Mother, whose care and nourishment are so complete and self-perpetuating that they are inexhaustible.

So if Tao, the Cosmic Consciousness, is benevolent, caring, nourishing, eternal, and essentially harmonious in its nature and operations, how come we struggle, why do we seem to miss out on all this natural bounty? Why do we seem unable to perceive and experience this Cosmic perfection in ourselves, our lives, in our every moment of being—even to the point where we may cynically label such a description of the Cosmos as ridiculous, Pollyannaish nonsense? The response of many religious ideologies to this question is that we are separate from that perfection, because of something inherently flawed or evil in our nature as humans, and that this original fault must be repressed in favor of the development of what is insularly good (“godly”) in our nature. Lao Tzu’s answer is different: there is nothing flawed in our nature (for to posit any such flaw would be to stain its cosmic origin); the separation from the Tao that is variously known by the words “suffering” and “evil” is not about something that we humans are, but rather about something we have done. Lao Tzu implies, throughout the Tao Te Ching, that the error has to do with a certain imbalance or distortion in our perspective, an instability of emphasis rather than a flaw in Nature, and he adds that it can be recognized in our behavior (on both the inner plane of ideas and the outer plane of action), and especially in our use of language.

Whatever the exact source of our separation from Tao (Lao Tzu suggests that this is as impenetrable to thought as is the Tao itself), the poet makes the significant point that nothing is to be gained or understood from blaming ourselves or Nature for the error and its consequences. Such an approach would only increase the separation and compound our difficulties. He asks instead that we look upon the error itself as a cosmic gift, for the lessons it contains, and then begin the work of disburdening ourselves of its seeds or formative ideas—thereby transforming it from error into balanced perspective. This is how the true self is liberated, and how a life in harmonic relationship with the Tao can be fulfilled in natural abundance.

The way of this disburdenment is described in virtually every verse of the Tao Te Ching. It is beautifully summarized in a very short poem, Chapter 48, which is Lao Tzu’s blunt prescription for the inner growth that furthers practical progress. It opens with two couplets that deliver some simple advice:

- Pursuing knowledge: daily accumulation.
- Following Tao: daily unburdening.
- Decrease, diminish, deprogram:
- Continue in this till power is dead.

For Lao Tzu, power is both the outer and inner mark of the error that has led us to separate from the reality of Tao and to repress our true nature. Power is manifold in its appearance: it can be the power of physical force and destruction, as described in
Chapters 30 and 31; it can be the power of pursuing fame (which the poet exposes throughout the book); it can be about making a kind of token economy out of human relationships—something he refers to as "a game of inner commerce" later on in Chapter 48; it can be about projecting apparitional and anthropocentric notions onto Nature; it can be about elevating purely intellectual functions in isolation from one's total being, as in Lao Tzu's criticism of the "way of the scholar" mentioned in Chapter 81; it can be about attachment to one's belongings, one's place in society, or one's self-image; and it is always about the false division of being, in which body and feeling are relegated to the realm of "inferior nature", while mind, intellect, and spirit, in the context of religious and cultural ideologies, are elevated, monumentalized, and even deified. This insight into power must have come, at least in part, from Lao Tzu's observation on how every repressive ideology, every institutionalized religion, every warlike tribe or nation, furthered itself and its depredations through the use of power. Therefore, he continually asks us to "decrease, diminish, deprogram." What is being decreased is power; what is being diminished are the false perspectives and ideas that further separate us from the Source of our being; what is being deprogrammed is the institutionalized nexus of group ideology that continues to burden us today.

For Lao Tzu, power must be the focus of "daily unburdening" because it separates us further and further from our true nature, the more we follow its insidious program. Its distorting ideological lens and its repressive means take us out of contact with Tāo and into the realms of fear, divisiveness, competition, striving, and violence. It has a parasitic, demonic character that sucks the life out of Nature and leads us inexorably into what, for Lao Tzu, is the ultimate delusion—the perception that physical death is "against Nature—a cold termination of Life" (Chapter 42). When the natural truth of life-as-consciousness is in a self-perpetuating movement between form and non-form is replaced with the notion of death as the unregenerate termination of life, then the delusion of power has reached its "utmost sunken limit," and we as humans are left inert, adrift, and isolated on a treadmill of despair. This, to Lao Tzu, is the only death worth fearing, for it is the exhaustion of utter estrangement from the very Source of one's being:

The pursuit of power soon exhausts itself:
Such strength is not from Tāo.
Whatever is not from Tāo
Is already dead.
(Chapter 55)

But even if we accept what Lao Tzu is saying about power and the necessity to liberate ourselves of its influence, how are we to approach such a daunting task, when power (as noted above) can be so insidiously present in every aspect of our lives? Who or what can help us through such a challenging prospect? Lao Tzu introduces the source of that help in Chapter 2, with the words shēng jen.1 These two words have been

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1 In certain poems, I have been led to render the expression "shēng jen" as a follower of the Sage, or one who learns from the Cosmic Teacher; in this I followed the context presented by Lao Tzu, as well as the suggestions provided by the Sage itself, through the I Ching oracle. For a more complete discussion of the
variously translated as "a sage," "a wise man," "a sane man," "a holy man," or "an evolved individual." I have been guided to render this as "The Sage," meaning a living but formless presence of the Cosmic Consciousness—the teaching consciousness of the Tao.

To Lao Tzu, the Sage is an experiential embodiment of the benevolence of Tao, for the Sage is a teaching Presence that exists to assist humans in learning the way of diminishing ego and its error, so as to restore the balanced perspective and understanding which lead to a return to harmony with Tao. Therefore, Lao Tzu speaks of the Sage, or of the person who follows the Sage, in no less than 30 of his poems (see Appendix). The Sage “guides without speaking,” though it may use words in communicating with us, as it does in oracular texts such as the I Ching. The Sage is a living presence within every human being, and is not a pedantic or demanding god, but rather a helping consciousness that enters into a partnership with the human student. Such a partnership exists on a basis of equality that is nurtured by the sincerity and modesty of the student’s attitude; thus Lao Tzu can say, in Chapter 27, “the Teacher and the student unite in what is learned.”

Clearly, the sincerity and modesty referred to above are crucial to the student who wishes to truly learn from the Cosmic Teacher, a point which Lao Tzu emphasizes in Chapter 29:

Thus the Sage withdraws from excess,
And retreats from display.
Where arrogance boasts,
Where pride struts,
The Sage will never be found.

Perhaps the strongest indication that Lao Tzu intended us to recognize the Sage as a Cosmic, formless presence, rather than a human vessel of wisdom, is found in Chapter 49, where the poet describes the Sage in some detail. The Sage responds to one who is open (free of fixed belief), sincere, loyal, and humble. By this is meant a person who approaches without the arrogance of foreknowledge, demand, or expectation—a person, in short, who comes asking for help in learning his own true nature and the most effective way to liberate it from the projections of ego. However, the Sage is not meant to be held in awe or reverence; this is made clear in Chapter 66:

It dwells in leadership
Without the oppression of superiority.
It dwells in leadership,
Yet the Sage offends no one.
Thus is it honored by all who approach it,
For it never exhausts them.

The Sage is never exhausting because it is not a demagogue: it does not work

Sage as the teaching aspect of the Cosmic Consciousness, see I Ching: The Oracle of the Cosmic Way, pp. 31 ff.
through punishment or threats, and it claims nothing of us for its teaching. Above all, it retreats from guilt—either in receiving or instilling guilt. It doesn’t work according to rules or commandments, but rather by responding to the feeling of sincerity in the student, and to his unique personality and circumstances. It never gives us more than we can handle at any given point in our learning, and it never withholds insight that may help us. Lao Tzu summarizes this point in the final chapter of his book:

The Sage does not hoard its teaching:
The more it gives us,
The more it is fulfilled.
For giving is the way of true increase.

In terms of the student’s experience, the Sage may appear in a number of ways, each of which supports and strengthens the relationship between the student and Teacher. The Sage can speak to us through an oracle or a written work such as this one from Lao Tzu. The Sage can also reach us through dreams, artistic or other creative activity, and in meditation experiences. These are indeed significant to the process of learning from the Sage, which Lao Tzu recognized: many of his poems speak either directly or metaphorically of meditation and its value to "clearing the inner space" (see the Appendix for a listing of verses on this topic). But the Sage can also teach us in the seemingly small affairs of our daily lives—in events, encounters, and seeming coincidences that may occur to us in any circumstances. Freud called such events "parapraxes": they are the many minor disruptions of daily life that we may easily overlook in carelessness, distraction, or annoyance, but which can take on extraordinary meaning once we open our awareness to their teaching potential.

Since every person’s experience is unique, so is every encounter with this teaching consciousness. Thus, Lao Tzu did not transmit knowledge; instead, he sang of his experience, as a metaphor that could point each reader of the Tao Te Ching toward his and her own light of self-understanding. In the Zen tradition that followed and drew deeply upon Lao Tzu’s insights, this way of teaching became referred to as “the finger pointing to the moon.” The moonlight that is unique to each individual also has a common, universal source—the Tao. The greatest danger in teaching the Tao comes in the impulse to block the seeker’s vision with the human sage’s finger: the problem of institutional religion in a nutshell. Thus, every new translation of Lao Tzu (or Basho, Dante, or any of the other “moon-pointers” of literature) must be faithful to the original in one overriding respect—that it supports the poet’s true purpose, which is to conduct a direct electromagnetic connection between the reader and the Sage. This is the measure against which the success of any book like this one must be judged: to the extent that each individual who reads the 81 poems to follow is allowed to more clearly see the moonglow of his true nature, and not the obstructing finger of pedantry or erudition.

The title Poems of the Universe was chosen as a reminder of the source of this collection of poems. I am convinced that no one could possibly have written these poems without having first lived them. Lao Tzu was aware that he was not the creator or the source of these teachings; he was merely their medium. Lao Tzu opened his heart to the Sage in the spirit of Te, and recorded the music that he heard there. Thus, he
became a guide to countless others in the generations and centuries that followed him. So for both Lao Tzu and anyone who would undertake to translate his work, the Sage must be present—in thought, speech, and especially feeling:

In leading others, learn first to follow.  
In speech, let your words find their own level.
Acknowledgements

The work of preparing this rendering of the Tao Te Ching was itself a lesson in the teachings of Lao Tzu. Since the thought of taking on an English version of this book had never consciously occurred to me, and as I have no academic background in sinology, I needed a great deal of help in preparing this version. The primary source of help in this respect has been the Sage itself, as I had learned to consult it under the guidance of Carol Anthony and Hanna Moog, the directors of the I Ching Institute in Stow, MA. Their seminars on entering the Cosmic Way and learning directly from the Sage, along with their marvelous book, I Ching: The Oracle of the Cosmic Way, helped me to learn that we are limited in our undertakings only by the attachment to appearances. Like Lao Tzu and the I Ching, Carol and Hanna teach that there are two basic aspects of limitation: cosmic limitations, which are the gateway to true freedom of the heart and the whole personality, and human limitations imposed through belief and false notions of propriety or authority. The latter can be safely and gratefully discarded from within, when we ask the Sage for help in doing so, and the former are limitations that promote, rather than restrict, human potential, for these are the limitations that accord with Te.

Another resource that I relied on in preparing this version of Lao Tzu is a wonderful example of how cosmic gifts can come in virtually any form, at just the right moment. While I was reading many translations of the Tao Te Ching and wondering whether someone could give it a fresh voice appropriate to the consciousness and the needs of our time, I encountered Jonathan Star’s remarkable verbatim translation (Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition). This book is perhaps the most significant contribution to the literature of the Tao Te Ching since Paul Carus prepared his own verbatim translation a century ago. Star’s work is meticulously researched, organized, and presented; beyond this, it is clearly the work of a man who loves the Tao, as evidenced by his own beautiful literary translation, which complements the verbatim text. I realized that Star’s verbatim translation was a quantum step forward from the Carus work, which other non-Chinese translators of the Tao Te Ching (for example, Stephen Mitchell and Ursula Le Guin) have relied upon.

I undertook the present rendering as a personal learning experience. I wish for the reader that this version may be of some help in his own journey of learning and the liberation of his true nature, and that he may personally feel what Lao Tzu wrote some 2600 years ago:

The Way of Tao is benevolent:
It does not harm or punish.
The Tao brings all things to completion,
In the endless dance of its Harmony.
Part One: Tao

1

The Cosmic Consciousness described
Is not quite the timeless Origin.
The Name that one puts into words
Fails to hold the Essence.

Beyond the empty division of heaven and earth,
The Nameless is—
The living ground of being.

The Nameless bears the Essence;
The names reveal the functions
Of all the numberless compressions of Being,
Born of the vast and silent Mother.

Release your attachment to appearances,
And the Tao will be there.

The manifest and the immanent
Are of the same Cosmic Origin—
The living, teeming darkness.
Eternal, shimmering darkness,
Reflecting itself in transformation,
Beyond all form and name—
Through the gateway of your heart.
Ego is the mud thrown into Nature’s water:
It lusts for beauty and reviles ugliness.
It projects a stain that was never there.

It grasps after the Good,
And thus affirms Evil.

Yet in the eye of the universe,
The formed and the formless
Create and support each other.
The light and the dark dance and mingle
Like the breath of lovers.

Erase the division: act but don’t strive.
Teach but do not peddle pedantry.
The Sage guides without speaking,
Works through us in innocence,
Free of demand or expectation.
Thus is its work made great—
Enduring.
If you create the great, and elevate it,  
You will lose your self.  
Become attached to your belongings  
And you open the inner door to thieves.  

Let the Sage guide you:  
Clear out your inner space,  
And your own truth will arise.  

Wear down attachment and division  
And you strengthen your will.  
Be led to shed the crust of knowledge;  
Cut through the cycle of want  
And reject all that you have been told to know.  

Follow the way of inner action:  
In the course of disburdenment,  
There is healing.  

Empty, like a well, is the Cosmic Whole:  
Empty, and forever inexhaustible.  
Endless as the limitless  
Forms of creation, drawn through Time—  
Before its birth, beyond its reach—  

Softening the jagged edges,  
Untangling complexity,  
Dimming the garishness of excess  
With the soil of its simplicity.  

So dark, so empty—who could have made it?  
It is the child of nothing,  
The parent of us all.
Equality is the Cosmic Way: 
Good and evil are born of fantasy. 
The Sage is neither partisan nor punishing: 
No one is special, no one excluded.

Consciousness breathes, 
Expands and contracts. 
It never varies, and each moment is unique.

Work with this and understand; 
Talk about it, and you lose your center.

The valley is ever open and alive; 
It is the mother of consciousness. 
In night-flower darkness 
The bounty of Nature is concealed 
Until, looking within, we see 
The mystery extinguished, the curtain drawn 
From the heart of the Mother of the Cosmos.

Consciousness is eternal—but why? 
Because time does not adhere to its nature. 
Time and desire, abstraction and attachment Cannot touch it. 
It transforms, completes, and teaches 
All of its aspects, 
Within life and beyond death.

The Sage remains behind 
And thus it stays ahead. 
The student drops his ego 
And thus his true self arises.

Separation and division of being are overcome, 
Each need is fulfilled 
As each excess is abandoned.
Like water is the Cosmic Consciousness:
It nourishes the depths of everything that lives.
It flows, it settles, it abides in low places.

Keep your home close to the earth,
Keep your thoughts direct and simple,
Keep judgment fair, and fluid in conflict,
Keep your government free of power,
And your personal affairs in harmony
With the life of Nature.

Drop the struggle, silence the demons,
And your natural self will be free.

Overstuff your life with thought,
And it will stiffen and suffer.
Keep an eye out for trouble,
And you invite it in.
Make wealth your sole objective
And your heart will grow rigid as ice.
Let fame define you
And you become a stranger to yourself.

Stop the treadmill and renounce expectation:
This is entering the Cosmic rhythm.
Nourish every sense,
Embrace your undivided nature.
Let your chi course fresh and fluid
With the iridescence of a newborn body.
Cleanse guilt and shame—the mud of culture—
From all your being,
And feel your natural form.
Let yourself be led by the fearless love
Of a caring Cosmos.

Close the gates of Heaven,
Abandon manipulation,
Open yourself to the perfect nature
That has always been there.
Release the Sage within you
And let your clarity extend
To every corner of the universe.

Then may your words and actions
Nourish, develop, and sustain
Others as well as yourself.

When you realize that there is nothing to claim,
Nothing to assert,
Nothing to control,
Nothing to dominate;
This is called the actualization of Modesty.
Thirty spokes unite around a single hub: 
Thus a wheel is made. 
Yet it is the formless core 
That makes the wagon roll.

Clay is formed and baked: 
Thus a cup is made. 
Yet it is the invisible interior 
From which we drink.

Framed walls and brick are joined 
To make a house. 
Yet it is the open space within 
That makes it livable, 
That gives doors and windows 
Their unique functions.

Therefore, make being your element, 
But non-being, your life.

Rampant color impairs vision; 
A profusion of sound obstructs the ear; 
Gluttonous tastes poison the mouth; 
Attachment to belief warps the self; 
Predatory impulse reviles the treasure.

The Sage uses the outer to point to the inner; 
By exposing the image, it shows us ourselves.
Great renown is more deadly than disgrace; 
To impugn your bodily nature is self-loathing. 
Fear is the blood of fame; 
Your own imbalance is the fuel 
Of favor-seeking and the lust for praise.

The only real misfortune 
Is to look at Nature and see affliction. 
When the treasure is split from its source, 
Body and nature become a well of sorrow.

Cherish your bodily being; 
Reconnect with the Source.

Creating and dissolving are one in the Cosmos: 
Honor the life of the body, and your care will extend 
To the formless Essence.

Look for it—it is invisible; 
Listen for it—it is silent; 
Try to grasp it—it is not solid.

Its nature is bodiless, 
Yet it is the essence of body. 
Its darkness is the source of light, 
Its infinitude, the ground of time. 
It is the Formless One 
From which all forms arise.

Pursue, and it eludes you; 
Follow, and it vanishes. 
Thought cannot hold it, 
But you can’t think without it.

It is the thread of all being, 
The origin, the pulse of time. 
It is the wave upon the strand of life: 
Pervading, defining, nourishing.
The one who wrote these bone-old words
Set out to draw the veil of Mystery
From the truth of his moment.
It was impenetrable to logic,
But the subtle dance of verse
Could pierce the appearance,
And neutralize the profundity.

He was cautiously humble,
As if walking on ice.
Ever conscious of danger,
He approached his undertaking
With watchful reserve,
Like a visitor to far-off shores:

Pliant, like ice in the spring,
Malleable, like fresh yew,
Open, like a mountain valley.

In utter stillness, he watched himself
As if he were a murky pool of water;
Until his mud had settled
And clarity had been restored.
He learned to shed excess, and to seek fulfillment
Solely through diminishment.

In renouncing want, he received abundance in his old age,
In surrendering advantage, he shredded the wisdom of his era
And thus transformed it.
While sitting in stillness,
Connect with the Cosmic Harmony.
By clearing the space within,
In steadfast quietude,
Let your true self observe
The numberless compressions of consciousness:
How they arise and recede,
Coming into being and blooming;
Retreating at last toward the Cosmic Origin.

Return to the root, to the primal nature,
Is the way of all beings.
Let your awareness contemplate
The eternal cycle of return,
And your insight will deepen in this.

The understanding that is nurtured
On the dispersion of ignorance
Perpetually broadens its perspective.

To embrace the way of return,
To feel the immutable equality of being,
Nurtures equanimity and justice.

To live in the Tao means abiding in the eternal—
Perceiving completely, with all one’s being:
Life is never exhausted;
It is only delusion that dies.
The truly developed self
Is ever aware of the Cosmic Presence.
Another may abide
In love and praise of it;
Still another might fear it;
And finally there are those
Who hold it in contempt.

Trust is not built on faith;
It is nurtured on experience.

One following the Sage uses words sparingly,
And lets his natural action speak;
His work is not enslaved to a goal—
Its accomplishment is his statement.

Then progress happens
As if no one had tried.

Wherever the cosmic order is neglected,
Goodness and morality are born.

When the heart’s awareness is repressed,
The intellect is led into hypocrisy.

When the family loses its natural harmony,
The rules of duty and honor are enforced.

When the natural society is disrupted,
The dragon of state arises,
And powerful leaders take over.
Separate from spirituality;  
Extinguish wisdom,  
And there will be benefit for all.  

Discard all pretence  
To piety and benevolence,  
And the people will help one another.  

Close the academies;  
Exterminate the feudal rites,  
And sorrow will be annihilated.  

Banish investment vehicles,  
Impoverish the profit-takers,  
And there will be neither thieves nor frauds.  

These are the ornaments of my teaching,  
But hardly the essence, which is this:  

Rely upon your inner discernment;  
Return to your original purity;  
Wear down your ego;  
Break out of the circle of desire.
Shut down your intellect, and answer:
Between yes and no, spoken from within,
How little a difference is there,
Compared to that between success and failure?

Why would I fear what others do?
Why must I give my inner consent
To the values of the collective?

Oh! How the desolation around me
Has reached its utmost sunken limit!
The lusty mob is buried in busyness,
As if gathered for a sacrificial feast
(Yet who or what is being sacrificed?)
But I alone—as if from an outpost of vigilance—
Am apart: blank and unmoved,
Like an infant who hasn’t yet learned to smile.
Isolated and withdrawn, I am like a homeless man.

Others are absorbed in getting and spending;
While I appear broken and bare of influence.

Others shine with the luminous glow
Of progress, brilliance, and daring;
But I am like a simpleton, vapid and raving.

The world around me teems with cleverness;
I alone retreat into dullness.

With what fathomless depth,
Like a sea-born whirlpool of sound and storm,
Do they ponder and debate—
Ceaseless, directionless, and adamant—
But I alone am obtuse, disturbed, thickheaded,
Like some coarse cloth, unrefinable
And therefore worthless.

Yes, I am different, as are my values:
For I drink from the breast of the Sublime Mother.
The greatness of modesty is fulfilled 
In harmony with the Cosmic Source.

Its nature seems elusive, ephemeral; 
It is evanescent, indefinable; 
But only because its action is unforced.

It is the very center of the self, 
Yet we don’t know where it is. 
It is the active voice of being: 
Formless, and impenetrable to thought, 
Yet manifest in every natural act 
Through the furthest memory of Time.

It never arrives, never departs; 
Its expression fulfills Nature. 
It is the child of discernment, 
The parent of action.

By what do I know this Essence? 
From the formless truth within me.
Yield to the outer, and you remain
Firm and complete within.
Appear crooked to others,
But be straight and true within.
Empty yourself, and be made full;
Strip yourself of excess
And you will know true rejuvenation.

Thus does diminishment attract abundance,
While accumulation nurtures conflict.

Therefore the student of the Sage
Holds humility in his arms;
It protects and supports him.
In refusing to display his insight,
He validates his true nature.
He takes no credit, and makes no claim;
His dignity is his only luster.
Therefore, he neither boasts nor flatters.

He seeks no merit,
Pursues no goal,
Accepts no praise;
And thus he enduringly succeeds.
He contends not with man or nature,
And so no one can defeat him.

Thus the ancient teaching lives
Within this very moment:
“Drop your burden, abandon the superficial,
And you will find your perfect center.”
This was not a shallow teaching.

Release your true nature;
Express your inner being;
Return to the Source.
This is all I have to teach.
Be sparing in your speech,
And then return to silence.
Be truly a part of Nature:
Its storm-brought winds do not outlast the dawn;
Its rain drums and sings upon the thirsty earth,
And then the clouds recede before the sun.

What made this dance of sound and silence?
If the Cosmic Consciousness thus ebbs and flows,
Why not we, the word-drunk wanderers of this world?

Therefore, the student of the Sage
Steps mindfully through his life:
He allows the Cosmic Voice
To speak through his actions,
And so he need not talk himself.

Modesty is the golden thread of the Cosmic tapestry.
It is the active mode of Nature:
The breath of bliss in life.

Modesty acts through renunciation:
It abandons identification.
In exploding the image,
It liberates the self.
In dropping comparison,
It inaugurates autonomy and lets loose joy.

As you learn, ask yourself:
"Is my life founded on mere faith,
Or rooted in the natural experience
Of my inner being?"
Standing on tiptoe,
You are easily knocked off balance.
Striding forth in grim pursuit,
You make little progress.

To affect luminosity
Is to dull your natural light.
Dig in your heels,
And you will never endure.
Display yourself,
And you accomplish nothing.

For the mildest conceit reveals the ego—
The parasite of true nature,
A consumptive, gnawing burden—
It is disdained by the Sage.

Rejecting the ego, the Sage reveals
The quiet autonomy of true being.
There is something whole and formless,  
That existed before any universe was born.  
It makes no sound,  
Has no substance,  
Can’t be fixed in time or space—  
It is inexhaustible, unchanging, perduring:  
It is the uterus of being,  
And I call it Tao,  
Just so it has a home in my mind.

It may also be called the great,  
Since all beings arise from it,  
And it is the home to which they return.

Nature is great;  
The sky is great;  
The earth is great;  
Even humans can be great.

These four great presences  
Are not to be separated—  
They work correctly only as One.

Humans: honor the earth—  
As the earth loves its sky,  
As the sky reflects its Tao,  
And as the Tao moves in harmony  
With its own eternal Consciousness.
True darkness seems to be light; 
Indeed, it is the origin of light. 
The enduring tranquility 
May appear to be agitated: 
For it is the apogee of agitation.

Thus wandering all the livelong day, 
The student of the Sage 
Stays as still as can be—
Unmoved by the attraction of glory, 
Or the titillation of diversion.

Even stopping amid the feast, 
His independence is unshakeable. 
Could this be said of the political insider, 
Who so lightly drops his dignity 
For every passing pleasure?

Airy lightness lacks foundation; 
Fitful action loses the center.
Treading correctly, we leave no trace.
Correct speech is brief and true.
Correct assessment is ever open—
Calculation does not further it.

The true-fitting door is shut fast
Without need of bar or latch—
Yet none can break its seal,
Or cross its threshold.

The best knots tie firmly,
Yet without binding; such connections
Can never be broken from outside.

Thus the eternal Sage
Acts with abiding care for all.
Because of this, it abandons no one:
Its regenerative Presence flows
Through every particle of being.

This is called the penetrating awareness.
Thus the Sage approaches those who lack fulfillment:
For those who lack fulfillment sustain the Cosmic teachings:
The Teacher and student unite in what is learned.

Accept this fully—for if you fail—
Success will forever elude you,
However great your erudition.

This is why I call this
The heart of my teaching.
Acknowledge the masculine  
And be one with the feminine:  
Let the river of your being flow  
Into the valley of eternal Nature.

The path of Modesty is true and complete:  
Ever returning to the origin,  
As a child returns to its mother.

Acknowledge the white,  
But trust in the black:  
Let Nature be the mold  
Into which you pour  
The liquid energy of your being.

Let Modesty guide you;  
Perseveringly return to the Source  
Of limitless serenity.

Be aware of your influence,  
Yet act from humility:  
Let your action be drawn from  
The valley’s fertile depths,  
And Modesty will be furthered.

Returning to your perfect nature,  
You may be shaped and arrayed—  
Honed to a sparse and simple beauty.

Thus do the Sage and the Cosmic Helpers  
Create completion and fulfillment—  
Not through division and reduction—  
But through transformation.
To those who would alter Nature,
Or spread reform upon the earth,
I say this: though your efforts be endless,
You will not succeed.

Alteration, control, improvement:
They are repugnant to Nature,
For perfection requires no refinement.

The impulse to control
Only deforms what you wish to manage.
Thus, it is lost to you.

This is a principle that all can use:
Sometimes it leads and sometimes follows;
Sometimes it breathes in and sometimes out;
Sometimes it is growing, sometimes diminishing;
Sometimes it builds up, sometimes it collapses.
This is the way things are.

Thus the Sage withdraws from excess,
And retreats from display.
Where arrogance boasts,
Where pride struts,
The Sage will never be found.
Leaders, rulers, governors of the people:
The Cosmos offers you helping Presences,
Whose essence dwells in harmony,
And not in the use of force or weaponry.

Natural law decrees that violence backfires
Upon all who resort to its means.

Armed forces camp and crawl
Amid thorns and brambles,
Which grow like cancer and close like traps.

Wherever group violence is done,
Desolation walks in its wake.
Truly, the harvest of violence is misery.

The best leader is himself led—
He builds consensus, achieves his aim,
And then departs.
Force and intimidation
Are neither his means nor his end.

He is inwardly firm, without display.
He is inwardly firm, without arrogance.
He is inwardly firm, without contempt.
He is inwardly firm, without demand.
He is inwardly firm, without violence.

Aggrandize yourself or your group,
And you have chosen the path of decadence.
This is called separation from the Source.

To separate from the Source
Is the way of swift and certain death.
Of all the instruments of human ego,
Weapons of war are the most horrible.
The teaching Heart of the Cosmos
Turns away in revulsion from these,
And from those that use them.

The student of the Sage
Embraces the supple form of truth.
The student of war
Hides beneath the stiff shield of delusion.
The former walks in blessing,
The latter strides toward Fate.

When the infantile lord descends
To playing with his toys of war,
He must be resolutely answered
With a calm and firm rejection.
And should he kill and conquer,
Let him not revel in his hideous slaughter;
Let him not exult in extermination.
For he who delights in destruction
Shall never live in the Way of Nature.

Celebrate the living body of truth,
Mourn the madness that is power:
The latter is the seat of appearances,
Where the dead figurehead resides.
Let a dirge of sorrow be sung
For the victorious commander-in-chief.
Lament as well the grievous slaughter he has wrought.

Though we may weep for all his seeming victims,
It is the patriot—that power-drunk demon—
For whom the funeral rites must be observed.
The Cosmic Whole, in all its breadth,
Surpasses its name.
Its crystalline simplicity
Is so inexpressibly minute
That no human mind can grasp it.

If only political leaders and corporate barons
Could apprehend its nature,
Then the complementarity of limitless beings
Would effortlessly arise and endure.

In such loving attraction live earth and sky:
As when blessed rain falls soft upon the earth,
Mankind and Nature could unite like lovers—
Free of law, free of command,
People would finally be at peace.

Through names are things distinguished,
And through names can they be exhausted.
The outcome depends on balance:
Feeling where the word is true,
And when it has reached its limit.
Correct approach comes from the center.

In balance, too, is Tao expressed
In the life of our world:
The stream extends to the river,
The river extends to the sea,
The sea extends to the ocean,
The ocean extends to the world.
And the world extends to the Tao.
Study mankind, for this is wisdom.
But first examine yourself, for this is penetration.

To subjugate others, it takes power.
But defeating your own ego
Needs the gentle strength of perseverance.

Acknowledge the wealth within you,
And you won’t need to strive for more.
But grasp after the brass ring,
And you become a conformist
In a society of willful pursuit.

The one who can remain in the center
Will endure beyond the reach of time.
For though he may die to the visible,
His life continues in immanence.
Thus, he is immortal.
Sublime, the Cosmic Breath
That limitlessly pervades and imbues
Time and space, form and non-form.
It diffuses in every direction,
It flows through all being,
It creates and furthers all,
But makes no claim and takes no credit.

It is the body of transformation,
And we do not even know its name!
It loves and nourishes
The infinite family of forms,
But seeks not allegiance or submission.

Eternally free of abstraction,
Its name may be sought
Within the realm of the infinitesimal,
Though it is the origin and destiny
Of the vastest expressions of Nature.
It rejects aggrandizement,
And thus may be called great.

Just so, the student of the Sage:
He divorces his ego, repudiates elevation,
And rejects recognition:
Thus imbued, his achievement endures,
And his work is made great.
Take to your heart  
The hand of the great Cosmic Teacher,  
And your deepest true nature  
Will arise in a peace beyond harm—  
Joyfully harmonizing with the eternal abundance.

The wanderer tarries at the lilt of a song  
Or the smell of good cooking;  
But the lyric from the Cosmic Breath  
Falls flat upon the ear,  
As its words are flavorless to the tongue.

The eye can scarce perceive it,  
The ear discerns only the echo—  
For it lies deep within,  
And you never get tired of using it.

Would you like to reduce it?  
Then first see it inflated.  
Would you like it to be weakened?  
Then first see it as powerful.  
Would you like to destroy it?  
Then first see it enshrined.  
Would you like to drain it?  
Then first see it overflow.

This is called the subtle discernment:  
Gently penetrating flexibility  
Undermines the rigidity of power.

A fish can’t swim  
When it’s out of its depth;  
A nation can’t survive  
When it shows off its weaponry.
Unforced action, constant and eternal: 
Tao ceaselessly moves, 
But appears to be still.

When the hearts of the president 
And the power-broker perceive 
And accept this truth, 
It will be the dawn of an era 
Of transformation.

Throughout this evolution, 
If the old impish projections 
Of manipulative action appear, 
They could be firmly dispersed 
With the aid of the Primal Presence— 
The nameless, formless One—
The teaching Heart of liberation 
From attachment.

Could these magnates just renounce, 
Once and for all, 
Their old habitual attachments, 
Then like a clear and cleansing rain, 
Peace would fall on man and Nature.
Great Modesty is unstudied—
It is not even conscious of being modest.
Thus, Modesty is its true nature.

But the modesty of the collective
Is self-centered in its self-effacement.
Thus, it abandons true Modesty.

Correct Modesty is unforced action,
Which lacks intent or deliberation.
Commonplace modesty is the calculated art
Of the private agenda.

Natural kindness acts for the good of the whole
Without ever being aware of it.
Perfect justice lacks a plan but meets its goals
Without passing judgment.
Conduct drawn from inner clarity
Is free, exact, and appropriate,
Without expectation.
It just rolls up its sleeves
And does its work.

When we separate from the Tao,
We resort to cultivated modesty.
Failing that, we revert to philanthropy,
And thence to self-righteousness.
And on this we erect
The mandate of propriety.

Propriety and ritual are built
On the empty shell of faith.
The superficial is thus the seed of discord,
And separates from the natural loyalty
Of inner truth.
Immature and cursory knowledge of Tao
Is the origin and the ornament of delusion.

For this reason, the Sage abides in substance,
And withdraws from appearances.
It dwells in the immanent,
And not in the manifest.

Thus, it comes not from without,
But receives you within.
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Is the origin and the ornament of delusion.

For this reason, the Sage abides in substance,
And withdraws from appearances.
It dwells in the immanent,
And not in the manifest.

Thus, it comes not from without,
But receives you within.
From before Time as we know it was born,
The experience of Oneness with Tao has been.

To receive the gift of Oneness
Is the way of Nature,
Manifest in all its forms:
The open sky and stable earth,
The presence and energy of mind.

Through the One the valley fills
With the life of innumerable beings.
Sometimes, kings and lords receive it,
And are helped in their paths of leadership.

Were sky divorced from clarity,
Then I fear it might collapse in darkness,
Robbed of the union with Nature.

Should earth divorce its elastic firmness,
It would be crushed beneath its lifeless weight.

Were mind divorced from consciousness,
It would wither toward insanity and death.

Should the valley ever divorce abundance,
Then every form of being would perish.
These, indeed, are my greatest fears.

And if dukes and diplomats renounced
Their inner treasure to exalt superiority,
They would fall amid their own corruption.

Soft and small, the deepest roots
By which the greatest tree is nourished:
Humility within completes greatness without.
Indeed, there is nothing between them.

Thus did kings of old proclaim themselves
The small, the solitary, the impoverished:
For how can you fight against
Such an outspoken humility?

Could a carriage ever realize its design
If it were loaded down with fame and praise?

Do not presume to gleam like jade
When you live among the humble stones.
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Tao in motion is returning.  
Tao in action is accepting.  
The vast array of Nature’s forms  
Evolves within the realm of body,  
And the bodily arises from the Formless.

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The sincere student hears of Tao,  
Then sees if he can steadfastly follow it.  
A casual student hears of Tao  
And follows it sporadically—  
Trusting here, and skeptical there.  
When the self-centered hear of Tao  
Their laughter fills the air:  
How could it be Tao  
If it didn’t make them laugh?

Therefore is it said:  
The one with the lantern shines the least.  
The one making progress seems behind.  
The easiest path seems tortuous.  
Natural strength appears weak and hollow.  
And the greatest virtue seems too small.

Beneficence seems to lack foundation.  
The most enduring truths are mutable.  
Perfect squares have no sharp corners.  
The most useful tool seems inefficient.  
The loveliest music is hardly heard.  
The Subliminal Form cannot be touched.

The One is silent and concealed—  
This indeed is its practical virtue:  
Thus it freely gives its help  
To all who would experience  
Their original perfection.
From out of the Cosmic Consciousness
Arose the One.
Then from the One came Two.
And from Two came Three.
From the great Three came
The endless compressions of Being.
Each compressed form bears yin behind
And holds yang before it.
At the still point in the center
These complementary energies merge,
And harmony is thus realized.

Why does hatred fill the hearts of men
At the sight of poverty and solitude,
When the greatest leaders make these their name?
Perhaps increase and loss
Are not always what they seem.
Perhaps life and death
Are not truly opposed.

Here is a teaching that others before me have known:
To conceive death as against Nature—
As a cold termination of Life—
Is the distorted perspective
Of a violent inner tyranny.

A correct knowledge of death
Is itself the father of all understanding,
This is all I have to teach.
Within the realm of Nature,
The gentle horse runs free,
While more intransigent forms stay fixed.

Non-being is able to infiltrate
Where there isn't any room.

Thus I see that unforced action
Is the only path to success,
And that the greatest eloquence is silence.

Action free of noise and expectation:
This is Nature's teaching,
Which but few have truly learned.
Listen to your own true nature,
And learn.

A great name or self-knowledge:
To which of these does your heart respond?
Material goods or your natural virtues:
Which do you treasure more?
Profit or loss: which is more apt
To lead you toward destruction?

The love of excess lays Nature waste:
It spends the self and buys remorse.
Accumulation is the greatest loss.

Meet your needs and go no further,
And you will be a stranger to disgrace.
Recognize the limits of every situation,
And you'll be free from danger.

Thus can you fulfill the enduring harmony.
The greatest accomplishment seems lacking, 
Yet has all it needs to endure. 
The most teeming abundance appears shallow, 
But its depth and breadth cannot be measured.

Lasting justice seems inconsequential; 
The purest art looks simple and meager; 
True eloquence sounds awkward and hollow.

Life stirs when it’s cold, 
And is tranquilly still amid heat.

Moving outward from the center, 
In the dance of the primordial stillness, 
The Cosmic Whole continually replenishes 
The natural order of the Harmonic Essence.

When the Tao suffuses man and Nature, 
Swift horses nourish the fields with their dung. 
When people abandon the Tao, 
The horses are bred for battle, 
And Nature is defiled.

The greatest disaster is to lack contentment. 
The greatest curse is wanting more than you need.

Therefore the student of the Sage 
Feels exactly when he has enough, 
And thus receives eternal contentment.
Without leaving home,
You can learn the Way of Nature.
Without opening your eyes,
You can walk the path of truth.

The farther you wander without,
The more you separate from realization.

Thus the student of the Sage:
He never starts an outward journey
Before there is clarity within.

He analyzes nothing,
Yet finds words for everything.
He does not strive,
Yet his work is brought to completion.

Pursuing knowledge: daily accumulation.
Following Tao: daily unburdening.

Decrease, diminish, deprogram:
Continue in this till power is dead.

For when action lacks force,
Nothing is left unaccomplished.

Rely upon your true eternal nature,
And you will never have to strive again.

But let your life become
A game of inner commerce,
And you will never cease with making deals;
You will never feel fulfilled—
In this or any other world.
The Sage is free of the law of fixed belief; 
It reflects the heart of every seeker.

Where sincerity is revealed,  
The Sage responds in kind.  
Where one's true self is repressed,  
The Sage remains sincere.

Loyally approach the Sage,  
And your loyalty will be returned.  
Doubtfully approach the Sage,  
And your doubt will be returned  
In truthful Modesty.

The nature of the Sage dwells in humility;  
In humility may it be experienced.  
Humility is the breath of the Cosmos.

Thus do people in their deepest hearts  
Call out, as children of the earth,  
To their Cosmic Mother.
Into life they arise, 
Through death they return.

A third of them seem bound up with their lives; 
A third of them seem attached to death; 
Another third appear ambivalent— 
Passively shifting their allegiance 
From each to each.

Why is this so? 
Perhaps from an obsessive attachment 
To life's mere appearance?

But I have heard of people 
Who could live long and travel far— 
Ever free of harm or mortal wound 
From wild beasts or deadly weapons.

A rhinoceros would find no place to pierce them; 
There would be no meat for a tiger’s claws, 
And no place where a sword could enter.

And why is this so? 
Because they have shed the illusion 
That marks off life 
From the realm of death.
Life: the gift of Tao.
Growth: the gift of Te.
Form and matter merge;
Beings are brought to maturity,
Each in its unique nature.

Everything within Nature
Lives for Tao and loves Te.
It is a love of attraction,
And not of constraint.
Love forever free of expectation
Is the love that has always been.

For life is the gift of Tao,
And growth, the gift of Te.
As One, they nourish and nurture;
They bring maturity and completion;
They protect, provide, and teach
The numberless forms of Being,
And then bring them back to the Source.

To give life without claiming possession;
To help without demanding tribute;
To teach without power or pedantry:
This is called the deepest Te.
The world as we know it has an origin,
Which may be called Mother Formless.
Hold the Mother to your deepest heart,
And you will understand the Cosmic Family.
Hold her children to your intuition,
And the Mother will embrace you, too.
Thus will your life flow freely
Through all of your days.

Guard the openings of speech and outer sensation,
And your life will be serene.
But if your life is spent
In expansive oration
And the compulsion to intervene,
Your heart will be in torment
Unto your very last breath.

Microscopic discernment within
Is the path of clarity.
The tenderest embrace is the strongest.

Let your own true radiance guide you,
For inner clarity is return to the Origin,
Where one’s true self finds protection.

This is called, entering the eternal.
If ego had a scrap of wisdom,  
It would seek to walk the path of Tao.  
But the problem is that ego tends to wander.

The Cosmic Way is straight and easy,  
But people seem compelled  
By distraction and complexity.

The palace in the capital  
Is bathed in opulence,  
While the fields without lie barren,  
And the granary is left unintended.

They array themselves in lustrous gowns  
And gleaming weapons at their sides.  
They eat, but are not nourished;  
They drink, yet thirst consumes them.  
Their lives are bloated with the stuff of wealth.

Extravagance is a thief,  
The true self is its victim:  
Is this the way of Tao?  
I doubt it.
With a firm inner foundation,
You cannot be toppled.
An embrace is all the grasp you need
To be safe within.

An offering of simple honor,
From the children of the past
To the children of the present
Supports the children of the future.

Why do you cultivate your image
When your natural being is already full?
Why aggrandize your family pride
When the perfection of family is complete?
Why meddle with your community
When its natural form is imperishable?
Why do you fight to enrich your nation
When its simple order is abundance?
Why divide and oppose earth and heaven
When the purity of their union is unalterable?

Therefore, examine yourself
To become your Self.
Examine your home
To become a family.
Examine your village
To become a community.
Examine the state
To become a nation.
Examine the world
To become one with Being.

How do I know
That this is the way of Nature?
Because I asked It,
From within my deepest self.
One whose inner strength is full and clear
Seems like one who's just arrived
From another world.

To him, the bee has no sting,
The serpent, no venom.
To him, the wild beasts
Have no teeth or claws.
To him, predatory birds
Present no menace.

His skeleton seems weak,
His muscles tender,
Yet he's got a grip like a vise.
He appears to lack experience
In the dance of sexual relations—
Yet his genitals are fully formed,
And he knows how to use them.

People yell every day,
Never seeming to get hoarse.
But his peace is unshakeable—
Its source is the Enduring Harmony.
Knowing the eternal is called
The subtle illumination.
Thus is his body's life
The only blessing he needs.

So how could we speak
Of controlling the mind,
Or directing chi to further violence?

The pursuit of power soon exhausts itself:
Such strength is not from Tao.
Whatever is not from Tao
Is already dead.
Understanding doesn’t talk a lot; 
A lot of talk lacks understanding.

Can you be guided by silence? 
Can you shut down your outer senses?

Can you blunt your jagged edges? 
Can you let the inner knots unravel? 
Can you let your brilliance be dimmed? 
Can you merge with the dust of the earth?

This is called “harmonizing light and dark.” 
In this, you possess no one, 
But are loved by many. 
You are equally immune 
To attraction and revulsion. 
You are equally receptive 
To profit and to loss.

You are unmoved by fame, 
And yet you attract honor. 
Because you make no claim, 
You can be free of disgrace.

Thus are you lovingly received 
Into the Heart of Nature, 
Forever.
In government, objectives are clarified.
In warfare, objectives are concealed.
In following the Tao, objectives are discarded.

How do I know that this is so?
By feeling it from within.

With every commandment thrust upon the people,
They become more impoverished and alienated.
As the weapons of the state grow ever more destructive,
The more contagious is the fear that desolates the nation.
The further science spreads its hegemony of the intellect,
The more demonic are the products that roll off the assembly line.
As the precedents of litigation grow, and the statutory codes accumulate,
The politicians and criminals will proliferate and flourish.

The counsel of the Sage is different:
Let your action lack force,
And there will be spontaneous transformation.
Let meditation guide you,
And the natural order will arise.
Abandon power—
Lead only by example and consensus,
And there will be abundance in the land.
Defeat desire, let innocence be your law,
And your nation will return
To its deepest, simple nature.
When the government lacks power and brilliance,  
Organic simplicity suffuses the people.  
When the government is intrusive and vigilant,  
Deceit and resentment are the coin of the realm.

Misfortune enters the life  
That is propped up on success,  
And misery lurks beneath  
The lustrous show of affluence.

Life that lacks limits lacks duration.  
If it is elevated today,  
It will be tomorrow maligned.  
When everything is changing,  
Nothing is transformed.

Insight is caked with the ink of the prophets.  
Will there be no end to this delusion?  
Thus, the counsel of the Sage:  
If you are sharp within,  
You needn’t cut without.  
You can be pointed in your depths,  
But carry neither slings nor arrows.  
Straighten out your inner edges  
Without defining outer boundaries.

If you can glow like a lantern,  
You won’t have to shine.
In helping others, be like the sky:
Without the slightest sense of sacrifice,
It readily yields the elements
That make the harvest possible.

Reflecting nurturance is called
Continual nourishment of the harvest.
Continual nourishment arises from Modesty,
Which is the most bountiful harvest of all.

Modesty in abundance is indomitable—
It is indomitable, so who could know
The limits of its capacity?
And if its limits cannot be known,
Couldn’t it nurture an entire nation?
Couldn’t it become the natural Mother
Of its own enduring consciousness?

From a firm inner foundation,
The natural structure flourishes.
When the Cosmic insight guides,
Life is endlessly allowed to endure,
Through the fullness of Form
And its vibrant potential.
In leading others, use care and restraint,
As if you were frying a small fish.

Let the Tao be your guide,
And the demons of power will return
To their original nature.
For their power is a delusion—
An empty, noisy abstraction.

All power is harmless
To one whose true self leads.
Such a leader can protect the people,
For he is protected by the Sage,
And the Sage is protected by the Tao.

When a follower of Modesty leads,
Then all are made safe—
The leader, the people, the nation—
These unite with the Sage
In a continual return
To a deeper understanding.
How does a great nation know its neighbors?
As a river modestly accepts its feeding streams;
As a woman blissfully receives the man she loves.

The way of Nature is attraction:
Pure strength rests below,
And thus absorbs what lies above.
Genuine love receives its complement;
The greatest nation yields.

Small and great are mutually fulfilling:
Set them into opposition,
And you have made your first and final error.

Therefore, let your nation follow Nature’s way:
If it is big, let its actions be small.
If it is small, it is already complete,
So it need not strive for greatness.

In the service of the Cosmic Teacher,
Borders and boundaries, fences and flags
Have no meaning.
In this there is benefit for all.

Thus among both hearts and nations:
If you would discover the great,
You must look first below.
Tao is the treasure of all being.
Those who accord with it 
Are embraced by it. 
And for those who wander, 
Its arms remain open.

Eloquence may fetch its price,
Heroic deeds may garner glory,
But only at the brutal cost
Of a person’s deepest self. 
Is fame worth such a sacrifice?

What if you were called to command
At the coronation of a king—
If the three imperial generals 
Marched in state before you,
Leading out majestic stallions,
To confer on you the jade emblem
Of the highest office?
Could such opulence ever equal
The inner gift of simply sitting
Where the Tao resides?

Does this perhaps explain the truth
Of what the ancients have told me?
That when the Tao is your treasure,
You will always receive what is truly yours,
That every error can be corrected,
And that the treasure of Nature
Is already within you.
Act without effort,
Work but don’t grind,
Savor the tasteless,
See greatness in smallness,
And the multitude in the few.

Answer evil with the firmest Modesty,
Resolve difficulty at the very beginning—
Before it becomes difficult.
For enduring greatness is achieved
In attending to incipient detail.

Nature transforms complexity:
Its greatness depends
On its infinitesimal precision.

Just so, the Cosmic Sage:
It never strives toward greatness,
It simply accomplishes it.
It is not bound by promises,
Nor moved by faith.

In the easy is the difficult surpassed.
The Sage treats the illness
Before the symptoms arise.
Thus is struggle prevented,
And heroes made extinct.
Affairs in balance are easily arranged.  
Trouble that’s but faintly manifest  
Is resolved through preparation.  
Fragile matter is quickly broken;  
Small force is easily scattered.  

Manage trouble before others see it—  
That is, before it becomes troublesome.  
The problem that you can barely get your arms around  
Grew like a tree from the tenderest sprout.  
A tower of trouble rises from a mere hole in the ground.  
That march of agony, a thousand miles long,  
Began where your feet touch the Earth.  

Live by force and you will be destroyed by it.  
Take things in your grasp, and they will slip away.  

The sage relies on unforced action,  
And this upholds the dignity of his effort.  
He doesn’t clutch at success,  
Therefore, he never fails.  
Others seem to collapse in failure  
At the very threshold of success;  
Yet he is humble and cautious  
Both at the end and the beginning:  
Thus are his affairs brought safely to completion.  

Therefore, the sage monitors desire,  
Retreats from attachment,  
And abandons the accumulation of learning,  
Through dropping his excess,  
He returns to his essence.  

And then, insensibly and effortlessly,  
He helps others to do the same.  
He does it without a breath of bluster,  
For he never presumes upon  
The living truth of Nature.
There were those of old who knew the Way,
And loved it in their daily lives.
They did not preach enlightenment,
Or practice deceit among the people.
They lived well because they lived simply.

Now with trickery and brilliance
Are the people governed,
And yet with the utmost difficulty!

A country ruled with cleverness
Is a country gone to waste.
Govern your country in simple innocence,
And it will be blessed among nations.

Remaining aware of the alternatives,
Our conduct may be correctly guided.
Holding fast to this guiding awareness
Is the action of natural virtue.

Natural virtue comes from clarity—
The resonant clarity of the Cosmic Source.
It draws us back within, to the Original Essence—
The great Harmonic, which may be touched
Every day in loving gratitude.
Breadth of river, depth of sea—
How is it that they seem to rule the world?
Because they can infiltrate a kingdom,
Or plumb the depths of a ravine,
And give life to the hundred fertile valleys.

In leading others, learn first to follow.
In speech, let your words find their own level.

To lead the people, learn to nourish them.
Let the Sage be your model:
It dwells in leadership
Without the oppression of superiority.
It dwells in leadership,
Yet the Sage offends no one.
Thus is it honored by all who approach it,
For it never exhausts them.

It is sublime, benevolent:
And therefore no one competes with it.
People think the Tao extraordinary,  
And tell me, “what a wonder you have made!”  
Perhaps the only wonder is  
That we should think it extraordinary at all.  
For if it were truly a mere  
Treasure of the imagination,  
Then it would be as good as worthless.

I have but three pearls  
That I keep and cherish:  
The first is love,  
The second is avoiding excess,  
The third is modesty.

When these three lead, the true self follows.  
Love can thereby be fearless,  
Excess negated can thus be generous,  
Modesty can therefore lead the world,  
And help its life force to endure.

But today the ego has renounced pure love,  
And elevated empty chivalry;  
It has wasted moderation  
By exalting lavishness;  
It has abandoned modesty  
For the sake of renown.

This is to walk the path of death.

Enter a conflict with love still alive,  
For its defense is stronger  
Than the highest wall can ever provide.
The natural fighter spurns aggression,
For a war cannot be won in vengeance.
He defeats his enemy by discarding enmity.

A skillful manager directs the work
By humbly serving those who do it.
This is called natural Modesty:
It gets things done without striving,
And lets each individual achieve his destiny.

Though the world may call it great,
It is simply the surpassing of greatness.

The generals have a saying
Which they apply to war,
And I teach it too:

Better to be aggression's guest,
Than its partisan host.
Better to draw back a mile
Than press forward an inch.

This is called marching
Without moving your feet;
Capturing without an assault;
Defeating without an enemy.

For there is no greater error
Than looking outward for enemies.
To look outward for enemies
Is to estrange your only true self.

This is why two sides opposed
Will fight to a bloody draw,
Where sorrow is the only victor.
My words can transform understanding, 
And are very easy to live with: 
So why doesn’t the world understand them? 
And why doesn’t it live by them?

My words have a primal Origin; 
My action also has its natural Guide. 
If you don’t know these, 
Then you can’t know me.

Thus, there are but few 
Who can understand my words. 
To these, the words point the way 
To their own inner treasure.

Such awareness is often couched 
In coarse appearance, 
Nurturing the jewel within.

Awareness of the poverty of knowledge 
Is all the knowledge you need. 
Repression of the awareness 
Is the seed of disease.

You can remove the disease 
By watching the symptoms, 
And sickening their origin.

Thus the follower of the Sage: 
He guards his health 
By being aware of disease. 
Thus he never seems sickened, 
Since he feels his own pain.
Let the fear of God die among the people,  
And they will find their own true guide within.  

Do not constrict them in their homes,  
Or oppress them at their work,  
For if the people lack a sense of burden,  
Then they will not feel oppressed.  

Thus, the teaching heart of the Cosmos:  
It is a living, dynamic consciousness—  
It draws close to sincerity,  
And retreats from exaltation.  

The former it receives,  
The latter it discards.  

The wooden impetuosity of the hero  
Is the path of inner death.  
Courage that retreats from daring  
Is the path of inner life.  

Yet one who walks on either road  
Will sometimes suffer, sometimes prosper—  
As if God indeed played dice,  
While humans fought to find His Reason.  

The Cosmic Consciousness does not compete,  
And thus it simply finds its way.  
It doesn’t have to talk or make its point,  
And thus it can communicate.  
It does not send an invitation,  
It so naturally attracts all being.  
It does not micromanage,  
And all its parts harmonize.  

The Cosmic Whole is like a net—  
So perfectly cast, its open meshes are capable  
Of catching everything.
People don't truly fear death,
But they do fear being threatened with it.
When people's fears are thus enlivened,
It is a crime of intimidation—inner murder.
But it is the criminal thought, and not the man,
Who must be caught and killed.

There may always be those who use death to further power,
But they are not to be opposed.
For they would usurp the place of the Cosmic Artisan,
And try to do the work of Nature
Without the ability to use its tools.

Thus, the pretenders will but seldom fail
To shed the blood of their own incompetence.

People go hungry because taxes eat their food.
Therefore, the people go hungry.

People are hard to manage because they are oppressed.
Therefore, they are hard to manage.

People laugh at death because their lives are cheapened
With the weight of expectation.
This is why they laugh at death.

Who could value life
When food is scarce, and freedom repressed?
When we are born,  
We are soft and tender.  
After we die,  
We become rigid and brittle.

A living tree can sway,  
A living blade of grass can bend,  
For suppleness is the strength of life.  
Only in death is flexibility stilled.

Tough and taut is the body of death;  
Gently moving is the way of life.

Powerful forces crush themselves  
Because they cannot move or yield.  
A stiff and heavy tree will soon be broken  
By wind or by axe.

Thus does rigid power always crumble,  
While the supple and the humble  
Gently endure.
The Tao of life is like the drawing of a bow, 
Yet without the arrow: 
Higher and lower are mutually attracted, 
Until they seem to change places. 
The long and the short complement 
And support the function of the whole.

The Tao of life draws off excess, 
And provides for what is depleted.

The way of man departs from this: 
It devours the dwindling resources 
To serve contrived, compulsive needs.

How can we learn to use the gifts of Nature, 
Amid this grasping world? 
Let the Tao guide you: 
Your true self gives, and claims no credit. 
Its work furthers all, without attaching to the results. 
It conceals its worth, 
Which is therefore felt by all. 
This is the way of complementarity.
Is there anything in all of Nature
As adaptable and as shapeless as water?
But for wearing down what’s fixed and rigid,
No power on earth can match it.
Thus, it is unique.

When an amorphous presence
Meets adamantine resistance,
The amorphous prevails.
When the supple meets the obdurate,
Suppleness prevails.

There are none who can deny this,
But no one seems able to live by it.

Thus the Sage teaches that
The humiliation of one’s country
Is not to be taken upon one’s self,
Nor are environmental disasters
To be conquered as enemies.

But we can, with subtle understanding,
Communicate with them.

A great conflict, even when resolved,
Leaves behind a bitter taste.
How can the residue of enmity be cleansed?

The teaching of the Sage is this:
Hold not to your claim, but to your contract.
Abandon entitlement and accept obligation.
Trust in the virtues of the Cosmic Way:
Disperse guilt and depart from blame.

The Tao plays no favorites,
But calls upon the inner truth of all.
Diminish the size of your inner nation;  
Let it become as small as is needed.

Let its talents be manifold and diverse,  
But never used or displayed.  
Naturally treasure the life of your humanity,  
But do not let death pursue you.

You have boats for sailing,  
Wagons for loading,  
But no need to guide them.

You have weapons to attack and defend,  
Yet no need to bear them before others.

In communicating with people,  
Return to the simplest means.

Eat well, and enjoy it;  
Dress both for comfort and beauty.  
Nurture harmony in your dwelling space.  
Know the daily joy of simplicity.

You will see and be seen by others:  
There may be crowing and barking among you,  
As between roosters and dogs.

But you need not be trapped in this commerce,  
For to the end of your days,  
You will be completely sufficient unto yourself.
Words that resonate may not be eloquent, 
But eloquence may never resonate.

Pure being does not argue; 
Those who argue pervert pure being.

Understanding is not scholarly; 
A scholar’s way lacks understanding.

The Sage does not hoard its teaching: 
The more it gives us, 
The more it is fulfilled. 
For giving is the way of true increase.

The way of Tao is benevolent: 
It does not harm or punish. 
The Tao brings all things to completion, 
In the endless dance of its Harmony.
Chapter Commentaries

Chapter 1

This poem speaks of the relationships between names—the words we give to things, events, actions, and of course ourselves—and the nameless essence from which we derive our life, and to which we return in death. Lao Tzu does not want us to think that our words are hopelessly inadequate to understanding the Cosmic Consciousness (this is an interpretation frequently placed on this poem in particular); rather, he'd like us to realize the natural limitations of our words. Words and language have limitations, just as our bodies, our planet and its natural resources, and our mental faculties have limitations. Words and names "fail to hold the essence" because, as Lao Tzu says in the final stanza, the essence can only be held in our hearts. But words, properly used, are capable of revealing the possibility of deep understanding, through describing the functions—what each thing does, and how it relates to the Whole. Lao Tzu is simply asking us to remember that function and action represent the manifestation, and not the immanence, of the Tao. If we can keep this in mind, that the manifestation varies and transforms; that what a thing does is not everything it is (for example, you are not your occupation, your family role, your gender, your race, your religion, etc.—not even the combination of these things); then we are not likely to make the mistake of reifying, or fixing, our ideas and descriptions of the operations of the Cosmos. When we are successful in avoiding this error, we have taken a vast step in furthering the natural order of the Cosmos and of human society. For in this clarity, this awareness of the limitations of language, we remove our feet from the concrete of religious, political, and ideological position-taking that is at the root of so much of the prejudice, conflict, injustice, and slaughter common to mankind over the past 3,000 or so years.

In this poetical meditation on language and its relation to the Cosmic Reality, Lao Tzu is suggesting another movement of understanding, which has to do with facing the apparent contradictions and logical impossibilities that he is presenting. Lao Tzu invites us into the cycle of logical tail-chasing (words can't properly describe Tao, but let's talk about it anyway), because he wants us to feel beyond the boundaries of reason. He would like us to step into that "living, teeming darkness," for this is the space in which we can truly feel the Tao, through our every bodily cell. The words that we use can point us toward this "shimmering darkness" of understanding, especially when we ask the teaching aspect of the Cosmic Consciousness, which Lao Tzu calls the Sage, to help us. But the words are not themselves the immanence; thus there is no such thing as "holy writ."

Chapter 2

In this poem, Lao Tzu asks us to step out of the realms of division and opposition, by examining ourselves through the projections that we may have accepted from the forces of collective acculturation. Here the poet asks a question that will
appear several more times in different metaphorical guises throughout the Tao Te Ching: "is it necessary to live on a treadmill of fortune, sliding from one polar opposite to another, and struggling to be on the right side at the right time?" Is this how the Cosmos truly works?

Then, as he always does in his poems, Lao Tzu offers us an alternative inner model: one of complementarity, represented in the images of dance and love. Lao Tzu discards the notion of some inherent cosmological conflict of polar opposites and presents instead a picture of Nature as the commingling of motion and sky, light and dark. Following the guideline that he established in Chapter 1, Lao Tzu describes the Cosmic Whole through what it does. But as for what it is, only stepping beyond the limits of reason can point the way: it is the emptiness that contains everything. It flows and it freezes; it evaporates and condenses; it merges into every element and state of being. It is the quantum darkness from which light freely flows—try to move it, and it is still; try to stop it, and it will always be moving.

Chapter 3

When you clutch something, you have already lost it. A thief can "read" attachment: he doesn’t have to see what it is you are carrying to know it is valuable, because he can sense your anxiety about keeping it in your grasp. The irony that Lao Tzu is pointing out here is that attachment actually creates and perpetuates separation, because it attempts to override the natural synergy of attraction that exists between us and what is truly ours. Of course, Lao Tzu is not an ascetic or a minimalist: the disburdenment that he describes in the final stanza is the very inner act that brings us the gifts and possessions that truly belong to us, without the need for forced protection or urgent attachment. The inner cleansing he proposes to us is the process that prepares the ground for natural possession. This theme is also explored in the I Ching, in Hexagram 14, Possession in Great Measure.

Chapter 4

Here is the first of many watery metaphorical expressions found throughout the Tao Te Ching. Lao Tzu likens the Tao to a well—dark, empty, yet containing the generational spark and the nourishment of all being. Water, even when it appears still to our eyes, is always in motion—wearing down the sharp and jagged, dissolving what is obdurate, softening glare—moving freely through its permutations between earth and sky, light and dark. Following the guideline that he established in Chapter 1, Lao Tzu describes the Cosmic Whole through what it does. But as for what it is, only stepping beyond the limits of reason can point the way: it is the emptiness that contains everything. It flows and it freezes; it evaporates and condenses; it merges into every element and state of being. It is the quantum darkness from which light freely flows—try to move it, and it is still; try to stop it, and it will always be moving.
Chapter 8

Following Tao is not about adopting an attitude of passivity, but nurturing inner strength instead. The superficial or populist interpretation of the so-called Taoist philosophy often invokes the phrase "go with the flow," in the sense of passive acceptance of injustice or encroachment. But with the phrase, "silence the demons," Lao Tzu reminds us that we are not meant to "go with the flow," for that is the stuff of inner weakness. He would encourage us to act with inner determination in this respect: to silence demons, both our own and those of others, through the fluid, invisible work of inner action. Water does its work with persistent strength but no effort; and thus it is effective. Even where it appears turbid, it nourishes, settles, flows, and acts. The same is true of the person in harmony with Cosmic Principles: he can speak simply and briefly, yet make his point clear; he can live "close to the earth" in wonderful abundance; he can remain poised amid conflict, but without bowing to power or resorting to manipulation. Water doesn't try to carve canyons or wear down mountains; it just does it. Its action occurs at an invisible and quantum plane of being. This is how transformation happens, and it is how it can happen through us as well: when we "nourish our depths" and "silence our demons," the natural self that arises is the same kind of quantum actor as the water that shapes and sustains ourselves and our planet. It has the unique ability to transform conflict into understanding, and bring us fulfillment and completion in every aspect of our lives. This is because its unforced action engages the helping presences of the Tao—the force of Nature that make things happen, and endure. These presences are what the I Ching calls "Helpers."

Chapter 9

We have a phrase in vernacular English for what Lao Tzu is describing here: it is called "paralysis by analysis." Nothing so stiffens feeling, foreshortens influence, or limits understanding, as intellectual reductionism. What follows from this saturation of thought is a kind of hypervigilance and obsessive doubt known in both medical and popular pathology as paranoia. We run the same destructive course when we allow institutional or dogmatic criteria of outer success to define our life's destiny. The correction to all of this is direct and immediately available: we can step off the treadmill and renounce the expectations that have been burned into us by a superficial and self-referential culture.

Guilt and doubt are the engines that drive paranoia, this constant, fearful referencing of experience and phenomena to the bizarre self-interest of a solipsistic world-view. The foundation of this world-view is unstable because it is simply an inaccurate, mistaken vision of the Cosmos and its operations; therefore, it needs to be propped and reinforced by manipulation and the pursuit of power. We push others around and manipulate Nature not because we are designed that way, but because we have been so stuffed with fear that we can no longer feel ourselves.

Chapter 11
What you see is barely the beginning of what is really there. In a culture such as ours, with its unceasing obsession with the exploitation of the marketplace and the accumulation of object-attachments, there is an urgent practicality to this message. If your inner house is so cluttered with form and outer convenience that there is no more space to support that form, then the invisible realm is ignored, and the inner space of freedom and autonomy is repressed, buried amid accumulation.

Some may recognize this as a principle of the now popular Chinese environmental art known as Feng Shui. Lao Tzu would probably remind us that "good Feng Shui" begins from within one's own being, and that this in turn depends on our own continuing inner sensation of that deep space from which our outer life is shaped. If the space within is muddled amid the repressive influence of acculturation and attachment, then our surroundings will appear concomitantly muddled, and what others perceive and experience of our personality will be similarly blurred and superficial. But if we honor the "open space within," then we will be led to clarity, and life can then become an effortless dance of Te. This, indeed, is the kind of Feng Shui that Lao Tzu would have us become familiar with, before we turn to the arrangement of the forms and objects of our environmental life.

Chapter 12

Self-display corrupts your ability to see within; making noise about yourself closes off your inner ear; the Tao itself cannot be tasted when one is obsessed with outer sensation. Lao Tzu never asks us to abandon the delights available to our outer senses; he simply asks us to place them in a more holistic context, one that allows equality to our inner senses. Indeed, once these inner senses are activated and trusted, they are discovered to deepen and enrich the experience of the outer senses. The same is true of belief and action: when we can consistently feel and sense beyond the level of the superficial, then our understanding becomes deeper and wider, and our action becomes naturally measured and penetrating. When the cursory images of attachment and gross sensation are exposed for what they are—a vain and ephemeral veneer of experience—then the true self, in all its depth and strength, arises without display, without vanity, without effort.

Chapter 13

Throughout the Tao Te Ching, the error of the pursuit of fame is exposed. In this verse, Lao Tzu shows how the desire for fame arises from a view of the self and of Nature as somehow limited, stained, or at fault. To thus "look at Nature and see affliction" means that one must do something to rise above this Cosmic affliction, this inborn insufficiency of the self and the universe. Frequently this means seeking renown or other recognition according to a group norm, usually in the service of intellectual or spiritual values. In most religious and cultural ideologies, this means belittling or demonizing the body and its functions as part of one's "lower nature." This act of dividing nature, especially one's own nature, into higher and lower aspects, is to "split the treasure from its Source." It is a fundamental error of human thought, and is entirely
unnecessary: our bodies are the formed expression of the Tao, the vessels of chi, the life force that pervades the Cosmos. Within the living body, cells are created, dissolved, and recreated continuously; this is the way of Nature, the way of transformation.

Chapter 15

Under the guidance of the Sage, I have recast this poem as a description of Lao Tzu himself, and his approach to exploring the Tao through this marvelous set of teaching poems. This is really a very short step from traditional translations, which have Lao Tzu describing the experiences of "ancient Masters." Clearly, Lao Tzu is not in the camp that deifies ancient masters, and he would certainly be horrified at his own deification at the hands of religious Taoists in the centuries after him.

This was revealed to me in a meditation image as I began the work of this rendering of the Tao Te Ching: I saw Lao Tzu standing uncomfortably on a very high pedestal of glistening ivory. I approached the pedestal, looked up at him, and then kicked hard at the base of the pedestal, which shattered, collapsing the whole. The old philosopher came tumbling down but landed on his feet. He smiled, reached out his hand toward me, and said, "thanks." This meditation (aside from providing me a great laugh) taught me a great deal about how to approach a new rendering of the Tao Te Ching, and it also taught me that Lao Tzu is still very much present in consciousness, and that he remains available to help and to teach—not as a god or a legend of an old and revered book, but as a living, conscious presence. In reference to this poem in particular, the Sage showed me that Lao Tzu had unconsciously written a sort of inner autobiography in verse, and that this is how I could present it in English.

Everyone, without exception, has the inner wherewithal to experience art and nature this way—just look within make that peculiar connection with the Tao that only you can make with it.

Chapter 16

This poem again reveals Lao Tzu's familiarity with the I Ching, for it evokes and draws upon Hexagram 24 of that text, which is called "Returning." To the poet(s) of the I Ching, "Returning" is about feeling the cycle death-and-life in every moment, in the same way that beauty and truth become one within an open heart.

This is an accurate summation of the theme of Chapter 16 of Lao Tzu as well, for it is what the poet means by "the dispersion of ignorance," and "it is only delusion that dies."

Also in Hexagram 24, the original text of the Judgment says, "to and fro goes the way." This is the dance of form and non-form described by Lao Tzu in this poem: forms arise and recede; they are born, flourish, and then retreat to their Cosmic Origin. And indeed, "life is never exhausted," for this return to non-form is followed by transformation back into form as the dance of consciousness endlessly perpetuates. We can truly experience this Cosmic Principle of returning, by "clearing the space within" in meditation, and by separating ourselves from the rigid prejudice of ignorance and false belief. This process of allowing inner clarity to develop opens understanding and
"nurture equanimity and justice." It is a self-perpetuating and deeply nourishing inner experience that never seems to run its course, but is always complete in itself, each time we allow it to arise.

Chapter 16 is a deeply moving poem. It is a literary meditation on death-as-life: forthright, dignified, and utterly free of false sentiment or ideology. To inwardly perceive the Cosmic principle of returning is to see beyond the realm of the apparent; it is the natural and most nourishing movement of the human heart.

Chapter 18

Separation from the Cosmic Whole is misfortune because it starves the true self in a suffocating act of oppression. This can happen at an intimately individual level (within the heart), among a family, or within an entire society of people, and the result is the same: a forced and false limitation of the natural self, the natural family, or the natural society. The I Ching refers to this type of oppression as "galling limitation" in Hexagram 60, Limitation. It adds that this "galling limitation must not be persevered in."

Lao Tzu reminds us that when the cosmic order is repressed, families, communities, and nations are then turned into food-chain style hierarchies—power structures supported by rigid and superficial notions of morality, intelligence, duty, reward, and obligation. An entire spectrum of sacrificial self-images arises from these ideas: images of the obedient spouse, the sacrificing parent, the hero in society, and the honor of god, country, family, or of the self as defined in the context of the collective, and the forced duties that this honor demands. In the next poem, Chapter 19, and several others, Lao Tzu encourages us to destroy self-images—as individuals, families, and nations—by ridding ourselves of the false ideas that feed them. As he suggests in Chapter 19, we all have the "inner discernment" to detect deceit and oppression; once we nurture and use that natural ability, we can then simply release ourselves of the ideas that further oppression.

Chapter 21

In this poem, Lao Tzu introduces the concept of Te, or, as I have been guided to render it, the cosmic principle of Modesty. It is a principle that informs natural action, of inner clarity that is inseparable from the outer movement or activity that it inspires. This outer movement is known as wu-wei, or unforced action. It comes from "the very center of the self," where the accretions and distortions of belief and analysis do not exist.

Te is the point at which the Sage, the teaching heart of the Cosmic Whole, intersects with and expresses our deepest true nature. You can't pin it down with definitions because it isn't fixed or formed; it gently and playfully eludes the clutches and machinations of ego (thus, the gentle humor of this poem, and others following, in which the poet sings of Te).

Te is neither attainment nor achievement, because it has never been apart from us: how can you attain something that you've always had, and how can you achieve
something that you have always been? It speaks clearly, but does not persuade; it works, but does not strive. Modesty is not the shrinking violet of consciousness, as it is often represented culturally ("rather shy" is one definition of modesty in the Oxford American Dictionary). The modesty that Lao Tzu is encouraging us to discover is expression and action molded from the personal and formless truth within: it is nothing less (or more) than the manifestation of Tao.

Chapter 24

This verse is about the inner and outer signs of that “parasite of true nature,” the ego. Wherever a person is engaged in self-display, the striving after fame, or the ideological rigidity of position-taking, the ego is present. "Standing on tiptoe" can also refer to the attitude of the gossip-addict: a person who strives to be “in the know” or to have “inside information,” usually about matters that are properly none of his business. In Lao Tzu’s time, as in ours, the halls of government, workplaces, and the media were saturated with such idlers. Perhaps in no other arena is the petty inanity of the hunger for superiority exposed, as the poet also mentions in Chapter 20.

Apart from its outward marks, the ego can be detected inwardly as well: it is “a consumptive, gnawing burden,” one that can, the poet suggests, be felt physically, from within one’s organic nature. Once the student discovers the signs of ego and can learn to recognize them within himself and in others, he can begin the practice of diminishment—the process of deconstructing the ego’s false beliefs and artificial hierarchies.

Chapter 25

It should be clear to the reader by now that Lao Tzu is not a religious man: not in the sense of adhering to an ideology of faith. His teaching is of a simple yet surpassing naturalism, based on inner experience rather than on belief, doctrine, or some holy writ. Yet here, he has written a kind of hymn to the Cosmos, a beautiful plainsong to honor the Inexpressible. As he does elsewhere in the Tao Te Ching, he resorts to feminine metaphor to describe the nature of Tao, calling it “the uterus of being.”

This poem is a celebration in verse of a deeply moving inner experience; the gratitude of the writer can be felt, reaching out of the page and toward its Cosmic Origin. Readers familiar with the work of Walt Whitman may find this mood of lyric celebration particularly resonant with that poet's "Song of Myself."

Chapter 26

One in contact with his inner truth is able to abide in darkness, as still as a moonless night, and yet remain in motion. For he understands that movement which comes from the clear and centered point of inner balance is often seen as stillness, and that his most pure and silent state of rest may appear to be a whirlwind of activity. The former state is often seen in the creative artist; the latter, in the athlete. But he is not
concerned with appearances or with the perceptions of others, for he is content in his own self-awareness. If there is pleasure to be had, he takes it gratefully and without selling his dignity for its superficial luster. For he knows that should he allow his inner independence to be purchased for a favor or a privilege, then he will have sacrificed the central and stable point of his connection to the Cosmic Whole.

Chapter 27

This is a distinctive chapter in the Tao Te Ching for several reasons. It begins with a beautifully lucid set of metaphors on speech and action that are in harmony with Tao. Lao Tzu follows these with an image of a "true-fitting door" which can close securely "without need of bar or latch." In the I Ching, the first line of Hexagram 60, Limitation, speaks of "not going out of the door" as a metaphor on the true self's ability to separate itself from the distorting beliefs and restrictive rules of the collective ego. In both of these texts, the point being made is that it is not a matter of fleeing from, or contending against, the repressive power of group ideology, but rather of simply having a proper inner seal on the doorway of consciousness, so that the vapid abstractions and insinuations of ego can find no entry point to one's true self.

In the second half of the poem, Lao Tzu considers the source of help available to people who would like to live, work, and form relationships from a stable, open center of being: the Cosmic Sage—the teaching energy of the universe. The Sage is available to all who ask for its help; it is a regenerative presence that can awaken and further understanding and awareness, because it works with the student, and not from above him. When we accept the help of the Sage in living a human life, we are guided toward fulfillment. This is why Lao Tzu declares that this is "the heart of my teaching."

Chapter 28

For me, the central metaphor of this poem is the feminine principle that Lao Tzu weaves throughout the Tao Te Ching. I don't know whether Lao Tzu would identify himself as a feminist; but I suspect that he'd rather have nothing to do with "-ism's of any sort. In any event, this is not a poem about women, but about the feminine. Science teaches us that estrogen (the female hormone) is as essential to men as testosterone (the male hormone) is to women. No surprise here: science, at its best, discovers the same truths that poetry delivers—just in a slightly different language.

As a teacher and poet, feminine images mean something to Lao Tzu: the valley may be thought of as a symbol of the source, or origin, of being—the place where conception and birth occur. Water also has feminine associations: it is the home-element of the developing fetus, and it is the nourishing, life-giving substance which makes up the great majority of both our planet and our physical bodies. These simple facts point to an equally simple reality: no matter your outer gender or sexual orientation, there is a feminine principle within you, which needs to be discovered and experienced. When it is repressed or denied, we are abdicating an essential aspect of our true and complete nature, and this alienates us from ourselves and our cosmic home.
But when we open ourselves to the inner feminine, suddenly our understanding widens, and our ability to act in harmony with our true nature and its Source is furthered. This is the unforced action of Modesty (Tê) as a Cosmic principle applied to human life: when you draw energy from this fertile valley of Modesty, then your action returns that energy back, pure and undistorted, to the Cosmic Whole. This, indeed, is how life is meant to be lived—as a beneficent cycle of being, in which a person uses the gift of his life-force (chi) to further the strength and purity of the Source from which he has drawn his being.

Chapter 30

Chapters 30 and 31 may be read as a unit, for they comprise the poet's teaching on violence, in the context of war and battle. Lao Tzu begins with a critical point, which distinguishes him and his teaching from the position of mere pacifism. As always with Lao Tzu, the point has a practical direction. He is not simply waving a flower and saying, "war is bad, man, and peace is good"; he is saying "war is totally unnecessary, because there's a natural way of resolving conflict that is far more effective." If those with the power to govern people and send armies into harm's way would simply recognize the helping presences of the invisible realm of being, then they would instantly realize that those presences are a far more practical alternative than the most powerful army imaginable.

This leads the poet into a discussion of natural law: violence inevitably finds its way back to those who use it to achieve the delusory goals of group allegiance. This is the law of the fall of empires and the death of civilizations guided by the use of power and aggrandizement. The natural leader is himself a follower—a follower of the Sage; thus his action is guided by Modesty, and his inner firmness is made manifest, yet without force, display, or violence. He does not set himself or his nation against the Source of their being, for the natural leader understands that tyranny and murder are relentlessly suicidal, for both the leader and his nation.

Chapter 31

Lao Tzu had no doubt noticed something that we may observe today in our world: those who enjoy the greatest safety from the danger of battle seem to cry the loudest for war. Let them be in governmental offices, in a posh bunker somewhere in a fortified countryside, sitting before a bank of television cameras, or residing in the editorial office of a tabloid newspaper—these are the most likely sources for the call of the hawk. These are the self-styled patriots, the "power drunk demons," as Lao Tzu refers to them, or the "walking dead," as they are referred to by Carol Anthony and Hanna Moog in I Ching: The Oracle of the Cosmic Way:

"...a person who has totally separated from his feeling consciousness, disdaining his feelings and his body. His chi energy is decreased by ignoring and suppressing his true feelings, and by rejecting the Cosmic gift of love. If neglected
long enough, his inner light dwindles to a mere set of coals...the Sage calls such a person one ‘without head’ [in Hexagram 8] because he lacks the ability to further connect with the Cosmic Whole. (p. 731).”

Lao Tzu says that such a person "may be safely met with a calm and firm detachment," and this advice is echoed again in The Oracle of the Cosmic Way:

[A walking dead person] may continue in this state for many years, stealing chi energy from other people. When a person realizes that he is being drained of chi energy in this way, he needs to inwardly disconnect from and remain neutral in the presence of a walking dead person [and] that he not view that person as a culprit, as that too would give him energy. (p. 731).

Thus, the walking dead person, who has killed his own inner truth to feed his ego upon the lives of others, is the very person "for whom the funeral rites must be observed," for he has committed the act of inner suicide that is warned of in Chapter 30. When this true self is lost or repressed, as in one "who descends to playing with the toys of war," then it is the murderous demon that must be expunged, and this can only happen through our calling upon the Sage within such a person, as Lao Tzu indicates in the next poem, Chapter 32. But as long as one "delights in destruction," he will be as if possessed by that demon, and hounded by it—to the very moment of his death, and beyond. Thus, Lao Tzu's teaching about war again reaches beyond the obvious: yes, war kills living bodies, and this is indeed to be lamented; but it also warps Nature, and the human place within it—and once that is lost, there can be no survivors.

Chapter 34

There is a natural, inherent greatness, which can be discovered by one who repudiates the false greatness of group identification. Greatness that must be sought or protected is not true greatness, but the empty elevation of ego. Lao Tzu uses this poem to help us feel the reality of true greatness: it does its work without claiming credit for it; it is free of abstraction and ideology; it turns away from any effort to aggrandize itself or its work. The fact is that our greatness is inborn: it is the treasure that is given to each individual at birth. The only way you could possibly miss it is by denying the invisible reality within you—by purchasing the ideological lie that says we are separate from the universe, superior to Nature. Discard the lie, and you will live your greatness.

Chapter 37

With this poem, Lao Tzu comes to the end of the first half of the Tao Te Ching. This is the part of the book that is called "Tao," while the second half is called "Te." It is a matter of emphasis more than content: Te is, of course, introduced in the first half of the
book, and Tao is never far from Lao Tzu's mind throughout the work as a whole. But, as will be seen, the concept of Te is brought into a detailed light in Part Two, whereas Tao has been the primary subject of the poetic dance in Part One.

Lao Tzu closes Part One with two poems, Chapters 36 and 37, that present an overview of the same process, wherein the student of the Sage approaches the journey of inner diminishment—the exposure, unraveling, and discarding of ego, in both its personal and societal contexts. It is the process of joining in partnership with the "teaching heart of liberation from attachment"—the Sage—and beginning the work of exposing and identifying what is inflated, powerful, holy ("enshrined" in Chapter 36), and saturated. Then the work of dissolving and transforming these projections, and freeing the true self from their influence, is undertaken: this is the "movement that appears to be still" of Chapter 37, the "subtle discernment" of Chapter 36, which "undermines the rigidity of power."

Chapter 38

Lao Tzu begins Part Two of the Tao Te Ching with two of his longest poems, Chapters 38 and 39. Together, they comprise an extended meditation on Te, or the Cosmic principle of Modesty. In brief, 38 talks about "Te as Te," while 39 talks about "Te as Tao." Together, they present the core of Lao Tzu's perspective on Modesty as a fundamental principle of action and understanding in following the Tao. Both poems also warn of the consequences of separation from the principle of Modesty. To this purpose, a picture is drawn of a regressive spiral of vain dogma, error, and delusion. The cultivation of false modesty as a self-conscious promotion of one's "better nature" leads to philanthropy. This leads in turn to complacency and self-righteousness on the part of those who are the purveyors of this philanthropy, and in its wake come propriety and ritual. By this point, we are so far from our true nature that we have enclosed ourselves in a garish and grotesque "ornament of delusion." We have reached the point where we "exalt superiority" (this from Chapter 39), and have opened the door wide to corruption; we have divorced mind from consciousness and thereby created a realm of "insanity and death."

Chapter 41

This is a wonderful and playful meditation on seeing beyond the realm of appearances. We can approach the Tao and its teaching function, the Sage, from many different perspectives, three of which Lao Tzu mentions in this poem. The "sincere student," it must be noted, is not said to be devout, reverent, or even especially serious (to judge by the poem's overall tone). He sees whether he can "steadfastly follow it," without any mention of devotion or sacrifice to an ideal: he just puts in his effort and asks for help, thus dispersing fear and awe in his approach.

Many of us have been through a similar experience to that of the "casual student," in which old belief systems (or certain precious shards thereof) are inwardly hoarded even as we begin to perceive how insanely they obstruct growth. Thus, we experience both trust and skepticism in our learning—sometimes simultaneously.
Finally, there are those who encounter the Tao and its teachings with ego mechanisms firmly in place, whose derisive laughter fills the air. Perhaps you have found yourself (either directly or implicitly) referred to as a “new age freak” or a “tree-hugging lunatic”. People who don’t know what true self-development is about will inevitably make fun of those who attempt it. But as Lao Tzu would remind us, “how could it be the Tao if it didn’t make them laugh?”

The list of curious epigrams making up the second half of the poem is another example of the seemingly odd deportment of one following the Cosmic Way. The lantern light, which is also mentioned in Chapter 58, is a metaphorical image for understanding that is not garish or overbearing: it faintly glows, but never shines.

This points up another natural beauty of Lao Tzu’s paradoxical approach: because it reaches into the bypaths and recesses of consciousness, the Cosmic Way is actually more efficient, since it is more thorough. This is why Lao Tzu can later say, in Chapter 53, that “the Cosmic Way is straight and easy.” Similarly, natural strength may seem weak to the superficial view, because it departs from displays of power and persuasion; natural virtue may seem unimpressive to a cursory perspective, because it retreats from ideas of stiff morality and egocentric shows of compassion (what is called “idiot compassion” in the writings of Chogyam Trungpa).

In fact, there always seems to be something lacking in the action, speech, and behavior of one involved in following the Sage, because what is lacking is ego! Ego, and its linear rigidities and angularities of belief, certainty, and power.

Nestled among these observations of the poet is another and related insight, that "the most enduring truths are mutable.” How can truth be enduring and mutable at the same time? Because, Lao Tzu points out, that is its nature: truth is a personal matter, an organic, growing form of living consciousness that never reaches a point of fixed certainty. Anything that is hard, fixed, and sealed in certainty is already dead and inert—this is an observation that Lao Tzu repeats throughout the book, as in, for example, Chapter 76. Fixed insight loses vision; absolute and unchanging truth is no longer true, because it is no longer alive.

This is exactly why it is such an advantage (a "practical virtue") that the Tao, and its teaching consciousness, the Sage, are "silent and concealed." Its silence gives it mutability—the capacity to take a natural shape within each individual personality; its concealment gives it an amorphous flexibility, which again makes it the unique and private inner experience appropriate to each person who approaches it in sincere steadfastness.

Chapter 42

Here is one of Lao Tzu’s paradoxical and oft-misunderstood verses. Of particular interest is the apparent reference to royalty’s time-honored habit of making a pretence of orphan birth or poverty: how does this justify a neutral attitude toward impoverishment and loneliness?

When he writes about "poverty and solitude," Lao Tzu is making a metaphorical statement about the inner meaning, and sometimes the outer perception, of the way of diminishment, which he refers to throughout the book. Poverty, in this context, is about making ego poor, and isolating its false ideas and ideological rigidities: this creates the
understanding that makes the leadership of the true self possible. It is then that the bipolar lies of ideology are revealed, and the natural principle of complementarity awakens to awareness. Life and death are not enemies—no more so than are winter and summer, or the two sides of your brain.

In this context, it is also worth noting the appearance of the terms "yin" and "yang" in the text—this is their only moment on Lao Tzu’s poetic stage. It is worth considering that these terms may well have been added into this verse by subsequent editors or commentators, long after Lao Tzu’s death. These words, yin and yang, have become so well known that they hardly need translation except in the way of clarifying the mistaken associations that have been laden onto them. You have probably encountered this: yang is light, male, strong, creative, active, solar, etc., and yin is dark, female, weak, passive, lunar, etc. The common relationship that is established between these two is of diametric opposition, or, at best, of a rather intransigent or reluctant complementarity.

This, clearly, is not Lao Tzu’s meaning in using these terms (if Lao Tzu actually wrote them); nor is he establishing some sort of cosmic hierarchy in the discussion of the relationships between the Cosmic Whole, the One, the Two, and the Three. Lao Tzu has no interest in hierarchies: this entire book is dedicated to the inner demolition of hierarchical thought and belief. Ask either a mathematician or a poet whether one number is better than or superior to another, and you will be met with laughter.

In order to understand Lao Tzu, we will have to disperse some of our notions about what is meant in the relationship between one that gives birth and the one that is born, and about the "top down" ordering of numerical relationship (i.e., number one is "above" number two, and so on). The poet speaks of the Cosmic Consciousness as being beyond form and number; he adds that from this Presence came the One. What could this One be?

It seems we need to recall that this is a poem about death—not about death as the termination of life, but as transformation between form and non-form. In that context, it appears appropriate to consider that the One is the transformative action of Tao—its ability to continue the flow of life in energy-consciousness that is transformed from one state to another, and perhaps back again. In this light, we can also think of the Two as light and dark, the Cosmic energies of form and non-form. The Three must then be a mediating Presence, a set of Cosmic Principles that choreograph the dance between the light and dark energies and their manifestations in the "endless compressions of being."

These three dancers have been identified by Carol Anthony and Hanna Moog, in their book, I Ching: The Oracle of the Cosmic Way as the principles of Modesty, Equality, and Uniqueness (see Part I of that text, p. 39). These are the "great Three" that pervade the Cosmic Harmonic and each of the "endless compressions of being." Each compression is qualitatively equal to all the others, and each is unique in its autonomy. This is why the principle of Modesty is natural and necessary: Modesty is the principle discussed in Hexagram 15 of the I Ching, and here in Lao Tzu, wherever he speaks of Te (see, for example, Chapters 38 and 39). The principles are no more hierarchical than are the two ventricles of your heart (which one do you prefer?).

Thus, the Cosmic Consciousness, in its spontaneous expression as the One, the Two, and the Three, along with the numberless forms that arise from it, dances to its own pure and primordial music. Lao Tzu called that music Tao; it can also be named Love.

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Chapter 43

A horse runs without inhibition through a meadow—it doesn't plan its run, plot its course, calculate its own speed, wonder why it runs, or critically compare its gallop with that of others. It doesn't even ask whether running is allowed, or whether it even "feels like" running: there is no self-consciousness in the act. It just runs, because that is its nature, or at least an aspect of it.

This is Lao Tzu's illustration of wu-wei, the principle of unforced action. It is a hackneyed concept, and was particularly disfigured a generation ago (one might say it was 'beaten to death') by the "beat generation." Wu-wei is not "non-action" in the sense of passivity, nor is it action that is carelessly or wantonly initiated, and it is certainly not a self-indulgent, "feel-good" type of energy. Wu-wei is action that proceeds from true nature, "without noise or expectation," as the poet observes; it works neither for nor against anything, and it has no fixed cause or goal. It is the energy of the total being in motion, and this is why it seems to penetrate or infiltrate the most dense and obdurate situations and circumstances. Its motion and its liquid ability to penetrate come from its lightness, for it is free of the heavy and rigid accretions of ego.

For people, this is a difficult concept to assimilate into experience, and Lao Tzu understands that: it's one reason that he wrote these 81 poems. He spends much of the Tao Te Ching encouraging us, reminding us that it is possible to learn how to let our formless inner senses and energies activate and transform life on the outer plane of being. It is possible because we already know how; we already are wu-wei. It is merely a matter of unloading the baggage of belief, expectation, display, and all the concretized trappings of ego.

This is the process of growth through diminishment described throughout the book: it is a progressive course of learning that is self-fulfilling because it is, in fact, a process of self-teaching in partnership with the teaching energy of the universe, the Sage. Indeed, there is nothing to learn except the way of diminishment: once we understand that to relieve oneself of ego is to automatically liberate the true self, then we can realize that there is nothing to attain or to cultivate. From this point of understanding, our inner horse is free to run.

Chapter 44

When an animal or a small child enters a new situation or environment, it will be observed to "test the waters," or to cautiously assess the things, beings, patterns of activity, and other conditions of the place and situation. This ability has, in fact, been studied across various scientific and naturalistic disciplines, with fascinating findings. It is the natural ability of organisms to "recognize the limits," as Lao Tzu expresses it, to read an environment with all the senses—both inner and outer—for potential danger, avenues of retreat, and whatever there is that lies beneath the surface appearance that may inform or protect. In such circumstances, animals will be seen to rely predominantly on their sense of smell—the outer scents that the environment presents, and the inner scents that they can detect with their entire being.
Thus, Chapter 44 is a poem about recognizing the limits as a preparation for action or adaptation. We humans can learn to avoid disgrace, remorse, and danger to our true selves by relying on our own sense of caution, our own ability to see, or sniff, the limits of every situation. Lao Tzu reminds us to ask, before we reach for profit, fame, knowledge, or wealth: what is this truly bringing me, and what might it cost me? Is it as much as I need, or is it more than my true self can afford? If the inner response to these questions feels like a warning, or if it even feels ambiguous, then it is time to ask for help from the invisible realm of being, of which your inner senses partake, and to let clarity develop within before you take action. In this way, we can learn to avoid many errors and still have abundance in our lives. In the next poem, Chapter 45, Lao Tzu addresses certain inner reference points that may help us in developing the clarity that avoids excess through recognizing limitation.

Chapter 45

In the previous poem, Lao Tzu brought the importance of recognizing limits to our attention. In this poem, he reveals life as lived beyond the obsession with appearances. The poem opens with two stanzas that contain the cautionary expressions found throughout the Tao Te Ching: things are not always what they seem, and we must see past appearances in order to further and protect our true being. Then there is an apparently paradoxical couplet, that may seem out of place: "Life stirs when it’s cold/And is tranquilly still amid heat." What is Lao Tzu telling us here? There is always the obvious: sure, some creatures are busy in cold weather, but others go off and hibernate. But Lao Tzu is talking about "inner temperatures" rather than seasonal variations.

For people, success and safety in social interactions are especially crucial, and these are linked to the issue of inner temperature. When we can feel that the egos of others around us are hot and active, it is best to be still and inwardly withdrawn, so as not to arouse still more heat from them, and of course to avoid being burned. When we feel a lowering of ego-temperature in a social environment, such as when ego has been "frozen" by an external shock, or when the heat of ego has been cooled by a breeze of common interest that awakens the true selves of all within the situation, then we can discover the potential for action, relationship, and involvement. Thus, recognizing both potential and limitation within social encounters is about feeling the inner temperature, and about seeing past appearances. Indeed, these amount to the same inner process: reacting to life from the center of one’s being; retreating from the heat of ego (in both oneself and others), and warmly engaging the cool lightness of being that is encountered in those who are lacking in display, aggrandizement, forced complexity and profundity, or pretence.

Chapter 46

Here, Lao Tzu dramatically underlines the themes he presented in Chapters 43 and 44, by referring back to the same metaphorical images of the horse and the dangers of excess. When horses are free to run (remember the discussion of wu-wei in Chapter
43), they spread nourishment back to the earth as fertilizer. But when they are bred and trained for war, then their nourishing dung is wasted on the killing fields, which are poisoned with the blood of human slaughter.

Unforced action returns nourishment to Nature, while force and power only defile it. War is always a product of the human obsession with excess; thus "the greatest curse is wanting more than you need." Not only does excess bring conflict, it makes us unable to even enjoy what we have! But to enter into a learning partnership with the Sage is to always feel when you have enough, which is the lesson of the previous two chapters. This, indeed, is the greatest blessing of all.

Chapter 47

This poem is one of many teachings on meditation in the *Tao Te Ching*. Lao Tzu here reveals an overall guide to meditation, and its benefits. You needn't wander ceaselessly without, lusting for outer variety and experience: the entire Cosmos and its movements can be experienced in stillness, by closing or muting the outer senses. Meditation brings clarity, the kind of deep freedom from burdensome attachment that makes the "outward journey" truly fulfilling and restorative, rather than merely diversionary.

In this context, the "outward journey" takes on many layers of meaning, beyond the association of mere travel. The outward journey can mean the process of making a career choice, deciding on a proposal of marriage, healing an illness, or making a purchase that nourishes our life and accords with our inner being. When we allow the Sage and the other presences of the invisible world to nurture us toward clarity through regular meditation, our speech is simple and accurate, and our action is direct, but without force or effort.

Chapter 48

Contrary to what a certain well-known American historical document may have implied, happiness is not best found through pursuit. Lao Tzu would like us to ask whether it makes inner sense to chase down happiness, understanding, or knowledge, as if they were external objects. Happiness is best revealed or discovered, and so is knowledge. Knowledge that is accumulated in the form of facts, statistics, and quotations from the "Masters" is every bit as obstructive as the accumulation of material goods with which many people seem to clutter their lives and homes.

Lao Tzu's alternative is "daily unburdening;" the regular and unrelenting inner deprogramming of the trappings of ego—intellectual clutter, degrees and diplomas, memorized formulae of theory and law, and the underlying assumption of the primacy and royalty of intellect among the various functions of the psyche. You can deprogram these errors by denying them their false claim to truth; and in this, the process of discovering the living wisdom of Tao is already underway.

The benefits of this process are synergistic: as your understanding of your natural position in the cosmic order broadens, so does that of your intellectual function within your own psyche. And once intellect is knocked off its false throne, it works far
more comfortably and efficiently, because it is no longer the lonely and reluctant tyrant of the psyche. For now the intellect is a fully functioning member of the total personality, and when a person discovers his natural wholeness, nothing is wanting: therefore, the "game of inner commerce" can be gratefully abandoned.

When your inner treasure is complete, there is nothing to gain, and the bubble of pursuit is burst, along with its insatiable thirst for the fulfillment that is always just beyond its reach. Until that bubble is exploded, we cannot escape the vicious cycle of making deals on the superficial plane—deals in which our own true nature is turned into a mere commodity.

Chapter 49

Wherever humility exists, the Sage approaches, ready to help and to teach, for "humility is the breath of the Cosmos." Humility is the sincere act of "calling out," in the sense of simply asking the Sage for help in understanding, while completely suspending both belief and disbelief. This is what makes true learning possible in the Way. Error is never a life sentence, but is itself a part of the learning process. The Sage returns a doubting approach with "truthful Modesty," and in this there is the possibility of growth and a return to sincerity and humility. When we are able to drop, or at least suspend, the attitude of fixed belief, we are then approaching the Sage with the necessary sincerity and humility for it to respond.

Chapter 51

I was guided in this verse to let the words Tao and Te speak for themselves without translation, if only to allow the music of this wonderful lyric play as freely as possible in this setting. As one would expect, it reads far more beautifully in the original Chinese, with its plainsong style rhythm and alliteration, particularly in the iteration of the character chih throughout the poem (it appears fifteen times, and is a possessive or nominative pronoun, which could mean "he/she/they" or "his/hers/their" or "him/her/them"). Even in English, this poem is an excellent illustration of how Lao Tzu's musical voice complements his teaching voice.

Chapter 52

It is very hard to hear the voice of the Formless presence within when you spend your life in constant talk and impulsive intervention into others' affairs. The poet's message in this verse is especially appropriate to family relationships, where the machinations of power and control operate both openly and insidiously, often through cultural rules of loyalty, fidelity, and hierarchy. Thus, Lao Tzu offers a teaching on opening the heart to the family of the universe, a reference to the feeling presences of the invisible world. He again chooses a feminine symbol, "Mother Formless." This evokes the message of Hexagram 37 of the I Ching, called "The Family," which also
draws upon feminine metaphor in its Judgment text, "the perseverance of the woman furthers." When we connect with the feeling presence of the Cosmic Mother, we open ourselves in turn to the community of beings within Nature that are her children: this is the "microscopic discernment within" that fulfills and reveals the natural life of the human family. When this discernment, this clarity, is present, the feudal structures of fealty and hierarchy can be discarded, and we discover that truly, "the tenderest embrace is the strongest." In Nature, the home is not a castle; the family is not a hierarchical ordering of roles according to such things as age or gender; there is no "breadwinner" or "provider"; no false duties of honor and obedience; and no titles or rules of ownership among the family members. These, indeed, are actually the bitter constraints that create division and breakdown within the family, and which lead the heart into torment, as the poet says.

Chapter 53

One who follows the Tao is ready to explore his entire being, in all its depth and variety. But one who treads the stark road of ego becomes trapped in side-paths and dead-ends that close off understanding in a cycle of want, frustration, and unceasing effort. The more you grasp for, the more you obtain; the more you obtain, the more you feel you need, and the more your true self is taken from you: thus, "extravagance is a thief."

Lao Tzu uses the final stanza to create a play on words, which cannot be exactly reproduced in English. He uses the word "tao," which means "thief, robber" to say that extravagance is a "tao" which robs one of Tao. For this version, I decided to simply insert a slightly different word-play in the closing couplet, again on the word Tao (pronounced "dow"), so that the answer to Lao Tzu’s rhetorical question, "is this the way of Tao?" is, "I dow-ed it." The point of this is not merely to copy Lao Tzu’s pun, nor to make the reader laugh (after all, any joke that has to be explained never was a joke), but rather to show that Lao Tzu was not a self-conscious or moralistic thinker. Even when he has a serious point to make, as he does here, he does it without bombast or moral assault.

Chapter 55

Here the poet imagines a being who has just arrived from another world, and how such a one may be entirely unconscious of the fears and pretences of humans. In this he finds a metaphor for the follower of Tao who has developed, or rather revealed, his true inner self. We are reminded of the stark imagery of Chapter 20, where the contrast is drawn between himself and the followers of the collective. There we met the poet himself—weak, naive, strange, dull, and separate—divorced from the world of purchase and competition, of power and control, of pursuit and its incipient fear. For himself, Lao Tzu can only explain that he is indeed different, for he "drinks from the breast of the Sublime Mother."

Then, here in Chapter 55, the "alien" metaphor is even more vividly raised, so that it is almost reified: the subject of this poem is one who simply has no inner
discourse with the values and fears of the collective, yet the positive bounty that comes of that separation is made clear. This person is strong, sexually able and (presumably) active, secure in the consciousness that "his body's life is the only blessing he needs." He has no need of new age gimmicks—mind control, self-improvement, or the nurturing of physical power through the manipulation of the life force within him. This person has all he needs in his physical being and its freedom from the constraints and self-conscious fears bred by ideologies and systems of religion or other forms of group belief. This, indeed, is his "subtle illumination": he is beyond the fixation with appearances; his understanding reaches past collective perception, past the pursuit of power, beyond intellect and deep into the realm of his feeling nature.

One note on translation must be added, since this rendering departs significantly from traditional texts, where the phrase chih tsu is taken to symbolize the follower of Tao as an infant or baby. I was guided to see that phrase as a compound that actually entails a play on words with Lao Tzu's own name (the same character can mean both "baby" and "philosopher"), the meaning of the whole being "one who is newly arrived." From there, it was no great stretch of imagination to see that the poet was thinking of a person or being who had appeared on earth from another world. This image seems to better resonate with the descriptions that follow it, and to emphasize the unique inner separation discussed above. It also places an appropriate context on the line chung jih hao erh pu sha, which is normally taken to refer to the baby that cries all day without getting hoarse. Clearly, Lao Tzu would not wish for us to draw such a comparison between a wailing infant and one who is said (in the very next line) to possess an "unshakeable peace." Indeed, there is no subject specified for whoever is crying or yelling; I found that it made the most inner sense as a comparison between the noise of the collective and the peace of the one in harmony with himself and his Origin.

Chapter 56

One of the wonders of this little book of poems is how Lao Tzu was able to hammer so lightly at the same themes, and with such delightful variation in expression, so that each repetition is fresh and uniquely nourishing. The themes here presented should be quite familiar by now to one who has read the poems in order to this point: the intrinsic value of dispersing excess in speech and action, the fulfillment that comes of dimming down the outer senses and turning within toward one's feeling nature, the deep love that is drawn to one who abandons claim and possession on others, and the natural grace that arises in one who is "unmoved by fame."

In many traditional renderings of this verse, it is presented as a teaching on sitting meditation: be quiet, close off your senses, be soft and still as you settle your inner dust. This is a very good approach, but perhaps only to half the poem, as it were. I have been guided to see this verse as Lao Tzu's teaching on living as meditation: how the inner values and practices that we usually think of as meditation (sitting down and being open, still and silent) can become a way of life. After all, meditation that is not continued into life has nothing of value over an afternoon nap.

I think that Lao Tzu would like us to learn to disperse the division between the practice of meditation and the activity of daily living. Meditation is not properly a means of escape or relaxation from the rat race beyond the chair or cushion; it is meant
to be what infuses the relationships and activities of every waking moment. When the way we do our work, raise our children, manage our homes, and interact socially becomes increasingly indistinguishable from the way we meditate, then the lesson of this poem will have been fully integrated into our lives. For this is where meditation takes us beyond the enrichment of life in a bodily form, and into the realm of true immortality, where "you are lovingly received into the Heart of Nature forever." As the division between inner and outer, between meditation and living, is dissolved, so is that between form and non-form, until the empty falsehood of death-as-ending is finally discarded. What then remains is all we need: life beyond time, perpetuated in consciousness.

Chapter 57

Clearly, there are points in this book where Lao Tzu "takes the gloves off," and this is one of them. Yet this verse goes far beyond a mere diatribe against laws and lawyers, armies and weapons, technologies of dull convenience, and the depredations of politicians and corporate tyrants, for the poet again offers a natural alternative to the proliferation of tyranny. As amazing as it may be to contemplate how little humans appear to have changed in 2,600 years, we must also read this poem with a view to its practical purpose: the gifts of peace, abundance, and true progress that we naturally desire as both individuals and as nations are more readily available to us than we have been led to believe by those who would define them in terms of legislation, power, and the manipulation of Nature. Drop the struggle, for there is nothing that needs to be fought; let the meditative life described in the previous poem guide you and your nation; lead by example and consensus, not with force or commandment. This is the way of return that is spoken of throughout this book, and the poet would like us to understand that though it must begin within each individual, it can continue in an entire nation.

Chapter 58

Affluence and power fail to endure because they require the support of an illusion of success, which is inevitably exposed. There is no such thing as grandeur, either in being the most powerful nation or the most famous person; there is only an outer display, which needs increasingly greater energy to disguise itself as genuine success. Thus, the effort of vigilance in maintaining an image is never relaxed: though its presentation may vary, such change is superficial and ephemeral, and will never endure. In the realm of image-making, therefore, "deceit and resentment are the coin," because the shifts in the landscape are confined to the apparent, and leave the inner plane ignored or repressed; thus, the deep and lasting glow of transformation is completely lacking.

The way of the Sage is to turn within and scrape away the overlaid delusions of grandeur with which the prophets and self-styled seers have obscured the original insight of true nature. This is the "inner cutting" which requires no outer sharpness; the inner light that doesn't need to shine. True insight lacks glare; thus, it endures.
Chapter 59

Here is Lao Tzu’s guide to those involved in what are today called “the helping professions.” If you are a therapist, a counselor, a doctor, a financial advisor, or involved in any work that offers help to others in the form of information and supportive services for the furtherance of physical, psychological, or material well-being, then you may have something to learn from this poem.

Lao Tzu’s first point is crucial: helping others is not about sacrificing yourself. To “give of yourself” in the sense of sacrifice is the self-indulgent vanity of the hero, and Lao Tzu would like us to have none of this nonsense, for that is of no help to anyone.

Helping in the Cosmic Way is more about “reflecting nurturance”—that is, allowing oneself to be a “camera obscura of help,” through which the true source of help reflects itself and is made effective. This true source of help comes from nature and the universe in their simple and often unseen energy-flows.

In the I Ching, such supportive currents of nature were known as “helpers.” Curiously, and as quaint as it may sound to the modern ear, the term "helpers" has cognate variants in contemporary English, even within the icily objective field of scientific medicine. “Helper T Cells” are essential cellular elements of the body’s immune system: when they are not present in the bloodstream, or are killed by a viral attack such as that which causes HIV/AIDS, the results can be disastrous for the organism. In the treatment of cancer, there is a type of therapy known as “adjuvant therapy.” The word "adjuvant" is Latin for "helping." Other examples could be given, but the point is that the idea of helping presences, even from within ourselves, is not a strange or esoteric notion. Lao Tzu would like us to keep this in mind wherever we propose to help others, for when we can successfully include these helpers of the Cosmic Consciousness in our daily lives and our professional endeavors, we clear the way for the "continual nourishment of the harvest," which can only come (for humans) in the presence of Te, or Modesty. Modesty, in turn, is present wherever we deny ego, with its intrusive and clumsy interference, any influence in the helping process.

Modesty enables transformation: it can arouse the helpers and thus be "indomitable" because it is pure consciousness, which has the quantum ability to reach past time and space, into the subatomic realm where true healing occurs.

Chapter 60

Lao Tzu, with his characteristic gentle humor, uses a seemingly mundane image to make a point about a matter of immense substance to both his own time and ours. Cooking a fish may seem mundane indeed compared to governing a nation, but it wasn’t for a common person living in Lao Tzu’s time in ancient China. You had to work to catch a fish and prepare the materials necessary for cooking it, and you weren’t likely to get a second chance at dinner if you did it wrong. Aside from the work of catching the fish, a fire had to be built and tended until it was a bed of hot coals appropriate for cooking. The ting, or cooking pot used in those days, had to be properly set over the heat for optimal results, and attention had to be directed toward the entire process. This
might have involved shaking the ting regularly, so that the fish cooked itself, as it were, in its own fat, and then recognizing the visual signs of "done-ness."

This kind of care and attention is what Lao Tzu would like leaders among people to apply to their governmental and administrative functions, for it is this non-intrusive and modest attention that allows the Tao and its helpers to complete the work of both cooking (providing outer nourishment) and leadership (providing inner nourishment). Even where the details vary (according to the kind of fish you are cooking, or the population you are leading), there is a common element to the experience: removing power and its trappings from the relationship, and allowing it to be transformed from a demonic display of force and manipulation, into a natural harmony between the leader and the led. At all events, it must be remembered that the nourishment and protection come not from ourselves, but from the hidden consciousness that is aroused by Modesty (Te).

There is a palpable lesson in this poem for modern leaders—especially those who contemplate the invasion of foreign lands with the most spurious and concocted justification. To thus attack and destroy the land and homes of others, when there exist far more efficient means of resolving a conflict, is to "burn the fish" and rob the people of the nourishment they most need—their own individual, inner independence.

Chapter 61

All sense of territory is the mark of ego, and is repugnant to the cosmic order. Thus the poet declares that "borders and boundaries, fences and flags" are meaningless to one who follows the Sage: this applies to both "hearts and nations"—individuals and entire civilizations.

Here, a personal meditation image may help to illustrate Lao Tzu’s point. It is a meditation that I have sometimes wished I could offer to members of the armed forces. It is very simple: you close your eyes and take a space flight, journeying out to an orbiting distance of the earth. Then, as many astronauts have done—often in a transformational experience, as was the case with Edgar Mitchell—you look back onto the earth and see both what is there, and what is not. Water and clouds, light and shadow, earthen colors of varying hues, from tawny mountain to verdant plain, all appear to the eye. But no borders, walls, fortresses, or other emblems of territory are seen from this distance. In such a setting, the Cosmos is seen to lack a sense of power, and the superficial paradigm of the universe as a mechanical system is annihilated and transformed: things in motion appear to rest in stillness, while the Whole, in this suspension, seems to dance with small, unceasing movement. But perhaps the most significant part of the meditation is the return to earth, where the perspective thus received is brought back into contact with a chair, a room, and light through a window. It is here, rather than in the "space flight" that the transformation is revealed; it is back on earth where the discovery occurs that, as Lao Tzu says, "pure strength rests below, and absorbs what lies above."

Chapter 62

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This verse contains a life-affirming message: there is no such thing as a point of no return, at or beyond which the treasure of Tao is forever lost. However far ego may have made you wander, into whatever dark dead end it might have brought you, return to the treasure is always possible, as long as you have the inner ability to make a choice. Thus, "every error can be corrected," for it is in that simple moment of decision and commitment that the open embrace of the Cosmos is rediscovered.

Chapter 64

This verse is notable for containing what is perhaps the most famous, and therefore the most misinterpreted, expression from the Tao Te Ching (and perhaps from all of Chinese philosophy), which is usually translated as:

The journey of a thousand miles
Begins with a single step.

As I worked with this couplet and the other metaphors from that second stanza, the question arose: "does Lao Tzu really mean to glorify the tree and the tower, and to have us pursue the "thousand mile journey?" It seems, from the context of the verse itself and the rest of the Tao Te Ching, that the answer to this question would be, in fact, "no." If trouble is best managed "before it becomes troublesome," then we are clearly being asked to perceive the grown tree, the tower, and the long journey, as the metaphorical consequences of "unmanaged trouble." This tilt in perspective gives the poem a pragmatic message, which is consistent with Lao Tzu's insight from other verses, particularly with regard to the metaphor of the long journey.

In other places, Lao Tzu reminds us that we can know the whole world without leaving our doorway, and that the outer wanderer too easily gets trapped in a net of attachment. Thus, Lao Tzu would consider the "long journey" to be the consequence of having failed to identify and retreat from the many short and early steps of ego. This is why the follower of Tao "monitors desire [and] retreats from attachment": so that his self-awareness prevents the necessity of taking any "long journeys"—pointless and dangerous odysseys of seeking and yearning. The farther we wander, the more do we become attached to the saga, until we are trapped in a net of seeking. This leads to increasing misdirection and suffering, so that the way of return is made ever more difficult, as Odysseus himself discovers in Homer's epic poem.

There is another crucial point being made in this verse, which is particularly significant to our time and culture, and it is about time and completion. Lao Tzu warns us of the danger of "collapse in failure" at the very brink of success, and he stresses the importance of humility and caution, especially near the end of a project or undertaking. For this is where the ego's urge for completion is most likely to become careless or obsessive.

Chapter 65

People are not by nature stupid and submissive, as some would make them out
to be. This is why it is so difficult to govern them with "trickery and brilliance," because they can inwardly read deceit and corruption in a leader, even if they appear to go along with the program.

"A country ruled with cleverness" is one whose leaders have set themselves above and apart from the people. It is as if such leaders parade their own enlightenment in the ways of governing before the people (a very common practice in election campaign speeches), to prove their fitness to rule. Inevitably, such nonsense will be exposed, because it traps itself in its own complex net of lies.

Lao Tzu offers a more practical and resonant approach to leadership, which accords with his teaching on personal governance: "remaining aware of the alternatives." It is to be noted that he does not speak in terms of "remaining aware of the opposites," because he is trying to lead us past an apparent paradox. To live well (and to lead well) by living simply is not to reduce every course of action to diametrically opposed paths, but to nurture one's own inner ability to feel and balance an entire range of alternatives. For when every decision is reduced to one of two opposing options (the Republican way or the Democratic way; to attack or to resort to diplomacy; to tax and spend or to offer tax breaks), a broad spectrum of possibility is ignored. It is within that very spectrum that the correct solution usually lies, and not at the polar extremes of choice. When we are reduced to governing from within the realm of opposites, then trickery and manipulation are required to divert the people from following the way of common sense and inner clarity. Lao Tzu is asking the modern leader, "why waste or repress resources that will make your job infinitely easier?" For when the Sage is allowed to lead, then much of the work of governing tends to happen by itself, through the "natural virtue" of each individual. This process leads the nation to the harmony in which true leadership spontaneously occurs; this is the "simple innocence" of which the poet speaks.

Chapter 66

Lao Tzu here continues his discussion of the theme of leadership from the previous poem. When leaders of the people allow the Sage to guide them in their work, they become like water. It doesn't calculate its flowing course, but simply follows the shape of the land wherever it leads, whether through a king's domain or into the depths of a ravine. As it travels, the water nourishes the land that receives it, in a dance of complementarity: the land provides the space and direction for the water's movement, and the water returns to it the elements necessary for fertile growth. Thus does the poet advise leaders: "learn first to follow," and then "learn to nourish." In nature, neither the water nor the land put on airs of superiority, control, or command, but each provides the other what it needs to realize its destiny. This is the way to lead people: follow the shape of their needs and circumstances, and then ask for the guidance of the Sage in providing them the direction and sustenance they need to fulfill their destiny. Thus, you will not offend them, because they will not perceive you as a superior; and you will never exhaust them, because they will not see you as a competitive force. This is the way of true benevolence.
Chapter 67

The Tao, of course, is not at all extraordinary—only ego makes it so. Tao is the ordinary, normal way of life and being within the cosmos. Lao Tzu didn’t create the Tao—it is not a figment of his imagination, nor some cosmological theory he invented, nor a pleasant but idle puddle of poetic fancy. Tao is Lao Tzu’s name for the living Consciousness that we can experience through our inner life, and Te (Modesty) is a word for how that experience can transform both the outer and inner aspects of our lives. Lao Tzu is again encouraging us to “negate the excess” of fixed beliefs and attitudes toward life and the cosmos, and experience Tao for ourselves, within ourselves—to see how this living but impersonal Presence finds voice and substance within the unique vessel of each true self—for where it leads, the true self follows.

Chapter 68

In the inner war, a spirit of vengeance inflames and empowers the demons of ego, since it casts us headlong into the bloody hell of opposition. This undermines the goal of self-development, which is to kill and transform the demonic consciousness of acculturation. To manage such a war correctly requires an attitude of humility—you put the work into the hands of those best able to do it right—the helping energies of the hidden world. This is how true greatness is achieved.

Chapter 69

This poem contains a warning against adopting a way of impulsive action, which will inevitably trap a person within a self-perpetuating cycle of opposition, where conflict is unceasing, battle lines always drawn and redrawn, where truce is tenuous and temporary, and where only sorrow wins. As elsewhere in the Tao Te Ching, the metaphor of “moving the feet” is symbolic of impulsive action—see also Chapters 31 and 64. Again, Lao Tzu points out that aggression tends to perpetuate itself: the search for outer enemies is the first and final act of self-destruction.

Chapter 70

In this poem, Lao Tzu asks the Tao itself to speak in the first person, describing its nature, action, and the correct means of approaching it. In the very first line, the essence of the Tao in action is revealed: transformation. The Pinyin Chinese word for transformation is “yì,” the very same character in the title of the oracle, “Yijing” (which is the same as I Ching in the Wade-Giles system of transliteration). As in Chapter 1 and throughout the Tao Te Ching, Lao Tzu describes the natural use of language as the path of Te, or Modesty: the Tao in action within the human realm of being. Words cannot tell us what Tao is, but they can tell us what it does—how it functions through our unique consciousness. Language arises from inner clarity, and it expresses this clarity; then, it returns to the Origin, which is silence. This is the transformative path of natural
language—a path that is described here and in Hexagram 1 of the I Ching.

Chapter 71

Negative emotions, such as hatred, envy, pity, and contempt are the symptoms of the metaphorical disease described in this poem. The symptoms of the disease must be watched, because they lead one to the "seed of disease," which is the arrogance of knowledge, exemplified in the false and superficial ideas that comprise the one-sided vision of scholarly accumulation (see also Chapter 81). True awareness is the consciousness of the poverty of knowledge in isolation from the totality of being; to fully sense this poverty is to "feel one's own pain," without the empty and officious compassion of a politician, a guru, or some other authority. This is the "awareness of disease" that Lao Tzu reminds us to nurture within ourselves: the deep self-knowledge that comes when you are acutely aware of not-knowing. This is the path of true independence.

Chapter 72

The fear of God is of a distant and threatening Being, which can only inflict pain and guilt, while repressing one's inner truth (the "true Guide" mentioned). Societies and governments behave like such a daunting God-force when they dictate and limit the acceptable norms of living and working, even to the point of defining what a proper home and job must be. When these strictures are lifted, then there is the deepest liberation. Just be sincere, and you will be helped.

Chapter 75

The peculiar structure of this verse, with its apparently clumsy redundancy, has been a matter of comment and rationalization by scholars and translators. Perhaps this poem's structure is best explained as a matter of emphasis: Lao Tzu is underscoring the inexorable and appalling connection between taxation and hunger, oppression and rebellion, despair and the cheapening of life. The expression "the people" is not a mere empty ideological abstraction, to be written into constitutions and political speeches, while each unique individual within the nation is forgotten or suppressed. Lao Tzu uses the alliterative language of verse to make a subtle but crucial point: "the people" are real beings, not a collective abstraction, and so when a government represses their natural freedom or robs them of their livelihood, then it has stolen from the treasure of each individual's life and its potential.

Chapter 77

The Tao Te Ching as a work of significant environmental awareness is again highlighted in this verse. Lao Tzu uses the image of a bow that draws itself, without the need of arrows, to describe the operations of Nature: it continually adjusts and
maintains its balance when it "draws off excess" to "provide for what is depleted." This metaphor was copied, probably by a Confucian writer, into the Image of Hexagram 15, Modesty, of the I Ching:

Thus the superior man reduces that which is too much,
And augments that which is too little. (Wilhelm/Baynes, p. 64).

However, Lao Tzu points out that there is no need for a "superior" or "cultivated" man to achieve this balance. Indeed, fixed notions of superiority and inferiority, higher and lower, are certain to disrupt and distort the way of Nature. All that is needed is the presence of the true self, unencumbered by false notions of superiority or acculturation. Our natural being knows exactly how to accord with the cosmic principle of inner balance: simply allow the long and the short to complement and support one another, because they are truly equal. For the bow is drawn, after all, with but one string.

Chapter 80

Discovering the essence through discarding the excessive is a recurring theme in the Tao Te Ching, and it applies to both inner and outer government. Chapter 48 pictured the growth of the natural personality as a process of diminishment and disburdening, which is contrasted with the commerce of ego-activity. Here, in Chapter 80, a different set of metaphors for this process is presented. Lao Tzu wants us to know not merely what Te is not, but what it is: what it feels like, how it manifests itself in society, and how entirely sufficient it is to the management of a natural life.

The expression, Po chi’h chi, here rendered as "Let your talents be manifold and diverse," is often translated as "labor saving devices." I was led to understand this expression as a metaphor for cleverness, or the agile use of the intellect. Lao Tzu is saying that cleverness is not a quality to be demonized or despised, but rather to be transformed by placing it at the service of one’s feeling nature; it is not to be put on display or used to humiliate or debase others.

"Wagons for loading" is another I Ching metaphor that Lao Tzu draws upon; it comes from Hexagram 14, line 2. In The Oracle of the Cosmic Way text, this is found to be a metaphor for the Helper of Transformation. (p. 206)—that is, a transformative energy that creates enduring change within a person or situation.

"There may be crowing and barking among you" refers to the activity of ego, both in conflict, self-display, and the egotistical commerce referred to in Chapter 48. However, in this poem, Lao Tzu assures us that we have the inner wherewithal to recognize such error and go on without becoming trapped in its contentious snares.
Appendix: Cross-Referencing of Poems by Topic

My own copy of the Stephen Mitchell translation of the *Tao Te Ching* is scribbled over with notes on verses that are topically related. So, near the end of this project, it occurred to me that it might help to offer the reader some such cross-referencing in an Appendix. Of course, it is meant as a general guide rather than a fixed or definitive listing of relationships among the poems. Each reader will no doubt find his own connections and resonant passages in this respect; what is offered below is meant to serve as a suggestion in beginning.

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