

# The Tao of Development



# **The Tao of Development**

An interpretation of the Tao Te Ching of Lao-Tzu

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For Donald

## Introduction

### The Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching is one of the classics of ancient Chinese thought. It is attributed to an elderly sage called Lao Tzu, said to have lived around 600 years BC. However, there is no hard evidence that Lao Tzu really existed, and current scholarship suggests that the book consists of ancient wisdom passed down through many generations until it was finally written down in the form we know it today around 300 BC. It offers a perspective on the nature of the world we live in, and, based on this perspective, it offers guidance to those who would lead or govern.

Although it speaks of the eternal *Tao*, and is recognised as a fundamental text of “Taoism”, this work has little to do with the religion of the same name that grew up in China some centuries later.

### Why did I do it?

Why would a person who doesn't speak a word of Chinese and knows next to nothing of Chinese culture and philosophy have the arrogance to attempt to rewrite one of the great classics of ancient Chinese thought? A fair question, I must admit.

Since I discovered the *Tao Te Ching* over twenty years ago, I have found it ever more valuable as a reference point and an aid to calm reflection in times of doubt or difficulty. Although I have made use of seven different translations, in both English and Spanish, I have not been satisfied with any one of them. The more literal translations are barely comprehensible to a modern reader unversed in ancient Chinese culture, and the modernised or poetic ones all have their own alternative take on the original.

I subsequently began to read scholarly studies of the text, as a result of which I started to form my own idea of what the book is really about. At about the same time I moved from England to Nicaragua, where the *Tao Te Ching* became indispensable to me as a tool for orientating and balancing myself in the face of new challenges. The mysterious and indescribable *Tao* came into focus as a way of being present and open, and perceiving the way the world develops around you.

And so I decided I could do something different with the ancient text. Without being able to read the original Chinese, I felt I could still offer a worthwhile new synthesis of what my studies had taught me about its meaning. At the same time, I was sure I could come up with alternative wordings to make the message of the original accessible and relevant to others like me who are

working for change, but want to do so with sensitivity and respect for what is already going on around us.

Finally, a key factor has been the marvellous experience of gaining a new way of expressing myself. Having spent the whole of my life, up to a few years ago, with the English language as my only means of verbal expression, I now have two: English and Spanish. Spanish has become my everyday means of communication, and at the same time a constant source of intriguing new ways to express old thoughts, while English remains the “home base” where I can be more relaxed and confident.

It thus became central to my plan to produce my new *Tao Te Ching* in a dual language version, partly to broaden the range of meanings to be found in the text, partly so that I could share something important to me with my new friends and colleagues in Nicaragua, and partly just for the challenge of doing it.\*

### Key terms

There are three terms that occur throughout the *Tao Te Ching* that are hard to translate, and yet fundamental to the underlying meaning of the text. They present difficult choices for the translator (or re-interpreter), as the decision you make about how to express them will determine the reader's understanding of the work.

#### ▪ Tao

From the opening lines of Chapter 1 we are warned that “The *Tao* that can be spoken of is not the real (eternal) *Tao*, the name that can be named is not the eternal name”, which makes it plain that any attempt to translate or explain *Tao* is doomed to failure. The message is hammered home in other chapters. *Tao*, we are told, “defies all analysis and understanding” (Chapter 14), and is “impossible to capture or understand” (Chapter 21).

The safest route for the translator, and the most often followed, is to leave it be, making no attempt to translate it. I have rejected this option as I feel that to leave “*Tao*” untranslated gives it an esoteric, mystical quality, which only serves to further mystify it, while at the same time giving the impression that it is something that actually exists, which, to my mind, it does not. Chapter 14 says as

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\* I haven't done the Spanish version yet. This booklet is just the English version.

much: “A formless form, a blank page; as a material thing in the world it doesn’t exist”. “*Tao*”, therefore, is not any kind of existent entity, whether material, metaphysical or spiritual.

However, if we don’t want to leave it as it is, we have to look for an acceptable translation. The Chinese character “*Tao*” can be translated as “way” or “path”. In this context, it is obviously meant as a symbol or metaphor. However, it doesn’t refer to a spiritual “path” to be followed by the Taoist faithful, but rather to a cyclical process of becoming: the “way” in which everything in the universe comes into being, unfolds, develops, declines, and returns to the ground from whence it came. “The way things develop is through cycle and return to the source” (Chapter 40).

The “Eternal *Tao*”, then, is simply a conceptualisation of this cyclical process. On the basis of this understanding, I have chosen to translate “*Tao*” as “the way things develop”. The disadvantage of this is that it’s a bit of a mouthful. On the other hand, it has the double advantage of being true to the original meaning of “the way”, as I understand it, while at the same time bringing into focus its direct relevance to how I live my life here and now. The *Tao Te Ching* is telling us that we can only intervene successfully if our perception, and therefore our intervention, is in tune with the way things develop.

#### ▪ *Te*

The second key term is “*Te*”. The character “*Te*” sometimes means “virtue”, and sometimes means “nature”, depending on its place in the text. In some contexts “virtue” seems to fit better, in others “nature” seems more appropriate. Often it is hard to tell, as it depends on how you read the underlying philosophical drift.

The way I see it, to a Taoist the two meanings are integrated. Taoist “virtue” is not saintly do-goodery or adherence to moral precepts, but rather a way of living and behaving which respects and is in harmony with the order and integrity of the natural world.

In most cases, therefore, I have translated “*Te*” as “integrity”, which I understand in both the everyday sense of coherence, or congruence in personal conduct, and the special Taoist sense of respecting nature and integrating oneself into the natural order.

In a few cases, where the conventional sense of “virtue” seems to fit better, I have rendered “*Te*” as “goodness”, as it makes more sense of the reading (e.g. Chapter 38).

#### ▪ *Sheng Jen*

The “*Sheng jen*”, literally “wise ruler”, is the central character of the *Tao Te Ching*. “*Sheng jen*” has also been translated as “sage” or “saint”. I think “wise leader” would be a better, perhaps more modern, alternative.

In the end, however, I opted for “wise person”, because the character and behaviour of the *Sheng jen* seem to me to question the whole idea of “leadership” – see, for example, Chapter 17. Anyone who wants to play a constructive role in society, and have a positive influence on others, can find a role model in the Taoist *Sheng jen*.

In the original Chinese, the gender of the *Sheng jen* is not specified, but it is impossible to write a non-gender-specific English translation that does not sound clumsy. Some modern translators have opted instead to have the wise person change sex every time she appears, but this did not appeal to me. I have made the wise person female throughout, and the ordinary person, lacking in Taoist wisdom, male.

I chose this option for several reasons. The wise person of the *Tao Te Ching* epitomises what are commonly held to be important female qualities. There is a theory that parts of the text date back much earlier than the conventionally accepted dates, and precede the advent of patriarchy. As Ellen Chen puts it, “Of all the ancient classics still extant, the *Tao Te Ching* alone draws its inspiration from the female principle”. Therefore it seemed appropriate to emphasise the fact that the Taoist leader is likely to be a woman.

### Concepts that challenge our thinking

I don’t want to go into a lot of textual exegesis. I’d rather you read the text for yourself and draw your own conclusions. However, there are some fundamental principles advocated by the *Tao Te Ching* that fly so directly in the face of “conventional wisdom” that it is hard to know what to make of them, and as a result they can be quite off-putting. So I feel the need to take a few paragraphs to say how I understand them.

The principles are:

- **Non action / non-intervention:** “The wise person practices doing less and being more” (Chapter 2), “The wise person ... accomplishes her work without acting” (Chapter 47), “Doing less and less, until she no longer does anything” (Chapter 48), “The wise person says ‘I practise non-action, and the people transform their own reality’” (Chapter 57), and so on.
- **No teaching or studying:** “The wise person ... helps others without teaching anything” (Chapter 2), “Get rid of your manuals and instruction books, and the people will be a hundred times better off” (Chapter 19), “She who is dedicated to studying carries more baggage every day” (Chapter 48), “With too much knowledge and cleverness, the community starts to disintegrate” (Chapter 65), and more in the same vein.

As if this wasn’t enough, the *Tao Te Ching* is also apparently against technology and innovation (e.g. Chapter 57, Chapter 80), and against travel (e.g. Chapter 47, Chapter 80).

If, like me, you have dedicated most of your life to promoting ideas of growth and development, learning and education, innovation and exploration, and helping people to make changes, all this comes as something of a slap in the face. What are we to make of it?

If you read the text as a whole, a more complex picture emerges. The wise person's "non-action" does not imply staying at home and doing nothing. She is, in fact, very active in the community. Along with the many references to non-action, there are plentiful clues to what she actually does with her time, albeit in a subtle and non-showy kind of way. If not a teacher in the conventional sense, she is certainly a facilitator of learning; never instructing, much less offering "knowledge", but working with those who want to learn, helping them to reflect on their reality and tune in to the way things develop. She is not a "leader" in any conventional sense, but her active presence – peaceful, open-minded, sensitive, perceptive of what's going on around her and reflecting it back – makes a huge difference to the way things develop in her community, principally by preventing others from messing up processes that are already moving in the right direction.

Nor is the *Tao* opposed to change. The organic process of *Tao* as cyclic development means everything is constantly changing. What the *Tao* is against is innovation for the sake of novelty, and, above all, interference with the natural environment. The *Tao Te Ching* was protesting against genetic modification 2,500 years before the rest of us: "To artificially enhance nature violates its harmony. To force development brings disaster" (Chapter 55).

Although it does not condemn it outright, the *Tao Te Ching* is certainly dubious of the value of foreign travel. It states, quite rightly in my view, that you don't need to leave home to find wisdom. It is also right to point out that for a stable and peaceable world, it is important that the majority feel secure and content in their own homes. War and poverty give rise to more travel than does tourism.

So don't be fooled into thinking that to follow the *Tao* means to sit around doing nothing all day. To work with people, or indeed just to be with people, in the way the *Tao Te Ching* proposes is challenging and demanding, but ultimately surprisingly effective.

Harry Shier, *Matagalpa*, March 2007

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## Suggested reading

Browne Walker, Brian (Trans.), *The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu* (St. Martin's Griffin, New York 1995). A modern translation that manages to be fairly close to the original yet reads well in poetic English.

Chen, Ellen M., *The Tao Te Ching, a new translation with commentary* (Paragon House, St Paul Minnesota 1989). A detailed and profound study, chapter by chapter, and a translation which I found very helpful in getting at the original meanings. I don't agree with Ellen Chen's religious angle, but I am grateful for her scholarship. I have studied this more than any other work on the Tao.

Heider, John, *The Tao of Leadership* (Humanistics, Lake Worth Florida, 1986). This is the book that awakened my interest in the Tao Te Ching about twenty years ago, and taught me more about how to be a trainer than anything I have read before or since. It is not a translation, but a manual of guidance for facilitators based on a modern reinterpretation of the original text.

Lau, D.C. (Trans.), *Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching* (Penguin, Harmondsworth 1963). Lau belongs to the school that believes the Tao Te Ching is not a coherent work, but a pot pourri of ancient sayings jumbled together with more recent (i.e. 3rd century BC) inserts. Perhaps because of

this, his work has been much slated recently. However, his introduction is obviously based on extensive scholarship, and his translation is a helpful source of comparison.

Liu, Kia-Way (Trans.), *Tao-tê Ching, Lao Tsé* (toExcel, Lincoln Nebraska 1988). This is one of several Spanish translations I currently use. It seems fairly close to the original, and the detailed introduction is refreshingly different from those of the English-language versions, bringing Marx, Mao etc. into the analysis.

Mitchell, Stephen (Trans.), *The Tao Te Ching* (Macmillan, London 1988). Probably the most popular English translation, having spawned most of those *Tao Te Ching* diaries, calendars, posters etc, in your local alternative bookshop. The reason it is so user-friendly is that instead of translating the difficult bits, Mitchell has replaced them with poetical alternatives of his own invention. However, it reads well, and was influential in encouraging me to have a go at it myself.

## The Tao of development

### 1

What can be explained about the way things develop,  
is not really the way things develop.  
Development that can be labelled and measured,  
is not what's really happening.

Things have been developing since the beginning of time.  
The process of development gives rise to everything in the  
universe.

To get at the essence of how things develop,  
forget your desire to label and define it.  
Be fully present in the process,  
and you will experience the way things develop.

Being and non-being, the known and the unknowable;  
here lies the way to awareness.

### 2

Appreciating the beautiful, makes others seem ugly.  
Praising the good makes the rest seem bad.

Because being and not-being identify each other,  
easy and difficult define each other,  
long and short explain each other,  
high and low meet on the horizon,  
the future follows right after the past.

So the wise person practices doing less,  
and being more,  
helps others learn without teaching anything,  
accepts whatever comes, and equally whatever goes,  
creates without wanting to possess,  
gives, and makes no demands.

When her work is done she moves on,  
without looking for credit or reward.  
Because she knows how to move on,  
her work endures.

### 3

If you give praise and prizes to the few,  
people will become competitive.  
If you attach great value to luxury goods,  
people will rob and cheat.

If you arouse envy,  
people will be agitated and stressed.

The wise person works by example:  
having an open mind and a generous spirit,  
letting go of desires and ambitions,  
showing strength of character,  
being in control of herself, so she can't be  
controlled or manipulated,  
being more, doing less, and letting things develop.

### 4

Everything that there is has developed from what was  
before.  
This process of development can never be exhausted or  
used up.

It smoothes off rough edges,  
untangles knots,  
diffuses the light,  
settles the dust.

It runs deep and it goes on forever.  
I don't know how it started.  
It goes back even before god.

### 5

The natural world isn't sentimental.  
Things come and go, and it doesn't get attached to one  
thing or the other.

The wise person avoids sentimental attachments.  
Because things are always changing,  
she doesn't try to hold on to the way things are now.  
The way things develop is like the bellows of a forge,  
empty and yet inexhaustible.  
It contains no heat, but makes a never-ending blaze.  
The more you discuss it, the less you'll understand it.

Better just be present and experience it at work.

**6**

The mountain erodes,  
but the valley endures for ever.  
This is the power of the female spirit,  
the spirit of the mother that gives birth to all the world's  
development.  
The female spirit is indestructible.  
You can draw on it forever,  
and it can never be used up.

**7**

The world will last forever.  
Why?  
Because it does not live for itself

The wise person puts herself last,  
and so finds herself in the lead.  
She is not concerned with herself,  
and so in herself grows strong.  
She doesn't pursue her own interests,  
and so things work out in her interest.

**8**

The greatest good is like water;  
it benefits everything and fights with nothing.  
It flows towards the low places.  
This is the essence of the way things develop.

Build only on solid ground.  
Stay in tune with the depths of your heart.  
Be generous in sharing what you have.  
Speak the truth.  
Help people to organise themselves effectively.  
Be purposeful and get the job done.

If you refuse to compete,  
no-one can compete with you.

**9**

Know when to stop; don't overfill the glass.  
Don't oversharpen the blade, or it will lose its edge.  
Fill your home with possessions, and you'll spend your  
life guarding them.

If you go after wealth, honour and glory,  
the path will sooner or later lead you to disaster

Do your work, step back and let it go.  
This is the path of wisdom.

**10**

Can you stay aware of the oneness of all things,  
and never lose sight of it?

Can you focus on your breathing, so you become supple  
like a newborn child?

Can you clear your inner vision, so you can see the  
underlying perfection of the world?

Can you bring new things into being, embodying the  
female spirit in the way you relate to others?

Can you gain awareness and wisdom through experience,  
without intellectualising?

Can you love the people you work with, and help them  
organise, through being calm and responsive?

Creating and nurturing,  
producing, without wanting to possess,  
facilitating, and letting go,  
guiding without controlling;  
this is deep integrity.

**11**

Thirty spokes meet to make a wheel,  
but it is the empty hole in the middle that lets the wheel  
turn.

A bowl is made from solid clay,  
but it is the emptiness inside that make the bowl useful.

A house is built of wood and bricks.  
but it is the space inside that we live in.

Make the most of what is here and now  
by working with what is not.

**12**

Too many bright colours are blinding,  
too many harsh sounds are deafening,  
too many strong flavours are overwhelming.

Chasing after possessions,  
always seeking entertainment,  
distracts your heart and stifles your growth.

The wise person lets go of material possessions,  
and is untroubled by surface appearances,  
She is centred, concerned with what lies within  
and with the true nature of things.

**13**

Be popular or be unpopular,  
either way you have the same problem.

So, why is that?

Being popular lifts you up,  
makes you feel good.  
Being unpopular knocks you down,  
makes you feel bad.  
Either way, you depend on what others think of you,  
and so you lose touch with your true self.

Identify yourself with your body,  
and your problems become personalised and unbearable.

So, why is that?

If your sense of self is attached to your body,  
you become isolated and fearful in the face of life's  
problems,  
but if your sense of self connects you with the whole  
world, you can face any problem without fear.

The person who feels herself part of the oneness of the  
world can live anywhere in the world.

The person who loves the whole world as herself,  
can be trusted to care for the world.

**14**

It may be looked at, but not seen,  
listened to but not heard,  
touched but not felt.  
The way things develop finally defies all analysis and  
understanding.

Shine a light on it – it isn't lit up,  
Switch off the light – it isn't dark.

It is never-ending, yet unnameable,  
a formless form, a blank page,  
as a material thing in the world, it doesn't exist.

Approach it, and you won't see its face,  
follow it, and you won't see its back,  
look for it, and it will always evade you.

Nevertheless, if you can feel a connection with the way  
things develop,  
you will find yourself in tune with the situation.  
To perceive the essence of the way things develop,  
is to attain a fundamental insight.

**15**

The wise leaders of ancient times were so penetrating, so  
subtle, so profound that we can't really know them.

But we can try to describe them:

Careful and alert like someone fording an icy river in  
midwinter,  
peacemakers in the midst of quarrelling neighbours,  
respectful like a guest in someone else's house,  
giving way like melting ice,  
plain and solid like uncarved wood,  
wide-open as a valley,  
opaque like muddy water.

When faced with a difficult decision, do you know how to  
wait patiently for the turbulence to subside,  
for the mud to settle and the water to become clear?

If you let the mud settle, the right course of action will  
arise by itself.

The wise person doesn't seek personal fulfillment,  
but instead gives of herself,  
letting herself be used up and depleted  
and, in doing so, finds herself renewed and replenished.

**16**

Strive for complete emptiness.  
Be still.

As you watch the flourishing diversity of the world,  
recognise how, in time, everything completes its cycle and  
returns to the source.

Everything in the world eventually returns to its roots.

To return to your roots is to find peace,  
to find peace is to know that everything is working itself  
out,  
to know that everything is working itself out is to  
recognise the eternal cycle,  
to recognise the eternal cycle is to achieve insight.

Not recognising the eternal cycle leads to acts of injustice.  
The person who has insight into the way things develop is  
tolerant,  
the tolerant person is fair,  
the fair person has the quality of leadership,  
and, being in tune with the way things develop,  
endures and is never exhausted.

**17**

There are three types of leaders.

The first type of leader is the person of whom, when their work is done, the people say, "Look what our great leader has done for us."

The second is the person of whom, when their work is done, the people say, "Look what our leader has helped us to achieve."

The best is the person of whom, when their work is done, the people say, "What leader? We did all this ourselves".

**18**

When people are out of tune with the way things develop, they operate instead with rulebooks and codes of conduct.

Even the cleverest plan, rigidly adhered to, eventually leads to bureaucracy and artifice.

When family members stop listening to one another, everyone plays out a traditional role, and all become resentful and frustrated.

As the state decays into corruption, the government survives by playing on traditional loyalties and patriotism.

**19**

Get rid of your manuals and instruction books, and the people will be a hundred times better off.

Get rid of scriptures and ethical codes, and the people will develop a morality based on justice and love.

Get rid of exploitation and profiteering, and thieves and swindlers will disappear.

These things just cover up the failures of human organisation. Therefore take your inspiration from undyed silk, or uncarved wood:

Let go of egoism and self-interest, calm your desires, simplify your life, stay close to nature.

**20**

Abandon the quest for knowledge and information, and you free yourself from worry.

What's the difference between yes and no? Between good and bad?

Trying to have an answer for everything is an endless and pointless task. Just be open and reflective.

The average person gets overexcited, goes out partying and looking for a good time.

The wise person remains calm, open-minded, seeing how things develop, not fixated on a specific goal.

The average person seeks wealth and material goods, amassing more than they need.

The wise person owns next to nothing; places no value on material possessions.

When she considers the people around her, the wise person says,

"They are bright and shiny, I am dull and confused, floating in the sea, blowing in the wind. They have their jobs to do. I am a wild free spirit. I'm different from everyone else. In spirit, I am still suckling at my mother's breast".

**21**

The way of integrity is to trust in the way things develop. Although this way is impossible to capture or understand, it has an essence that can be perceived, an essence that embodies the truth of how things develop.

This essence has remained constant since ancient times. To perceive it, identify the source, the germ from which all things develop.

And how do you know that all things come from this source? By being in tune with the way things develop.

**22**

Being flexible, you'll stand firm.  
Accepting criticism, you'll be vindicated.  
Emptying yourself, you'll be filled up.  
Using up your resources, your resources will be renewed.

Possessing little, you'll acquire wisdom.  
Possessing much, you'll acquire anxiety.

The wise person, being in tune with the oneness of the world, becomes a model for the world:

She doesn't show off, yet she shines.  
She doesn't justify herself, yet her integrity is unquestioned.  
She doesn't boast of her success, yet her achievement is recognised.  
She doesn't promote herself, yet she is known as a leader,  
She doesn't compete with anyone,  
and so no-one can compete with her.

"Being flexible you'll stand firm". Maybe this old saying is meaningless?

No, it's about preserving your integrity.

**23**

The natural way is to say little.

A whirlwind doesn't last all morning.  
A rainstorm doesn't last all day.

What causes them?  
They are natural phenomena.  
If these things can't endure, how much less will the actions of humans?

Focus on perceiving the way things develop,  
and you'll be in tune with development.  
Focus on doing the right thing,  
and you'll recognise what needs to be done.

Focus on doubt and mistrust,  
and you'll meet with doubt and mistrust.

**24**

Walking on tiptoes, you won't get far.  
Walking on stilts, you won't reach your destination.

The person who shows off doesn't shine.  
The person who has to justify himself isn't respected.  
The person who boasts of success isn't valued.  
The person who promotes himself isn't accepted as a leader.

To the wise person, in tune with the way things develop, these behaviours are unnecessary and pointless.  
The person who perceives the way things develop doesn't behave this way.

**25**

Before the beginning of time there was something indeterminate, quiet and empty, solitary and unchanging, moving cyclically, never tiring.  
Think of it as the mother of the universe.

Because I don't know its name,  
I call it "The Way Things Develop".  
If I have to describe it, I'll call it "universal".

"Universal" means being everywhere.  
"Being everywhere" means traveling far,  
and what travels far, has to return to its source.

The way things develop is universal,  
heaven is universal,  
earth is universal,  
humanity is universal.

So, humanity is one of the four universals that make up the world.

Humanity emanates from the earth,  
earth emanates from heaven,  
heaven emanates from the way things develop.  
The way things develop emanates only from itself.

**26**

Heaviness is the root of lightness,  
tranquility is the master of agitation.  
The wise person easily travels all day,  
because she has everything she needs with her.  
She is not concerned with material wealth  
and chooses to live simply.

Why should a person with such resources neglect her responsibilities?

The person who behaves irresponsibly  
cuts off the root of their respect.  
The person who becomes agitated and loses self-control is  
out of tune with the way things develop.

**27**

To travel well, is to leave no scar on the environment,  
to speak well, is to leave no-one hurt or offended,  
to calculate well, is to use no counters.  
A well-secured door needs no lock,  
yet no-one can open it.  
A well-wrapped parcel needs no string,  
yet no-one can unwrap it.

The wise person is always ready to help people,  
and excludes no-one,  
always makes good use of the resources to hand,  
and wastes nothing.  
She does this through her insight.

The wise person is the teacher of those who need to learn.  
Those who need to learn are the raw material with which  
the wise person works.  
If teachers don't respect the learners,  
and learners don't respect their teachers,  
they are heading for failure, however intelligent they are.

To recognise this is the path to wisdom.

**28**

To know the male, and yet hold to the female,  
is to enter the womb of the world.  
To enter the womb of the world is to be surrounded by  
positive energy,  
to be a baby again.

To know the white, and yet hold to the black,  
is to hold the template of the world.  
To hold the template of the world is to be a channel for  
positive energy,  
without beginning or end.

To know honour, and yet hold to humility,  
is to live in the valley of the world.

To live in the valley of the world is to be filled with its  
positive energy,  
to be simple and natural, like uncarved wood.  
Wood, by its natural qualities,  
allows itself to be carved into a bowl.  
The wise person, through her human qualities,  
allows herself to take a guiding role, and serve others.  
She can be a leader, without dominating or oppressing.

**29**

The person who wants to change the world will not  
succeed.  
The world has a sacred spirit that will not allow itself to be  
moulded or manipulated.  
He who tries to change it will fail,  
he who tries to possess it will lose it.

Because people must sometimes lead  
and sometimes follow,  
sometimes blow hot,  
and sometimes blow cold,  
sometimes be strong,  
and sometimes be weak,  
sometimes stand firm,  
and sometimes fall.

Aware of this, the wise person avoids extremes,  
avoids excesses, avoids extravagance.

**30**

The person in tune with the way things develop will not  
try to subjugate others by force of arms.  
The use of weapons always harms those who wield them.  
Where the army is encamped,  
nothing grows but weeds and thorns.  
After a war, poverty is sure to follow.

The wise person seeks a conflict resolved  
without a show of strength,  
without crowing in victory,  
without taking more than she needs,  
without discrediting her opponent.

In this way, through awareness of how things develop, she  
resolves conflicts without force.

**31**

Weapons are tools of destruction,  
and are rejected by all people of good will.  
The person who is in tune with the way things develop  
never takes up arms.

The wise person does not have enemies,  
because she knows that those opposed to her  
are part of her family, the oneness of humanity.

Weapons are tools of destruction,  
The wise person, if she is forced to take up arms in self  
defense, takes no satisfaction in the struggle,  
and no pleasure in victory.

To take pleasure in victory at arms  
means to find satisfaction in killing.  
Those who have once found satisfaction in killing,  
have forever lost sight of the way things develop,  
and so can no longer achieve their ends  
through peaceful cooperation.

The wise person celebrates a victory in combat  
like a funeral, with sorrow and mourning.  
Aware of the oneness of humanity,  
she sees it as the loss of her own family,  
and of her own humanity.

**32**

You can't give a name to the way things develop.  
In itself, it isn't anything you can see or touch,  
but it is more powerful than any force in the world.

If political leaders were to govern according to the way  
things develop,  
everyone would be drawn to participate.  
Just as the rain falls evenly without being commanded,  
people would find unity,  
and cooperate without coercion.

When you help people to organise,  
help them establish their responsibilities,  
and once this is done,  
make no more rules and regulations.  
If you can stop before bureaucracy sets in,  
you can save the group from collapse.

The way things develop in the world  
is like streams flowing into rivers,  
rivers flowing into the sea.

**33**

To understand other people is intelligence.  
To understand yourself is insight.

To control other people is power.  
To be in control of yourself is integrity.

To aspire to great wealth is to be poor.  
To know that you have enough is to be rich.

To be at peace with yourself  
is to be at home anywhere in the world.  
To be accepting of death,  
is to live without fear of death.

**34**

The way things develop doesn't mean everything goes in  
the same direction.  
Things develop in all directions.

Although everything in the world develops,  
the way things develop didn't create them,  
and doesn't own them.  
It protects and nourishes all beings,  
but it isn't their master.

The way things develop is as small as nothingness,  
and as big as the universe.

**35**

The person who has awareness of the way things develop  
can travel the world without fear.  
Wherever they go they will be content and at peace,  
everywhere they go, they will find tranquility.

Travellers are attracted to loud music and good food.  
Getting yourself in tune with the way things develop  
seems tedious by comparison.

Looking at it, you cannot see it,  
listening for it, you cannot hear it,  
tasting it, you detect no flavour,  
using it, you never deplete it.

**36**

He who has been raised to a great height  
can readily be brought down to earth.  
He who has an inflated idea of himself  
can easily be weakened.  
He who has been praised to the skies  
can soon be forgotten.  
He who has thrived on generous donations  
can quickly be replaced.

This is a subtle insight.

The soft overcomes the hard.  
The weak overcomes the strong.  
As the fish is never seen out of water,  
weapons of war should never be publicly displayed.

**37**

The way things develop in itself does nothing,  
and yet nothing is left undone.  
If political leaders were in tune with it,  
the people themselves would transform their reality.

If the process of transforming reality  
gives rise to envy and rivalry,  
the wise person ensures that they subside again,  
returning to nameless simplicity.

In the nameless simplicity there are no desires.  
Through tranquility and the absence of desire  
the world governs itself.

**38**

True goodness isn't concerned with being good,  
thus it is truly good.  
False goodness is obsessed with being good,  
thus it is not truly good.

A truly good person does nothing,  
for they have no selfish motivation.  
A hypocrite is always doing things,  
and always has a selfish motivation.

He who acts rightly out of true goodness  
has no other motive than this.  
He who acts rightly in pursuit of justice  
has a clear motive to pursue.  
He who acts rightly out of conformity with tradition  
expects a set response, and if he doesn't get it,  
he rolls up his sleeves and picks a fight.

When awareness of the way things develop is lost, there is  
still integrity to hang on to.  
When integrity is lost, righteousness appears.

When righteousness is lost, piety appears.  
When piety is lost, only ritual observance remains.  
Ritual observance is the empty husk of true faith.  
It is also the road to chaos.

Therefore the wise person concerns herself with inner  
truth, not with surface appearance,  
with the kernel of the fruit, not the petals of the flower.  
She leaves the one aside, to focus on the other.

**39**

From the beginning of time, following the way things  
develop, these things have become part of the oneness of  
the universe.

The sky attained oneness, and became clear.  
The earth attained oneness, and became peaceful.  
Spirit attained oneness, and became a moving force.  
The valleys attained oneness, and were replenished.  
Life attained oneness, and became fertile.  
The leaders of humanity attained oneness, and became an  
example to their followers.

If the sky wasn't clear, it would tear itself apart.  
If the earth wasn't peaceful, it would destroy itself.  
If spirit was not a moving force, it would fade away.  
If the valleys were not replenished, they would dry up.  
If life was not fertile, it would die out.  
If leaders were not an example to their followers, they  
would lose respect.

The root of greatness is humility.  
As the highest tower has a low foundation,  
the greatest leaders think of themselves as insignificant  
and unworthy.  
The root of their greatness is their humility.

The most honoured are those that don't seek honour.  
They don't wish to shine like polished jade,  
or chime like bells.

**40**

The way things develop is through cycle and return to the  
source.  
It works without force.  
Everything comes from being.  
Being comes from not-being.

**41**

When the wise person learns about the way things develop, she remains in tune with it in everything she does.

When an ordinary person learns about the way things develop, he sometimes works with it, but mostly ignores it.

When a foolish person learns about the way things develop, he falls about laughing.

The foolish person's laughter is proof that this is the way things develop.

Because ancient wisdom tells us:

The path to enlightenment seems dark,  
the path of progress seems to go backwards,  
the easy path seems difficult,  
the greatest integrity seems empty,  
the greatest purity seems stained,  
the greatest abundance seems insufficient,  
the greatest strength seem weak,  
the greatest solidity seems hollow.

The ultimate square has no corners  
the ultimate vessel is never finished,  
the ultimate music has no sound,  
the ultimate image has no form.

The way things develop is hidden and nameless,  
yet through it all things are nourished and made complete.

**42**

The way things develop gives birth to the oneness of the world.  
The oneness of the world gives birth to male and female.  
Male and female give birth to earth, sky and life.  
Earth, sky and life give birth to everything that exists in the world.

Everything in the world contains both the male and female principles.  
Combining in a single breath, they create harmony.

Ordinary people hate to feel insignificant and unworthy,  
and yet this is how the greatest leaders see themselves.

He who makes himself less will grow.  
He who makes himself great will diminish.

I teach what I have learnt from my teachers:  
the violent do not die a peaceful death.

**43**

The softest thing in the world overcomes the hardest.  
That which is without substance can penetrate where there is no space.  
In this I recognise the effectiveness of non-action.

Teaching without words,  
facilitating without action;  
nothing is more effective than these.

**44**

Fame or health, which is more desirable?  
Health or wealth, which is more important?  
Gain one and lose the other: which is worse?

He who loves fame will pay a high price.  
He who amasses wealth will suffer heavy losses.

The person who is content to own little has no fear of poverty.  
The person who knows how to let go has no fear of loss.  
This is the way to a long and peaceful life.

**45**

Ultimate perfection seems imperfect,  
yet it endures forever.  
Ultimate fullness seems empty,  
yet it can never be exhausted.

Ultimate straightness seems winding,  
Ultimate skill seems clumsy,  
Ultimate eloquence seems tongue-tied.

Movement triumphs over coldness,  
Restfulness triumphs over heat.  
Calmness and purity are the guiding principles of the world.

**46**

When a society is in tune with the way things develop,  
work-horses plough the fields.  
When a society is out of tune with the way things develop,  
war-horses gather at the borders.

There is no greater failing than giving way to desire.  
There is no greater weakness than giving way to greed.  
There is no worse disease than meanness of spirit.

To recognise when you have enough,  
is to have all you need

**47**

Without crossing your threshold, you can know all the  
universe.  
Without looking out of the window, you can see the path  
to heaven.  
The further you travel, the less you will learn.

The wise person understands without travelling,  
is aware without seeing,  
accomplishes her work without acting.

**48**

She who is dedicated to studying  
carries more baggage every day.

She who is in tune with the way things develop  
carries less baggage every day.

Doing less and less,  
until she no longer does anything,  
through non-action  
nothing is left undone.

The world is won through letting things take their own  
course.  
He who is driven by the desire to reorganise the world  
only sees it slip out of his reach.

**49**

The wise person doesn't follow her own ideology,  
she follows the aspirations of the people.

Being good to the good,  
and also to those who aren't good,  
her goodness has integrity.

Trusting the trustworthy,  
and also the untrustworthy,  
her trust has integrity.

The existence of such a person  
can make ordinary people feel uncomfortable.

But eventually they will open up to her,  
and become part of her family.

**50**

Of all those who travel from birth to death,  
one third travel the path of life,  
one third are already on the path of death,  
and one third are striving to keep to the path of life, but  
grow fearful as it draws near the graveyard.

The desire to prolong life creates the fear of death.  
The wise person respects both life and death equally,  
without fear.

Thus she who knows how to look after herself,  
can travel in the wilderness without fear of tigers or  
buffalo,  
can cross a battlefield without weapons or amour.

The buffalo will find no way to gore her,  
the tiger will find no way to claw her,  
the arrow will find no way to pierce her.

Why?

Because she is not bound by the fear of death.

**51**

Everything that exists comes into being according to the  
way things develop,  
is formed of material substance,  
is sustained by the order of the natural world,  
is shaped by its environment.

Thus everything in nature works in tune with the way  
things develop, and with the natural order of things.  
No-one dictates it, it happens naturally.

Everything is created according to the way things develop.  
The natural order sustains all things,  
germinates them and raises them up,  
feeds them and protects them,  
brings them to fruition and returns them to the earth.

Producing, without possessing,  
facilitating and letting go,  
guiding without controlling;  
this is deep integrity.

52

The world has its origin  
in the universal mother.

If you sense the spirit of the mother,  
you will know her children.

If you know the children, yet hold to the spirit of the  
mother, you will endure, and never be exhausted.

Shut out the chaos of sensory stimulation,  
stay centred within yourself,  
and your energy will flow constantly.

Open all the doors,  
respond to all the stimulation,  
and your energy will be continually be dissipated.

To perceive the smallest nuances is to possess intuition.  
To hold fast to gentleness is to possess bravery.  
As you appreciate the light that guides your way  
also look back to know where it has its source.  
Stay in tune with the way things develop,  
and you won't meet with trouble on the road.

53

If I have a little knowledge of the world  
I will use it to follow the great highway,  
and fear nothing but to stray from it.  
The great highway is smooth and easy,  
but most people prefer side tracks and dead ends.

The court is bedecked in splendour,  
yet the people's fields are full of weeds  
and their stores are empty.

If the leaders are dressing in embroidered robes,  
carrying arms at the ready,  
gorging on fancy food and drink,  
growing richer every day,  
this is called robbery and corruption.  
It is not in tune with the way things develop.

54

That which is deep-rooted can't be knocked down,  
that which is firmly tied can't be shaken loose.  
If you have integrity, your children and your grandchildren  
will honour your memory.

Cultivated in yourself, your integrity will be secure.  
Cultivated in your family, integrity will enrich it.  
Cultivated in the community, integrity will make it  
flourish.  
Cultivated in the world, integrity will become universal.

You can see this in your fellow human beings by looking  
within yourself.  
You can see it in families by looking at your own family.  
You can see it in society by looking at your own  
community.  
You can see it at work in the world by looking around you.

How do I know the world is like this?  
Like I said, it is there for all to see.

55

The person who has true integrity  
is like a newborn child;  
wasps and bees won't sting it,  
wild animals won't attack it,  
birds of prey won't take it.

Its bones are soft and its muscles weak,  
but the strength of its life-force is overwhelming.  
It knows nothing of sexual desire,  
yet its penis is erect,  
so strong is its vital energy.  
It can cry all day and never become hoarse,  
so perfect is its inner harmony.

To know this harmony is to be in tune with the way things  
develop.  
To be in tune with the way things develop is to attain  
insight.  
To artificially enhance nature violates its harmony.  
To force development brings disaster.

Growth that is artificially forced  
is not in tune with the way things develop.  
Whatever is forced in this way  
ages quickly and dies prematurely.

56

Those who know don't talk.  
Those who talk don't know.

Close the door,  
shut out the noise,  
smooth off the sharp edges,  
untangle the knots,  
soften the glare,  
let the dust settle,  
feel yourself part of the oneness of all things.

The way things develop is not something you can get close to,  
but nor can you get away from it.  
You can't praise it,  
you can't blame it,  
you can't benefit it,  
you can't harm it,  
but, perceiving it at work in the world,  
you can respect and treasure it.

57

Govern the state through stability.  
Treat war as deviation.  
The world can be won  
through the power of non-action.

How do I know?

Because I see that the more oppressive the rulers,  
the poorer the people,  
the more weapons there are,  
the more violence and aggression,  
the more technology develops,  
the more pointless are its products,  
the more rules and regulations there are,  
the more fraudsters and cheats.

So the wise person says:

I practise non-action and the people transform their own reality.  
I am peaceful and the people resolve their own conflicts.  
I don't buy or sell and the people prosper by themselves.  
I have no desires and the people return to simplicity.

58

When the government is easy-going  
the people are open and honest.  
When the government is rigid and interfering  
the people are devious and deceitful.

Good fortune is shaped by misfortune,  
misfortune is latent in good fortune.  
Where is the dividing line?  
There is no distinction.  
What seems like progress can turn out to be disaster,  
what seems a triumph can turn out to be defeat.

For a long time people have failed to understand this,  
therefore the wise person helps people correct their errors  
without losing face,  
challenges without offending,  
sets things right without forcing,  
enlightens without dazzling.

59

To help people organise according to the way things  
develop, nothing works better than moderation,  
because to practise moderation  
is to be in tune with the way things develop.

She who is in tune with the way things develop  
will be secure in her integrity.

She who is secure in her integrity  
will overcome all obstacles.  
She who overcomes all obstacles  
can face any challenge.  
She who can face any challenge  
is ready for leadership.

Because she holds fast to the spirit of the mother,  
her roots are deep,  
her foundation is firm,  
she has a long-term vision  
and her achievement endures.

60

Governing a large country is like frying a small fish:  
For best results, don't interfere with it.

Care for the world in harmony with the way things  
develop and the forces of destruction will be powerless.  
The forces of oppression will be unable to harm the  
people, and the leadership will be benevolent.

Integrity will spread in all directions.

**61**

A great nation is like low-lying land;  
many rivers flow into it,  
it embodies the female principle.  
The female overcomes the male through her calmness and  
receptivity.

A large country can win over a small country by being  
open and accepting of it.  
In the same way a small country can win the protection of  
a large country by recognising and respecting it.  
Thus one shows respect by offering protection,  
the other shows respect by accepting it.

The large country wants to embrace and support more  
people.  
The small country wants security in alliance with its  
neighbour.  
For both to achieve their aims and live in peace,  
it is right that the large state takes the low-lying position.

**62**

The way things develop is the core of all life.  
It guides the way for people of integrity.  
It also provides refuge for those who lack integrity.

Honours can be bought with fine words,  
good deeds can set you above the crowd,  
but is it right to reject those who are not capable of this?

When a new leader takes office  
or a new government is installed  
people rush forward with gifts and offerings,  
and yet the most valuable treasure you can give a leader  
costs nothing:  
be calm and offer your perception  
of the way things develop.

Why did the ancients have such great respect for the way  
things develop?  
We can't say it was for personal gain;  
rather to maintain the balance of nature.  
For this they were held in high esteem.

**63**

Practise non-action,  
act by not-doing,  
see by not-looking.  
Treat big things as of little importance,  
and small things as full of significance.  
Repay injury with healing.

Tackle a big problem one step at a time;  
achieve a great work through small actions.  
The most difficult job in the world  
can be reduced to easy steps.  
The biggest project is brought to fruition  
one action at a time.  
The wise person doesn't embark on grand projects,  
and so achieves far-reaching changes.

He who makes big promises rarely delivers the goods.  
He who claims everything will be easy  
invariably finds things more difficult than he thought.  
The wise person is prepared for the difficulties  
and so finds her task easy.

**64**

A system in equilibrium is easy to maintain;  
problems can best be dealt with before they arise.  
What is fragile is easily broken;  
what is broken is easily scattered to the winds.  
Deal with problems before they arise;  
put things in order before they become chaotic.

The greatest tree grows from a tiny seed;  
the tallest tower is made of earth and clay;  
the journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.

Try to control things and you will fail.  
Try to hold on to things and you will lose them.  
The wise person doesn't try to control things,  
and so doesn't fail;  
doesn't try to hold on to things,  
and so has nothing to lose.

All too often a project fails  
just when it is on the point of becoming a success.  
If people organised as carefully at the end of a project as at  
the beginning,  
their projects wouldn't fail.

Therefore the wise person desires only to be without  
desire,  
has no use for glittering trophies,  
learns how to unlearn,  
avoids the excesses of ordinary people.  
Without controlling, she facilitates the natural  
development of all things.

**65**

In earlier times, the wise ones who were in tune with the way things develop didn't seek to enlighten people, but kept the community simple and close to nature. With too much knowledge and cleverness the community starts to disintegrate.

He who organises with cunning and cleverness only weakens the community.  
He who organises with simplicity and openness strengthens the community.  
To know these two things is to understand the principle of all government.  
To understand this principle is to govern with integrity.  
To govern with integrity may call for profound and far-reaching changes,  
but eventually it achieves unity and harmony.

**66**

The sea receives the tribute of all rivers and streams because it places itself beneath them.

In the same way, if you wish to organise people speak to them with humility;  
if you wish to lead people learn to follow them.  
Thus the wise person is above the ordinary people but they don't feel her weight.  
She organises the people but they don't feel any pressure.  
So she has the support of the whole community.

Because she doesn't compete with anyone, no-one can compete with her.

**67**

Everyone tells me that my message is profound, but has no practical use.  
It is because it is so profound that it seems pointless.  
If it was practical, it would long ago have ceased to be profound.

I have three treasures to which I hold fast.  
The first is love,  
the second is moderation,  
and the third is humility.

When I feel love, I can be brave.  
When I practise moderation, I can be generous.  
When I am humble, and place myself last, I can be a leader.

Bravery without love,  
generosity without moderation,  
leadership without humility;  
all are paths to destruction.

Struggle lovingly and you will overcome;  
defend lovingly and you will stand firm.  
Love will support and protect you.

**68**

A good general isn't warlike,  
a good warrior isn't aggressive,  
a good victor isn't vengeful,  
a good leader places herself below the people.

This is the power of non-aggression,  
and the quality of leadership.  
This is being in harmony with the way things develop.

**69**

The best advice in a conflict is the old strategy which says, "Don't attack ... wait and see.  
It is better to retreat a foot than advance an inch".

This is called progressing without pushing forward,  
confronting without aggression,  
repelling without force,  
overcoming without violence.

There is no greater risk than to underestimate an opponent.  
To underestimate an opponent is to lose all advantage.

When two equal forces confront each other,  
the one that feels anguish at having to fight will emerge victorious.

**70**

My teaching is easy to grasp, but impossible to understand,  
easy to follow, but impossible to practise.

My words have a simple message,  
my teaching has a purpose,  
but still they are not understood,  
and I remain unknown in the world.

Those who recognise me and respect my teaching are few,  
but they are people of wisdom.  
Under their coarse clothes they carry a jewel in their hearts.

**71**

Moving from correctness to questioning,  
this is positive.  
Moving from questioning to correctness,  
this is sickness.

When you become sick of your sickness  
you are no longer sick.

The wise person is sick of her sickness,  
therefore she is not sick.

**72**

When no one is afraid of a leader's power,  
the leader is truly powerful.

Don't put pressure on people.  
Treat them with respect.  
It's because you treat them with respect  
that they respect your leadership.

The wise person knows herself,  
but doesn't set herself apart from others.  
She loves herself,  
but doesn't rate herself above others.

In each case, she takes the first option and drops the  
second.

**73**

Bravery based on daring will get you killed.  
Bravery based on love will see you through.  
The second is positive, the first, destructive.

The way of nature never competes, but always wins;  
never speaks, but always responds;  
cannot be summoned, but always arrives;  
cannot be hurried, but is always on time.

The natural order of things sometimes appears unjust.  
Who knows why?  
Even the wise person finds this difficult.

Nature's great net has a wide mesh, but nothing slips  
through.

**74**

When tyranny makes life unbearable,  
to threaten people with death is pointless.

When the people have a life worth living,  
the death penalty is effective,  
but who needs to use it?

Killing should be the sole responsibility of the great  
executioner.

Taking the place of the great executioner  
is like sawing wood in the workshop of the master  
carpenter:

You end up cutting your own hand.

**75**

The people are hungry.  
The rulers impose unjust taxes, so people have no food.

The people are rebellious.  
The rulers interfere with their lives, so people become  
defiant.

The people are risking death.  
They are fighting for a better life, so they are willing to  
risk everything.

The person who lives to enjoy life  
is wiser than the one who lives for some other end.

**76**

At birth, a human being is soft and yielding;  
in death, stiff and hard.

All beings, grass and trees,  
alive are soft and yielding;  
dead are stiff and hard.

Thus the rigid and unyielding are companions of death,  
the soft and flexible are companions of life.

An army that doesn't yield is destroyed.  
A tree that doesn't bend, breaks.  
The hard and rigid are brought down.  
The soft and flexible rise up.

**77**

The natural way is like tensing a bow:  
The highest part is pulled down,  
the lowest part is pulled up.  
The excess is reduced to make up the deficiency.

The way of nature is to reduce surplus  
so as to make up deficiency.  
The way of humankind is the opposite:  
It takes from the most needy,  
and gives to those who already have excess.

Who can give up his surplus for the good of others?  
Only one who is in tune with the way things develop.

The wise person acts, expecting no return;  
achieves results, but doesn't take credit.  
She has no desire to show off.

**78**

Nothing is softer and weaker than water,  
yet nothing can compare with it for wearing down the hard  
and strong.  
There is no substitute.

The weak overcomes the strong  
and the soft overcomes the hard.  
Everyone knows this simple fact,  
but no one can put it into practice.

A wise one once said:  
He who accepts all the nation's horse-shit  
grows the finest crops.  
He who takes on all the nation's ills  
becomes the nation's leader.

The truth can often seem paradoxical.

**79**

In the resolution of conflicts,  
there's always some resentment left behind.  
What's the good in that?

The wise person is owed much,  
but doesn't demand payment.  
The person of integrity is concerned with what she owes to  
others.  
The person without integrity is concerned with demanding  
his due.

The way things develop shows no partiality.  
If you respect it, it respects you.

**80**

Better small communities with few people:  
The people have no desire to move far.

Boats and carriages fall into disuse; there is no urge to  
travel.

Weapons and armour rust; there is no occasion to display  
them.

There is no use for technology.

People find that knotted strings serve well enough to  
record their transactions.

They enjoy their food,  
feel comfortable in their clothing,  
and relaxed in their homes.  
They value their local culture and traditions.

Neighbouring countries are so close you can hear the dogs  
barking and the cocks crowing across the border,  
yet people grow old and die without ever feeling the  
inclination to visit them.

**81**

True words aren't elegant.  
Elegant words aren't true.  
The good aren't judgmental.  
The judgmental aren't good.  
The wise don't know all the answers.  
Those who know all the answers aren't wise.

The wise person doesn't work to amass wealth.  
She works for the good of others,  
and this enriches her.  
She gives herself to others,  
and this replenishes her.

Nature's way is to benefit all and harm none.  
The way of the wise person is to work for all  
and compete with none.