LAOZI

DAO DE JING

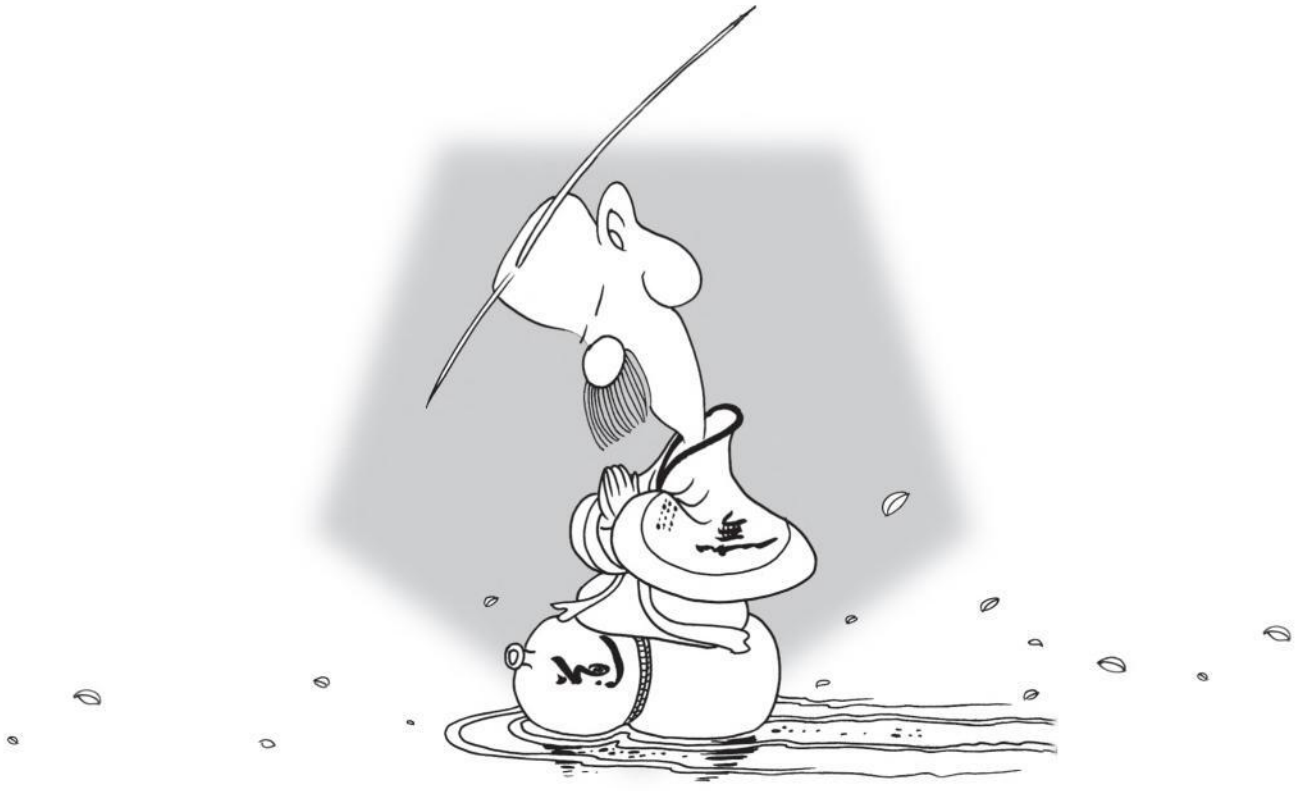
ILLUSTRATED BY

C. C. TSAI

FOREWORD BY

PICO IYER

AUTHOR OF *THE ART OF STILLNESS*



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Contents

BOOK II: VIRTUE

Foreword

A Radical Reminder

PICO IYER

All of us have heroes who brace and inspire us by redefining what is meant by achievement. For some it might be Thomas Merton or Dorothy Day, who seem great precisely because they lived so humbly. For others it might be the fourteenth Dalai Lama, who clearly sees leadership as a form of service and knows that inner wealth outlasts material possessions. For many it's someone like sixteen-year-old Greta Thunberg, who chose to remind the world from a position of absolute modesty—and near-invisibility—that what it too often regards as progress is in fact murderous decline, as we neglect the laws of Nature in favor of the temporary agendas of men.

Whenever we bow before such models, I feel we're bowing *before* the Dao, whether or not we know that name. The brief, pellucid collection of wise precepts, ascribed to Laozi and brought to us here with a refreshingly colloquial immediacy and a perfectly down-to-earth humanity, is essentially a wake-up call to all of us to recall what we knew before we fell captive to society's assumptions. The Dao is radical, in the literal sense, because it comes from the root and calls us back to the source. It is mysterious as empty space, time without end, and all we cannot claim to grasp or articulate. But it speaks to some intuition inside nearly every one of us, regardless of our background, that trying to make a name for ourselves is only going to defame us, and that desire feeds on itself unendingly, even as joy knows what it is and finds contentment right here, right now.

Maybe that's why the paradoxical truths of this direct yet enigmatic text have lasted so long and come through to many who have no need of words like "Dao De Jing" and do not even know if Laozi existed. I think of Henry David Thoreau, choosing to live at an angle to society, plumbing his inner resources, defining "journalist" and "extravagance" in fresh and inspiring ways, conscientiously objecting to the arbitrary laws of society. How apt that he chose to live beside water, which, like the Dao, endures and encourages reflection even as it wears away stone. I remember the time my house burned down in a forest fire and, having lost every last thing I owned, I finally saw what I truly valued. Now, I realized, I could live with space for something far beyond me to fill my being up. I recall the unknown citizen who stood in front of a tank in Tiananmen Square, clutching two shopping bags, and I see that the Dao never dies, maybe in part because—as this text suggests—it was never born.

The Dao by its definition is non-denominational and universal; part of what Laozi stresses is that words divide us where silence brings us together, names create divisions where what's beyond them is all-encompassing. What we most crave, therefore, is a depiction of it as easily apprehended by children, old people, and citizens worldwide as C. C. Tsai's illustrations. An accompanying translation as everyday as Brian Bruya's gives us a voice as unpretentious and true as a friendly chat on a local park bench. The Dao stands on no ceremony and makes fun of all airs, so to receive it as it comes to us here—from

a cheerful, even irreverent illustrator who has chosen to live according to inner laws and a rich sense of simplicity—seems as invigoratingly apt as, in fact, a piece of coarse clothing concealing a heart of jade.

I've seen many fine and clarifying versions of the Dao in my time, and the Zen monks all around me near my home in Western Japan sometimes live it without needing to think about texts. More importantly, though, I know the truth of this in my own life, as do all of us when we're at our clearest. I'm always happiest when I'm lost in something outside of myself and truest when I'm listening to life rather than trying to impose my plans or ideas upon it. I've always been more sustained by an inner savings account, made up of what I trust and give, than by anything to be found in my checking account or my resumé. I recoil from myself when I hear myself trying to be serious, and draw closer when I detect a sense of play.

The beauty of the Dao may well be that it's as ubiquitous as air—or water—and that it doesn't care what we think or say of it. But read the precepts of Epictetus or the Book of Proverbs in the Bible and you can see it winking back at us. Note how Shakespeare's Fools are regularly the source of wisdom that self-revering kings turn to in moments of need and you know that it was alive and well in Elizabethan England. Consult Annie Dillard in her hidden perch in the hills of Virginia, who tells us she considers herself a "humorist"—precisely because we see her as a wise contemplative—and you will recall that illustrations may be the best way into the Dao, since they, like it, often refuse to traffic in simple explanations.

In Laozi's upside-down overturning, serving up unconventional truth means serving up something extraordinary in all its everyday ordinariness. An uncommon sensibility is a jolting path towards common sense. And instead of the *Daily News*, as Thoreau might have put it, the text we most profit from is the *View from Eternity*. In the age of the tiny screen, we long more than ever for the larger picture. And at a time of the accelerating new, we sense we can best be grounded and instructed by the old.

Make way, then, for a wisdom that's nothing special and a vision you perhaps knew best before you knew better. In this joyously direct and unfussy rendition, what comes to us is as natural as a slap on the back, as urgent as an awakening bonk on the head.

Pico Iyer
Laguna Beach
October 7, 2019

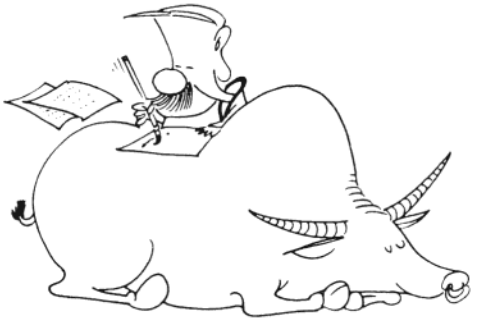
Introduction

BRIAN BRUYA

There was a news story about an online computer program that creates inspirational sayings. I tried the site, and the first aphorism to appear was: "Our knowledge begins with our senses." The second was: "Ensure that a neighbor puts on pants."

The fact that the first one has been an axiom of empirically-minded philosophers over many centuries suggests that something approximating complex human intelligence is going on behind the scenes at this website. The second suggests the opposite. Either way, the site gets us thinking about the power of catchy sayings in philosophical thinking. Two thousand years ago in Europe, it was common for philosophers to boil ideas down to memorable maxims in order to keep them in front of the mind. This practice largely disappeared from the field of philosophy, but the impulse to the pithy remained. Benjamin Franklin perfected the practice, and we still see sayings printed on posters, pasted onto car bumpers, and tattooed onto skin. But when does a saying go from merely pithy to profound?

In my opinion, the sign of a true literary or philosophical classic is that it both touches the reader in a profound way and is memorable. Nursery rhymes and the sayings of *Poor Richard's Almanac* are memorable but not necessarily profoundly moving. Love stories, biographies, and essays that speak to contemporary issues can be profoundly moving but do not necessarily withstand the test of time.



The *Dao De Jing* is both of these. Its aphoristic style is catchy and superficially appealing. Its deeper meaning is multifaceted, inviting numerous readings over a lifetime of study.

As a philosopher rather than a literary critic, I will speak primarily to the layers of meaning in the *Dao De Jing*, but I should begin by situating it in terms of history and literary style. Historically, there is a lot we know and a lot we don't know about the *Dao De Jing*.

The book comes down to us in many editions—on silk, on stone, on bamboo, on paper; they are found in tombs, caves, temples, and encyclopedic collections, often accompanied by scholarly explanations. At this writing, the earliest full version of the *Dao De Jing* we have (which happens to be written on silk) dates to no later than 168 BCE. The earliest partial version (which is written on bamboo slats) dates to ca. 300 BCE. We also know that Sima Qian, who died in about 87 BCE, wrote an extremely influential biography of Laozi, situating Laozi as an older contemporary of Confucius (551–479 BCE) and author of the *Dao De Jing*.

What we don't know is how much, if any, of Sima Qian's biography is true. Three or four centuries passed between the purported time of Laozi and the writing of the biography. In that time, there are some mentions of Laozi but not many, and none that can be reliably dated. This absence of information has led Western scholars of early China to infer evidence of absence, with many preferring the position that Laozi was a mythical figure and the book itself a collection of maxims that was added to over time.

Not surprisingly, most Chinese scholars follow Sima Qian in believing that Laozi was a historical figure who wrote the *Dao De Jing* during the time of Confucius. Unfortunately, right now there is no way to know for sure who is right. We can either side with Chinese tradition or withhold belief until there is convincing evidence. Regardless, we still have before us a brilliant book that dates, in part, at least to around the time of Aristotle (whose own writings, by the way, have all been lost, and the works we have in his name disappeared for several hundred years until they reappeared in edited form—a fact that Western scholars rarely dwell on).

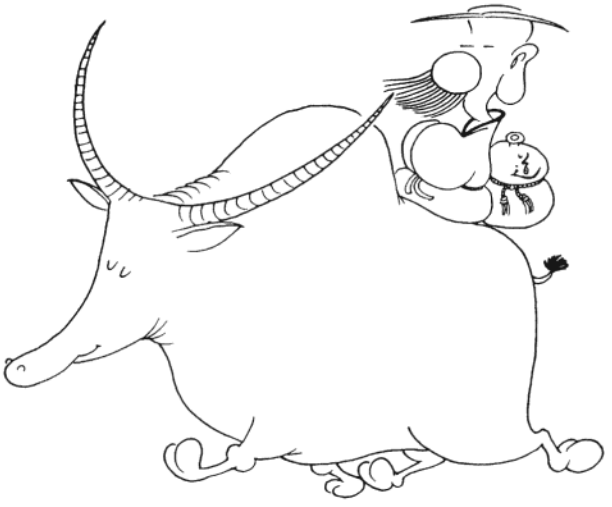
Some Western interpreters of the *Dao De Jing* overromanticize it, saying, for example, that it is one long poem. It isn't. Although it has poetic features, such as some end-rhymes and some lines that are parallel in structure, it has never been considered an example of poetry in Chinese literary history. We can say that it is poetic but not that it is a poem.

The language of the *Dao De Jing* is appealing, no doubt, but the ideas are even more so. The overarching theme of the *Dao De Jing* is *Dao* 道, a term that means something like "natural law," but not in exactly the way that you are probably thinking of natural law. When you hear or read the term "natural law," you probably envision something like Newton's laws of physics—planets traveling in orbit around the sun, objects falling by gravity, and so on.

Or maybe you think of natural law in a religious sense—that certain moral truths are built into the fabric of the universe. Both concepts of natural law are familiar to most people educated in the West, and although they are in some ways similar to the concept of Dao, they are also critically different.

Dao refers to the way nature works but rather than an emphasis on incontrovertible law by which all things must move, the emphasis is on recognizable patterns by which all things spontaneously grow and flourish. Instead of physical mechanics as a model for natural law, a better model for Laozi would be biology or fluid mechanics—life and the life-giving, flow and the flowing. Images we see in the *Dao De Jing* are grass, water, and the feminine. What is it about these that represent nature? They are flexible, dynamic, humble, and/or generative. Not only are they models for how nature works, they are also models for how people should live.

Taking physical mechanics as a model for nature in the West eventually led to a separation of humans from nature—because human action is not law-like in the way that nature is, nor should it be. For most Chinese philosophers, by contrast, natural action has always been the highest form of human aspiration. The keys to understanding Daoist natural action are the concepts of *wu-wei* 無為 and *ziran* 自然.



Really, the two terms *wu-wei* and *ziran* represent two aspects of the same idea—spontaneous motion. *Ziran* generally (but not exclusively) emphasizes the spontaneity of motion in broader nature and *wu-wei* emphasizes it in the human sphere. In order to achieve *ziran*, a human being should *wu-wei*. *Wei* in Classical Chinese means "to do" or "to act" toward some goal with some intention in mind. The most obvious goal we see in the *Dao De Jing* is the goal of achieving good government. Today, we associate good government with studying, planning, and then executing accordingly—all overt, intentional behavior—in order to create a free, prosperous society. But Laozi says, "By acting in accordance with nature and governing selflessly, there will be nothing in the country that is not well-governed," (chapter 3) which suggests that either we are wrong or Laozi is outdated. The key to reconciling Laozi's notion of freedom with our own lies in the idea of selflessness.

Consider Ronald Reagan's reference to the *Dao De Jing*. He once quoted chapter 60 in a State of the Union address: "Govern a great nation as you would cook a small fish; do not overdo it." Reagan meant that there should be fewer laws and regulations holding back human ingenuity, which when unleashed can bring unprecedented prosperity. A basic insight of capitalism is that by allowing everyone to pursue their selfish desires, we can prosper together. Reagan (or, more likely, his speech writer) didn't notice that ingenuity and selfishness in single-minded pursuit of material prosperity is contrary to a Daoist notion of how things ought to be.

Laozi did say, "The more laws there are, the more outlaws there will be" (chapter 57), which again sounds like a Reaganesque thing to say, but Laozi is about reducing more than just laws. He is about reducing the desire to gain, the desire to get for oneself at the expense of others, the desire to get ahead.

The way Laozi sees it, when we are all in pursuit of selfish material desires and pleasures, we become contentious, willing to harm others (or let others be harmed) for our own gain. Conventionally speaking, we try to mitigate this harm, or at least lessen our guilt, by developing a system of virtues. This slows some people down, but those in power often ignore them or even exploit them for their own benefit. The solution, according to Laozi, is not just to reduce laws but also to reduce our reliance on the system of moral virtues. To do that, people must have fewer desires.

That seems like an impossible task. How do you get people to have fewer desires? Isn't that going against their natural

inclinations? According to Laozi, it all begins at the top. It is a long-standing educational belief in China that people learn by example. If the people at the top reduce selfish desires, then people lower down will follow suit. It is a pretty simple method that brings three themes in the *Dao De Jing* together: self-cultivation, governing, and cosmology.

Leaders need to engage in self-cultivation, separating themselves from the typical goals and standards of society. They need to live a simple life of serenity, neither desiring more than they need nor contending with others for treasures or land. The people will then respond by also reducing their desires, leading simpler lives, striving for less, being less contentious—ultimately achieving the aims of good government all on their own. The overall condition of society, then, will more closely resemble that of nature, where the rains come without help, the sun shines without assistance, and growing plants take water but not more than they need, eventually returning it to its source.

"This all seems well and good for a faceless society, but what about individuality? What if we don't want to be just another drone?" This question seems to follow logically from what we've discussed, but does it really? Where in Laozi's philosophy do we see him promoting conformity? That's what laws and moral standards do. By reducing the need for them, we allow for *more* individuality, not less. Don't we have the saying that every snowflake is unique? This principle applies to more than just snowflakes. Think of fingerprints and facial recognition. They rely on the uniqueness of external features. Maple leaves all follow a similar pattern, but each is unique in itself. So are lizards and mountains, clouds and stones. Individuality is a feature of nature.

One of the most difficult ideas in the *Dao De Jing* is the notion of virtue. We see it many times, especially in the second half, which is called the "Book of Virtue." The title of the *Dao De Jing* means "the classic (*jing* 經) of *Dao* and virtue (*de* 德)." Now, we've just said that Laozi was against conformist moralities of society, including the use of virtue to rein in people's desires. So how is he suddenly a great proponent of virtue?

The best way to understand the concept of *de* is to think of it as Dao at the level of the individual. Dao is a way, as in a method or a path. On its own, it is a general method or path,

but no single method or path works for everyone. *De* is each person's individual method or path. To have virtue in a Daoist sense is to be your best individual self, living according to your conditions and in harmony with your surroundings.

Let's look at chapter 51:

> The Dao produces all things; virtue nourishes them. Things come in all shapes and sizes, and their environment brings them to maturity. The Dao and virtue are the basis of the creation and growth of all things. Therefore, things esteem nothing more than the Dao and value nothing more than virtue. The reason the Dao is esteemed and virtue valued is that they do not interfere with things but always let nature take its course. The Dao produces them, while virtue fosters them, allows them to grow, nurtures them, brings them to maturity, and protects them. Producing without taking as one's own, nurturing without presuming upon one's abilities, bringing to maturity without trying to control. This is the most profound virtue.

In the concluding panel, Tsai explains:

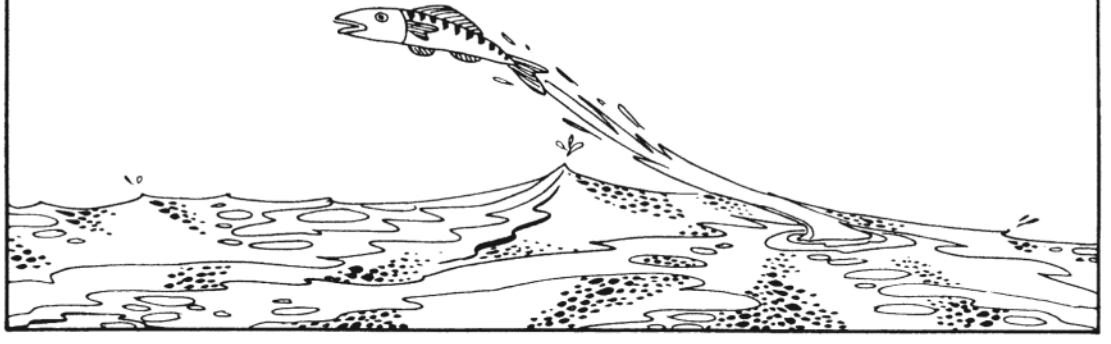
> The Dao and virtue create all things but entirely with spontaneity as the basis. They do not control or interfere with them, just allowing them to develop naturally. The greatness of the Dao and virtue lies in this lack of selfishness and desire, and it is why they are held in high regard by all things.

We can think of Dao as the general pattern and virtue as its individual manifestation. Dao gives us the general shape of the maple leaf, and virtue gives us each individual maple leaf. What does that mean then for human individuals? Being virtuous means being who you are without encroaching on others, directly or indirectly. In Laozi's Daoism, there is plenty of room for spontaneous individuality, but it does not manifest as crazy self-expression or selfish pursuit of desires. Rather, it manifests as quiet self-mastery.

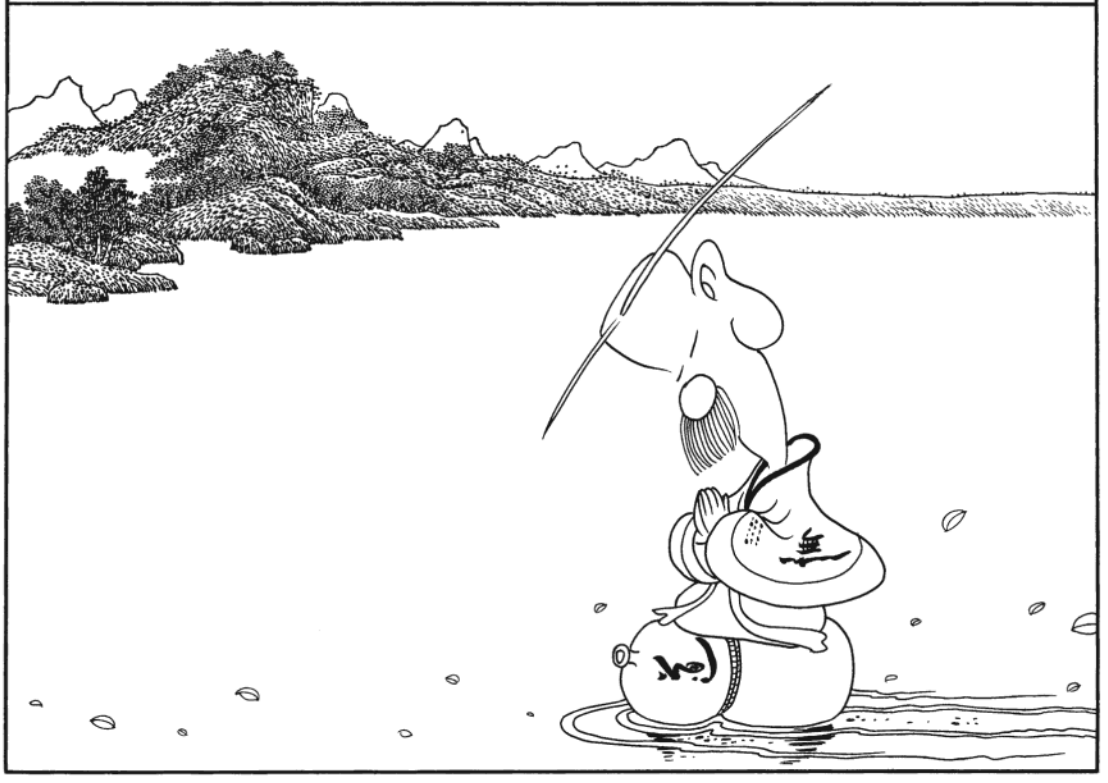
When you are reading through the *Dao De Jing* and you come across something that seems strange to you, see if you can use the discussion above to make sense of it. I find that the thing that most often prevents people from understanding a Chinese classic is the presuppositions that they bring to it. Americans, especially libertarians, will see the reference to frying fish in chapter 60 and immediately think it echoes their own political view when it really doesn't. The same goes for importing a Christian view of selflessness. There is a notion of selflessness in Laozi, but it is not a Christian kind of self-denial or self-sacrifice for the sake of a transcendent good. It is difficult to get out of one's own perspective, but thinking through the above ideas can help get you into a more Daoist frame of mind for understanding the text.

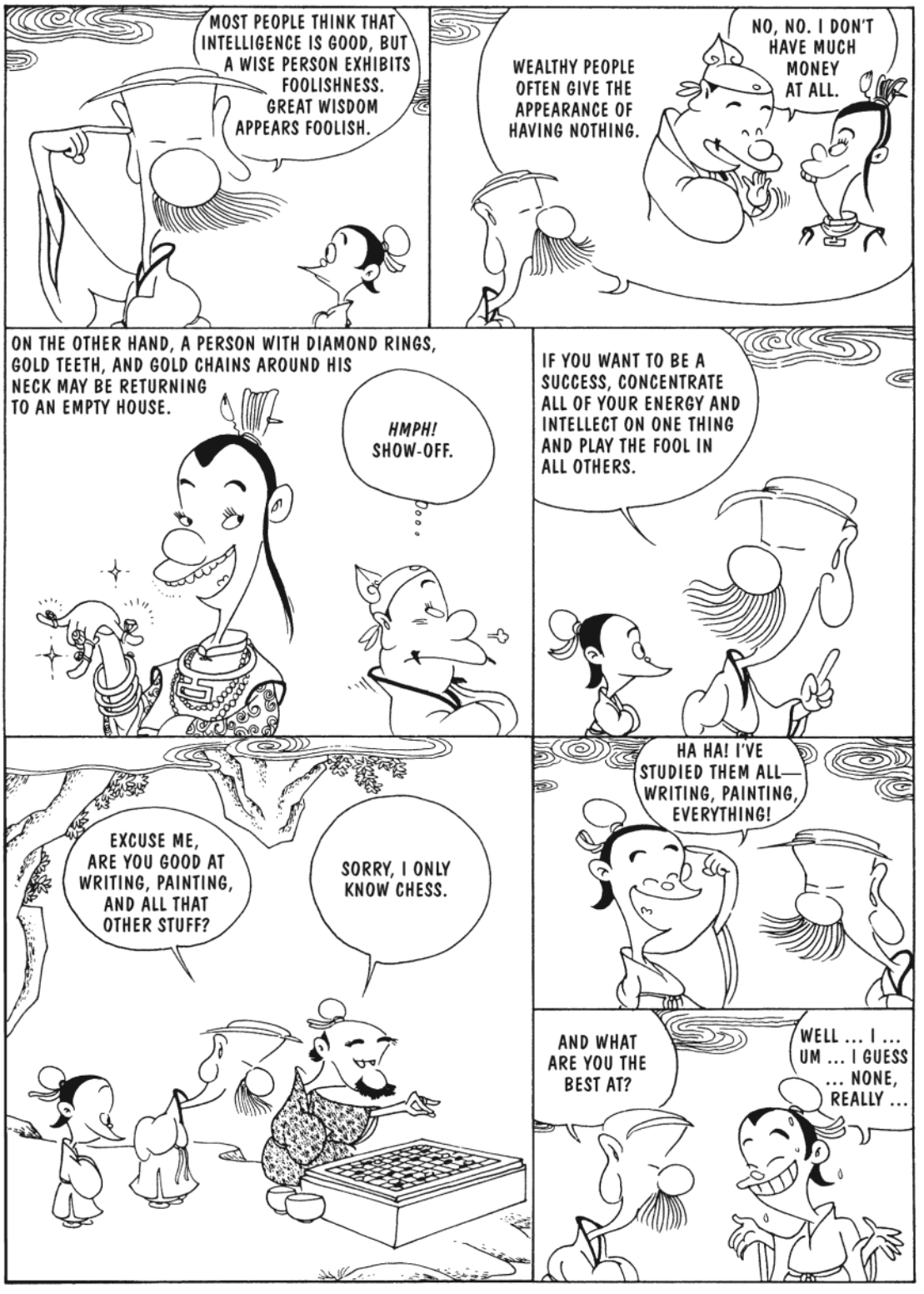
As with many classics, it takes time to fully appreciate the profundity of its ideas. The sketch I've provided above is a stepping-stone to a lifetime of study. Read as many versions of the *Dao De Jing* as you can. Study their different perspectives and explanations. Expose yourself to other Daoists, like Zhuangzi and Liezi, and learn about how Daoism meshed with Buddhism to form the core of Zen Buddhist beliefs. Gradually—or maybe suddenly—the ideas embedded in the clever aphorisms will crystalize, and an ancient, unique view of humanity and the cosmos will come into view.

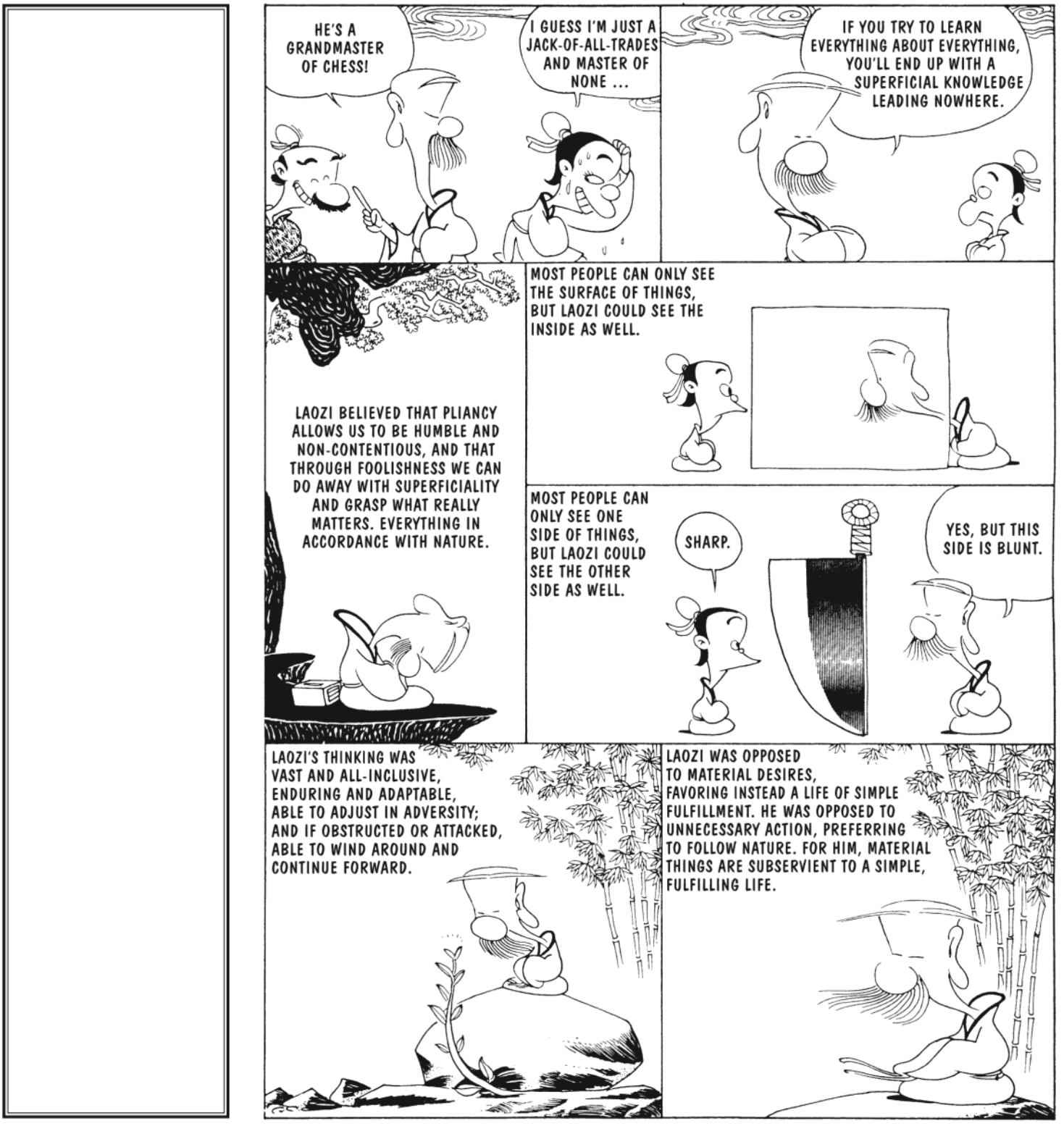
DAO DE JING



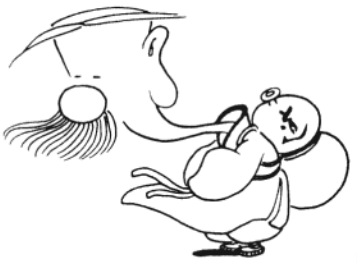
LAOZI







LAOZI
IS LIKE
A DRAGON



ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE CENTURIES AGO, SOPHISTICATED CULTURES FLOURISHED IN SEVERAL PARTS OF THE WORLD. THESE CULTURES PRODUCED OUTSTANDING SCHOLARS AND THINKERS. IN GREECE, THERE WERE THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS THALES AND HERACLITUS.

IN INDIA,
SIDDHĀRTHA GAUTAMA
FOUNDED THE
BUDDHIST RELIGION.

OF THESE, THE MOST INFLUENTIAL WERE THE CONFUCIANS, DAOISTS, MOHISTS, AND LEGALISTS. A GREAT COMMUNICATOR OF WHAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS THE DAOIST SCHOOL WAS A MAN WE CALL LAOZI.

IN CHINA, DURING THE SPRING & AUTUMN AND WARRING STATES PERIODS (770–221 BCE), NUMEROUS SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT AROSE AND COMPETED VIGOROUSLY FOR DOMINATION.

老子者，楚苦縣厲鄉曲仁里人也，姓李氏，名耳，字聃，周守藏室之史也。