《道德经》

玄妙解

Decoding the Tao Te Ching

SIM Pooh Ho

Translated by **Tekson TEO**

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Foreword

Tekson Teo's translation of Master Sim Pooh Ho's book on the *Tao Te Ching* is masterly. To be precise, Teo's translation is an interpretation of Master Sim's book. Even the translation of 玄妙解 in the title as "decoding" calls for a judgment of what Master Sim intends to convey. It is certainly not Google's translation.

Teo is a longstanding disciple of Master Sim and has a deep understanding of Master Sim's thinking. However, Master Sim's thinking is multi-layered and a disciple's grasp of his master's knowledge is never complete. I am reminded of what Master Sim said of his master, Wu Tunan. Master Sim once asked Grand Master Wu when he would complete his learning from him. Grand Master Wu did not reply the first time. When asked again later, he stroked his white beard and remarked wrily that he himself was still learning. Grand Master Wu's point which Master Sim keeps reiterating to us, his disciples, is that we ourselves should never stop learning.

The deep sources of Taijigong are the *Tao Te Ching* and *I Ching*. Master Sim's understanding of the *Tao Te Ching* is a result of many years of patient study and deep reflection, including what he learned from Grand Master Wu. His book is profound and precious, and deserves to be read and re-read. As the disciple grows in knowledge and wisdom, he discovers or uncovers a new layer. Master Sim himself takes an interest in quantum mechanics and dark matter and stresses the need to update our understanding in the light of new scientific discoveries.

It is Master Sim's lifelong wish that the benefits of Taijigong should be made available to all people and not just to Chinese people. Having his book translated into English, or interpreted in English, is therefore an important task which he entrusted to Teo. Teo took this on not as a task but as a mission into which he has invested much time and effort. Indeed, he told me that this mission has become an all-consuming passion. As he wrestles with alternative interpretations, and clarifies them with Master Sim, he feels himself transformed.

In this process of interpreting Master Sm, Teo came to be dissatisfied with existing English translations of the *Tao Te Ching*, of which there are many, and has therefore decided to do his own translation which hews closer to Master's interpretation of the book. The result is an English translation of the *Tao Te Ching* as "decoded" by Master Sim.

Master Sim wrote his book principally for the benefit of his disciples. He asked Teo to do a translation principally for those disciples who do not understand Chinese. Like a seed that grows once it is planted, Master Sim's book has reached a wider readership. Teo's English translation will spread it further. Taijigong is a living tree that bears rich fruits.

George Yeo
Former Foreign Minister of Singapore

How It All Began

For centuries, Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* has fascinated people from every discipline of study, be it history, culture, military, politics, or management. My focus of this book is on its application to self-cultivation and Taijiquan.

Legend has it that Laozi revealed to the spiritually accomplished border guard Yin Xi the wisdom of Tao while penning the *Tao Te Ching* for posterity. The book sheds light on the origin of Tao. An excellent guide for self-cultivation, it explains the role of humankind in the universe and the importance of returning to the Source. Although it is concise and consists of only slightly more than five thousand Chinese characters, it is no less influential than scriptures many times its volume. Unfortunately, the gem of wisdom has been submerged in the sea of annotations for millennia.

The *Tao Te Ching* is about Oneness. It is penetrating, unembellished, and meant to be a guide for self-cultivation. Many people, unfortunately, miss the forest for the tree and fail to appreciate its essence. A similar fate befell the Chan (Zen) Buddhism, which was developed by Bodhidharma during his nine years of isolation. The essence of its wisdom was overshadowed by the Shaolin kungfu it was associated with. This explains why I feel compelled to share with my disciples what I have learned from the *Tao Te Ching*. The embedded messages I have discovered during decades of immersion in the teachings, verified through my Taiji practices, are profound. Through the methodology of Taijigong, which consists

of the levels of *Shi*, *Jin*, *Qi*, and *Hua* (or Form, Inner energy, Qi, and Transcendence, respectively), I progressively demonstrate to the disciples what the wonders are in the book of wisdom.

Some readers are curious about the title of the book, *Decoding the Tao Te Ching*. It is meant to fill a gap. Most people rely on the dictionary definitions to interpret the *Tao Te Ching* and overlook the book's credentials in self-cultivation and eternal Tao. Their interpretations are usually directed with a temporal focus. We cannot rely on the dictionary definitions to attain Tao. It is, nevertheless, a necessary step. What is important is that we don't stop there. We have to probe below the surface to uncover the underlying messages. I hope the sharing can lead to a deeper appreciation of the teachings so that more people can bring back their innocence, gain new ground, and overcome obstacles along the way. It is with these in mind that I name the book as *Decoding the Tao Te Ching*.

Editor/Translator's Notes

Lauded as one of the greatest books of wisdom ever written in human history, the *Tao Te Ching* was written by Laozi, a Chinese Sage of some 2,500 years ago. Since then, the philosophy of life and a spiritual pursuit based on it, known as Taoism, has flourished, not only in China but also around the world. The *Tao Te Ching* has become one of the most sought-after books of wisdom and is said to be the most-translated work after the Bible.

Despite the tremendous influence it commands, the *Tao Te Ching* is surprisingly tiny. It is hard to imagine. The book of such renowned wisdom comprises only slightly more than 5,000 Chinese characters and can be printed on a few pieces of standard letter paper. However, we must never underestimate its profundity. The wisdom it embodies provides a glimpse into the dynamics of the colossal universe, inspirations for a meaningful and profound life, and freedom of the mind that helps readers to go beyond their confines.

Decoding the Tao Te Ching is Master Sim's interpretation of the ancient book of wisdom. Honestly, although I was honored when asked to translate the book, there was also a lot of hesitation. It is a tall order. The *Tao Te Ching* of Laozi is not at all easy to read. Embedded in each of its 5,000 Chinese characters are highly profound messages. At the same time, Master Sim's interpretations are full of references to Taijiquan, religious texts, and folklore, which are a feast to the mind but take patience to chew and digest. To grasp either of the books is intimidating, not to mention rewording them

in English. Fortunately, I overcame the initial doubts, and boldly took up the challenge. Delightfully, the project turned out to be a refreshing and rewarding experience. Trudging through rigorous terrain is grueling. But it is also where the thrills are. I am humbled and inspired.

Master Sim's approach to the subject is anything but academic. It is both spiritual and experiential. The Taiji lineage he inherited from Grand Master Wu Tunan is a milieu for immersion in the wisdom, and the system of Taijigong the lineage inculcates is an exciting playing field to see the teachings in action. Taiji practices such as Transcendence with Heaven connects him to the core of the universe and enables his frequent "dialogues" with the Sage. His unique approach to the ancient book makes the interpretations penetrating, inspiring, and a class of its own.

The Chinese version of the book is a culmination of a series of lectures conducted in 2016. Upon requests from several of his senior disciples, the classes were given in Master Sim's abode located on a scenic mountain in China surrounded by acres of pine trees. It was a rare treat, and I was privileged to be in the audience, and subsequently, also in the editorial panel that put the book together.

I adhered to the original texts as far as possible when doing the first drafts of the translation, until it hit a snag. Many of Master Sim's references are culturally specific and can be bewildering for people without a similar background. His elaborations on Taijiquan are technical and not easy for non-practitioners to follow. Bearing the international readers in mind, I, with the permission of the author, adapted parts of the book. Several passages on Taiji, which were originally in different parts of the book, were also taken out to form a chapter.

While *pinyin* is the mainstay now for the notation of Chinese words, it is a relatively recent phenomenon. The key terms for the *Tao Te Ching*, however, are so entrenched in the Wade-Giles format. In order to avoid confusion, I have chosen to retain them. So, the *Tao Te Ching* is Dao De Jing, Tao is Dao, and Te is De. As for the rest, I use *pinyin* as far as I can. Therefore, Tai Chi is written as Taiji, Tai Chi Quan as Taijiquan, and the *I Ching* as the *Yijing*.

In addition, several terms are unique to the book, and I would like to highlight some of them.

The author uses a few unique terms to describe Tao, including Tao Core (道体) and Tao Zero (道零); and Tao Use (道用) and Tao One (道一). Tao Core and Tao Zero refer to the formless Tao. Tao Use and Tao One or One, on the other hand, refer to its manifestations, which may also be described as Te (德). The key difference between them is that the former is formless, while the latter is its manifestations that impact the myriads of things directly. Besides, the author uses the phrase "Now in the emptiness, now in the present" (即空即有) frequently. It happens when he refers to the oscillation between the formless Tao and its manifestations, or non-being (无) and being (有).

Another recurring term in the book is the *taihe* qi energy (太和之炁). Scientists today use terms like protons, atoms, neutrons, molecules, ions, quantum, or dark matter to describe tiny matter of the universe. Laozi calls them collectively as "something nebulous" (有物混成), and within it is the primordial qi energy. The *taihe* qi predates Heaven and Earth, but is still present and it underlies every existence, and keeps the entire universe in order. It is ultimately Tao and, in Taijigong, forms a conduit for us to connect to Tao Core.

In the time of Laozi, writing a book was laborious because every word had to be knife-engraved on the bamboo slips. It was time-consuming, so writers chose words with immense care. This explains why the words usually comprise multiple meanings and thus are hard to understand. It poses a major challenge for translation. 有 and 无, for example, can be literally translated as "have" and "have not", but they encapsulate a mammoth amount of information beyond what any dictionary definition can possibly contain. There is a lot of compromise when expressing many of the words in English, not to mention finding equivalents.

In addition to understanding the meanings of the words, it is important not to read the book as just another book. Reading of the *Tao Te Ching* is meant to be experiential, not just academic. It requires constant reflections and regular revisits to the book for its insight. This is what *Decoding the Tao Te Ching* does.

The author recalled what his Master told him, "If you want to really learn from me, turn the one thing you learn into three; then thirty, three hundred or three thousand!". We absorb and expand from what we have learned. From one simple idea, we generate another three, three hundred and three thousand. This is the approach the author uses in his decoding of the *Tao Te Ching*. I would think that it is one we should take, too.

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Chief among them is the sponsor for the project, who has chosen to remain anonymous. No words can express our appreciation of his generosity and support.

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Thanks also to Mr Zach Jensen. His critique and comments from a native English speaker's perspective provide me with valuable insight that helped me to fine-tune my approach to addressing the international readers, especially those from the West.

Many of the fellow disciples are extremely supportive and helpful. Special mention goes to Mr Sim Pern Yiau for his many suggestions. I enjoy every discussion with him, be it about the use of words or the applications of the teachings in Taijigong.

Many thanks to others, including the many fellow disciples, who have helped me in one way or another. It is a regret I cannot mention every one of them here. The list is simply too long.

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Chapter 1

Taiji of the Universe (Tao Core, Tao Use)
易有太极（道体，道用）

The Tao that can be mentioned
Is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal name.
Non-being, the beginning of Heaven and Earth.
Being, Mother of all things.
Thus in the constant non-being,
There is a desire to view its mystery.
In the constant being,
There is a desire to view its boundary.
These two, share a common origin,
Yet come forth with
a different name.
Both are called a mystery.
One mystery after another,
The gate to all wonders.

In the vein of the *Yijing*, one of the oldest books in the history of humanity, Laozi begins the *Tao Te Ching* by introducing Tao (道, *dao*4) as the origin of the universe. It is the One Source that generates the myriads of things and where they eventually return to. It is the root of all existence.

The Tao that can be mentioned is not the eternal Tao

No one, however, is able to tell us what Tao exactly is. As Laozi says in this chapter, it cannot be described by words. Even if it "can be mentioned" (可道, *ke*3*dao*4), analyzed, and discussed, something is bound to be lost in the process, and what we can conclude is never "the eternal Tao" (常道, *chang*2*dao*4).

A key reason why Tao cannot be explained is that it is "non-being" (无, *wu*2), with neither form nor shape. How do we describe something without form?

Tao, however, is too important not to be mentioned. Out of necessity, Laozi coined the word "Tao". This is, however, just a name, and it behooves us to be open to compromise — to talk about it within this constraint. That is what Laozi does anyway. In the 81 chapters of the book, he painstakingly explains Tao, in words, as best he could, so that others may better understand it.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name

Unlike Tao, naming (名, *ming*2) is perceptible, and it is never eternal. Naming is best interpreted in both the worldly and spiritual perspectives. First, the worldly perspective. Let's imagine the times we name things. We often do it out of convenience in order to know what we are talking about. There are many ways to name a thing. We can base it on the thing's behavior or appearance. However, whatever a name is, it isn't permanent; it changes when circumstances change.

For example, we name water as "water", when it is in liquid form, but we call it "ice" when it is solidified. When ice melts, we call it "water" again. A gust of wind turns water into a "wave", and a rise in temperature turns it into "steam". In this way, the names of water change as its behavior changes. Because circumstances don't remain constant, a name is always subject to change. It is not "the eternal name" (常名, *chang*2*ming*2).

Now, a spiritual interpretation. As we have established, a name is given to a thing with a set of conditions in mind. If we can be in control of the conditions, we can turn water into ice, steam, and waves at will. By the same token, as long as we are in control of the determining factors, we can optimize any situation that we are in, rather than allowing the situation to control us. If we aspire to be a sage, for example, we must learn the set of factors that condition a sage and allow the factors to arise. When the factors are present, and the condition is ready, we become what we aspire to be … naturally.

Non-being, the beginning of Heaven and Earth. Being, Mother of all things

Laozi next presents us with another pair of concepts: Being and non-being. These concepts are so fundamental that they are the two primary pillars of the book.

"Non-being" is a translation of 无 (*wu*2), which literally means "nothing". Being, on the other hand, is a translation of 有 (*you*3), which means "something".

How can "nothing" and "something" be so important? Even more perplexing is that Laozi describes "nothing" or non-being as the beginning of Heaven and Earth, and he adds that "being", or "something" is "Mother of all things" (万物之母, *wan*4*wu*4*zhi*1*mu*3). But, when we break it apart, we find the reason for this is not confusing or complicated at all.

To understand what the Sage means, we have to go back to the very origin of Tao.

We may call the Tao origin as Tao Core (道体, *dao*4*ti*3). Tao is formless, and so is Tao Core. Although it is elusive, it is omnipresent

and has been around since the beginning of time. Before the emergence of Heaven and Earth, Tao Core was in a nebulous state that Taoists describe as *wuji* (无极, *wu2ji2*). It means "infinity", where there was no awareness, no shape, no form; only a mass of qi (pronounced like "*chee*") energy known as *taihe* qi (太和之炁, *tai4he2zhi1qi4*) that revolved relentlessly in a state of chaos.

Then came the magical moment, something like the Big Bang explosion. At that moment, *taihe* qi converged with *Yuanyang* (元阳), or the Primordial Yang Energy. The convergence sparked off a beam of light that traveled thousands and thousands of miles. In a flash, Heaven was born. Soon, Earth came into being. All of a sudden, Tao became perceptible. While in itself still formless, it was now manifested in the newly born Heaven and Earth. With Heaven and Earth, Yin and Yang energies permeated the universe. Since *Yuanyang*, the Primordial Yang Energy, was life-giving, Yin Yang energies worked in harmony to generate life, and the myriads of things mushroomed. "Tao generates one, one generates two, two generates three, and three generates the myriads of things," exclaims Laozi in Chapter 42 of the *Tao Te Ching*.

This is how, from the One Source, the myriads of things were born. Because Heaven and Earth were generated by *wuji* or non-being, Laozi, therefore, says, "Non-being, the beginning of Heaven and Earth."

A common Western philosophical dilemma is: "Which came first? The chicken or the egg?" In Taoism, however, we go one step further and ask: "What existed before everything, that made everything possible?" As mentioned earlier, Tao is the One Source that everything comes from. It was originally "nothing", and all of a sudden, Heaven and Earth emerged from the nebula, and the myriads of things came into being.

Thus in the constant non-being, there is a desire to view its mystery

Non-being is the beginning of Heaven and Earth and being is the Mother of all things. In order to know the universe, we need a good understanding of both non-being and being.

Non-being is "constant" (常, *chang*2). It is always around us, brimming with possibilities of things waiting to be born into existence. While it is older than Heaven and Earth, it has not vanished and will outlive them. Even if Heaven and Earth someday disappear for whatever reason, non-being shall remain. It is, therefore, eternal.

When we align ourselves with the constant non-being, we can see the unseen and the wonders within it. For example, in the deep stillness of meditation or the practice of Taijiquan, we experience the serenity within non-being.

In Taijigong, the school of Taiji that I teach, we immerse ourselves in the *taihe* qi energy that takes us back to the constant non-being. In this state of marvels, there are neither forms nor divides. It allows us to behold the wonders of Tao Core, i.e., the origin of Tao.

In the "constant non-being" (常无, *chang*2*wu*2), "there is a *desire* to *view* its *mystery*". To witness the wonders three things, as mentioned in the clause, are essential: Desire (欲, *yu*4), view (观, *guan*1), and mystery (妙, *miao*4).

First, let's talk about "desire". There are two types of desires; one is instinctive, and the other is spiritual. The desire to eat when we are hungry and put on warm clothes in cold weather are instinctive. In contrast, spiritual desire is of a higher order. We admire the sages and want to learn what they do. This is also a desire, and it is this desire Laozi mentions in this chapter.

"View" means "to see". But, the kind of sight Laozi talks about is not visual. Here, "to see" refers to a reflective technique that prompts us to look inward and conduct dialogues with our inner self. It is common in spiritual practices, including Taoism and Buddhism.

The pictogram of "mystery" is 妙, which means "wonders". It consists of two sub-characters: 女 and 少. 女 means "female". It is about being feminine and mild-mannered, so it carries the connotation of modesty, humility, and tolerance. 少 means "small in quantity" and implies that the wonders are in having less. It may sound absurd because we are accustomed to always wanting more. Here, the word "mystery" implies that, if we are going to witness

wonders of the universe, we will have to begin by staying both humble and frugal. At the same time, we must also be ready to work with the "non-being", a behavior known as non-doing, or "*wuwei*" (无为, *wu2wei2*).

Putting the three things together, the "desire to view its mystery" provokes us to look inward to see the mysteries surrounding non-being, and it answers questions like who we are, where we are from, and where we are heading. This desire leads to a deeper appreciation of life and helps us uncloak many of its mysteries.

In the constant being, there is a desire to view its boundary

Now, let us look at the "constant being" (常有, *chang2you3*). Being and non-being correspond to each other. Non-being is about the non-being, i.e., formlessness, of Tao, while being is about the present and the material world in which we live.

The word "boundary" perplexes many people. It is a translation of 徼 (*jiao4*), which means "boundary" or "border". Let's begin by looking at the structure of the pictogram. Radical 彳 implies "do and reflect", and carries a connotation of observation and reflection. It is reminiscent of what we mentioned earlier: In between being and non-being, we find the wonders of the universe. So, the "boundary" is the border between being and non-being. There is a desire to see it because it is a delicate thin line and can be difficult to detect. On one side of the line is being, and on the other side is non-being. We can witness wonders of the universe only if we are aware of the line.

The boundary is delicate because while being and non-being appear to be different, they are one. We see being in non-being and non-being in being. Being refers to things that we can see and touch, like a person or a house. The beings, nevertheless, are essentially non-being. They are illusory. Yes, a person standing in front of us is alive and kicking, so they are a being. We can feel their breath, talk to them, and pat them on the back. But are they just a being? Where will this person be one hundred years from now? They will likely have passed on. By then, they will have returned to non-being

because they are no longer living in this world. As such, the person is both a being and a non-being. While a person has a lifetime of "being" for a hundred years or so, not all creatures are that lucky. Houseflies, mosquitoes, and germs have only days or hours.

Of course, being and non-being are not just about life and death. We don't return to non-being *only* upon death. We return to it now and then. Non-being is our root, it is with us all the time, and we cannot live without it. It is just that, more often than not, our attention is on being, so we are oblivious to the presence of non-being.

Living in a world of constant being, we are faced with all kinds of challenges it poses, and it is no wonder it consumes all our attention. To earn a living, not only do we have to work hard, but we must also learn new things and continue to hone our skills. As an academic, we cannot stop reading and conducting research. As business professionals, we must manage our people and ensure that the business is profitable. As a medical doctor, we must stay on top of new advances in medicine while taking care of our patients.

The *Tao Te Ching* is down to earth. It is not against us doing what we need to make a living. That doesn't mean, however, that we can forget the constant non-being. We need both, and it is important to maintain a delicate balance between them.

How do we keep a balance? The simplest thing to do is to observe the presence of non-being when we go about whatever we do for being. If we are in business, the constant being requires us to make a profit. Without profit, the business isn't sustainable. It, nevertheless, doesn't mean that we can upset the constant non-being within us: our perpetual self.

We must not use the challenges of being as an excuse for misconduct. For example, we must not try "making a killing" by running a casino or a brothel. It is shortsighted to ruin the eternal for the temporal: To tarnish our perpetual self for the sake of worldly indulgence. The consequence isn't worth it. By viewing its boundary, we are regularly reminded to reflect on what we do and guard against unwittingly straying from Tao. "If we conform to

Tao, the power of Tao flows through us," says Laozi in Chapter 23. By constantly viewing the boundary, Tao is with us, and we are blessed.

These two, share a common origin, yet come forth with a different name, both are called a mystery

"These two" refers to the constant non-being and the constant being. They are different. One is formless; the other is form. However, they share a "common origin" (同, *tong*2). As if two sides of a coin, they coexist and are mutually dependent. They "come forth" (出, *chu*1) with a "different name" (异名, *yi*4*ming*2). Tao is non-being. Te (德, *de*2) is being. Te is a manifestation of Tao, so it is ultimately Tao, but given a different name.

How the "come forth" takes place is mystical. It transforms Tao from the constant non-being to the constant being, leading to a change of name but not the essence. For example, we often refer to Shakyamuni — founder of Buddhism — as the Buddha. This is what we know him to be when he is out and about in the constant being, as a person teaching and helping people. When he is in deep stillness, however, he is in the constant non-being known as Tathagata. The two names refer to the same person but in different states.

In "Both are called a mystery" (同谓之玄, *tong*2*wei*4*zhi*1*xuan*2), Laozi uses the word "mystery" to describe the enigmatic connections between the being and the non-being. A question that puzzles everybody is what we had been before we were born. Using the terminology of Tao that we have just learned, we used to be non-being. But how different is the non-being to our current being, i.e., what we are now? Similarly, when we pass on, we are back to the non-being. Does the non-being that we become carry any characteristics of our current being? How is it going to be different from the non-being we used to be? How did all these come about? Nobody knows. Like Laozi says, "Both are called a mystery." Are they not mysterious? They are, indeed.

One mystery after another, the gate to all wonders

We find mysteries in the ways things operate and change and the manners in which Tao is pursued. It is said that before attaining complete enlightenment, the Buddha went through 500 rebirths; each was built on the attainment he had accumulated over previous lives. When he finally arrived, there was a radiance of light that traversed millions of miles and brightened up the entire universe. Things continue to change with "one mystery after another".

"The gate to all wonders" (众妙之门, *zhong*4*miao*4*zhi*1*men*2) is the source from which all mysteries are generated. To find the gate, we must observe not only the wonders but also the boundary where being and non-being intersect. Enter the gate, and we return to the constant non-being. Exit the gate, and we see the constant being. By going in and out of the gate, we see the mysteries of the universe unfold.

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Chapter 2

Yin Yang of Taiji
是生两仪 (阴阳)

We all know beauty as beauty
Because of ugliness.
The good as good
Because of the not-so-good.
Being and non-being engender each other.
Difficult and easy complement each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low play off each other.
Sound and voice harmonize each other.
Front and back follow each other.
Thus the Sage does by non-doing,
Teaches by not saying a word.
Things are left to live by their nature,
And the Sage rejects none.
They create but possess not.
Do but seek no glory.
Accomplish but claim no credit.
Alas! As they claim no credit,
Tao leaves them not.

Having introduced being and non-being in Chapter 1, in this chapter, Laozi talks about another pair of fundamental concepts: Yin and Yang. They accompanied the emergence of Heaven and Earth and brought with them what is commonly known as "divides"; a state of divisiveness that is opposed to oneness.

We all know beauty as beauty because of ugliness

"Beauty" (美, *mei*3) here refers not only to pleasant appearance, but also things like prestige, wealth, glory, domination, and power. We know beauty because there is ugliness (恶, *e*4). Beauty is coveted. Everyone wants to be beautiful, and some even resort to unscrupulous means to be so. This is why the corrupted, sly, and hypocritical slip into the cloak of beauty to fool others, and corrupt leaders menace the world in the name of justice to plunder and kill.

The true beauty, however, must not be tainted with an ulterior motive. When there are divides, selfishness, and intrigue, a thing is no longer beautiful but ugly. Beauty is a reward of the good seeds we planted earlier, sometimes as far back as our previous lives. The surest way to have beauty is, therefore, the cultivation of true virtues.

The good as good because of the not-so-good

It is interesting to note that while Laozi compares beauty to ugliness, he compares "good" (善, *shan*4) with "not-so-good" (不善, *bu*4*shan*4). Why is there such a change in tone? The reason is simple: A good deed is, after all, a good deed, even if it is less-than-perfect. There is no need to be harsh about it.

The word "good" here is a translation of 善, which carries a connotation unique to the *Tao Te Ching*. It means not just "good", but the "highest good"; almost as good as Tao. Those who are "good", in this sense, are non-discriminatory. They treat everything as equal and harbor no prejudices. In the *Tao Te Ching*, the virtue is also described as the highest "Te" (德). "A person of the highest Te

does not think of Te but lives naturally with Te," says Laozi in Chapter 38. They don't even think of doing good when they are doing good.

In contrast, those who are "not-so-good" are discriminatory. They have divides and are self-centered. Not only do they harbor likes and dislikes when doing good, but they also cannot wait to announce to the world the good deeds they have performed. Even then, they are doing good! Laozi, therefore, is less critical when describing them. From this, we can see how meticulous the Sage is in his choice of words. Each one of the 5,000 characters of the *Tao Te Ching* is carefully picked.

When there are divides, there is a difference between you and me and the good and bad. Laozi thus says, "Being and non-being engender each other. Difficult and easy complement each other. Long and short define each other. High and low play off each other. Sound and noise harmonize each other. Front and back follow each other." Let's see how a person of Tao should handle such differences in the things they do.

Being and non-being engender each other

When we see differences in things, we must observe the underlying forces and discern whether the forces are mutually enhancing (相生, *xiang*1*sheng*1) or defeating (相克, *xiang*1*ke*4). An engineer and someone in marketing may have conflicting views in a product design, but their differences are meant to make the product stronger. Such relationship is mutually enhancing. On the other hand, when a competitor launches a campaign to smear a product, it is meant to harm the standing of the product, so the relationship is defeating. When handling differences, a person of Tao goes for the enhancing and avoid the defeating. By doing so, they thrive with Tao.

The interplay between being and non-being is mutually enhancing and they help each other. As a person of Tao, we must go with the mutually enhancing flow.

Beings are things that can be perceived. Underlying every being, however, as pointed out in Chapter 1, is non-being, which is formless. In fact, in the final analysis it is engendered by non-being. A pot, for example, is envisioned in the mind of the artist before it is created as an object. Although a being is tangible, it is temporal, not permanent. It is essentially illusory and will eventually return to non-being. When there is birth, there is death. When there is tide, there is ebb. "Being and non-being engender (相生, *xiang*1*sheng*1) each other". A plant sprouts in spring and withers in autumn, and by spring it is full of life again.

This cycle repeats itself, and we must know the cycle to appreciate the underlying principle of existence. With awareness of the reality, there is no fear of death. Death is dreaded, because people hate to lose. But, when we understand the cycle and the underlying forces, we know that death is not a dead end, and thus not a loss. On the contrary, death is where new life begins. For a person of Tao, it can even be an ascension to a higher order. Knowing this, a person of Tao worries no more and has no fear of death.

Most people, unfortunately, don't see life this way. They care only about being: What they are doing now and the years ahead in their current life, rather than something perpetual. When they know how being and non-being engender each other, they will see the non-being and extend their vision of life beyond the decades of which they are living. They don't just see years but hundreds and thousands of years ahead that span many lives.

To do this, we have to jump out of the entrenched mindset. Of course, we cannot reverse what we have done in the past. We can, however, do something different for our future. Perhaps reading this book is a turning point. Or, maybe, we simply make a decision to be kind in everything we do from this point on. When we view life as a series of renewals, we cultivate our being in the present in order to refine our non-being for our future in this life and beyond. We must, therefore, make the most of every life and build upon each one; getting better and better in the long run.

Of course, being and non-being are not just about life and death. They are part of every existence and define every minute of our life. The money we make and the things we buy with it are being, the happiness

that we bring to the family with the things we buy is a non-being. When we perform self-cultivation, the activities we conduct, such as meditation, are being. The refinement of our character is non-being.

Children are related to their parents through blood lineage. We may see this as being. The lineage, however, works only in the current life. There is another lineage that keeps them together beyond their current life. We may call this the qi lineage, which is in the non-being. The parent and child have to share a common qi lineage so that their link can go beyond the current life, or they may not be seeing each other again. Why? Because a blood lineage is temporal. A *qi* lineage, on the other hand, is based on *taihe* qi, which is Tao and the constant non-being. It is perpetual. Another good example of a *qi* lineage is that between a Master and their disciples. This is how my Master, Wu Tunan, myself and my disciples are linked together with the lineage that can be traced back to the great Taiji Master Zhang Sanfeng (born in 1247) and ultimately Laozi. It is long lasting. Cultivation of qi lineages is common across other spiritual practices and cultures as well. The only difference is in the names.

Difficult and easy complement each other

Difficult (难, *nan*2) and easy (易, *yi*4) sound contradictory, but they are two sides of the same coin, so they complement (相成, *xiang*1*cheng*2) each other. The relationship is mutually enhancing. Although adversity is tough, when we take steps to overcome it, we improve our problem-solving skills and, eventually, make the difficult easy. While it is important to see setbacks positively, we must not underestimate things that are easy. If there are inherent complications, things that are easy can turn nasty if we take it lightly. In the things we do, we must also see how the difficult and easy complement each other.

Long and short define each other

Long and short are relative. We cannot tell the long (长, *chang*2) from the short (短, *duan*3) without putting them side-by-side. They

define (相形, *xiang*1*xing*2) each other. A foot is longer than an inch but shorter than a yard. Long and short, however, doesn't matter if we have no divides. When we notice how they enhance each other, their difference in length doesn't matter.

If long is strength and short is weakness, we can make ourselves stronger by not allowing the long and short to become mutually defeating. While we don't feel inferior for being weak, we are not conceited for being strong. Rather, we see how they can complement each other. We may, for example, work with others as a team so that they can make up for what we are weak in, and optimize our strength by improving ourselves to scale new heights. We enhance the long with the short and the short with the long.

High and low play off each other

The high and the low play off (相倾, *xiang*1*qing*3) each other to gain a foothold, so they are mutually defeating. The high (高, *gao*1) needs to step on the low (下, *xia*4) to become high, and the low cannot become high with the high on top. The relationship is, therefore, one of mutually defeating. We must see how we can turn it around. A way to do it is that when we are in a low position, respect the leadership of those above. When we are high up, win the people below over with our sincerity and virtue. With trust there is teamwork, and it turns the defeating relationship into one of enhancing. Instead of fighting, we allow the high and low to thrive together by complementing each other.

Sound and voice harmonize each other

Voice (声, *sheng*1), albeit sweet, is monotonous without a good accompaniment. When we harmonize (相和, *xiang*1*he*2) the strengths of voice with sound (音, *yin*1), we create a win-win relationship.

In self-cultivation, harmonization works in two ways: Being and non-being. We work on the "constant being" to harmonize the Yin and Yang energies. Smoothening the qi circulation in our body is one

way to do this, and it helps us to stay healthy and live longer. At the same time, we work with the "constant non-being". We blend the air we breathe with the perpetual energy *taihe* qi. By doing so, we refine our souls and live our ultimate destiny.

Harmonization is important in all aspects of life. In geopolitical context, for example, it happens when countries work together for mutual benefits. When one country helps another in its development, both countries, their allies and all the citizens benefit. What if the harmony is jeopardized? The relationship becomes mutually defeating, and both countries, their allies and all their people lose.

Front and back follow each other

This relationship is evident between leaders and followers. It is mutually enhancing. First of all, the leaders lead at the front (前, *qian*2) and the followers follow at the back (后, *hou*4). At the same time, the leaders listen to the needs of the followers to make their leadership more effective. When I work with my disciples, this is what we do to keep our Taiji lineage alive. Master Wu Tunan was in front, and I followed him from the back. Now, I am in front, and my disciples are following me from behind. This is how the torch has been passed on from Laozi and other ancestors — to benefit the later generations. As teachers, on the other hand, we identify the strengths and weaknesses of our disciples and adjust the programs, so that they can progress better in their training.

Thus the Sage does by non-doing

"Non-doing" is a translation of 无为 (*wu*2*wei*2). It is, however, not about doing nothing. Rather, it is about how we can tap into the power of non-being to get things done. Like Laozi says later in the chapter: "Things are left to live by their nature, and the Sage rejects none. They create but possess not, do but seek no glory, grow but dominate not, accomplish but claim no credit." We flow with nature and live the non-being of Tao.

Teaches by not saying a word

Because the Sage works with non-being, it is hard for them to articulate what they do. Therefore, instead of relying on talking, the Sage "teaches" (教, *jiao*1) by "not saying a word" (不言, *bu*4*yan*2). They set themselves up as role models and inspire not only by what they say but also by what they do. At the same time, they help the followers to reflect on what they do.

Very often, to really learn a lesson, we must weather the storm ourselves and learn life's lessons "the hard way". The Sage can't work on our behalf. In order for us to learn, they must step aside and do nothing. It looks callous, but deep down, it is profound kindness. This is the most arduous aspect of "teaching by not saying a word".

Things are left to live by their nature, and the Sage rejects none

When "things are left to live by their nature" (作焉, *zuo*4*yan*1), they thrive with nature. Cycles of nature are unstoppable. We cannot stop winter from arriving because we don't like it. The Tao of Heaven allows things to grow and perish by following their own nature and by going with the flow of the law of the universe. Plants sprout, grow, wither, and conserve as the cycle of the seasons rolls on. The Sage accepts what is and "rejects none" (不辞, *bu*4*ci*2).

They create but possess not

Tao creates everything but owns nothing. Although we are a creation of Tao, Tao claims no credit for what it does. This is the virtue of Tao we find in the Sage that we must emulate.

Parents, for example, should not be possessive of their children. Children are the extension of blood lineage, so bringing them up and educating them is the heavenly duty of their parents. This doesn't, however, mean the children are their parents' property or that they should subject themselves to their parents' manipulation.

If we are a parent, we cannot deny our children's own destinies. They become our children for a variety of reasons that are out of our control. They could be here to pay their gratitude for our kindness to them in a previous life. If this is the case, they are naturally loving. They could, on the other hand, be here to seek revenge for our unkindness to them in a previous life. If this is the case, they can be reckless, and we must take the opportunity to pay what is due.

As the Chinese saying goes, "Every child has their own blessings." We must do our part and remember that blood lineage is short lived; only qi lineage lasts. Therefore, we must guide our children to take the path of Tao, so that we can extend the qi lineage to them.

Do but seek no glory

We practice non-doing and "seek no glory" (不恃, *bu*4*shi*4) for what we do. For example, the glory of this book is not mine. If you find this book helpful, the wisdom herein doesn't belong to me. I am just doing my part by sharing it with the world.

Accomplish but claim no credit

Things get done when conditions for their accomplishment are met. So, when the Sage "accomplishes" (功成, *gong*1*cheng*2), they see no reason to feel arrogant about it. They "claim no credit" (弗居, *fu*2*ju*1). Rather, they pay gratitude to the people and conditions that made the achievement possible.

Alas! As they claim no credit, Tao leaves them not

Alas! Since the Sage claims no credit for their success, Tao leaves them not (弗去, *fu*2*qu*4). Learning from the Sage, we must begin and end with Tao in all things we do. When we are one with Tao, Tao flows through us. When we claim credit and seek possession, self-interests set in and Tao stays away from us.

Laozi introduces the concept of non-doing, i.e., *wuwei*, for the first time in this chapter. Many people misinterpret non-doing to mean the Sage is apathetic or laid-back. However, after completing this chapter, it becomes clear that "non doing" is not about doing absolutely nothing. It is about doing by tapping into the power of non-being. If we and, better still, the entire human race, can practice true non-doing, stability and prosperity shall prevail. People of all countries will harmonize and live happily with contentment in enduring peace.

Chapter 3

Inspire the People, Lead the World

安民治世

Exalt not the eminent,
And people contend not.
Value not the precious goods,
There is theft no more.
See not the undesirable,
And the mind is not confused.
Thus the Sage leads by
Softening the mind,
Strengthening the belly;
Weakening the ambition,
And toughening the resolve.
They inspire people to stay
Not-knowing and not-desiring;
and they forbid the clever from interfering.
If we practice non-doing,
There is nothing that we cannot manage.

This is a highly controversial chapter, probably because of the sentence that says: The Sage "inspires people to stay not-knowing and not-desiring." Some readers interpret it as a promotion of ignorance in order to make people easy to govern. Is this the case? Hopefully, we can do our parts in dispelling the confusion.

Exalt not the eminent, and people contend not

Exalting the eminent is not wrong if the exaltation doesn't cause divides. Unfortunately, this is unlikely to be the case. When we single someone out and "exalt" (尚, *shang*4) them as "eminent" (贤, *xian*2), we are suggesting that others are not. So, we have divided people into classes of the eminent and otherwise, e.g., high and low. Furthermore, the eminent tend to enjoy prestige and superiority over others, making their positions even more coveted.

Given a choice, most people will want to join the league of the eminent. Obviously, this is not possible, or the privileged position would not exist. To prevent their privileges from being diluted, the incumbent erect barricades to ward off competition. The wealthy and powerful, for example, would strategically define "eminence" to keep the rest of the population poorer and powerless. This distorts the essence of eminence. It is based no longer on virtues, but the ability to compete.

When the focus is wrong, the quality of the eminent goes downhill. This is what happens to many high-sounding committees around the world. Their members use the positions to advance personal gains and political agenda, oblivious to the virtue of the eminent. What is worse is when the malicious pretend to be eminent to mislead. Quack doctor fakes reports to sell counterfeit medicine; self-proclaimed "investment advisor" swindles away people's hard-earned money with clever scams. Widespread social problems ensue, resulting in ruins of personal fortunes or even lives.

Exalting the eminent, therefore, is not just a matter of rhetoric. It creates divides and leads to agony. By not exalting the "emi-

nent", we slow the spread of vice, sin, and thus, agony. Imagine if, instead of celebrating the superior, we focused our attention on self-cultivation and the attainment of Tao. If people don't feel inferior, and if they are content with what they have, they would naturally feel less inclination toward violence and other destructive or criminal behaviors.

Value not the precious goods, there is theft no more

Precious goods (难得之货, *nan2de2zhi1huo4*) command value because of scarcity, not because of their contribution to life. Are oysters, shark fin, lobsters, diamonds, and oil more valuable than water and air? Clearly not! Then, why are they coveted and command higher prices? It is because of our perception of them. The perceived difference between tasty and tasteless, valuable and cheap are not real. When the wrong perceptions persist, there is theft (盗, *dao4*).

What if we return to non-being and Tao? We eat just enough to stay healthy so that we can perform self-cultivation. We don't long for fancy foods, we don't covet possessions, and we don't envy others for having what we don't. Thus, there is no motivation to become thieves.

The "theft" Laozi talks about here is not only petty stealing, but it includes theft on a much larger scale that causes widespread suffering. For example, countless wars costing countless lives have been fought only because of perceived valuable commodities, including anything from spices to oil. Every one of them could have been averted if only the human race didn't value rare possessions.

See not the desirable, and the mind is not confused

When we don't covet things we don't have, our mind becomes clear. But, when we continuously desire that which we don't have, our thoughts become muddied, and we lose the composure. Therefore, if

we don't want to become corrupt, don't put ourselves in a position to be bribed. If we don't want to be distracted by lust, stay away from pornography. By seeing not the "desirable" (可欲, *ke*3*yu*4), "the mind is not confused" (心不乱, *xin*1*bu*4*luan*4). Instead of being confused, we are directed by our true nature.

Thus the Sage leads by softening the mind, strengthening the belly

In this chapter, Laozi teaches us three things thus far: No competition, no theft, no confusion. What do we do if any of them is challenged? Laozi offers countermeasures in the following paragraphs.

First, we soften the mind. By "softening the mind" (虚其心, *xu*1*qi*2*xin*1), we are free of unnecessary baggage. We can do this by recognizing the ephemeral nature of things. Money, fame, status, etc. are not for us to keep forever. If not even life is permanent, how can any of our possessions be permanent? This awareness "softens the mind" and sets us free.

What about "strengthening the belly" (实其腹, *shi*2*qi*2*fu*4)? Many people find the word "belly" puzzling. One way to understand this is to refer to the *Yijing* and see how the hexagrams are structured. The *Yijing* uses 64 hexagrams as a means to explain the "System of Changes". Although the hexagrams vary, every one of them consists of six horizontal lines, either continuous or broken, stacking from bottom to top. We can use the hexagrams as metaphors for things in the universe. If we use them as an analogy for our body, the first two lines on the bottom are our legs (implying Earth). The subsequent two lines in the middle are the belly (implying human), and the remaining two at the top are the head (implying Heaven).

By seeing the third and fourth lines as a symbol of human, in contrast to Heaven and Earth, "Strengthening the belly" can be interpreted as protecting our human body from harm. To do that, we must keep to the center and live our life around Tao. Yet another connotation of the third and fourth lines of a hexagram implies "adversity" and "fear". Strengthening the belly, in this sense, can

mean to guard against adversity and fear by being vigilant at all times. As if treading on thin ice, we remain alert so that we don't misstep or unknowingly commit bad karma.

Some people also interpret "Strengthening the belly" to mean we should stop eating before we are full because indulging in creature comforts invites gluttony. This interpretation is not wrong, but it is not as profound as the above interpretations suggest.

Weakening the ambition, and toughening the resolve

The "ambition" (志, *zhi*4) here refers to the aspirations for earthly achievements, such as the pursuit of glory and wealth. These goals are fine, but we must bear in mind that such accomplishments are ephemeral, because the materialistic gains that we obtain are not for us to keep forever. As such, we must not be obsessed with them. Laozi is moderate. He does not say that we should give up *everything;* only that we should be "*weakening* the ambition" (弱其志, *ruo*4*qi*2*zhi*4).

"Resolve" paraphrases 骨 (*gu*3), which means "bone". It is spiritual in this context and refers to the attainment of Tao. We must weaken the ambition for earthly gains but toughen our resolve for the attainment of Tao.

"Weakening the ambition" and "Toughening the resolve" complement each other. Together, they make us humble but firm; so that we are not easily thwarted by adversity. Worldly ambition is like desire, and it is illusory. "Resolve" is like bone, and it is resolute. We can't physically touch our desire, but we can touch our bone. We need to pay attention to both.

They inspire people to stay not-knowing and not-desiring

The word "people" (民, *min*2) here refers not to just a country's people but also community members. For example, as a Taiji master, my students are my "people".

absolutely nothing; but doing things by tapping into the power of the non-being of Tao. This further explains what Laozi says in Chapter 2 when he says the Sages "… create but possess not, do but seek no glory, accomplish but claim no credit." By tapping into the nature of non-being, we are able to do by not doing.

When people practice non-doing, they find no reason for contention, to be a thief, or to feel confused. They soften their mind, strengthen their belly, weaken their ambition, and toughen their resolve. By so doing, there is nothing in the world that they "cannot manage" (不治, *bu*4*zhi*4).

Chapter 4

Fusion of Yin Yang

道冲

Tao is like
Emptiness in a cup (Tao fuses).
Use it, and it never
seems to fill up
(it is hard to be filled).
Deep as an abyss,
It is like the origin of all things.
Blunt the sharpness,
Untangle the knot,
Blend in with the light,
Merge with the dust.
So translucent,
It doesn't seem to go away.
I don't know whose child it is;
It seems to predate the sage king.

radical is made up of two components: A dot and a tick. The dot "、" moves downward, and the tick "✓" moves upward. Together, they symbolize Yin and Yang. The dot is Yang, and the tick is Yin. As for 中 on the right, it means "middle" or "center". When we put the two parts together, the pictogram implies the blending of Yin and Yang.

Yin and Yang are two aspects of the energy that permeate Heaven and Earth. They are contrasting forces within every being. Yang is creative and Yin destructive. We see the interplay of Yin and Yang in the four seasons. Spring and summer are Yang, which flourishes with life. Autumn and winter are Yin, which withers the liveliness away. The transition is gradual. From the warmth in spring to heat in summer, then coolness in autumn to frigidity in winter. Laozi uses the pictogram "fusion" (冲) to describe the ebb and flow of energy. "By blending the Yin and Yang, they produce harmony," Laozi says in Chapter 42. The cycle is unstoppable, moving on and on, and is "hard to be filled" (久不盈, *jiu3bu4ying2*).

The two versions of opening sentences offer different perspectives of the ways Tao works: Emptiness of a cup, and fusion of Yin and Yang. Emptiness is about the non-being. The fusion of Yin and Yang is about being. We need both of them. When we are in emptiness or the constant non-being, we are in the formlessness of Tao Core. We cannot stay in it forever, however, because we have a life to live. We must come out of it and stay in the present, i.e., the being, to meet the daily challenges. We are, therefore, constantly oscillating between the non-being and being. In the scenario of the cup, both the emptiness and its physical features are One. Being and non-being coexist, and they complement each other.

Let's see how we can use fusion in a life situation. If, say, someone attempts to pick a quarrel with us, what should we do? Being empty takes us back to the constant non-being, and we are accommodative. With the non-being, it is hard for us to feel angry even during a quarrel. Then, we are back to the being of the present to manage wane and wax of the Yin and Yang of the energy. To counter the aggressive energy of Yin, we inject into the situation brightness of Yang. We are respectful and forgiving, never mind who is right


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