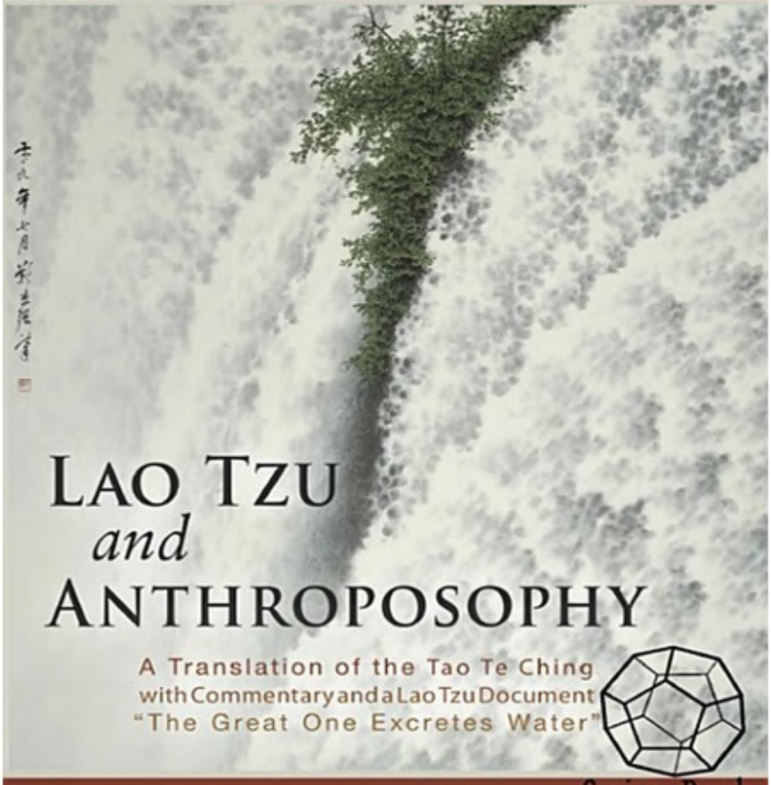

LAO TZU *and* ANTHROPOSOPHY

A Translation of the Tao Te Ching
with Commentary and a Lao Tzu Document
"The Great One Excretes Water"

SteinerBooks

KWAN-YUK CLAIRE SIT

SECOND EDITION

LINDISFARNE BOOKS

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Kwan-Yuk Claire Sit
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PREFACE

An author once quipped that there may be more writers who translate and comment on the *Tao Te Ching* (also known as the *Lao Tzu*) than there are readers. This is probably an overstatement, and yet we cannot deny that this masterpiece by Lao Tzu is exceedingly popular. The *Tao Te Ching* no doubt reveals profound universal truths and instills an intimate enchantment in its readers. Although many have explored it extensively, some still find uncharted areas pertaining to their own particular interests. I am one such reader-turned-writer who is enthusiastic about sharing her investigation with readers of this classic.

The subject of *Tao* is so vast and has a wide array of attributes that no one book could ever exhaust it. Each book can deal with only particular aspects of *Tao*. The present book, probing the *Lao Tzu* with the teachings of Anthroposophy,[1] is intended for those who yearn for a life of harmonized spirituality and practicality.

My initial reading of the *Lao Tzu*, twenty some years ago, was very superficial. My knowledge of classical Chinese (*wen-yan-wen*文言文) was inadequate to understand this work. To learn what it is about, I had to rely on the accompanying notes and commentaries written in contemporary Chinese (*bai-hua-wen*白話文). I skimmed

the book and found many useful aphorisms. I was also intrigued by its heavy use of oxymora. At the time, I did not ponder their deeper meanings and was keen to move on to other subjects.

When working on the manuscript of my book *The Lord's Prayer,* I reread the *Lao Tzu* to incorporate some of its sayings. I was also studying Anthroposophy and practicing an exercise recommended by the original teacher of Anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925). In this exercise, I tried to recall, in reverse, subject matters I encountered—poems, stories, events, and so on. After succeeding in reciting some short Tang poems in reverse, I naively challenged myself to tackle chapters of the *Tao Te Ching*. To my surprise, I could hardly recall the chapters in normal order, let alone recite them in reverse. It was very frustrating that their details kept slipping through my mind. At last it dawned on me that this inability to recall them was due to my lack of true comprehension of the material. Hence, I committed myself to studying the *Lao Tzu* scrupulously. It is both amazing and gratifying that my interest in Anthroposophy has been instrumental in enhancing my cognition of this deeply veiled classic.

According to Steiner, human consciousness evolves over eons. We started with a deep trance-consciousness, which developed gradually to a clear, wakeful consciousness. It has taken humankind many millennia to progress from mere sentience to intellect to self-awareness. Before (and even during) the development of the sentient

consciousness, human beings had a kind of dreamy consciousness and were vaguely aware of their connection with the spiritual world. They could perceive messages of the "gods" through oracles or divination of special signs in nature. "Mystery centers" existed where advanced teachers trained initiates to perceive and understand the gods' mandates. Those initiates would then use their gained knowledge to assist in governing the people. These were highly disciplined individuals who had deep compassion toward others and would not succumb to material temptations. In his teachings, Steiner deals mainly with the Western esoteric tradition, but he also indicates that guidance by the spiritual world in ancient times was universal. Thus, I suppose that the ancient Taoist masters in China played roles similar to those of Western initiates.

Anthroposophy teaches that human beings are meant to develop the intellectual mind, through which we can make moral judgments freely on our own (see appendix 1). As it happened, direct guidance from the spiritual world slowly diminished, and the spiritual world, or *Tao,* has become far less involved in guiding human affairs. It has receded from the without and instead hides deeply within each human being as one's conscience. This hidden aspect of *Tao* is probably what Taoists refer to as the "real being"; what Buddhists call Buddha nature or the Cosmic Buddha; and what Christians identify as the Christ or Holy Spirit. Steiner explains that outside guidance has slowly ebbed over the span of many millennia. But, even in this modern

age, a faint remnant of the initiate tradition still exists in remote corners of the world. I speculate that the stories of Carlos Castaneda (1925–1998) recount his initiation experience with the shaman Don Juan of a certain decadent Indian tradition.[2]

During Lao Tzu's time, Taoists no longer engaged directly in the affairs of the government and played only an obscure role in society. What the remote past had been and what disappeared in later times is clearly indicated in the *Tao Te Ching* by these statements: "Taoist adepts of old..." (chapter 15); "Therefore, when the Great Tao recedes..." (chapter 18); "In antiquity, these attained oneness..." (chapter 39); "Why did the ancients value this *Tao* so much..." (chapter 62); "The ancients who practiced *Tao*..." (chapter 65); "This is known as in union with Heaven—the perfection of the ancients..." (chapter 68); and so on.

Since outside guidance has receded, it is vital that we listen to the inner promptings of *Tao*. We train our minds so that we can "attain emptiness to the far end" and "keep stillness in the deep bottom" (chapter 16). When we engage in chasing after fame and wealth, we unwittingly excite the mind. Therefore we must make conscientious and diligent efforts to "disregard the without and take care of the within" (chapter 12). In fact, in discerning the hidden *Tao*, "the further one travels, the less one knows" (chapter 47). This shift of guidance by *Tao* from the outer to the inner inevitably created a few problems in the transition.

Let us consider several issues during the time of Lao

Tzu. First, because the ruling elite governed their nation without the wise guidance of Taoists, they easily got trapped by their greed for money, power, and influence. They created commotion in society and caused people great suffering (chapters 72, 75). Lao Tzu's frequent mention of how the rulers of antiquity maintained an orderly society reflects his concern over the unruliness of the nations at his time (chapters 17, 39, 57, 65).

Second, the number of students willing to study and follow the Taoist tradition must have been declining, since the practice of *Tao* was no longer a vehicle to prominent government positions. It is no wonder Lao Tzu laments that "they do not know me. Those who know me are few. Those who follow me are even rarer" (chapter 70).

Third, most Taoist masters probably maintain a very low profile, even "remain hidden" (chapter 15). Hence, when individuals do wish to study Taoism, they may have difficulty finding a genuine teacher. Books such as the *Tao Te Ching* can fill the gap somewhat, but books are not ideal teachers. Certain esoteric practices require not only oral instruction from a teacher, but also a teacher's assurance of the student's unselfish and humble character. Nonetheless, a well-conceived book can still inspire.

It was probably in the context of such a historical background that Lao Tzu compiled the oral Taoist tradition and wrote the *Tao Te Ching*. Yet, we do not really know who Lao Tzu was. The traditional view holds that the author Lao Tzu can be any one of three persons. One is Li

Er 李耳, whom Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.) had visited. Another is Lao Lai Tzu 老萊子, another contemporary of Confucius. The third is Lao Dan 老儋, who once had an audience with Duke Xian 獻公 of Qin (r.384–362 B.C.E.).[3] Some scholars opine that the *Tao Te Ching* is a work of the Warring Period (404–221 B.C.E.). If so, then the author referred to as Lao Tzu could not have been a contemporary of Confucius. Whichever the case, we do not need to know who Lao Tzu was to reap the benefits of his profound teaching.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu frequently indicates how the sage leads the people and says, "In the realm there are four greats, and king is one of them" (chapter 25). It seems as if the *Tao Te Ching* were a book for teaching kings and lords how to rule. When we understand that the word *king* is meant to represent the ideal human being—one who can be a role model leading others—we realize that Lao Tzu is actually teaching individuals to become "sage kings," or simply "sages."[4] Essentially, he is showing students a path to self-realization.

The *Tao Te Ching* is divided into two parts. In part one, the "Tao Ching," or "Book of Tao," Lao Tzu explores the universal principle of *Tao*. In part two, the "Te Ching," or "Book of Te," he provides practical advice on how to actualize the virtues of *Tao*. Ingeniously, he uses the affairs of worldly kings to illustrate the conduct of the ideal human being. He is not necessarily guiding secular kings to

rule states, though his teaching is surely applicable in this respect and would certainly benefit those rulers who would follow it. Rather, he is showing people how to rule the state of their own self.

We believe that Lao Tzu may be writing for the common people, because he often uses ordinary objects and activities to shed light on the deep and subtle aspects of *Tao*. War was rampant during his time, and he had keen empathy for the suffering of people during such times (see chapters 30, 31, 80). It is thus natural for him to point out the inhuman aspects of war and to explore ways of minimizing battle causalities. "When so many are killed," he sighs, "it is befitting to be mournful; even a victory should be observed as a funeral" (chapter 31). He is resolutely peace-loving. He advocates negotiations over battles: "Those who are adaptive accomplish their objective not with the use of force.... If they have no peaceful means to succeed, they abide" (chapter 30). If war is utterly unavoidable, he stresses treating the opponent with compassion: "Indeed, those who have compassion will win in battles and be secure in defense. It is as if Heaven will protect them with a wall of compassion" (chapter 67).

Until 1973, there were only a few traditional editions of the *Lao Tzu* without significant differences. One of the more popular among those editions is often called the Wang Bi (WB 王弼) edition. Readers associate Wang Bi (226–249) with this popular edition, because he was the first scholar who systematically commented on the *Lao Tzu*

from a philosophical perspective. To learn about Wang's comments, readers may consult, for example, *The Classic of the Way and Virtue* by Richard John Lynn.

Then, in 1973, archeologists found two copies of the *Lao Tzu* among a library of literary classics in a tomb from around 168 B.C.E. at Mawangdui (MWD 馬王堆) in the city of Changsha, Hunan Province.[5] While the Chinese call these two copies the "Silk Scripted Lao Tzu," Western scholars generally refer to them as the "MWD text."

Later, in 1993, archeologists found another collection of *Lao Tzu* documents in a tomb sealed before 278 b.c.e. at Guodian 郭店, Hubei Province.[6] This collection is referred to as the "Bamboo Slip Lao Tzu." I have translated and commented on two items from this collection (see chapter 63 and appendix 2). At this point I will focus on the MWD text and contrast it with the WB edition.

The two MWD copies (referred to as Text A and Text B) are written on silk in script no longer in common use. Judging from the script and the use of words later deemed taboo in the Han Dynasty, scholars infer that Text A was copied some time before the reign of the first emperor of the Han Dynasty, Liu Pang 劉邦 (r.206–194 B.C.E.), and Text B during his reign.[7] The contents of these two copies are mostly identical, with only minor differences in wording. Though there are missing words in both copies (sometimes quite extensive in Text A), one can, with reference to the traditional editions, render the MWD text a

comprehensive reading.

The texts of the MWD and the WB versions are also essentially the same. They differ significantly, however, in the arrangement of the contents and subtly in some wording. Let me outline their differences and show how I synthesize them in this book.

In the WB edition the text is divided into eighty-one numbered chapters. The beginning chapters (1–37) are called the "Tao Ching" and the remaining chapters (38–81) the "Te Ching." By contrast, the MWD text has no chapter divisions, but only a clear separation into two parts. For convenience, we use the WB chapter numbers when referring to the MWD text. In the MWD text, the order of the "Tao Ching" and the "Te Ching" are reversed; part one is the "Te Ching" and part two the "Tao Ching." Yet, within each part, the chapter sequences of the MWD text are almost identical to that of the WB edition except for three deviations. Specifically, 24 is placed between 21 and 22; 41 is placed between 39 and 40; and 80 and 81 are placed between 66 and 67 (see the following chapter lists).

My reading of both versions convinces me that the "Tao Ching" should nonetheless come before the "Te Ching." Consequently, I follow the WB edition's presentation of the two parts. However, within each part the arrangement of the chapters in the MWD text is definitely more coherent than that of the WB edition. Hence, within each part, I adopt the MWD order except chapter 41, which I place between 38 and 39 instead of between 39 and 40. Please

refer to the relevant chapters for the reason of these juxtapositions. To show how the arrangement of this book differs from that of the WB and the MWD versions, I list the chapter orders below:

WB:

Book One: Tao Ching

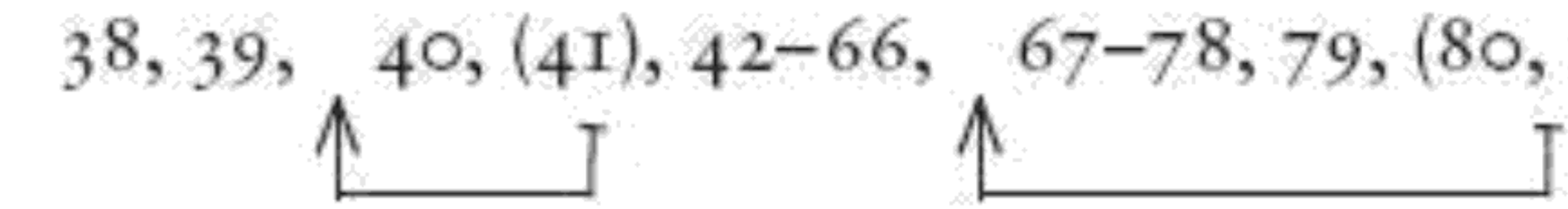
1, 2–21, 22, 23, 24, 25–36, 37

Book Two: Te Ching

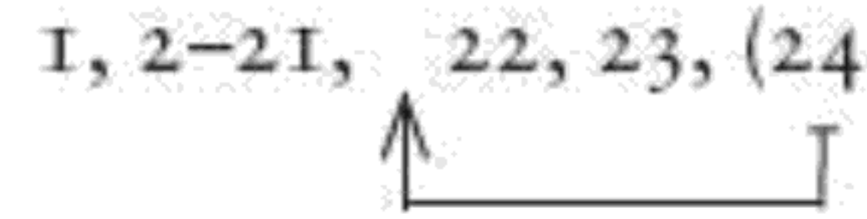
38, 39, 40, 41, 42–66, 67–78, 79, 80, 81

MWD:

Book One: Te Ching

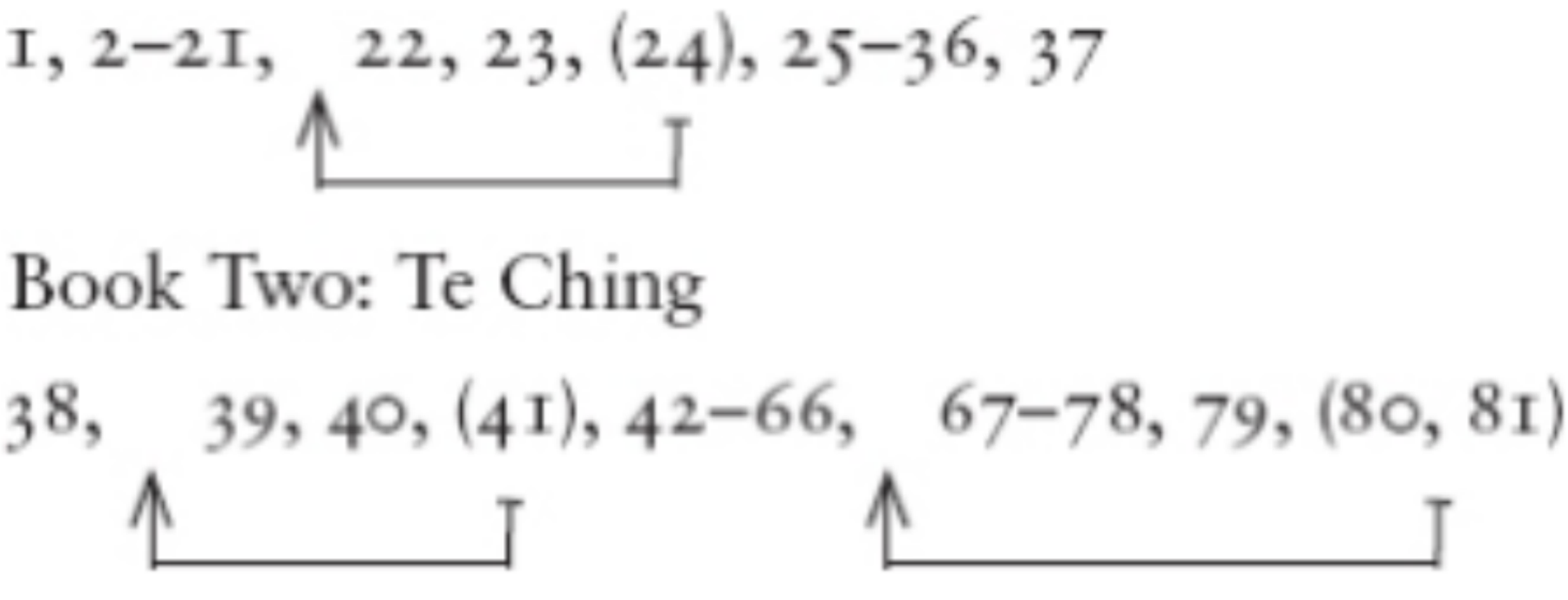


Book Two: Tao Ching



This book:

Book One: Tao Ching



Let us now examine the differences in wording. With reference to the WB edition, we find that here and there in the MWD text, a long clause or a few words are added, left out, or changed. Readers interested in a detailed (word-by-word) comparison between these two versions may consult works by D. C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching* and Henricks, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching*. It is interesting that the MWD text is generally more revealing of Lao Tzu's ideas. It may not have brought about a revolutionary perspective of the *Tao Te Ching,* but the MWD text definitely presents a more penetrating reading of this classic. Indeed, experts are still conducting in-depth research of the MWD text, and we can expect a more insightful reading of the *Lao Tzu* to appear in the near future (see comments in chapter 75).

In this book, although I use the WB edition as a template, I essentially adopt the whole MWD text. Many of those adoptions provide a finer nuance in the content, which I deem unnecessary to specify. However, when the MWD text and the WB edition convey significantly different views I will comment on them, and depending on how they differ I may also include both texts for

comparison (see e.g. chapters 8 and 20).

When preparing this manuscript, I owe the efforts of many prior translators and commentators of the *Lao Tzu*. Their renditions provide a luxuriant field for me to harvest and greatly enrich my writing experience.

A Special Note on romanization: except for well-known names and terms such as Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, and *Tao* (using the Wade-Giles system), most Chinese names and terms are romanized using the pinyin system, the most commonly used for Standard Mandarin.

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1 See appendix 1 for a brief introduction to Anthroposophy.

2 Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carlos_Castaneda (09/26/10).

3 Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laozi (09/26/2010).

4 See comments in chapter 25.

5 See Henricks, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching,* pp. xii–xiv.

6 See Henricks, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching,* pp. 1–8.

7 See Henricks, *Lao-Tzu Te-Tao Ching,* p. xv.

BOOK ONE

TAO CHING

1

道，可道也，非恆道也。名，可名也，非恆名也。無，名萬物之始也；有，名萬物之母也。故恆無欲也，以觀其妙；恆有欲也，以觀其所徼。兩者同出，異名同謂。玄之又玄，眾妙之門。

A *Tao* that can be a road is not the eternal *Tao*.
A name that can be a title is not the eternal Name.

Wu[1] is named for the origin of all things.

You[2] is named for the mother of all things.
So, ever free of desire, we can see its subtleties.
Ever full of desire, we can see only its manifestations.

These two[3] appear together.
They differ in name, yet are considered the same.
This mystery of mysteries,
　is the gateway to all marvels.

COMMENTS

We are embarking on a wonderful journey of the *Tao Te Ching*. The terms *Tao, wu,* and *you* have very rich connotations that we may not fully apprehend in the first reading. However, when we keep an open mind and patiently follow Lao Tzu's guidance, we can gradually deepen our appreciation of their intrigue yet far-reaching

implications.

The word *Tao* (道) can be used as either a verb or a noun. As a verb, it means to guide or to speak. As a noun, it stands for a road, a guide or method, or the eternal Way —something that seems to exist, and yet it is so difficult to grasp that Lao Tzu expounds on it with more than five thousand words.

Nan Huaijin 南懷瑾 (b. 1918) explains that using the word *Tao*道 to mean "speak" is quite common during the Tang and Sung dynasties (618–1279), but not so during Lao Tzu's time, around the sixth to fourth centuries B.C.E.[4] However, not commonly used does not mean never used, we need not completely avoid this meaning in reading the *Tao Te Ching*.

Tao is also the sound for the Primal Wisdom. Rudolf Steiner relates that "The wisdom of Atlantis was embodied in the water, in a drop of dew. And the word dew [*Tau* in German] is nothing other than the ancient Atlantean sound."[5] Someone has even suggested that Taoism is an offshoot of the long-lost civilization of Atlantis. Nevertheless, we do not need to know about ancient Atlantis to appreciate the sublime wisdom of *Tao*.

In the two opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu is making a pun on the words *Tao*道 and *ming*名. *Tao*道, as a road, can be walked, but not as the Primal Wisdom *Tao*. *Ming*名, as a title, can signify temporary fame, but not as the eternal Name of *Tao*. Lao Tzu is setting a tone for his

exposition. We shall see that he is fond of using oxymora. For instance, he says, "*Tao* is eternal and nameless" (chapter 32), yet "from the present back to antiquity, its Name never goes away" (chapter 21). Furthermore, he is also adept at illuminating deep and difficult subjects with simple and common objects. For example, he symbolizes the bestowing virtue of *Tao* by a vessel (chapter 4). His juxtaposition of similar yet different ideas subtly sparks us to ponder seriously his profound messages.

When we use *wu* and *you* to name the non-revealing and revealing attributes of the Primal Wisdom *Tao,* we are actually confining them to something specific, yet they are more than such designations. Names are merely makeshift labels for discussion, not the real thing.

Before creation, *Tao* is in the non-revealing state, dark and void. There is no substance in it, yet it is pregnant with potential for everything. This state, which we can consider the origin of all things, is called *wu*. During creation, *Tao* is in the revealing state, manifesting its essence in everything. This state, which we can consider the mother of all things, is called *you*. Herein lies the deep mystery of *Tao*; these two states always appear together and are regarded as one. *Tao* is forever revealing, creating a myriad of things, and simultaneously non-revealing, returning to the void with nothing in it.

We may find it puzzling that a thing is concurrently "being" and "non-being." Maybe the example of a photon in quantum physics can throw light on this mystery. A

photon has a wave–particle duality. It can be treated as a particle, yet its wave characteristics can always be calculated. This example is somewhat technical; Lao Tzu offers simpler and more appropriate examples in chapter 11. At this point, he simply tells us that *Tao* is in a state of "oneness," eternally creating and disintegrating. We cannot separate the two processes. *Tao* is indeed deep and profound.

If Lao Tzu can discern and inform us in this mystery, then shouldn't we also be able to savor its wonders? He imparts to us an exceedingly powerful practice to gain entry to this mystery of mysteries. He advises us to get rid of our desires. He explains that while we are filled with desire we see just the outer manifestations of *Tao*. Only when we are without desire can we know its inner subtleties. The *Tao Te Ching* is essentially a guide on taming desires.

---

[1] *Wu*無: Non-revealing, non-tangible, or nothingness.

[2] *You*有: Revealing, tangible, or essence.

[3] *Wu*無 and *you*有.

[4] Nan, *Lao Tzu Ta Shui*老子他說, p. 36.

[5] *The Secret Stream: Christian Rosenkreutz & Rosicrucianism*, p. 36.

2

天下皆知美之為美，斯惡已；皆知善之為善，斯不善矣。有無相生，難易相成，長短相形，高下相盈，音聲相和，先后相隨，恆也。是以聖人處無為之事，行不言之教，萬物作而弗始，生而弗有，為而弗恃，成功而弗居。夫唯弗居，是以弗去。

Everyone recognizes beauty as beautiful.
This is because there is ugliness.
Everyone recognizes goodness as good.
This is because there is badness.
The have and the have-not produce each other.
The difficult and the easy complete each other.
The long and the short shape each other.
The high and the low fulfill each other.
Tone and sound harmonize each other.[6]
The front and the back follow each other.
They are always so.
Therefore, sages manage affairs with non-action (*wu-wei*)[7]
and conduct teaching without words.
They let all things arise freely,
produce without possessing,
act without being arrogant,
achieve without claiming credit.
Because they claim no credit,

no credit is lost.

COMMENTS

Tao is always in the state of unity, but we are in its created world of duality. For us, neither goodness nor badness can exist by itself. To discern one, we need the presence of the other as a point of reference. When people differentiate the polarities, they may develop a preference, wanting to keep one or to avoid the other. Yet the two poles are not static. One pole will naturally lead to the other. We can never hold on to or avoid either pole.

Therefore, when the sage manages affairs, the mind is not stirred toward one pole or the other. This state of the mind without desire stirring it is called non-action (*wu-wei*). The sage teaches through exemplifying conduct, letting things arise freely, producing without being possessive, acting without being arrogant, claiming no credit for achievements. In fact, credit, like everything else, comes and goes dynamically. By claiming no credit, one loses no credit.

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[6] Nowadays, we regard *sound* (*sheng*聲) and *tone* (*yin*音) as synonyms. However, in ancient China, the word *sound* refers to a single sound, while *tone* is a mixture of sounds. For a discussion on the difference between the terms *tone* and *sound* in ancient China, see Chen Cheng-Yih, *Early Chinese Work in Natural* Science*: A Re-examination of the Physics of Motion, Acoustics, Astronomy, and Scientific Thoughts*, pp. 19–20.

7 The term *non-action* (*wu-wei*無為) does not mean inaction or no action. It refers to the stilled mind that is not stirred by desires. We shall learn more fully the meaning of *non-action* in chapters 43 through 48. For now it suffices to interpret non-action as action without selfish desire.

3

不尚賢，使民不爭；不貴難得之貨，使民不為盜；不見可欲，使民不亂。是以聖人之治也，虛其心，實其腹；弱其志，強其骨。恒使民無知無欲也。使夫知不敢弗為而已，則無不治。

Not adulating talents prevents people from contending.

Not valuing hard-to-get goods prevents people from stealing.

Not displaying what is desirable prevents people from agitating.

So that is how the sage governs:

empty the mind and fill the belly;[8]
weaken the ambition and strengthen the bones.

Always keep the people from being clever and having desire.[9]

Make them know to restrain from acting erratically,

then everything will be in order.

Comments

This chapter discusses how to rule. Proper rule is neither for control nor to claim credit, but to lead as a role model. When the ruler does not act erratically, the nation will follow suit and be orderly. Thus, the principal criterion for

a ruler is the ability to rule one's own self, to tame desire and to weaken one's ambition. In a broad sense, each person is a ruler of the self. Thus, this teaching on how to rule applies to everyone.

To avoid succumbing to temptations, people need a firm will to keep the mind from becoming agitated. To this end, Lao Tzu advises us to keep the belly filled and the bones strengthened. Let us investigate the wisdom of this suggestion.

Experience indicates that well-fed people are generally more content and less likely to commit crimes. Additionally, we hail those who are not corrupted by temptations as having "strong bones." Thus, we connect the belly and the bones subconsciously with the mind and the will.

Alchemical Taoism may shed light on this advice. Its doctrine uses the trigrams HEAVEN ☰ and EARTH ☷ to symbolize the will and mind in their primal state, and the trigrams WATER ☵ and FIRE ☲ to represent the will and mind in their fettered state.[10] HEAVEN consists of three solid (yang) lines, indicating the leadership strength of the will. EARTH consists of three broken (yin) lines, indicting the mind's virtues of receptivity and submission. FIRE, with the yin line in the middle and two yang lines outside, indicates that the mind is no longer open but filled with desire and ambition to lead. WATER, with the yang line hidden between two yin lines, indicates a will that is weakened by a fettered mind. Symbolically, to empty the

mind means to revert the two outer yang lines of FIRE to yin, so the mind is like EARTH, receptive and submitting. To fill the belly and to strengthen the bones mean to revert the two outer yin lines of WATER to yang, so that the will is like HEAVEN, with firm leadership strength.[11]

Anthroposophy can deepen our appreciation of Lao Tzu's suggestion from a different perspective. Steiner teaches that people function in three domains: thinking, feeling, and willing. He explains that thinking is associated primarily with the head, feeling the rhythmic (lung and blood) system, and willing the metabolic and limb organization. These three functions subtly affect one another.[12]

Thinking that is easily influenced by feelings of likes and dislikes will generate a great array of desires and aversions. We naturally lessen our ambition when our mind is empty of such thoughts. Science does not yet know exactly how willing works, but Rudolf Steiner teaches that willing is connected with our metabolic process and limb movements. When we have eaten and move our limbs, the food that is burned up by the metabolic process will circulate around more efficiently as the limbs move. The coordination of these two activities helps the will to be reflected as mental images in the mind. Thus, when the mind is not clouded by ambitious thoughts, the belly is filled with food, and the limbs are moved by strong bones, the will to act non-erratically becomes clearer in one's thinking. There is indeed great wisdom in the counsel,

"Empty the mind and fill up the belly. Weaken the ambition and strengthen the bones."

---

[8] The "belly" is where the *qi* center is located, about two inches below the navel. Taoist tradition holds that filling the belly with *qi* is conducive to longevity. Nevertheless, we read the *Tao Te Ching* more with a philosophical slant than with concern for longevity.

[9] "Not being clever" and "not having desire" are major themes of the *Tao Te Ching* and recur often.

[10] Cf. Sit, *The Lord's Prayer,* pp. 135–137.

[11] See comments in chapter 10.

[12] See, for example, Steiner, *The Foundations of Human Experience,* pp. 49ff.

4

道沖，而用之有不盈也。淵兮，似萬物之宗。挫其銳，解其紛，和其光，同其塵。湛兮，似或存。吾不知其誰之子，象帝之先。

Tao is like an empty vessel.

It is used but never filled.

Oh, how profound, the apparent source of all things.

It blunts sharp edges.

It unravels tangles.

It softens brightness.

It blends with dust.[13]

Oh, how darkly vague; it seems barely existent.

I do not know whose child it is.

Its image precedes the Heavenly Lords.

COMMENTS

The metaphor of *Tao* as an empty vessel and the source of all things recalls this fairy tale:

> A poor family has a magic empty bowl. Whenever they need anything they take out the bowl and make a wish, and things of their wish appear from it. One day, the couple next door discover the family's secret and steal their bowl. Being greedy, this couple keep thinking up wishes for valuable goods. Piles of treasure pour from the bowl so

quickly that they are soon buried alive.

Generally speaking, none of us are greedy like that couple. Nevertheless, the story warns people about the danger of greed. Moreover, it also illustrates a profound attribute of *Tao* that is used but never filled. It is empty yet inexhaustible.

Before continuing to chapter 5, let us digress and consider Lao Tzu's writing style in the *Tao Te Ching*. He structures his work the way a composer scores a piece of music. He announces and explores themes and revisits them with variations in later chapters.

For example, in chapter 1 he announces the main theme on the profound and subtle nature of *Tao*. In chapters 2 and 3, he introduces more themes, stressing the non-possessive aspect of *Tao*. Now he shifts to illumine *Tao*'s marvelous bestowing virtue in chapters 4 to 6. It is a good exercise to detect variations of the announced themes in the later chapters to deepen our appreciation of the *Tao Te Ching*.

We may gradually learn that Lao Tzu often expounds topics in a series of three chapters. Thus, the structure of the *Tao Te Ching* reveals a "signature of three" that illustrates an important characteristic of *Tao* (see chapters 14 and 42).

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[13] *Dust* is a metaphor for the world. "Blending with dust" means one is not above the world but is humbly submerged in it. It also symbolizes the sage who is willing to remain behind in the dust that is stirred up by

the people in the front.

5

天地不仁，以萬物為芻狗；聖人不仁，以百姓為芻狗。天地之間，其猶橐龠乎？虛而不屈，動而愈出。多聞數窮，不若守於中。

Heaven and Earth are not sentimental.

They regard all things as straw dogs.[14]

Sages are not sentimental.

They regard all people as straw dogs.

Isn't the space between Heaven and Earth like a bellows?

It is empty yet inexhaustible.

The harder it moves, the more it produces.

More listening[15] or frequent probing:

neither is as good as staying in the middle.

COMMENTS

Suppose we consider the virtues such as blunting sharp edges, unraveling tangles, softening brightness, and blending with dust, as the feminine traits of *Tao*. By contrast, we may regard the virtue of being non-sentimental as its masculine trait. Indeed, *Tao* and human beings, as well, are both masculine and feminine. (For discussion on this aspect of humankind, see chapter 28 and appendix 1.)

In this chapter, we can detect the subtle recurrence of the themes "managing affairs with non-action" and "teaching

without words" (chapter 2). We may reason that Heaven and Earth teach the sage without words. They show the sage to be unsentimental. Thus the sage can manage affairs through non-action. Not being sentimental, sages do not stir the mind with likes and dislikes. They cling to nothing. No matter what the object is, after its use, they will let go of it as they would a straw dog.

Though Heaven and Earth are not sentimental, nature nevertheless provides. Here Lao Tzu uses a bellows to emphasize the miraculous feature of *Tao's* bestowing virtue. It is empty inside, yet it can produce air when operated. The amount of air produced depends on the manner of operation. In fact, the air that blows out is none other than the air drawn in. Thus, if we can keep the mind empty like a bellows (without a myriad of selfish desires), we can accomplish our task exactly as intended.

Lao Tzu illustrates this input-output phenomenon again in the next chapter, and he explores it more fully in chapters 22 to 24. For now, he does not elaborate much.

"More listening or frequent probing: neither is as good as staying in the middle." The important thing is to maintain the mind like the middle of a bellows—empty of sentiments.

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14 In ancient times, straw dogs were constructed for ceremonies. One would not attach any sentiment to them, since they are discarded after use.

15 Suppose there are ten possible solutions to a problem. Ideally a good student, after just listening to

one solution, would be able to figure out all ten. So there is no need to listen repeatedly. There is a modern Chinese writer whose name is Wen I-duo 聞一多 literally, “Listen, once-many.” Probably he deems that listening once is already too many times. Indeed, by stilling our mind we can know what we need to do without listening to other people's suggestion.

6

谷神不死，是謂玄牝。玄牝之門，是謂天地根。綿綿若存，用之不勤。

The valley spirit never dies.
It is called the mystic female.
The gateway of the mystic female
　is the root of Heaven and Earth.
Lingering like a thread, it barely seems to exist.
Yet its use is inexhaustible.

COMMENTS

A valley is open and spacious. On the one hand it facilitates vapors in rising to Heaven and helps dews condense on the Earth, as though it is the mystic gateway connecting Heaven and Earth. On the other hand, like a responsive female, it always echoes what is sounded. Hence, the spirit of the valley is called the mystic female.

Lao Tzu provides three metaphors that illuminate the bestowing virtue of *Tao*: a vessel, a bellows, and a valley. He notes its humble attribute in chapter 4, its unsentimental attribute in chapter 5, and its mystic attribute in this chapter. Yet he keeps one common theme: It is empty yet inexhaustible.

We may view the valley spirit as a metaphor, but there is no reason to doubt the existence of spirits in nature. For example, there are many stories about Taoists taming evil

spirits by charms and talismans. In more modern times, Rudolf Steiner explains the functions of elemental spirits in many of his anthroposophic lectures.[16]

The Taoist tradition considers the human body a microcosm of *Tao*. Thus, every person has a "mystic female" within. Finding it, one automatically has access to the root of Heaven and Earth or a means to longevity. Some Taoists assert that chapter 16 actually teaches how to get to the root of Heaven and Earth. However, as stated earlier (see note 8, page 8), this study of the *Tao Te Ching* is not intended for longevity but for a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

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16 For references, see Smith, *The Burning Bush,* pp. 561–564.

7

天長地久。天地之所以能長且久者，以其不自生，故能長生。是以聖人後其身而身先，外其身而身存。不以其無私邪？故能成其私。

Heaven lasts and Earth endures.
Why does Heaven last and Earth endure?
It is because they do not exist for themselves.
Therefore, they can be everlasting.
Hence, sages remain behind yet lead.
They ignore their own safety yet endure.
Isn't it because they are selfless that they are self-realized?

COMMENTS

Lao Tzu talks about the never-dying mystic female and probably anticipates that many students would seek her out for an everlasting life. Therefore, he explains the true meaning of immortality, telling us that not living for oneself will lead us to "an everlasting life." He points to the most conspicuous example: Heaven and Earth. Then he invites us to ponder these oxymora: sages remain behind yet lead; they ignore their own safety yet endure; they are selfless yet self-realized. The deep principle behind these seemingly contradictory phenomena is explained in chapter 23. Lao Tzu probably thinks that students need to become familiar with the general attributes of *Tao* before learning

such an astounding principle.

8

上善若水。水善利萬物，而又爭居眾人之所惡，故幾於道。居善地，心善淵，與善天，言善信，政善治，事善能，動善時。夫唯不爭，故無尤。

Great good is like water.
Water is good at nourishing all things.
It also[17] strives to settle in places people detest.
So it is close to *Tao*.
It is good to dwell lowly on the Earth;
    to still the mind in the deep of an abyss;
    to give freely after the way of Heaven;
    to speak sincerely;
    to govern justly;
    to work efficiently;
    to act in a timely way.
Not striving with others procures no reproach.

COMMENTS

If sages do not exist for themselves, how do they conduct their lives? Lao Tzu does not mention *how* directly; rather, he explains in seven ways the goodness of water, which characterizes an entity not existing for itself. Hence, we shall know what to model ourselves after.

Lao Tzu begins by praising the nourishing virtue of water, commenting that "it also strives to settle …" He

ends by praising the virtue of water for "not striving with others…" Is he contradicting himself? Perhaps this is why the WB edition changes the word *also* to the word *not* (see note below).

When he comments in the beginning that water "strives to settle in places people detest," he effectively indicates water's virtue in not striving with anyone, because wherever it settles people would loathe. Isn't it because of this particular *striving* inclination that water is only *close* to *Tao* and not yet *Tao*?

Now let us examine how the sage models after water in its seven ways of goodness. Whenever water settles in a pond or lake, it is always in the lowest part of the landscape. This shows the virtue of humility. The sage stays low under all circumstances.

When water rests in the deep of an abyss, no wind can rouse any ripples. Thus, the sage stills the mind like water in an abyss; no temptation can stir it.

Water falls as rain from Heaven, acquiring no retribution. The sage benefits others without exacting retributions.

Whether water is murmuring in a small brook or roaring in a great river, its sound reflects the environment. Similarly the sage always speaks sincerely.

Water provides nourishment for all creatures without preference. Thus the sage is just and fair.

When water encounters small objects, it carries them along. When it encounters a large obstacle, it simply flows

around it to continue its journey. This inspires the sage to manage affairs efficiently by incorporating workable suggestions while avoiding stubborn opposition.

Tides come and go punctually. The sage establishes good working habits and attends to matters in a timely fashion.

Lao Tzu says that water, with such high virtue in seven ways and humbly avoiding strife with everyone, is only close to *Tao*. Can we imagine how highly virtuous *Tao* is? Nay, *Tao* is beyond virtue, it is mystic virtue.

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17 This word *also* (*you* 又) is in the MWD text. The WB edition uses the word *not* (*bu* 不) instead: "It does not strive. It settles in places people detest."

9

持而盈之，不如其已。揣而銳之，不可長保。金玉滿堂，莫之能守。富貴而驕，自遺其咎。功遂身退，天之道也。

Fill the cup to the brim;
It is not so good as stopping in time.
Hone the blade overly sharp;
the sharpness cannot stay long.
Amass a houseful of gold and jade;
no one can secure them.
Being wealthy and insolent,
you leave only a legacy of calamities.
Retire when the work is done,
this is the way of Heaven.

COMMENTS

If we aspire to be at one with *Tao*, we need more than to be like water. Does this mean we have to try extra hard to the utmost of our ability? Lao Tzu tells us not to go to extremes. The message in this verse is easy to understand, but what it teaches may be hard to practice.

10

載營魄抱一，能無離乎？專氣致柔，能如嬰兒乎？滌除玄覽，能無疵乎？愛民治國，能無智乎？天門開闔，能為雌乎？明白四達，能無知乎？生之、畜之，生而弗有，長而弗宰。是謂玄德。

In keeping the soul and spirit as one,
    can you prevent separation?
In softening the vital energy to be supple,
    can you become like an infant?
In cleansing inner vision,
    can you keep it free of blur?
In loving people and governing the nation,
    can you avoid cleverness?
In opening and shutting the gate of Heaven,
    can you act like a female?[18]
When enlightened and seeing every corner,
    can you remain innocent?
Produce and nurture;
    produce, but not to possess;[19]
    foster, but not to control.
This is mystic virtue.

COMMENTS

In chapter 8, Lao Tzu exhorts us to emulate water in our dealings with the world. Here, he focuses on our inner

development to attain mystic virtue. Taoist initiates, with the guidance of a teacher, may read this chapter with deeper insight. We can glean only its general philosophy and supplement that with teachings from Anthroposophy. It teaches that the human being consists of four members: an "I," an astral body, an etheric body, and a physical body (see appendix 1). Each has its function and intricately influences and assists the others. We venture to say that Lao Tzu informs us about how to harmonize these four members.

According to Anthroposophy, the "I" (or self) consists of two parts. The lower part is the soul, and the higher part is the spirit—that is, the Christ as in the teachings of St. Paul: "Not I, but the Christ in me."[20] Taoists refer to the lower self as "the guest" and the higher self as "the host" or "the real-being" (*zhen-ren*真人), the *Tao* in disguise.[21] The mind is part of the soul, and the spirit guides the mind through the will. When we flood the mind with desires, we can barely recognize the existence of the spirit, let alone follow its guidance. Thus the very first step for a Taoist student is to practice calming and stilling the mind so that the soul (the guest) and the spirit (the host) can coordinate harmoniously as one.

Anthroposophy explains that the astral body is the instrument for our feelings and perceptions. It should cooperate with but not dominate the mind (soul). However, many people are easily affected by their feelings and consequently their thinking becomes erratic. Taoists