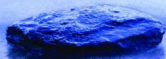


# lao tzu: tao te ching

*An English Version by Ursula K. Le Guin*

老子  
道德經



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LAO TZU

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TAO TE CHING

A BOOK ABOUT THE WAY  
AND THE POWER OF THE WAY

An English Version by  
Ursula K. Le Guin

with the collaboration of  
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## INTRODUCTION

The *Tao Te Ching* was probably written about twenty-five hundred years ago, perhaps by a man called Lao Tzu, who may have lived at about the same time as Confucius. Nothing about it is certain except that it's Chinese, and very old, and speaks to people everywhere as if it had been written yesterday.

The first *Tao Te Ching* I ever saw was the Paul Carus edition of 1898, bound in yellow cloth stamped with blue and red Chinese designs and characters. It was a venerable object of mystery, which I soon investigated, and found more fascinating inside than out. The book was my father's; he read in it often. Once I saw him making notes from it and asked what he was doing. He said he was marking which chapters he'd like to have read at his funeral. We did read those chapters at his memorial service.

I have the book, now ninety-eight years old and further ornamented with red binding-tape to hold the back on, and have marked which chapters I'd like to have read at my funeral. In the Notes, I explain why I was so lucky to discover Lao Tzu in that particular edition. Here I will only say that I was lucky to discover him so young, so that I could live with his book my whole life long.

I also discuss other aspects of my version in the Notes—the how of it. Here I want to state very briefly the why of it.

The *Tao Te Ching* is partly in prose, partly in verse; but as we define poetry now, not by rhyme and meter but as a patterned intensity of language, the whole thing is poetry. I wanted to catch that poetry, its terse, strange beauty. Most translations have caught meanings in their net, but prosily, letting the beauty slip through. And in poetry, beauty is no ornament; it is the meaning. It is the truth. We have that on good authority.

Scholarly translations of the *Tao Te Ching* as a manual for rulers use a vocabulary that emphasizes the uniqueness of the Taoist “sage,” his masculinity, his authority. This language is perpetuated, and degraded, in most popular versions. I wanted a Book of the Way accessible to a present-day, unwise, unpowerful, and perhaps un-male reader, not seeking esoteric secrets, but listening for a voice that speaks to the soul. I would like that reader to

---

Commentaries at the foot of some of the chapters are my own responses to the text. They are idiosyncratic and unscholarly, and are to be ignored if not found helpful. In the Notes at the end of the book are more detailed

see why people have loved the book for twenty-five hundred years.

It is the most lovable of all the great religious texts, funny, keen, kind, modest, indestructibly outrageous, and inexhaustibly refreshing. Of all the deep springs, this is the purest water. To me, it is also the deepest spring.

—*Ursula K. Le Guin*

---

considerations of some of the chapters, thanks to my sources and guides, and remarks on how I arrived at my version.





# Book One

## TAOING

The way you can go  
isn't the real way.

The name you can say  
isn't the real name.

Heaven and earth  
begin in the unnamed:  
name's the mother  
of the ten thousand things.

So the unwanting soul  
sees what's hidden,  
and the ever-wanting soul  
sees only what it wants.

Two things, one origin,  
but different in name,  
whose identity is mystery.  
Mystery of all mysteries!  
The door to the hidden.

---

A satisfactory translation of this chapter is, I believe, perfectly impossible. It contains the book. I think of it as the Aleph, in Borges's story: if you see it rightly, it contains everything.

## SOUL FOOD

2

Everybody on earth knowing  
that beauty is beautiful  
makes ugliness.

Everybody knowing  
that goodness is good  
makes wickedness.

For being and nonbeing  
arise together;  
hard and easy  
complete each other;  
long and short  
shape each other;  
high and low  
depend on each other;  
note and voice

make the music together;  
before and after  
follow each other.

That's why the wise soul  
does without doing,  
teaches without talking.

The things of this world  
exist, they are;  
you can't refuse them.

To bear and not to own;  
to act and not lay claim;  
to do the work and let it go:  
for just letting it go  
is what makes it stay.

---

One of the things I read in this chapter is that values and beliefs are not only culturally constructed but also part of the interplay of yin and yang, the great reversals that maintain the living balance of the world. To believe that our beliefs are permanent truths which encompass reality is a sad arrogance. To let go of that belief is to find safety.

## HUSHING

Not praising the praiseworthy  
keeps people uncompetitive.

3

Not prizing rare treasures  
keeps people from stealing.

Not looking at the desirable  
keeps the mind quiet.

So the wise soul  
governing people  
would empty their minds,  
fill their bellies,  
weaken their wishes,  
strengthen their bones,

keep people unknowing,  
unwanting,  
keep the ones who do know  
from doing anything.

When you do not-doing,  
nothing's out of order.

---

Over and over Lao Tzu says *wei wu wei*: Do not do. Doing not-doing. To act without acting. Action by inaction. You do nothing yet it gets done. . . .

It's not a statement susceptible to logical interpretation, or even to a syntactical translation into English; but it's a concept that transforms thought radically, that changes minds. The whole book is both an explanation and a demonstration of it.



## SOURCELESS

### 4

The way is empty,  
used, but not used up.  
Deep, yes! ancestral  
to the ten thousand things.

Blunting edge,  
loosing bond,  
dimming light,  
the way is the dust of the way.

Quiet,  
yes, and likely to endure.  
Whose child? born  
before the gods.

---

Everything Lao Tzu says is elusive. The temptation is to grasp at something tangible in the endlessly deceptive simplicity of the words. Even some of his finest scholarly translators focus on positive ethical or political values in the text, as if those were what's important in it. And of course the religion called Taoism is full of gods, saints, miracles, prayers, rules, methods for securing riches, power, longevity, and so forth — all the stuff that Lao Tzu says leads us away from the Way.

In passages such as this one, I think it is the profound modesty of the language that offers what so many people for so many centuries have found in this book: a pure apprehension of the mystery of which we are part.

## USEFUL EMPTINESS

Heaven and earth aren't humane.  
To them the ten thousand things  
are straw dogs.

Wise souls aren't humane.  
To them the hundred families  
are straw dogs.

Heaven and earth  
act as a bellows:

Empty yet structured,  
it moves, inexhaustibly giving.

---

The “inhumanity” of the wise soul doesn't mean cruelty. Cruelty is a human characteristic. Heaven and earth—that is, “Nature” and its Way—are not humane, because they are not human. They are not kind; they are not cruel: those are human attributes. You can only be kind or cruel if you have, and cherish, a self. You can't even be indifferent if you aren't different. Altruism is the other side of egoism. Followers of the Way, like the forces of nature, act selflessly.

## WHAT IS COMPLETE

The valley spirit never dies.  
Call it the mystery, the woman.

6

The mystery,  
the Door of the Woman,  
is the root  
of earth and heaven.

Forever this endures, forever.  
And all its uses are easy.

## DIM BRIGHTNESS

Heaven will last,  
earth will endure.  
How can they last so long?  
They don't exist for themselves  
and so can go on and on.

So wise souls  
leaving self behind  
move forward,  
and setting self aside  
stay centered.  
Why let the self go?  
To keep what the soul needs.

7

## EASY BY NATURE

### 8

True goodness  
is like water.  
Water's good  
for everything.  
It doesn't compete.

It goes right  
to the low loathsome places,  
and so finds the way.

For a house,  
the good thing is level ground.  
In thinking,  
depth is good.  
The good of giving is magnanimity;  
of speaking, honesty;  
of government, order.  
The good of work is skill,  
and of action, timing.

No competition,  
so no blame.

---

A clear stream of water runs through this book, from poem to poem, wearing down the indestructible, finding the way around everything that obstructs the way. Good drinking water.

## BEING QUIET

9

Brim-fill the bowl,  
it'll spill over.  
Keep sharpening the blade,  
you'll soon blunt it.

Nobody can protect  
a house full of gold and jade.

Wealth, status, pride,  
are their own ruin.  
To do good, work well, and lie low  
is the way of the blessing.

## TECHNIQUES

Can you keep your soul in its body,  
hold fast to the one,  
and so learn to be whole?  
Can you center your energy,  
be soft, tender,  
and so learn to be a baby?

Can you keep the deep water still and clear,  
so it reflects without blurring?  
Can you love people and run things,  
and do so by not doing?

Opening, closing the Gate of Heaven,  
can you be like a bird with her nestlings?  
Piercing bright through the cosmos,  
can you know by not knowing?



To give birth, to nourish,  
to bear and not to own,  
to act and not lay claim,  
to lead and not to rule:  
this is mysterious power.

---

Most of the scholars think this chapter is about meditation, its techniques and fulfillments. The language is profoundly mystical, the images are charged, rich in implications.

The last verse turns up in nearly the same words in other chapters; there are several such “refrains” throughout the book, identical or similar lines repeated once or twice or three times.

## THE USES OF NOT

Thirty spokes  
meet in the hub.  
Where the wheel isn't  
is where it's useful.

Hollowed out,  
clay makes a pot.  
Where the pot's not  
is where it's useful.

Cut doors and windows  
to make a room.  
Where the room isn't,  
there's room for you.

So the profit in what is  
is in the use of what isn't.

---

One of the things I love about Lao Tzu is he is so funny. He's explaining a profound and difficult truth here, one of those counter-intuitive truths that, when the mind can accept them, suddenly double the size of the universe. He goes about it with this deadpan simplicity, talking about pots.

## NOT WANTING

12

The five colors  
blind our eyes.  
The five notes  
deafen our ears.  
The five flavors  
dull our taste.

Racing, chasing, hunting,  
drives people crazy.  
Trying to get rich  
ties people in knots.

So the wise soul  
watches with the inner  
not the outward eye,  
letting that go,  
keeping this.

## SHAMELESS

To be in favor or disgrace  
is to live in fear.

To take the body seriously  
is to admit one can suffer.

What does that mean,  
to be in favor or disgrace  
is to live in fear?

Favor debases:  
we fear to lose it,  
fear to win it.

So to be in favor or disgrace  
is to live in fear.

What does that mean,  
to take the body seriously  
is to admit one can suffer?  
I suffer because I'm a body;  
if I weren't a body,  
how could I suffer?

So people who set their bodily good  
before the public good  
could be entrusted with the commonwealth,  
and people who treated the body politic  
as gently as their own body  
would be worthy to govern the commonwealth.

---

Lao Tzu, a mystic, demystifies political power.

Autocracy and oligarchy foster the beliefs that power is gained magically and retained by sacrifice, and that powerful people are genuinely superior to the powerless.

Lao Tzu does not see political power as magic. He sees rightful power as earned and wrongful power as usurped. He does not see power as virtue, but as the result of virtue. The democracies are founded on that view.

He sees sacrifice of self or others as a corruption of power, and power as available to anybody who follows the Way. This is a radically subversive attitude. No wonder anarchists and Taoists make good friends.

## CELEBRATING MYSTERY

Look at it: nothing to see.  
Call it colorless.  
Listen to it: nothing to hear.  
Call it soundless.  
Reach for it: nothing to hold.  
Call it intangible.

Triply undifferentiated,  
it merges into oneness,  
not bright above,  
not dark below.

Never, oh! never  
can it be named.  
It reverts, it returns  
to unbeing.  
Call it the form of the unformed,  
the image of no image.

Call it unthinkable thought.  
Face it: no face.  
Follow it: no end.

Holding fast to the old Way,  
we can live in the present.  
Mindful of the ancient beginnings,  
we hold the thread of the Tao.

## PEOPLE OF POWER

Once upon a time  
people who knew the Way  
were subtle, spiritual, mysterious, penetrating,  
unfathomable.

15

Since they're inexplicable  
I can only say what they seemed like:  
Cautious, oh yes, as if wading through a winter river.  
Alert, as if afraid of the neighbors.  
Polite and quiet, like houseguests.  
Elusive, like melting ice.  
Blank, like uncut wood.  
Empty, like valleys.  
Mysterious, oh yes, they were like troubled water.

Who can by stillness, little by little  
make what is troubled grow clear?  
Who can by movement, little by little  
make what is still grow quick?



To follow the Way  
is not to need fulfillment.  
Unfulfilled, one may live on  
needing no renewal.

---

In the first stanza we see the followers of the Way in ancient times or *illo tempore*, remote and inaccessible; but the second stanza brings them close and alive in a series of marvelous similes. (I am particularly fond of the polite and quiet houseguests.) The images of the valley and of uncut or uncarved wood will recur again and again.

## RETURNING TO THE ROOT

Be completely empty.  
Be perfectly serene.  
The ten thousand things arise together;  
in their arising is their return.  
Now they flower,  
and flowering  
sink homeward,  
returning to the root.

The return to the root  
is peace.  
Peace: to accept what must be,  
to know what endures.  
In that knowledge is wisdom.  
Without it, ruin, disorder.

16

To know what endures  
is to be openhearted,  
magnanimous,  
regal,  
blessed,  
following the Tao,  
the way that endures forever.  
The body comes to its ending,  
but there is nothing to fear.

---

To those who will not admit morality without a deity to validate it, or spirituality of which man is not the measure, the firmness of Lao Tzu's morality and the sweetness of his spiritual counsel must seem incomprehensible, or illegitimate, or very troubling indeed.

## ACTING SIMPLY

True leaders  
are hardly known to their followers.  
Next after them are the leaders  
the people know and admire;  
after them, those they fear;  
after them, those they despise.

To give no trust  
is to get no trust.

When the work's done right,  
with no fuss or boasting,  
ordinary people say,  
Oh, we did it.

---

This invisible leader, who gets things done in such a way that people think they did it all themselves, isn't one who manipulates others from behind the scenes; just the opposite. Again, it's a matter of "doing without doing": uncompetitive, unworried, trustful accomplishment, power that is not force. An example or analogy might be a very good teacher, or the truest voice in a group of singers.

## SECOND BESTS

18

In the degradation of the great way  
come benevolence and righteousness.  
With the exaltation of learning and prudence  
comes immense hypocrisy.  
The disordered family  
is full of dutiful children and parents.  
The disordered society  
is full of loyal patriots.

## RAW SILK AND UNCUT WOOD

Stop being holy, forget being prudent,  
it'll be a hundred times better for everyone.  
Stop being altruistic, forget being righteous,  
people will remember what family feeling is.  
Stop planning, forget making a profit,  
there won't be any thieves and robbers.

But even these three rules  
needn't be followed; what works reliably  
is to know the raw silk,  
hold the uncut wood.  
Need little,  
want less.  
Forget the rules.  
Be untroubled.

19

---

This chapter and the two before it may be read as a single movement of thought.

“Raw silk” and “uncut wood” are images traditionally associated with the characters *su* (simple, plain) and *p'u* (natural, honest).