

Tao
Te
Ching



LAO TZU

Translated by
JONATHAN STAR

The New Translation from Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition

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Introduction

Don't let this little book fool you. It is small in size but it's going to have a great impact on your life. It is a short eighty-one verses but it's going to live a long time in your memory. While you'll be able to apply its meaning to your daily life right away, it will probably take you years to embody.

The Tao Te Ching is a book of ancient Chinese wisdom written around 500 B.C., which by custom is attributed to the great sage Lao Tzu. One reason the Tao Te Ching has endured for thousands of years is because on the surface it appears to be a simple, almost conversational book, which immediately befriends you—but which upon continued reading reveals a timeless brilliancy of wise poetic truths. In truth it is a sacred text of depth and genius that has, in my experience, no equal. The Tao Te Ching is a key—a key that will unlock for you a new way of understanding life and a new way of living yours.

This is *the* translation for anyone truly wanting to understand the Tao Te Ching. Up until recently, this Eastern text has been translated into English by scholars since the late 1800s. While they used the English lexicon to accomplish their purpose (which was to make a scholarly translation), and while it left the text correct in a literal sense, it deprived the verses of their sheer beauty and poetic power. Thus many of these early translations come across as a bit dusty, old-fashioned, and irrelevant to our lives.

Don't take my word for it, see for yourself. First the older translation of the first stanza of Verse 5:

*Heaven and Earth are not humane,
And regard the people as straw dogs.
The sage is not humane,
And regards all things as straw dogs.*
(Translated by Charles Muller, Tōyō Gakuen University)

Now Jonathan Star's translation:

*Heaven and Earth have no preference.
A man may choose one over another
But to Heaven and Earth all are the same
The high, the low, the great, the small—*

*All are given light
All get a place to rest*

The first is an accurate translation that might be intellectually correct. Jonathan Star's translation also adheres closely to the original text, but is far more profound because of its ability to be immediately grasped and applied to your life. Scholarly texts feed the mind and that's a good thing; but a text that feeds the mind, body and soul, and, not to mention, one which can help us to transform our lives today, is infinitely more valuable.

While the early translations are still common fare and have value for the scholar, a recent number of modern translations have emerged that appeal to the spiritual seeker. Those translations (or "versions")—by Stephen Mitchell, Ursula Le Guin, and Brian Browne Walker, just to name a few—all offer something of value, and I've admired many of them. However, none of them have done what Jonathan Star has done, which is to marry the scholarly concerns of accuracy with the poetry of someone who has lived the words. He brilliantly balances the two worlds—the academic and the experiential—in a way that I believe no other translator of the Tao Te Ching has done before him. For me, this is simply the best translation available, bar none.

Here's what you can expect. I have been a teacher of the Tao for nearly two decades, and since the day this text was put into my hands I have been teaching from it exclusively. It has brought me and thousands of my students over the years the pure and simple heart of the Tao Te Ching; and as a result it has fed our hunger, quenched our thirst, and ignited our desire to live our everyday lives in new ways—simply, deeply, richly, fully, meaningfully. I believe this translation of the Tao Te Ching will lead you into a personal, direct, and even mystical experience of the Tao, which will uplift and transform your life in countless ways. Expect it to engage you not only intellectually, but emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. To put it even more plainly: this translation will positively change your life.

Believe me—you can trust the translation you are holding in your hands.

—AUGUST GOLD
Sacred Center New York

Verse 1

A way that can be walked
is not The Way
A name that can be named
is not The Name

Tao is both Named and Nameless
As Nameless, it is the origin of all things
As Named, it is the mother of all things

A mind free of thought,
merged within itself,
beholds the essence of Tao
A mind filled with thought,
identified with its own perceptions,
beholds the mere forms of this world

Tao and this world seem different
but in truth they are one and the same
The only difference is in what we call them

How deep and mysterious is this unity
How profound, how great!
It is the truth beyond the truth,
the hidden within the hidden
It is the path to all wonder,
the gate to the essence of everything!

Verse 2

Everyone recognizes beauty
 only because of ugliness
Everyone recognizes virtue
 only because of sin

Life and death are born together
Difficult and easy
Long and short
High and low—
 all these exist together
Sound and silence blend as one
Before and after arrive as one



The Sage acts without action
 and teaches without talking
All things flourish around him
 and he does not refuse any one of them
He gives but not to receive
He works but not for reward
He completes but not for results
He does nothing for himself in this passing world
 so nothing he does ever passes

Verse 3

Putting a value on status
will cause people to compete

Hoarding treasure
will turn them into thieves

Showing off possessions
will disturb their daily lives

Thus the Sage rules
by stilling minds and opening hearts
by filling bellies and strengthening bones

He shows people how to be simple
and live without desires

To be content
and not look for other ways

With the people so pure

Who could trick them?

What clever ideas could lead them astray?

When action is pure and selfless
everything settles into its own perfect place

Verse 4

Tao is empty
 yet it fills every vessel with endless supply
Tao is hidden
 yet it shines in every corner of the universe

With it, the sharp edges become smooth
 the twisted knots loosen
 the sun is softened by a cloud
 the dust settles into place

So deep, so pure, so still
It has been this way forever
You may ask, “Whose child is it?”—
 but I cannot say
This child was here before the Great Ancestor

Verse 5

Heaven and Earth have no preference

A man may choose one over another
but to Heaven and Earth all are the same
The high, the low, the great, the small—
all are given light
all get a place to rest

The Sage is like Heaven and Earth
To him none are especially dear
nor is there anyone he disfavors
He gives and gives without condition
offering his treasure to everyone

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The universe is like a bellows
It stays empty yet is never exhausted
It gives out yet always brings forth more

Man is not like this
When he blows out air like a bellows
he becomes exhausted
Man was not made to blow out air
He was made to sit quietly and find the truth within

Verse 6

Endlessly creating
Endlessly pulsating
The Spirit of the Valley never dies
She is called the Hidden Creator

Although She becomes the whole universe
Her immaculate purity is never lost
Although She assumes countless forms
Her true identity remains intact
Whatever we see or don't see
Whatever exists or doesn't exist
Is nothing but the creation of this Supreme Power

Tao is limitless, unborn, eternal—
It can only be reached through the Hidden Creator
She is the very face of the Absolute
The gate to the source of all things eternal

Listen to Her voice
Hear it echo through creation
Without fail, She reveals her presence
Without fail, She brings us to our own perfection

Verse 7

Heaven is ancient
Earth is long-lasting
Why is this so?—
 Because they have no claims to life
By having no claims to life
 they cannot be claimed by death

The Sage puts his own views behind
 so ends up ahead
He stays a witness to life
 so he endures
What could he grab for
 that he does not already have?
What could he do for himself
 that the universe itself has not already done?

Verse 8

The best way to live
is to be like water
For water benefits all things
and goes against none of them
It provides for all people
and even cleanses those places
a man is loath to go
In this way it is just like Tao

Live in accordance with the nature of things:
Build your house on solid ground
Keep your mind still
When giving, be kind
When speaking, be truthful
When ruling, be just
When working, be one-pointed
When acting, remember—timing is everything

One who lives in accordance with nature
does not go against the way of things
He moves in harmony with the present moment
always knowing the truth of just what to do