

Tao Teh King

by LAO TZU

Interpreted as
**Nature and
Intelligence**
by Archie J. Bahm



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TAO TEH KING

I

Nature can never be completely described, for such a description of Nature would have to duplicate Nature.

No name can fully express what it represents.

It is Nature itself, and not any part (or name or description) abstracted from Nature, which is the ultimate source of all that happens, all that comes and goes, begins and ends, is and is not.

But to describe Nature as "the ultimate source of all" is still only a description, and such a description is not Nature itself. Yet since, in order to speak of it, we must use words, we shall have to describe it as "the ultimate source of all."

If Nature is inexpressible, he who desires to know Nature as it is in itself will not try to express it in words.

To try to express the inexpressible leads one to make distinctions which are unreal.

Although the existence of Nature and a description of that existence are two different things, yet they are also the same.

For both are ways of existing. That is, a description of existence must have its own existence, which is different from the existence of that which it describes; and so again we have to recognize an existence which cannot be described.

II

It is because we single out something and treat it as distinct from other things that we get the idea of its opposite. Beauty, for example, once distinguished, suggests its opposite, ugliness.

And goodness, when we think of it, is naturally opposed to badness.

In fact, all distinctions naturally appear as opposites. And opposites get their meaning from each other and find their completion only through each other. The meanings of "is" and "is not" arise from our distinguishing between them.

Likewise, "difficult and easy," "long and short," "high and low," "loud and soft," "before and after"—all derive their meanings from each other.

Therefore the intelligent man accepts what is as it is. In seeking to grasp what is, he does not devote himself to the making of distinctions which are then mistaken to be separate existences.

In teaching, he teaches, not by describing and pointing out differences, but by example.

Whatever is exists, and he sees that nothing is gained by representing what fully exists by a description—another lesser, diluted kind of existence.

If something exists which cannot be wholly revealed to him with his viewpoint, he does not demand of it that it be nothing but what it seems to him.

If some one else interprets him, he does not trust that interpretation as being equal to his existence.

If some part of him stands out as if a superior representative of his nature, he will not surrender the rest of his nature to it.

And in not surrendering the whole of his nature to any part of it, he keeps himself intact.

This is how the intelligent man preserves his nature.

III

If no distinctions of superiority and inferiority prevail among officers, they will devote themselves to their tasks rather than to rivalries with one another.

If no special value is placed upon rare things, one will have no incentive for stealing them.

If nothing appears to arouse envy, one will remain satisfied with things as they are.

Since this is so, the wise administrator does not lead people to set their hearts upon what they cannot have, but satisfies their inner needs.

He does not promote ambition to improve their status, but supports their self-sufficiency.

He does not complicate their lives with knowledge of multifarious details or with an urge to attend to this, that and the other.

By keeping people contented, he prevents those who **mis-**takenly believe that ambition is better than contentment from leading the contented astray.

By being calm and contented himself, he sets an example for his people.

IV

Nature contains nothing but natures; and these natures are nothing over and above Nature.

In Nature, all natures originate, all conflicts are settled, all differences are united, all disturbances are quieted.

Yet, no matter how many natures come into being, they can never exhaust Nature.

To look for an external source of Nature is foolish, for Nature is the source of all else.

V

Opposites are not sympathetic to each other.

Each one of the many kinds of opposites acts as if it could get along without its other.

But Nature treats opposites impartially, dealing with each of every pair of opposites with the same indifference.

And the intelligent man will regard opposites in the same manner.

No matter how deeply natures are torn by opposition, Nature itself remains unchanged.

In conflicts between opposites, the more one attacks his seeming opponent (upon which he really depends for his completion), the more he defeats himself (and thereby demonstrates that only Nature, and not any opposite abstracted from existence, is self-sufficient).

So, likewise, no matter how much debaters argue, their argument proves nothing.

Things are what they are, regardless of how much we disagree about them.

VI

The tendency toward opposition is ever-present.

Opposition is the source of all growth.

And the principle of opposition is the source of all opposites.

The principle of opposition is inherent in Nature, so opposition will continue forever, no matter how many opposites may come and go.

VII

The principle of initiation persists; and the principle of completion continues also.

Why do such opposing principles persist? Because they inhere in Nature, rather than stand by themselves.

That is why opposites endure.

The intelligent man, when an issue arises, stands off and observes both contentions.

Since he does not take sides, he never loses a battle.

By not favoring one side more than another, he is able to appreciate the virtues of both sides.

VIII

The best way to conduct oneself may be observed in the behavior of water.

Water is useful to every living thing, yet it does not demand pay in return for its services; it does not even require that it be recognized, esteemed, or appreciated for its benefits.

This illustrates how intelligent behavior so closely approximates the behavior of Nature itself.

If experience teaches that houses should be built close to the ground,

That friendship should be based upon sympathy and good will,

That good government employs peaceful means of regulation,

That business is more successful if it employs efficient methods,

That wise behavior adapts itself appropriately to the particular circumstances,

All this is because these are the easiest ways.

If one proceeds naturally, without ambition or envy, everything works out for the best.

IX

Going to extremes is never best.

For if you make a blade too sharp, it will become dull too quickly.

And if you hoard all the wealth, you are bound to be attacked.

If you become proud and arrogant regarding your good fortune, you will naturally beget enemies who jealously despise you.

The way to success is this: having achieved your goal, be satisfied not to go further.

For this is the way Nature operates.

X

If you would retain a wholesome personality, must you not restrain your lower interests from dominating over your higher interests?

If you wish to live healthily, should you not breathe naturally, like a child, and not hold your breath until your vitality is nearly exhausted?

If you desire to realize the potentialities of your indescribable original nature, how can you insist that some selected aspect of your personality is really superior to that original nature?

If you are required to govern others, ought you not be able to guide them by example, rather than by forcing your will upon them?

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If Nature's way is a joint process of initiation and completion, sowing and reaping, producing and consuming, can you rightly demand that you deserve always to play the role of the consumer?

If you desire to know the natures of the various kinds of things, must you meddle with them, experiment with them, try to change them, in order to find out?

Nature procreates all things and then devotes itself to caring for them,

Just as parents give birth to children without keeping them as slaves.

It willingly gives life, without first asking whether the creatures will repay for its services.

It provides a pattern to follow, without requiring anyone to follow it.

This is the secret of intelligent activity.

XI

Every positive factor involves its negative or opposing factor; for example:

In order to turn a wheel, although thirty spokes must revolve, the axle must remain motionless; so both the moving and the non-moving are needed to produce revolution.

In order to mold a vase, although one must use clay, he must also provide a hollow space empty of clay; so both clay and the absence of clay are required to produce a vessel.

In order to build a house, although we must establish solid walls, we must also provide doors and windows; so both the impenetrable and penetrable are essential to a useful building.

Therefore, we profit equally by the positive and the negative ingredients in each situation.

XII

Interest in the varieties of color diverts the eye from regarding the thing which is colored.

Attention to the differences between sounds distracts the ear from consideration for the source of the sounds.

Desire for enjoyment of the various flavors misdirects the appetite from seeking foods which are truly nourishing.

Excessive devotion to chasing about and pursuing things agitates the mind with insane excitement.

Greed for riches ensnares one's efforts to pursue his healthier motives.

The intelligent man is concerned about his genuine needs and avoids being confused by dazzling appearances.

He wisely distinguishes the one from the other.

XIII

Pride and shame cause us much fearful anxiety.

But our inner peace and distress should be our primary concerns.

Why do pride and shame cause us so much fearful anxiety?

Because:

Pride attaches undue importance to the superiority of one's status in the eyes of others;

And shame is fear of humiliation at one's inferior status in the estimation of others.

When one sets his heart on being highly esteemed, and achieves such rating, then he is automatically involved in fear of losing his status.

Then protection of his status appears to be his most important need. And humiliation seems the worst of all evils.

This is the reason why pride and shame cause us so much fearful anxiety.

Why should our inner peace and distress be our primary concerns?

Because:

The inner self is our true self; so in order to realize our true self, we must be willing to live without being dependent upon the opinions of others. When we are completely self-sufficient, then we can have no fear of disesteem.

He who wisely devotes himself to being self-sufficient, and therefore does not depend for his happiness upon external ratings by others, is the one best able to set an example for, and to teach and govern, others.

XIV

Since what is ultimate in Nature cannot be seen with one's eyes, it is spoken of as invisible.

Since it cannot be heard with one's ears, it is called inaudible.

Since it cannot be grasped in one's hands, it is thought of as intangible.

But not even all three of these together can adequately describe it.

Nature did not originate in beginnings, and will not reach its goal in endings.

Rather it acts unceasingly, without either absolute beginnings or final endings.

If we cannot describe it intelligibly, this is because it is beyond our understanding.

Nature is the formless source of all forms, and yet it remains unaffected by its forms.

Thus it appears to us as if mysterious.

No matter how closely we scrutinize its coming toward us, we cannot discover a beginning.

No matter how long we pursue it, we never find its end.

One must comprehend the way in which the original Nature itself operates, if he wishes to control present conditions.

That is, he should study the ultimate source itself.

This is the way to understand how Nature behaves.

XV

In primitive times, intelligent men had an intuitively penetrating grasp of reality which could not be stated in words.

Since their instinctive beliefs have not been recorded for us, we can only infer them from old sayings which have come down to us.

Regarding caution when crossing a stream in winter: the more nervous you are, the more likely you are to slip and fall.

Regarding suspicion of enemies: the more you fear others, the more they will be afraid of you.

Regarding courtesy as a guest: the longer you stay, the more you become indebted to your host.

Regarding melting ice: the more you do to prevent it from melting, the quicker it melts.

Regarding making furniture: the more you carve the wood, the weaker it gets.

Regarding digging ditches: the steeper you slope their sides, the sooner they will wash down.

Regarding muddy water: the more you try to stir the dirt out of it, the murkier it gets.

What, then, should we do in order to clear the muddy water? Leave it alone and the dirt will settle out by itself.

What, then, must we do in order to achieve contentment? Let each thing act according to its own nature, and it will eventually come to rest in its own way.

Those who fully comprehend the true nature of existence do not try to push things to excess.

And because they do not try to push things to excess, they are able to satisfy their needs repeatedly without exhausting themselves.

XVI

In order to arrive at complete contentment, restrain your ambitions.

For everything which comes into being eventually returns again to the source from which it came.

Each thing which grows and develops to the fullness of its own nature completes its course by declining again in a manner inherently determined by its own nature.

Completing its life is as inevitable as that each thing shall have its own goal.

Each thing having its own goal is necessary to the nature of things.

He who knows that this is the ultimate nature of things is intelligent; he who does not is not.

Being intelligent, he knows that each has a nature which is able to take care of itself. Knowing this, he is willing that each thing follow its own course.

Being willing to let each thing follow its own course, he is gracious. Being gracious, he is like the source which graciously gives life to all.

Being like the gracious source of all, he embodies Nature's way within his own being. And in thus embodying Nature's way within himself, he embodies its perpetually recurrent principles within himself.

And so, regardless of what happens to his body, there is something about him which goes on forever.

XVII

The most intelligent leaders bring about results without making those controlled realize that they are being influenced.

The less intelligent seek to motivate others by appeals to loyalty, honor, self-interest, and flattery.

Those still less intelligent employ fear by making their followers think they will not receive their rewards.

The worst try to force others to improve by condemning their conduct.

But since, if leaders do not trust their followers then their followers will not trust the leaders,

The intelligent leader will be careful not to speak as if he doubted or distrusted his follower's ability to do the job suitably.

When the work is done, and as he wanted it done, he will be happy if the followers say: "This is just the way we wanted it."

XVIII

When people try to improve upon, and thus deviate from, the way Nature itself naturally functions, they develop artificial codes of right and wrong.

When knowledge becomes highly abstract, men are deceived by mistaking abstractions for realities.

When instinctive family sympathies are replaced by rules for proper conduct, then parents become "responsible" and children become "dutiful."

When corruption replaces genuine benevolence in government, then loyalty oaths are demanded of officials.

XIX

Therefore—

If we ignore intricate learning and knowledge of petty distinctions, we shall be many times better off.

If we neglect to insist upon the formal proprieties of etiquette, our intuitive sympathies will return.

If we abolish opportunities for profiteering "within the law," incentive for political corruption will disappear.

If the foregoing three principles are unclear, then at least the following are understandable:

Simply be yourself.

Act naturally.

Refrain from self-assertiveness.

Avoid covetousness.

XX

If we stop fussing about grammatical trivialities, we will get along much better.

The difference between "Yes" and "Ya" is insignificant as compared with a genuine distinction like "Good" and "Bad."

Yet some people are as fearful of making a grammatical mistake as of committing a vital error.

How stupid to waste our lives in infinite details!

While others enjoy devoting themselves to ceremonious holiday celebrations, such as the spring festivals, I stay at home as unperturbed as a helpless babe.

So while others are feasting, I appear neglected.

Am I the one who is a misguided fool?

When every one else is exuberant, I continue to be disinterested.

When everyone else is alert to the niceties of etiquette, I persist in being indifferent.

I am as unconcerned as the rolling ocean, without a care to bother me.

While others behave like busybodies, I alone remain placid and resist arousal.

How can I withstand the pressure of public opinion? Because I am succored by Mother Nature herself.

XXI

Intelligence consists in acting according to Nature.

Nature is something which can be neither seen nor touched.

Yet all of the forms which can possibly be seen or touched are latent within it.

And all of the things that will actually be seen or touched are embedded as potentialities within it.

Deep in its depths are activating forces.

No matter how unplumbable the depths, these forces unfailingly sustain the world as it appears to us.

From the beginning until now, they have never ceased to express themselves in appearances.

How do I know all this to be so? It is intuitively self-evident, for every existing thing testifies to it, including what appears right here and now.

XXII

Submit to Nature if you would reach your goal.

For, whoever deviates from Nature's way, Nature forces back again.

Whoever gives up his desire to improve upon Nature will find Nature satisfying all his needs.

Whoever finds his desires extinguished will find more desires arising of their own accord.

Whoever desires little is easily satisfied.

Whoever desires much suffers frustration.

Therefore, the intelligent person is at one with Nature, and so serves as a model for others.

By not showing off, he is exemplary.

By not asserting that he is right, he does the right thing.

By not boasting of what he will do, he succeeds in doing more than he promises.

By not gloating over his successes, his achievements are acclaimed by others.

By not competing with others, he achieves without opposition.

Therefore the old saying is not idle talk:

“Submit to Nature if you would reach your goal.”

For this is the only genuine way.

XXIII

Things which act naturally do not need to be told how to act.

The wind and rain begin without being ordered, and quit without being commanded.

This is the way with all natural beginnings and endings.

If Nature does not have to instruct the wind and rain, how much less should man try to direct them?

Whoever acts naturally is Nature itself acting.

So whoever acts intelligently is intelligence acting.

And whoever acts unintelligently is unintelligence in action.

By acting naturally, one reaps Nature's rewards.

So by acting intelligently, one achieves intelligent goals,

Whereas by acting unintelligently, one comes to an unintelligent end.

Those who do not trust Nature as a model cannot be trusted as guides.

XXIV

One who tries to stand on tiptoe cannot stand still.

One who stretches his legs too far cannot walk.

One who advertises himself too much is ignored.

One who is too insistent on his own views finds few to agree with him.

One who claims too much credit does not get even what he deserves.

One who is too proud is soon humiliated.

These, when judged by the standards of Nature, are condemned as "Extremes of greediness and self-destructive activity."

Therefore, one who acts naturally avoids such extremes.

XXV

There exists something which is prior to all beginnings and endings,

Which, unmoved and unmanifest, itself neither begins nor ends.

All-pervasive and inexhaustible, it is the perpetual source of everything else.

For want of a better name, I call it "Nature."

If I am forced to describe it, I speak of it as "ultimate reality."

Ultimate reality involves initiation of growth, initiation of growth involves completion of growth, and completion of growth involves returning to that whence it came.

Nature is ultimate, the principle of initiating is ultimate, and the principle of perfecting is ultimate.

And the intelligent person is also ultimate.

Four kinds of ultimates, then, exist, and the intelligent man is one of them.

Man devotes himself to satisfying his desires, fulfilling his purposes, realizing his ideals, or achieving his goals.

But goals are derived from aims.

And all aiming is Nature's aiming, and is Nature's way of being itself.

XXVI

Saneness or sobriety is more basic than frivolity.

Calmness or self-sufficiency is superior to being agitated.

Therefore the intelligent man, though he goes on a long journey, will never depart far from his means of conveyance.

No matter how exciting the distractions, he never submits to their lures.

What would happen if Nature were to act frivolously?

If it became frivolous, it would be deprived of its sanity.

If it became agitated, it would lose control of itself.

XXVII

The wise traveler has no need to retrace his steps.

The effective speaker does not need to repeat himself.

The generous trader needs no scales.

The self-closing door needs no bolt; for it will not open itself even though it is not forced to stay shut.

Things which go together naturally do not have to be tied; for they will not separate even without bonds.

Therefore the intelligent man expresses his beneficence to other men by accepting each man's own way as best for himself.

And he performs the same service for all other beings, for he willingly recognizes that, by following its own nature, each thing does the best that can be done for it.

This may be called the two-pronged lesson:

Bad men can learn from the good man's successes.

Good men can learn from the bad man's failures.

Whoever despises such teachers, whether good or bad, or who fails to appreciate such lessons,

Even though he may be a "walking encyclopedia," is really a misguided fool.

This is the secret of wisdom.

For Nature is already as good as it can be.

It cannot be improved upon.

He who tries to redesign it, spoils it.

He who tries to redirect it, misleads it.

Consider how Nature operates:

Some things precede while others follow.

Some things blow one way while some blow another.

Some things are strong while others are weak.

Some things are going up while others are going down.

Therefore, the intelligent man avoids both extremes, shunning excess in one way as well as in the other.

XXX

Whoever tries to help Nature run itself does not need to use force.

For force will be met with force, and wherever force is used, fighting and devastation follows.

After the battle come years of destitution.

He who is wise lets well enough alone.

He does not press a victory by further conquest.

When peace has been restored, he does not behave like an arrogant victor.

When security has been regained, he does not gloat like a conqueror.

When he gets what he needs, he does not destroy those who have been defeated.

Whenever he does something which he has to do, he does it without cruelty.

When things reach maturity, they decay of themselves.

So cruelty is unnatural.

Whoever acts unnaturally will come to an unnatural finish.

XXXI

Weapons have a negative value, for they create fear in others.

Therefore, the follower of Nature avoids them.

For when among intimates, one naturally prefers the gentler, more trusting, position on the left.

And when among enemies, one naturally jockey for the more strategic position on the right.

Since weapons have a negative value, the intelligent man will have nothing to do with them if he can.

But when he is forced to use them, he does so with reluctance and restraint.

He does not admire conquest.

For, whoever desires to conquer desires to kill.

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