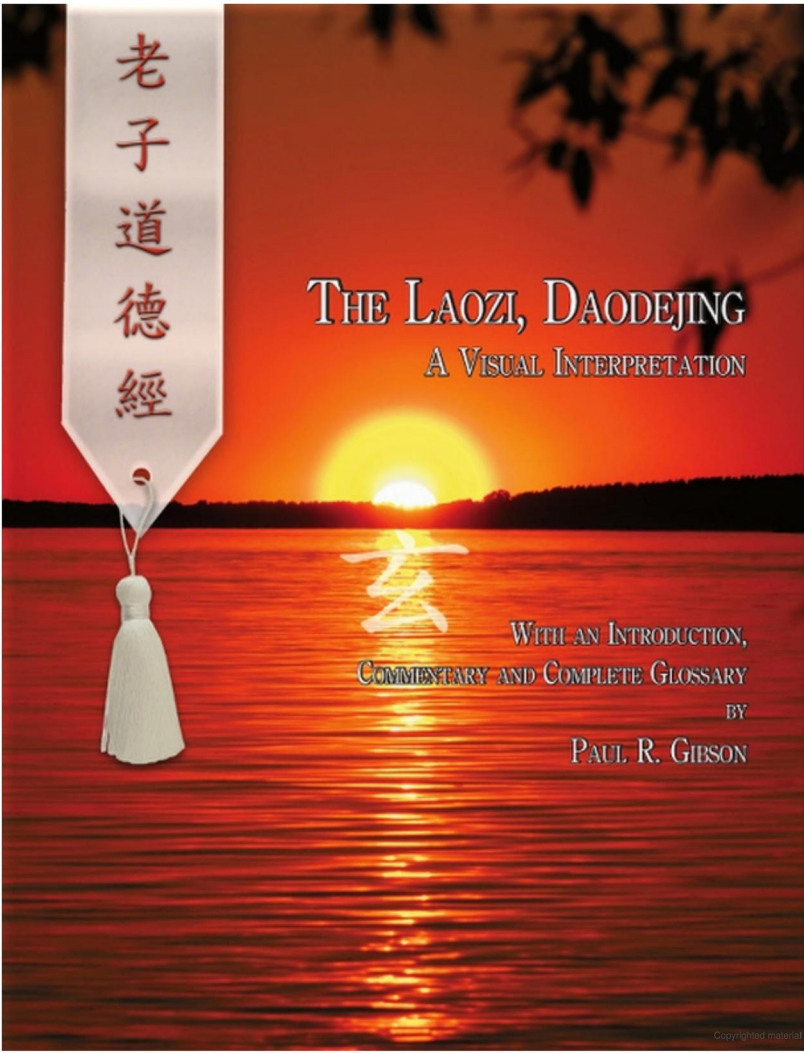

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老子道德經

THE LAOZI, DAODEJING

A VISUAL INTERPRETATION

WITH AN INTRODUCTION,

COMMENTARY AND COMPLETE GLOSSARY

BY

PAUL R GIBSON

Score
Books

An image is something that provides meaning. A word is the conveyance through which an image is expressed.
To provide meaning, nothing is better than images. To express an image, nothing is better than words.
Images give rise to words therefore one can interpret words as witness to an image.
Meaning gives rise to images therefore one can interpret images as witness to meanings.

Meaning is learned from images. Then images are expressed by words.
Although the image comes to be understood by words, words become forgotten once the image is attained.
While images preserve meaning, they are forgotten once meaning is understood.

Wang Pi 王弼

Fishing baskets are used to catch fish but when the fish are caught, the baskets are forgotten.
Traps are used to catch rabbits, but when the rabbits are caught, the traps are forgotten.
Words are used to express ideas but when the ideas are understood, the words are forgotten.
Where can I find a man who has forgotten his words so I can have a word with him?

The Chuang Tzu 莊子

Thanks to my wife, Karyl, for all her patience and support.

Introduction

Historically there have been three main religious/philosophical traditions in Chinese culture: Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Many people in the West are familiar with the Buddha and Confucius, but a surprising number are still unfamiliar with the main document that underlies Taoism, the *Lao Tzu* (*Laozi*), or as it is commonly known today, the *Tao Te Ching* (*Daodejing*); yet it is one of the most translated books in history. So, why this interpretation and commentary? Because I want to illustrate the depth, subtlety and richness of the language and philosophy by explaining the visuals provided by key Chinese characters and the pictograms that precede them.

The Tao Te Ching is very short and is written in Chinese characters (this version is 5,269 characters—approximately 797 of them unique) known technically as *logograms* and *ideograms*. These characters can provide many interpretive insights that singular word replacements can't. They often consist of compound diagrams consisting of one or more root components. The primary root components are called *radicals*. Alone and more often combined, these components form the painted word. Instead of being geared toward a word-for-word translation, these characters offer up clues within the pictures they paint; and a picture is worth *ten thousand* words. Even when my words are similar to those of other translations, within my commentary I'll expound upon the construction and meaning of various characters so you can see how and why my interpretation may differ at times.

Even if a translation appears fairly straightforward, all interpretation is subjective; it must be. Just as every translator interprets, every reader brings his or her abilities to understanding (interpreting) what they read. So it is, will be, and always has been, you will interpret what I have interpreted. Valuing this tendency rather than fighting that which is natural, I intend to offer up ways of *seeing* the text: Together we will review the text through its images rather than hearing only the words as traditionally translated. Since there is no way to translate without interpretation, what follows are several "literal" examples of Chapter 1. (Rather than top to bottom, right to left, I've formatted the text below in a modern left to right style.)

道可道, 非常道.
名可名, 非常名.

無名,萬物之始,
有名,萬物之母.

故,常無欲
以觀其妙.
常有
欲以觀其徼.

此兩者同出而異名.
同謂之玄,
玄之 又玄,
衆 妙之門.

Here is a translation of the text by way of *Google Translate 2014:*

Road to Road, very Avenue.
Name that can be named very name.

Unnamed, beginning of all things,
Famous, mother of all things.

Therefore, often desire
In view of its wonderful.
Often I want
To watch go around.

Both but with a different name.
With that of the mysterious,
Metaphysics and mysterious,
All the wonderful door.

Now, this may be a literal translation, but it is not very helpful to our understanding. It lacks any context, whether visual, historical, philosophical or otherwise.

For those interested in rhyme and how the characters might sound, we now look at the *Wade-Giles romanization*. A romanization is an English *construction* that replaces Chinese characters with spelled out words so as to bear some semblance to how they might sound when spoken:

Tao k'o Tao, fei ch'ang Tao.
Ming k'o ming, fei ch'ang ming.

Wu ming, wan wu chih shih.
Yu ming, wan wu chih mu.

Ku ch'ang wu yü,
Yi kuan ch'i miao.
Ch'ang yu yü,
Yi kuan ch'i chiao.

Tz'u liang chê t'ung, ch'u erh yi ming.
T'ung wei chih hsüan,
Hsüan chih yu hsüan,
Chung miao chih mên.

Keeping some traditional, historic and philosophical context in mind, here is a helpful example:

Tao able to be Tao'd, opposes unchanging Tao.
Name able to be named, opposes unchanging name.

Non-being, names ten thousand things its origin.
Being, names ten thousand things its mother.

Therefore by unchanging non-being,
Desire follows from true sight of its essence.
By unchanging being,
Desire then sees its appearance.

Both but with a different name,
In unity it is called dark;
Dark again it is dark,
All essence its entrance.

Although a word-for-word translation/interpretation like this can be quite helpful, as any interpretation becomes further removed from the source images, we do well to consider what we might be missing. Because my own interpretation is quite literal, at times it might sound terse or clunky, but I think it is important to try to render the text as it seems to be written. Any aid and clarification that I think might help will be accomplished, I hope, within my commentary.

Using information provided by the characters, and by delving deeper into the underlying philosophy, I hope to add some color to meaning that might otherwise be too black and white or obscure. English speakers are so accustomed to expect word-for-word translations, we forget, or might not be aware of, the picture the characters paint. They encompass images and offer context far beyond that of the basic word/phrase replacements that I use prior to my commentary.

Today, like any other age, there can be a wide gulf between formal language and common usage. Many of us may understand much formal and common usage, but we may sometimes be too far removed from today's popular sayings to have necessary comprehension. We then have rhyme that often leads the author to curious character choices and their ordering. Moreover we have the color and complexities that arise from "wordplay" like puns. Furthermore there is very little punctuation, as we know it, within the text. Beyond this, the style is rooted in paradox and is sometimes cryptic due to the nature of its subject matter. Often we must go back in time and rely upon ancient commentaries in order to glimpse context and thus glean value from the text. Therefore, I am so indebted to these commentaries that this work is hardly my own.

The reader should know that there are a number of versions of the Tao Te Ching, and there are some minor differences between these texts. Such things should be expected. Early on, these concepts were probably transmitted orally for generations. Then, the earliest hand written texts were hand copied many times over many years. There are smudges, errors and other ambiguities. Even the popular Wang Pi (226–249 CE) version of the Lao Tzu that has come down to us along with his commentary is not the version that Wang Pi is commenting on. But I have no intention of delving into such issues. Various scholars have long compared all available texts and have offered up changes that attempt to clear up common errors and irregularities. Such changes have been distilled into acceptable compilations such as the one contained herein. But even if there did exist a single perfectly readable unaltered text, we

are all interpreters; each of us will still read and understand it differently. We will still disagree upon possible meanings and intents. The text itself addresses this tendency in some subtle and not so subtle ways.

So far I have displayed some of the original characters and then introduced *Wade-Giles*. This popular romanization was invented in order to replace Chinese characters with words using a Latin alphabet so as to aid the English speaking world. Today, the *Wade-Giles* system has been mostly replaced by the *Pinyin* romanization. Among other things, *Pinyin* tries to refine some pronunciations through revised spellings, such as Dao De Jing or Daodejing instead of Tao Te Ching (Tao Teh King). When I was young, the capital of mainland China was referred to as Peking (Pei-ching) but today's *Pinyin* romanization has us know it as Beijing. P's have been replaced by B's; T's replaced by D's; Ch's replaced by J's; etc, some separate words or hyphenated words have been joined, etc. Within this text I default to *Wade-Giles* for no good reason except that this is what I became most familiar with years ago.

Today, some consider the Tao Te Ching to be mainly a work of philosophy while others say it is essentially a religious text. This distinction probably meant little to the ancient Chinese mind, and this distinction is not always made within other cultures, ideas and writings. For example, the text can be understood to say that *Tao* is an image of what *precedes* God. The Judeo-Christian bible's Wisdom books, specifically the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon* 8:4-6, has been interpreted as saying (conversely?) that although *Wisdom* is the image *of* God, it is Wisdom that chooses what God will do.

Philosophical, religious or both, the Tao Te Ching's foundation follows from its value of *realism*, and its message is practical. Whether we consider God as "Being" or not, the Tao Te Ching values "non-being" (as prior to being) in much the same way that some of the Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers did. Although many philosophers since then seem to have little use for a philosophy that values infinite Reality above definable reality, leave it to the Tao Te Ching to find use for the useless: Valuing infinite Reality before all, is not only good rational order, surprisingly it can order our practical values while providing foundational moral guidelines.

The Tao Te Ching can be read as disparaging knowledge and reason. Some believe it harkens back to a simpler time and wants us to revert to it. But since the text undeniably praises wisdom and understanding, and then utilizes reason to make its case, such readings lack value. When we read the text in light of the *metaphysical realism* that underlies it, we

realize how it expects us to consider reality in its infinite sense, and then update and adapt our personal values in accord with this. Whereas science is the study of physical nature, metaphysics is the study of the nature of reality, and the Tao Te Ching concerns itself with the psychology of realism as well as its practical application.

Though defensiveness of personal viewpoint is the default setting for the human mind, the Tao Te Ching recommends that we devalue our personal views of reality while searching out and embracing the reality within other viewpoints. No matter how much religion and philosophy may urge us, and no matter how much we feign our acknowledgment and value of it, we resist greater value because valuing greater reality beyond our own view is not natural for us. Instead, we value our narrow views of reality and come to value our beliefs instead. This is true whether our point of view is physical (attained by our senses) or mental (acquired by way of reason).

Ancient nomadic travelers might have heard a noise in the bushes and immediately thought *tiger!* True or false, right or wrong, such thoughts induce the evasive reactions required to survive. These nomads couldn't take the time to consider whether this noise might simply be a rabbit or the wind. But over time, bands of travelers would come to settle down together. They would attain more permanent shelter in which to raise families and build more stable communities. The relative security of shelter and larger community decreased the need for reactionary impulse. More importantly, society itself requires an acceptance of ideas beyond reactionary thought in order to maintain peace and unity within. Humankind is still struggling with the process. For most of us, *right* remains a reaction to *wrong;* thoughts of *truth* prompt us to condemn seeming *falsehoods*. Although this reactive thought process has been natural and often helpful, within society our points of view often fail to result in useful understanding. Instead, our strongest tendency is to form opinion and then overvalue our resulting beliefs. But opinion and belief tend to be reactionary and discriminatory rather than thoughtful and encompassing. Beliefs not only hinder the individual, they cause immeasurable conflict within society in general. The tiger is no longer outside our camp; the tiger is within.

We look for truth, and believing we find it, we stop looking. We settle upon our viewpoints, opinions and beliefs rather than valuing the greater reality from which we chose them. The beliefs we value then become the basis for how we view everything from politics to religion, as well as everything else. Yet it is our beliefs that put us at odds with each

other. Our beliefs replace greater reality as the foundation for our reason and values. Yet we praise our beliefs. We fight for our beliefs. Friends, neighbors, countrymen, patriots all; we will praise each other for the views we hold in common while our enemies do exactly the same thing, employing this same value of belief as the standard for their reason. All of these parties have come to equate belief with, or elevate belief above, knowledge and reality. So it is, we have come to value our beliefs above greater reality while believing they serve greater reality.

So, the problem isn't so much with *what* we believe, as with *how* belief functions. Belief can trap us in a circular logic that works against itself from the inside out. It is this sort of sure knowledge that the Tao Te Ching warns us away from. And since it is difficult to reason our way out of this trap, we must step outside of our circle in order to find value there. Although we are stuck with our viewpoints to a great degree (what else do we have?), the knowledge gleaned from them need not dead-end in the beliefs that we come to equate with truths. The Tao Te Ching tries to point out the problem, its gravity, and then gives us examples of how to recognize the problem in its various disguises so we may avoid the traps. In doing so it teaches us how to value reality in its infinite sense (*Tao*), so as to humble us by tempering our thoughts and actions.

For those unfamiliar with the Tao Te Ching, I'll provide a very brief background:

Legend has it that the text was authored by Lao Tzu, which means *Old Master*. It is said that he was conceived immaculately from a shooting star and then held in the womb of his mother to be born in old age. One day, after living an extremely long life, and while mourning the decadence of society, he decided to leave the city of his birth forever. But before he could go, he was recognized by a guard at the city gates. The gatekeeper pleaded with him to leave behind a written record of his philosophy. The text left behind was then known as the *Lao Tzu*. Even though a single individual may have authored the majority the text, the original title *Lao Tzu*, likely speaks more to the age-old wisdom of the text rather than to any author's actual name.

Standing beside legend are more official histories that are almost as suspect. Ancient historical sources often associate the text with Lao Tan, born 604 BCE; later to become keeper of the imperial archives. This dating suggests that Lao Tan was a contemporary of Confucius, and although there are stories, there is nothing to confirm that the two ever met. Furthermore, details within the text itself seem to conflict with these dates. Therefore it is possible that the text didn't reach its common form

until approximately 300 BCE. Regardless of the date, authenticity of authorship, or the existence of later additions and revisions, the central themes of the text were obviously ancient long before the earliest extant texts of which we are aware.

Like the Judeo-Christian bible, the 老子 *Lao Tzu* was not originally divided into chapter and verse. Such divisions probably arose as helpful markers for readers following commentaries to the text. The first division of the text was probably to divide it into two sections. The first section begins with the character 道*Tao*, and the second section (commonly beginning at Chapter 38) emphasizes the character 德 *Te*. During the reign of emperor Ching (156 BCE-141 BCE), the entire work was honored as a sacred text, officially elevating this text of philosophy to that of a 經 *Ching*. Today the *Tao Te Ching* often comes down to us divided into 81 short chapters; a tradition I follow here

THE LAOZI, DAODEJING

老子道德經

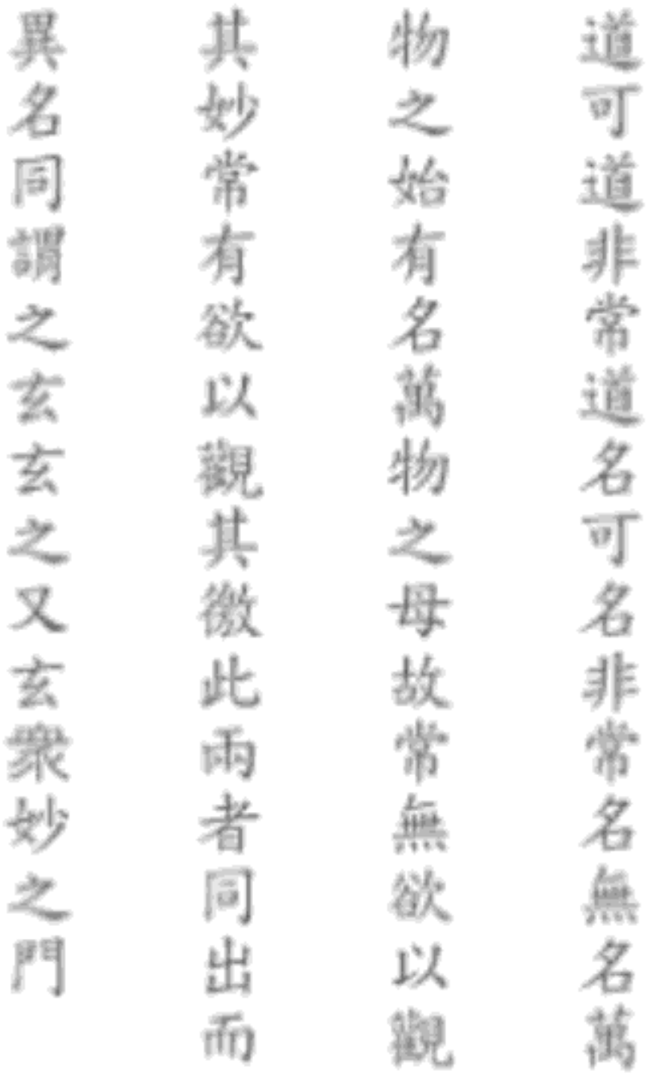
1 章

Tao, able to be realized, is not infinite Tao;
Names, able to define, cannot infinite define.

Lacking point of view, the ten thousand entities are in potential;
Having viewpoint, is the mother of the ten thousand entities.

Therefore, constantly lacking idealism accords with
A bird’s eye view of such wonder.
Constantly possessing idealism,
Accords with a glance off the surface.

These twin views together arise, yet are estranged at definition.
Their likeness speaks to the abstruseness,
Dark, it is in turn dark;
A multitude of wonder its gateway.


道可道非常道名可名非常名
無名萬物之始有名萬物之母故常無欲以觀其妙常有欲以觀其徼此兩者同出而異名同謂之玄玄之又玄衆妙之門

The Philosophy of Tao

Due to the very nature of Tao, the author has an incredible challenge to surmount. Consider the dilemma: The need to find ways of communicating the value of infinity while using definite terms. To serve these ends, the author designates “Tao” as a placeholder. Tao is not intended to be defined as a word; 道 *Tao* stands-in like a *logo* that represents reality in its infinite sense. So it is that because Tao represents these complexities, it is an ideogram rather than a logogram. All interpreters must know this but many still define Tao as “the way”. In doing so, I think interpreters not only go against the author’s intents, they devalue Tao through even this minor definition. The need for us to realize the value of Tao prior to our definitions, is foundational to the entire text. Throughout the text, especially in Chapter 25, the author warns the reader away from making such fundamental errors. While we require language to communicate value, language itself conspires against us because *to define is to make finite*, yet *that which is finite is no longer infinite*. Whereas the definiteness of words can cause us to miss the bigger picture, the author is fortunate to be using characters that help paint the picture. Many people have never thought about this, let alone confronted these topics, and yet as we will see throughout the text, these concepts can be foundational for human values, not only in lieu of our current beliefs but in lieu of belief (as we equate it with knowledge and truth) itself.

Herein we consider two popular and intertwined ways of viewing the world; that of Realism (herein designated by Tao) and that of Idealism. Realism, in the philosophical sense presented, refers to the common sense notion that far greater reality exists prior to, and outside of, our physical and rational viewpoints. As the Source, this reality must be valued more than what happens before our eyes. If not, poor judgement will be ours while we blame others for their poor judgment. Idealism, on the other hand, stresses the notion that our most valuable reality exists *within* our common perspectives, opinions and beliefs. So it is that these beliefs *become* our values. Therefore these values cause us to devalue the self-evident source that gave rise to these views in the first place. But once this happens, we have already devalued reality and forgotten the psychological process that caused our error.

The reader should also be advised that 道 *Tao* is used in two different ways. Just as today, in our day to day communication we might say something is true when we are speaking about a specific instance: *In this particular space, it is a fact that we have one tree and one bush.* Whereas at other times we might say a general *principle* is true because it applies to all instances beyond the particular, like, *one thing plus another will always equal two things*. So it is that within the text, the character 常 *ch'ang* (the common or infinite) sometimes represents a broadly shared view but it might also represent the infinite “view” beyond all particulars, in much the same way as Tao. Tao, however, almost always extends beyond the limits of physical reality. But since the author’s intent is to be practical, in some rare cases, such as “Tao, able to be realized”, Tao may point to a commonly shared sense of reality rather than more infinite reality.

So here we are; the author is taking us way back to the beginning; back to the moment when we realize the world through our physical senses. Prior to our many *views* (and our other senses) which help us to name, define and divide reality, the metaphysical “view” that precedes any physical point of view, remains undivided. Undivided reality is the standard and source from which all views partake. Since the first chapter is the foundation of the Tao Te Ching, I am spending considerable time explaining terms and concepts that will be repeated, emphasized and otherwise explained throughout the text.

For those who find this beginning a difficult and abstract place to start, the next chapter provides more practical examples about knowledge that might be more accessible for some. Perhaps you can read that chapter and then *back into* this chapter from there. The intent of the Tao Te Ching, after all, is to reveal the practical value of reality in its infinite sense; *Tao*.

Interpretive notes

When the main character can't be defined, the interpreter is left with an interesting circumstance to pass on to the reader. For example, in English, the first line may literally be rendered much like this: *Tao able to be Tao'd is not infinite Tao.* Like every interpreter before me, I am faced with a dilemma. In order to serve the reader, it seems I must pick a term to replace *Tao'd*. Some pick the term "spoken" and some go so far as to use the term "walked"; I've reluctantly chosen the term "realized" because it is essentially accurate in that it fits well with the text's philosophy of reality. But I'll resist such definition throughout the rest of my interpretation.

There are two traditional ways of interpreting the first stanza: One, is to speak of the "nameless" (prior to definition), and the other is to speak of "non-being" (prior to existence). Herein I combine both rather than letting words get in the way of interpretation and the author's imaginative intent. For clarity, I prefer to speak of the *defined* and *undefined* rather than *named* and *nameless.* I also prefer to speak of "having viewpoint" and "lacking point of view" rather than speaking in terms of *being* and *non-being*. As it is, these alterations don't change the essential meaning. I hope, however, that using these terms will help provide an entry point to the topic that makes it more accessible to the modern reader while also matching up best with the imagery of the author's chosen characters.

The first four lines explain how: ***Reality, prior to being viewed (or otherwise sensed) is infinite. Infinite reality encompasses all, whereas any viewpoint is personal, finite, exclusive. Our viewpoints divide (define/name) aspects of reality so we can communicate it to others.*** (Herein, divided aspects of reality are called 萬物 "the ten thousand entities", i.e. everything.)

The second stanza speaks of two different ways of seeing. Here we find the character觀 *kuan*, that is often translated as *to observe.* When we break down the character, the meaning expands. The character is made up of several images. It features the radicals: 隹*a bird* + 見 *to see*. As such, *a bird's eye view* can be broader and more encompassing than our base view. This perspective could be that of the wise owl or perhaps a fishing bird whose lofty viewpoint allows it to see past the surface reflection of the water in order to successfully catch fish.

Of course the bird can, at times, find itself located on the ground with us, and so the final character of the second stanza, 徼 *chiao*, refers to a *boundary*. The character includes a radical 彳 which means *step left*. The complete character therefore represents a sort of *boundary to side-step*. All of this presents a nice picture, and although I couldn't do it here, the author made this stanza rhyme (consider the *Wide-Giles* in the introduction). I can only leave you with the take away: *We can believe our narrow points of view are true, or we can side-step this illusion and value a broader view*. So, lines five through eight tell us: ***Our ability to differentiate things is obviously valuable but the downside is not so obvious. In fact, the downside is often hidden from us due to the nature and strength of our viewpoints. Our points of view are so strong and definite that we mistakenly call our views "true" rather than realizing how they are merely convenient and tentative.*** Our personal, shortsighted view is an *idealistic* view rather than a broader, more *realistic* view.

So far in the chapter, the emphasis has been upon infinite reality but the third stanza begins by pointing out a necessary point of metaphysical realism: "These twin 'views' arise together, yet are estranged at definition". Here, the character 者 *che*, generally represents *the one who.* The author is speaking of the subject's viewpoint of the object viewed. This point is foundational to the philosophy of the text: Since we come to value reality in the moment we view reality, we often come to mistake our view *of* reality *for* reality itself. *The strength of our perspective makes us think our views* are *reality, equal in value* to *reality, or more important* than *reality beyond our views.* So why is this so important to understand? Because when we confuse our view of reality with reality itself, we call our viewpoints right and others wrong; other people call their views true and ours false. We continue to dismiss each other's viewpoints in a never ending vicious cycle of conflict. Sometimes we do this covertly, sometimes overtly, sometimes violently. This is the primary fault within human values; the *original sin.* We make these errors of knowledge everyday and it is harmful to our values. Our ignorance of reality

beyond our own viewpoints means we overvalue our own views at the expense of others. This promotes poor judgment while it divides society through prejudice and other distinctions.

Unfortunately, the rest of the stanza (lines eleven through thirteen) seems to suffer from redundancy because the radical *hsüan* 玄 is repeated several times. Part of its intent, however, is to tie the preceding stanzas together by way of such a great visual metaphor that it later helped to inspire an entire school of Chinese philosophical thought called, 玄學 *Hsüan-hsüeh* (*Xuanxue*) the School of the Abstruse. The character is often rendered as *darkness* but it also represents *abstruseness*. Abstruse means *to conceal* and it also means to *push away*. Visualize an image reflecting off of the surface of the water that thereby gets the way of your clear view of the water's depth. Ancient commentaries inform us that although *hsüan* 玄 has been be linked with the dark color of water,[1] traditionally *hsüan* 玄 refers to the dark color of sky. *Hsüan* 玄 refers to a dark red color; the symbolic color of heaven. Visualize a deep red sunset sky *mirroring* off the water (like the last line of the second stanza, *glancing off the surface*). So, clear waters only appear dark due to their reflection of the dark sky, "Dark, it is in turn dark". There are many different characters that refer to darkness but this character was chosen by the author for good reason. The darkness spoken of here is inseparable from its reflective quality, yet we are often blinded by the shimmer. Before mirrors, and even before polished bronze was used like a mirror, water was used to view one's own reflection; the darker the pool, the greater the reflection. So, *hsüan* 玄 represents the great depths that become obscured by surface reflections. Also note that this reflection is backwards. Although it seems to accurately mirror the vast heavens beyond, it is superficial and obscures all depth.

So it is that we also find the character 兩 *liang* for *twin*. It is said to represent the twin yokes on a cart. We also find the character 又 *yu*, that means, *again*. It follows from ancient seal scripts that represent *a hand that picks, and in turn, picks again*. Within this chapter we have several characters that seem to call attention to the sort of repetitive or reflective quality that *hsüan* 玄 represents. Once we begin to realize that our depth of clarity is masked by this reflection, this can become the gateway to our understanding of "a multitude of wonder". We will observe this sort of *wordplay* throughout the text. (Consider, specifically, Chapter 10 and its associated commentary.)

Keeping all this in mind, we have a complete picture painted of different ways of seeing; physically and metaphysically; personally and more broadly. The preceding stanzas become united in the last five lines while illustrating the reason and purpose of the entire chapter: ***Our viewpoints are limited, yet so definite as to deceive us about their completeness. Yet, as if from a bird's eye view, clarity and depth can be observed right past the surface reflection of things. When we properly value that greater reality exists prior to viewpoint, we will in turn, devalue and reorder our own perspective. Realizing the problem gets us one step closer to solving it and valuing the wonder.***

As you read further (i.e. Chapter 15), you will see many chapters within the Tao Te Ching making reference to water. These references are literal, figurative, metaphorical. Their depth visually accomplished by way of the water radical contained within the characters painted.

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[1] The character for *hsüan* 玄 does not contain the water radical 氵. *Hsüan* 玄 *is* a radical. At a certain point in the history of the texts, *hsüan* 玄 was often substituted with 淵 *yüan*, which does contain the water radical. Although *yüan* 淵 does refer to the darkness of deep water, the character *hsüan* 玄 represents much more. Later on, the character in many of the texts was changed back.

2 章

When all in the world know its beauty to be beautiful,
Ugliness thus results.
When all know its good to be good,
The not good thus results.

Therefore, existence and its lack, give birth to each other;
Difficulty and ease complete each other;
Long and short shape each other;
Above and below are flip-sides of each other;
Voice and instrument harmonize with each other;
Ahead and behind follow each other.

To be in accord, the wise leader
Resides without intervening in affairs, and is capable of teaching without words.
The ten thousand entities are taken for granted yet none are dismissed.
To create yet not possess; To serve yet not make dependent.

To accomplish goals yet not dwell therein;
Only those not residing are thereby not evicted.

為善斯不善已故有無相生
難易相成
長短相形高下相傾音聲相
和前後相
隨是以聖人處無為之事行
不言之教
萬物作焉而不辭生而不有
為而不恃
功成而弗居夫唯弗居是以
不去

The Psychology of Tao

For those who found the first chapter too abstract, this chapter might help. This chapter begins with practical psychological examples of the preceding philosophy. Whereas the first chapter took us back to a world before, and up to, the point of perception, the author now proceeds to the moments and consequences immediately following from our perception of the world. We find out how the realistic philosophy laid out in the first chapter effects us psychologically. Here we have practical examples of where we stumble and why it matters. We learn how our rational viewpoints grow up alongside our physical points of view. Though our mental points of view form the basics of communication and knowledge, they can, unfortunately, culminate in divisive belief. We then learn how the wise leader might embrace qualities of Tao so as to set an example about how we might side-step these problems.

Whereas the first chapter never spoke of *dualism* (it spoke only of infinity and our myriad views of infinity), here we see how our dualistic distinctions (good from bad for example) begin to overwhelm our thought process. These distinctions may seem reasonable and helpful upon first glance, but they can cause conflict by dividing our values as well as our society. So we are reminded that all we *now view* arises from what we *may view* and that what we *may view* exists as potential for all of us. Dualistic distinctions, however useful, tend to limit our values because we come to see them as opposing each other rather than completing each other. As in mathematics, opposites complement each other because each is born out of the idea of the other. Here we see how the limits of mental perception not only parallel the limits of our physical senses, they multiply our errors almost to a point of no return because we can rationalize them far beyond any defense of our physical senses. Although we are sure that our physical senses are accurate rather than convenient (although any magician knows how easily fooled our senses are), what we sense we tend to call *true* even though the convenience provided by our senses may be the very distraction that keeps us from valuing the greater more humbling reality beyond.

The bottom line of this chapter is that we should prefer value over dualism: *Greater value may again be realized once we begin to devalue our rigid distinctions. When we recognize that opposition is created through belief, we can then revalue our distinctions on a sliding scale. This reevaluation is the first step in our corrective process.*

Once we realize our errors, we might then go back and begin to revalue infinite reality. This might be likened to a process of reverse engineering. We don't invent reality and we can't recognize reality directly, but we can trace our way back through our mental process, and then back through physical viewpoint, in order to value reality as it exists prior to our viewpoints. These clues can help us reorder our values so that we don't overvalue unrealistic, self-made ideals. Although the text has much to say about the faults of knowledge, that doesn't mean it is against learning. It values reason and reminds us that in order for our learning to progress, it can't dead-end in opinion and belief.

Since definition and teaching can get too close to indoctrination, a good teacher realizes the implications, and is capable of teaching without defining terms too strictly. This can keep the student's mind open to further potential. Opposites, whether realized through physical sense or our rational thought process, depend upon each other as much as they appear to be in conflict.

In the original Chinese, the last stanza rhymes. I didn't make it rhyme but I couldn't leave out the wordplay: The last line plays on the line before when it speaks of not being able to *evict* those who do not *dwell* within their own accomplishments (opinions, ideologies, beliefs).

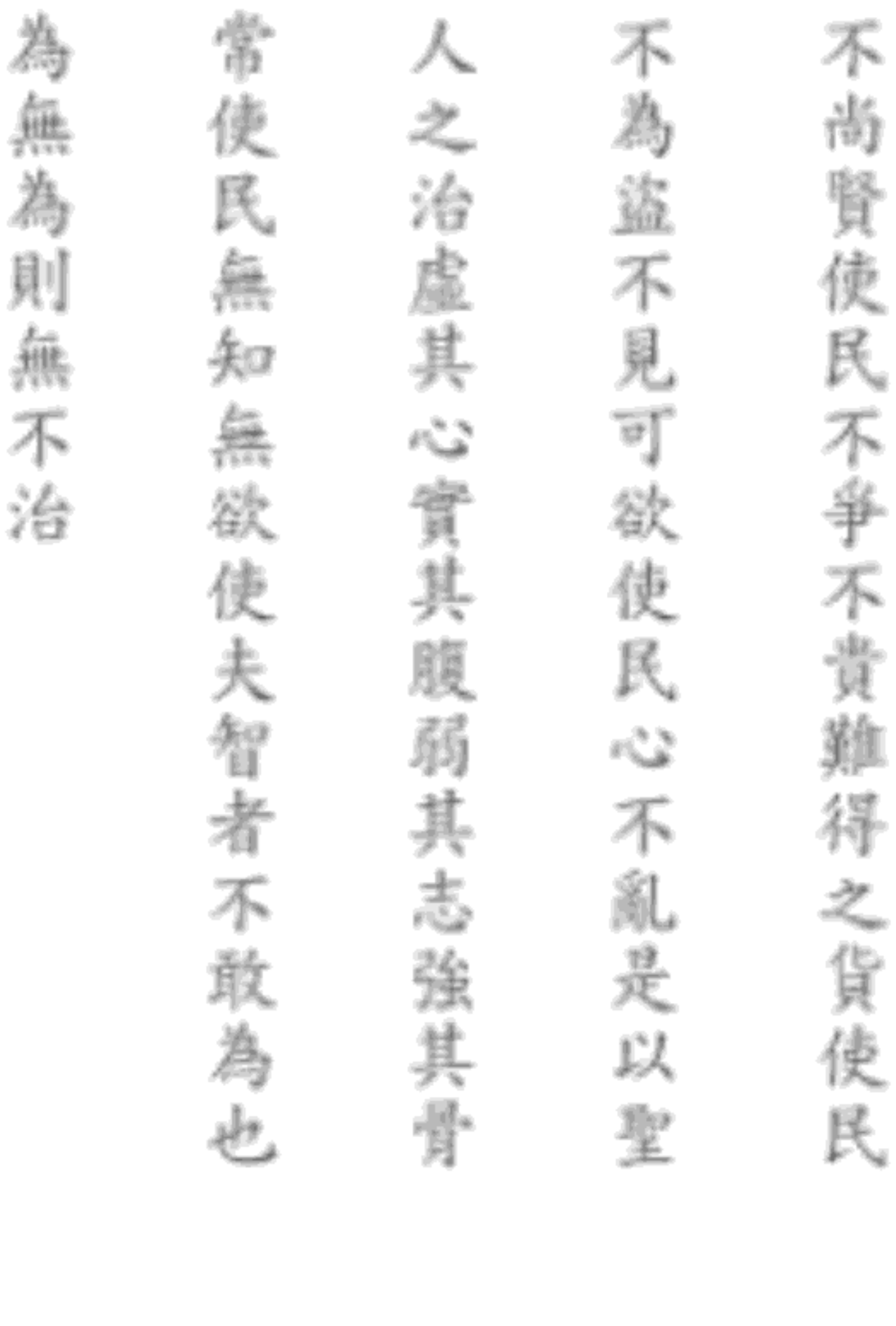
Interpretive notes

The characters and their meanings are relatively straightforward and require no comment.

3 章

Not valuing the righteous
Helps the citizenry not to compete.
Not prizing difficult to obtain goods
Helps the citizenry not to become thieves.
Not admiring certain ideals
Helps the citizen’s intentions lack confusion.

To be in accord, the wise leader
Heals by emptying their minds,
Filling their bellies,
Weakening their wills,
Strengthening their bones.
Constantly enabling citizens to non-belief and to lack ideals;
Enabling those with knowledge to not dare react.
Act without acting then nothing is unmanageable.


不尚賢使民不爭不貴難得之貨使民不為盜不見可欲使民心不亂是以聖人之治虛其心實其腹弱其志強其骨常使民無知無欲使夫智者不敢為也為無為則無不治

Social Reality

The last chapter touched upon problems with knowledge and belief. The author is now moving beyond personal belief and our possible tempering of it, and touches upon the sociopolitical issues involved.

Interpretive notes

Several of the lines herein seem to have the ruler sounding somewhat authoritarian, but when understood in the context of the preceding chapters, a reasonable message comes to the fore. There are metaphysical rules and then there are laws of nature; and then there are social rules that follow from these. Although a ruler may impose social rules, social rules should not imposed as a matter of propriety so much as they should follow from the physical and metaphysical realities that precede them.

Chih 治, can mean *to govern*, *manage* or even *to heal*. The character breaks down as 氵 *water* + 台 representing *a formal term of address*. In other words, it represents a stream (for example) which has been harnessed in some manner for our own use.

When this chapter refers to the belly, traditionally this refers to the place where imagination resides. Imagination can broaden rather than restrict our views.

When the second to last line says: 為 *wei* 也 *yeh*, literally *to act also*, I've interpreted this as *to react*. So when the next line begins: 為無為, *wei wu wei*, *act without acting*, it might be better read as, *act without reaction*. But since this may not be exactly what the author writes, I've interpreted the text as it is and I merely note this interpretive option here.

Hsin 心 means heart/mind/intent. The heart/mind will form our intentions. Valuing reality as it is (Tao), can help our intentions lack confusion.

4 章

Tao floods;
Yet in use it seems never to overflow.
Fathomless;
Like the ancestor of the ten thousand entities,
It tempers the points,
Unravels the tangles,
Diffuses the glare,
Reunites the dust.
Calm clarity;
Seeming possibly to exist.
I do not know whose child it is;
Its image precedes that of the lord.

道沖而用之或不盈淵兮似萬物之宗
挫其銳解其紛和其光同其塵湛兮似
或存吾不知誰之子象帝之先

Genealogy of Tao

Weaving imagery, philosophy and theology, we again refer back to the beginning. The chapter ends at the beginning: that Tao perhaps exists before the lord, and so “the lord”, is at best a secondary value or image of Tao because of how each of us define God through our beliefs.

One might imagine infinity as a vast emptiness or as a complete fullness of all things simultaneously. This dynamic is presented within this chapter. Unable to name, define, or know it, it *seems* empty yet since all things follow from it, it also *appears* full. In this way, the process of reality is dynamic. (Consider Chapter 11.)

Interpretive notes

A quick overview of the characters within this chapter reveal that the theme is water. We find three different characters that include a water radical 氵. This begins in the first line with 沖 *ch'ung* (flooding, roiling water); then in the third line we see 淵 *yüan* (water so deep, that even though clear, you can’t see to the bottom), fathomless like infinity itself. Finally we complete the visual in line nine with a character that utilizes 湛 *chan* as “calm clarity” (clear waters of such depth as to be calm). The combination of all these water based characters lead up to notions that run deep but our personal perspectives may still keep us removed form any deep personal involvement. This chapter repeats themes from previous chapters and builds upon them. Opposites do not contend, they complement each other. They reveal the nature (or potential nature) of each other.

When I render the text, “I do not know whose child it is; Its image precedes that of the lord”, herein I have interpreted the character 象 *hsiang*, as image. It is worth noting that this character, following from the ancient pictograph, gives the visual of an *elephant*. The Han Fei Tzu 韓非子 (Han Fei, 280–233 BCE), tells us about how the character passed from the pictogram of an elephant to the character meaning *image*. We learn that although many of us may have never seen a live elephant, we may come upon the skeleton of a dead elephant and *imagine* the size and shape of the living elephant from observing its bones. Therefore when the ancients spoke of the *image* or likeness of something, they often used terms like 象 *hsiang*. So it is that we might recognize God as an image of

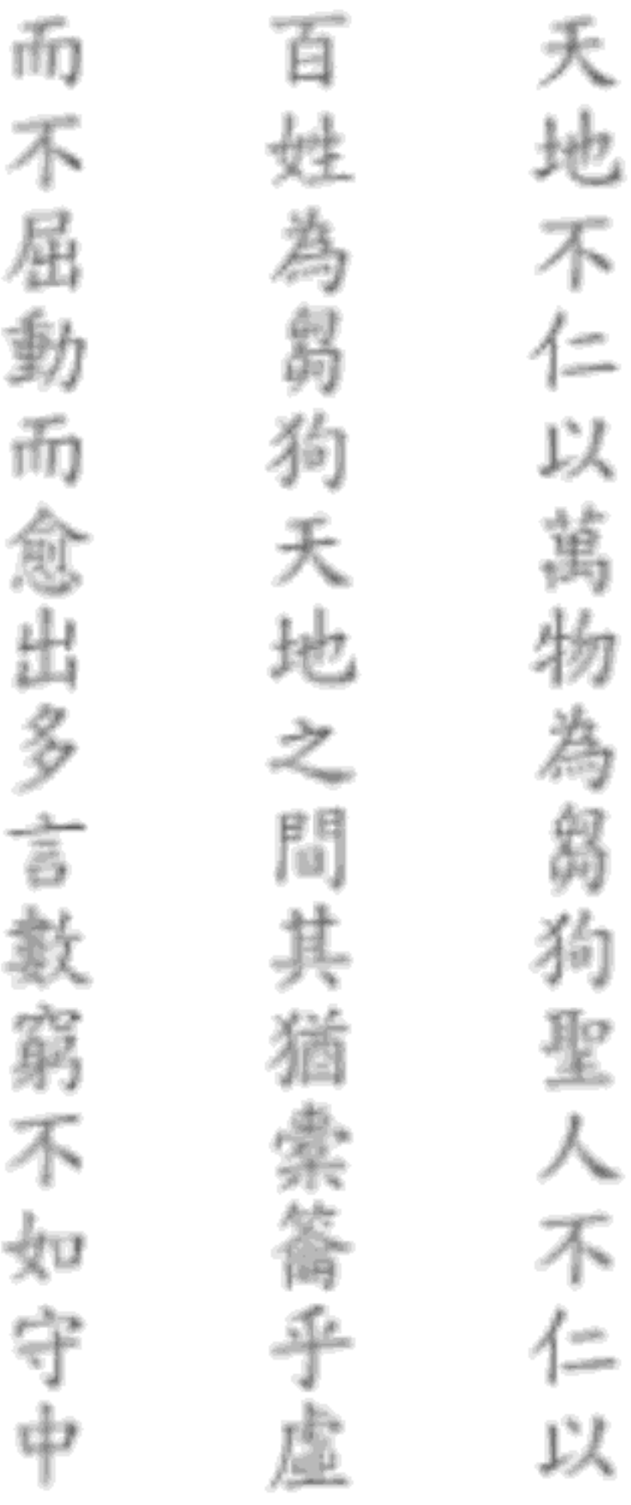
Tao—in the same way, we might reunite a lost child with its parents—due to a familial resemblance.

5 章

Heaven and Earth are not kind;
In accord, the ten thousand entities serve as straw dogs.
The wise person is not kind;
In accord, the hundred families serve as straw dogs.

The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows:

Empty yet not spent;
Used, yet recovers to produce.
Many words amount to exhaustion;
Do not take heed, guard the center.


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籥乎虛而不屈動而愈出多言數窮不如守中

Tao as Process, Not as an Entity

Tao exists as it is without regard for our thoughts, feelings or lack thereof about it. Nature's laws are the same. There is no *intent* in this; it just is as it is. Here, the characters that mean "Heaven and Earth" might best be interpreted together simply as *nature*. The "wise person" is one who tries to follow Tao. Nature and its laws do not bend to our will; they are not kind. The wise person, in pointing out that reality won't bend to our desires and ideals, also seems unkind. Regardless of your viewpoint, you are better off accepting and even valuing reality as it is. Every thing in the world and every perspective is convenient rather than lasting and common. We may value our beliefs but neither nature nor Tao values them. To be in accord with nature and Tao, we must surely toss aside our opinions, beliefs and ideologies if we truly value reality beyond our thoughts and beliefs about how reality ought to be.

Interpretive notes

There are two popular interpretations of the characters 芻 狗 *ch'u kou*. One is *grass* and *dog*. Another more popular interpretation comes from the *Chuang Tzu (Zhuangzi)* from the 4th century BCE. Here the characters are interpreted as *straw dogs*. Here we are told that straw dogs were ceremonial tokens valued during ritual but then discarded as worthless after the ceremony. So it is that the *ten thousand entities* (i.e. every thing and every perspective) may seem constant and favored until the forces of nature, or of reality, impinge upon them and indiscriminately destroys them. We may try to predict volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, or we may rely upon ceremony or ritual in our attempts at disaster control, only to find that these events are beyond our grasp. The wise person realizes this and tosses such ideals aside as *straw dogs*. If we can realize this value, our realization might serve us.

Back to the other interpretation as "grass and dogs". Both grass and dogs are common. The grass serves the dog, the dog serves the human. Each are mutually dependent in their servitude of the other without any intention to do so or to be so. Humans are dependent upon nature, and both humans and nature are dependent upon, and servants to, reality.

The characters 百 *pai*, the *hundred*, and 姓 *hsing*, as *family name*, are generally understood as referring to *the common people*. These two characters seem to bind the whole chapter to a sort of dependence upon,

or a servitude to, a tradition that can be difficult if not impossible to break free from. The first stanza speaks of *all things*: “the ten thousand entities”, and so now the concept is linked with “the hundred families”. The character 姓 *hsing* breaks down as 女 *woman* + 生 *born* = *family lineage*. In ancient China the family name was passed down through the mother’s lineage. Feminine concepts are key to Tao.

The second stanza refers to 橐 *t'o* a bag with openings at both ends; possibly like that of a bellows or perhaps a drum covering. *Yueh* 籥 can represent a flute or the tube that a bellows sack blows through. Either way we regard it, the more either is worked, the more air/sound it produces/reproduces. The in/out motion of the bellows can also represent, lets say, reproductive activity. This notion seems to match up well with the imagery of family lineage but either interpretation results in adequate meaning. This family lineage also seems to represent the genealogy of Tao from the prior chapter. Therefore, I note the playfulness of language while also noting possible links within this and to other chapters.

In the original Chinese, the first and final stanza rhyme. The modern meaning of 如 *ju;* is *such as* or possibly *as if*. But the character is a visual of a woman speaking instructions to be followed, (or perhaps hearing instructions to follow) and therefore it can mean *to heed* or *to listen*. We may also view it as a compound with the preceding character. 不如 means *it would be better to*. Any of these interpretations happen to work fine.

6 章

The valley spirit is deathless; This is called *the abstruse female;*
The abstruse female is a gateway
To what is called *the foundation of heaven and earth.*
Threading softly, it seems to exist;
To use it is not hard work.

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 Spirit of the Imagination

The valley spirit reflects an *image* that only *appears* to exist, yet it exists without end. Therefore it seems to represent the rational process of *imagination* itself.

Whereas previous chapters have lamented the blinding aspect of knowledge and belief as derived from our five senses, imagination comes to our rescue. Imagination is not like our more masculine senses; imagination is a more subtle, perhaps *feminine* sense that isn't bound by physical viewpoint. Imagination is not one of our five senses but it can be considered as our *metaphysical sense*. All of us, in common, can draw upon this sense at any time. It is so common yet so subtle it is taken for granted or even ignored and rebuffed; yet we use it all the time and we can repeatedly use this sense without ever using it up.

The book of *Lieh Tzu*, *(Liezi)* 列子, perhaps from 400-350 BCE, tells us that these same words are also found in *The Book of the Yellow Emperor*, 黃帝.

Interpretive notes

In the original Chinese, the entire chapter rhymes.

Much like the previous chapter, this one seems to be shrouded in ancient ritual, terminology and imagery. Although the characters are straightforward enough to interpret, it can be complex to understand. Although some of the language is similar to Chapter 4, the term "valley spirit" is not used anywhere else within the text.

As in Chapter 1, we again find the character 玄 *hsüan*, for *abstruseness*. Here it appears alongside the character 牝 *p'in* which represents the *female*. The female reflects an image of its characteristics. Some sources say this character literally refers to a *dark horse* or *dark mare*. It is said that the mare represents feminine freedom and power. Other sources tell us that the character represents a *cow* (representing the female of any species). Each way of interpreting it fits with the chapter's intent. The valley spirit represents our less aggressive and more receptive nature. Because of this, I regard the valley spirit, the abstruse female, as being representative of the spirit of *imagination* itself.

The first character 谷 *ku*, means *valley* but tends to refer to the valley formed by water cutting its path through the land. The character 谷 *ku* follows from ancient seal scripts and seems to break down as an

abbreviation for 水*a stream* over 口 *a mouth;* therefore, the mouth of the stream or of a gorge formed by these waters. Within the earlier Ma-wang-tui versions of this text, a variation of the same character is used. The character used there confirms the water radical and so the essential meaning of *water flowing through a valley* is confirmed. The second character, 神 *shen*, represents *signs from heaven*. The radicals breakdown this way: 礻 *a sign*, 申 *from a superior*. So it is that *imagination brings us signs from heaven as it flows through a valley toward the mouth.*

Later we find the character 綿 *mien.* It is repeated twice. It represents *softness* or cotton. Following the valley stream metaphor, I interpret the repetition (perhaps too broadly) as cotton thread; a river *threading softly* through the lowly valley, serving everything in all directions while being fed from all directions; much like Tao. (Consider Chapter 8.)

The entire verse is about imagination. All of this fits well with what the Chapter 1 has to say about the value of our imagining a bird's eye view and, how imagining other points of view might temper the rigidity of our knowledge/belief.

7 章

Heaven is eternal, the earth long lasting.
Heaven and earth are placed
According to their ability to endure through time;
Because they do not live for themselves,
Are therefore able to endure and grow.

To be in accord, the wise people place their egos behind,
Yet find their selves out front;
Externalize their ego yet the ego survives.
Is it not because of one lacks personal error
That one is able to accomplish personal interests?

天長地久天地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非以其無私邪故能成其私

Transferring Value to Humanity

There is a pattern within the Tao Te Ching of bringing up an abstract point, noting the philosophy and/or psychology of it, and then pointing out a practical application of it. The value of the images presented is for the responsible persons among us to mirror.

A consistent theme of the Tao Te Ching is its interest in paradox. The text often brings up one point in order to contrast it to another. But in doing so it intends to note the dependence of seeming opposites. Your self/ego is important but its value can only be fully realized when you put your self/ego in a subordinate position to greater reality.

Interpretive notes

The first line, 天長地久, has become a common saying: *As eternal and unchanging as the universe;* but in order for it to maintain the author's context, it is not read that way here.

The characters and meanings are straightforward but there are also possible compound words and phrases to consider such as 是以 *shih i*, meaning *to be in accord.* While some might interpret this as *therefore* or *thus*, those terms demonstrate that what follows next is to be a logical progression. But when 是以 are used, it is most often an advisory statement to show how one *should* act in order to *comply* with the preceding circumstance. It is advice or a lesson in compliance. Often the lesson is immediately followed by a summary that begins *therefore.* Only in Chapter 75 do I deviate and find that 是以 might better be interpreted as *this is why.* It fits that context while also reading smoother.

Another character compound in the second to the last line generally denotes a question:
不以 *Is it not because?*

8 章

The highest good is like a stream.
A stream is good at benefitting the
Ten thousand entities while not competing;
Subsisting with the multitudes in places loathed;
Therefore near to Tao.

Good residence is grounded;
Good intentions run deep;
Good interaction is kind;
Good speech is faithful;
Good governing directs;
Good business is capable;
Good actions are timely.

Only those who do not compete
Are thereby not singled out.

上善若水水善利萬物而不爭處衆人之所惡故幾於道居善地心善淵與善仁言善信政善治事善能動善時夫唯不爭故無尤

The Highest Value

Examples in nature and practical examples of how one acts when embodying values of Tao. Water always flows to the lowest point. The lowest point is where Tao dwells; in the valleys where humility is taken for granted. Most people distain these places while scheming and contending to get away and to distinguish themselves from the humble.

Interpretive notes

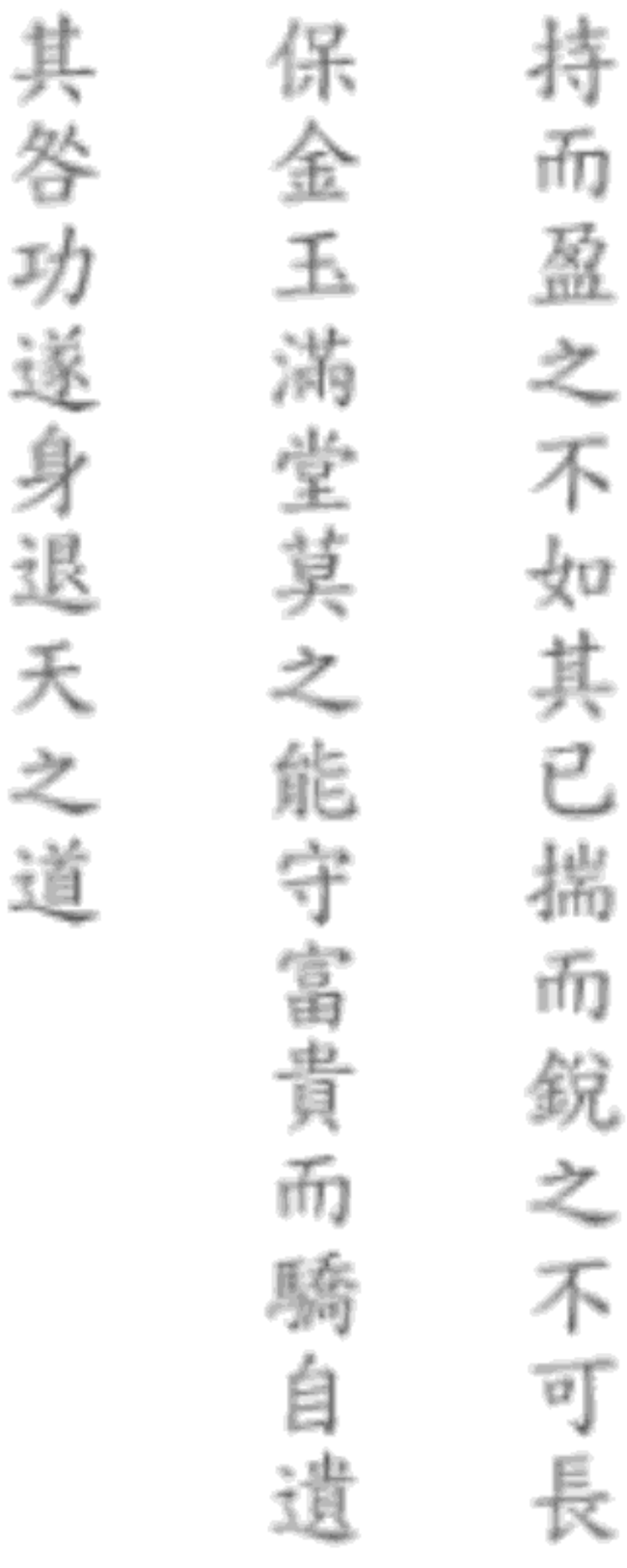
Once again this chapter features water themes: The stream flowing to the low points, grounded, running deep. Yet in this way it serves the highest values. Still, most people seek to stand out and rise above it all.

I interpreted the characters 幾於 as a compound that together mean *almost in regard to*, or simply, *near to*, as in, “Therefore near to Tao.”

The last character 尤 *yu*, today often means *outstanding* but the character also denotes, a *characteristic many would find fault with*. The character itself gives the visual of a hand with a line on it. The line might represent a blemish. A blemish *stands out*, and the blemish on a finger singles it out as distinct (outstanding) from the other fingers.

9 章

To support and yet exceed;
It would be better to have stopped.
To pound an edge and yet sharpen;
Its inability to last is guaranteed.
As gold and jade pack a large room,
There is none who can then protect it.
To value riches as well as self-pride,
Is to pass on the defect.
Accomplish, and immediately withdraw your ego.
Such is the Tao of heaven.



On Excess

The last chapter focused on moderation due to our realization of how opposites complement. This chapter is about the fact that it is much more common for us to overreach.

In the last line we have the term *Tao of heaven*. We are immersed within our personal realities, viewpoints, and ego, but beyond our limited personal realities is the greater natural reality of this world. Beyond this we should also consider the greater metaphysical reality that is the *Tao of heaven*.

Interpretive notes

There are several ways of reading this chapter and its characters, and most are fine. *Ch'ih* 持meaning *to support*, and *ying* 盈 means *to fill to overflowing*. The characters leave us with the visual of not only filling but then overfilling a vessel. Individually the several characters that follow seem to make little sense, but together as a compound, 不如, *puju* is a phrase meaning *it would be better*. Finally we have 已 *yi*, meaning *to stop*, *cease*, *to end*. “It would be better to have stopped.”

The third line begins with 揣 *ch'uai*, and means *to add to* or *to put work into*. In this context it means to put work into steel by hammering the edge sharp. This *tempering process* makes the steel harder but in doing so the steel is prone to becoming too brittle, especially when sharpening it further. To over sharpen a hardened edge makes it likely to dull quite quickly. The art of tempering and sharpening was perfected early on in the orient.

I 遺, means to *bequeath an inheritance*. I’ve used the words, “to pass on”. Just as you pass on your inheritance, you also pass on other values (prejudices, et al.) to your children. The last line suggests you should set an example for your children just as the Tao of heaven sets an example for you and for nature before you.

10 章

While encamped with the mortal soul and embracing the One,
Can you not separate?
In concentrating the vapor to cause tenderness,
Can you be like a newborn?
In washing away abstruseness from your view,
Can you lack blemish?
In loving your nation and governing the citizens,
Can you not intervene?
In the spreading and narrowing of heaven’s gates,
Can you act as a female with wings?
In clear view of all four reaches,
Can you be indeterminate?

To create and nurture; To create yet not possess;
To serve yet not make dependent;
To lord without lording over;
This is called *abstruse responsibility*.

載營魄抱一能無離乎專
嬰兒乎滌除玄覽能無疵
能無為乎天門開闔能為
達能無知乎生之畜之生
不恃長而不宰是謂玄德

氣致柔能如
乎愛國治民
雌乎明白四
而不有為而

Reflecting Upon Viewpoint

This verse points out the difficulties posed by personal perspective and then offers up things to consider while working around this difficulty in order to achieve wisdom. There is much more going on in this chapter than first meets the eye.

Here, parts of the philosophy of Chapter 1 are expressed in more religious sounding terms. We find this shift done at several places within the text. We can look at mysteries as mystical and mythic, or we can look at mysteries realistically and practically. Rather than forcing a distinction, the author speaks to both ways of seeing; both ways of seeing can amount to the same lessons.

Interpretive notes

The first line sets the tone. Ancient Chinese belief refers to both (mortal) *physical souls* 魄 *p'o*, and to *spiritual souls* 魂 *hun*, but this chapter only refers to *p'o*. Therefore the author's emphasis here is not to *contrast* the two souls, but to imply complementary value. We might liken *p'o* to physical perspective whereas *hun* is closer to spiritual, metaphysical or imaginative perspective. We might employ our spiritual soul so as to temper our physical perspectives. This process can bring the two together so as to embrace the One, which is to embrace Tao.

The third line begins, somewhat curiously, "In concentrating the vapor". Over time this line has engendered many mystical interpretations. Although the religious sound of the chapter might lend itself toward some mystical interpretation, I'll put forth the characters for your consideration: *Chuan* 專 means *to concentrate*, or *condense*; 氣 *ch'i* refers to *steam/vapor*. The character 氣 *ch'i* breaks down to give us the visuals of 气 *steam* + 米 *rice*. These characters are followed by 柔 *jou* which means *soft/tender*.

As in Chapter 1 and other chapters, we find the character for *hsüan* 玄, the *abstruse*. Here it is used in the third line along with *lan* 覽, which means *to view;* but the earlier Ma-wang-tui texts use the characters *hsüan* 玄 and 監*chien* together instead. This is helpful in clarifying the intended meaning. Today, the character 監 *chien* might be translated as *a view from above;* specifically that of a supervisor looking down upon a subordinate, but 監 *chien* is an ancient character that breaks down into several other characters: It features a *minister crouching* 臥, *over a vessel*

皿, ostensibly containing liquid, thereby seeing one's own reflection. As we've already seen, in ancient times, water was used to view one's own reflection. The etymology of the character is as follows: 臣+人+血with these replacements: 人 as 𠂉 and then 血 as 皿. So it is that this specifically represents a human peering into 血 *a chalice filled with blood* (an ancient religious sacrificial symbol). This imagery lines up well with what the ancients said of 玄 *hsüan* as the dark red color of the heavens. Here we have the dark red color of *blood* 血. The character 血, follows from the ancient seal script for blood: 

Hsüan is then used in the last line of the Ma-wang-tui texts as well as most others. Therefore there may be yet another level of meaning offered up by the imagery of line five: *When trying to view into the depths of water, our view can become obscured by our own reflection.* In each of the cases mentioned, the concept, as well as the visual of reflection, fit well with each of these contexts. As difficult as it is to see beyond our own reflection, it is to our benefit to do so. So, 德 *te*, represents our *ability to respond* to this reality. We must recognize our problem before we can know to see beyond it. The concept *abstruse responsibility* is repeated in Chapters 51 and 65.

This chapter is making its point through the use of negative statements (four of the first six statements include the character 無 wu, indicating *not*, *lack*, *without*) but the intent of the chapter is the promotion of positive values. Although lines five and six read, "In washing away darkness from your view, can you lack blemish?" We can read these more positively as, "In washing away the darkness from your view, can you then gain clear perspective?"

11 章

Thirty spokes unite in a single wheel hub,
Converging in vacancy to have the vehicle be of use.
The saturating of clay with water in order to serve as a vessel,
Converges with vacancy to have the vessel be of use.
Chiseling out doors and windows so as to serve a structure,
Converges with vacancy to have the structure be of use.
Therefore, *to have*, accords with benefit
When *its lack* is in consideration of usefulness.

三十幅共一轂當其無有車之用埏埴
以為器當其無有器之用鑿戶牖以為
室當其無有室之用故
之以為用
有之以為利無

The Use of the Useless

Some beautiful as well as practical examples to make a metaphysical point. Beyond our physical perspective lies useful value whether we realize its existence or not. A drinking glass may be empty, but within this apparent emptiness is the potential to be filled; it thereby becomes useful in quenching our thirst. A house is of little use without a door to enter and exit, or without windows for light or view.

Interpretive notes

The third character in this verse is 幅 *fu*. This is generally a measure word representing the width of cloth or scrolls of text or images on a cylinder. The cylinder or spool, resembles that of the spoke of a wheel. Whether we have cloth or written scrolls, they are spooled on such a cylinder.

For what I hope serves the reader's clarity, I use the term *vacancy* for 無 *wu* rather than *lack*. The last line features the characters 以為 that I interpret as a compound meaning *to consider*. Hence the last line reminds us that all things definite and sure are of greatest value only when we consider the usefulness of their lack.

12 章

Five colors make people’s eyes blind.
Five notes make people’s ears deaf.
Five flavors make people’s taste satiated.
Horses galloping, in pursuit of the hunt,
Makes people’s minds develop madness.
Difficult to obtain goods make a person’s walk hindered.

To be in accord, the wise person serves the belly
Rather than serving the eye.
Causing the rejection of that and the choosing of this.

五色令人目盲五音令人耳聾五味令人口爽馳騁畋獵令人心發狂難得之貨令人行妨是以聖人為腹不為目故去彼取此

Realizing your Limits

The sensual (not to be confused with sexual) perspective, as well as the mental perspective that follows from our senses, is so strong that it misleads us from greater value. We all have desires and ideals but we often lack valuable discretion unless our value of infinite reality tempers our perceptions; otherwise we will always walk a crooked path.

Interpretive notes

In the original Chinese, the first stanza rhymes.

Tradition has it that the five colors are black, green, red, white and yellow. The notes: A, C, D, E, G. The flavors: bitter, salty, sour, spicy and sweet. When you combine all colors, notes or flavors at once, they lose their individual clarity and become scattered or mixed-up. The character referring to taste, 爽 *shuang*, today, often means *refreshed*. But the character breaks down as 大 *vast* + □ *scattered*. In this context, like the others, the condition being reached is overly stimulated; *satiated* to the point of *destroying* desire.

Just as in Chapter 3, the *belly*, 腹*fu*, is the place where imagination resides. Inner vision (insight) may come to be valued over the eye's external perspective.

13 章

Favor and disfavor are alike in alarm;
Fortune and great misfortune are likened to the ego.

Why say that *favor and disfavor are alike in alarm*?
Favor serves the base;
To obtain it seems alarming;
To lose it seems alarming;
This is to say that *favor and disfavor are alike in alarm.*

Why is it said that, *fortune and great misfortune are likened to the ego*?
I pinpoint my accord with great misfortune to my having an ego.
Upon reaching ego-less-ness, where are my misfortunes?

Therefore, treasure using your ego to serve the world
So as to seem suitable to consign the world to.
Those loving to use their egos in service of the world
Are likewise suitable to entrust with the world.

寵辱若驚貴大患若身何謂寵
寵為下得之若驚失之若驚是
若驚何謂貴大患若身吾所以
者為吾有身及吾無身吾有何
以身為天下若可寄天下愛以
下若可託天下

Treasuring the View Beyond the Self/Ego

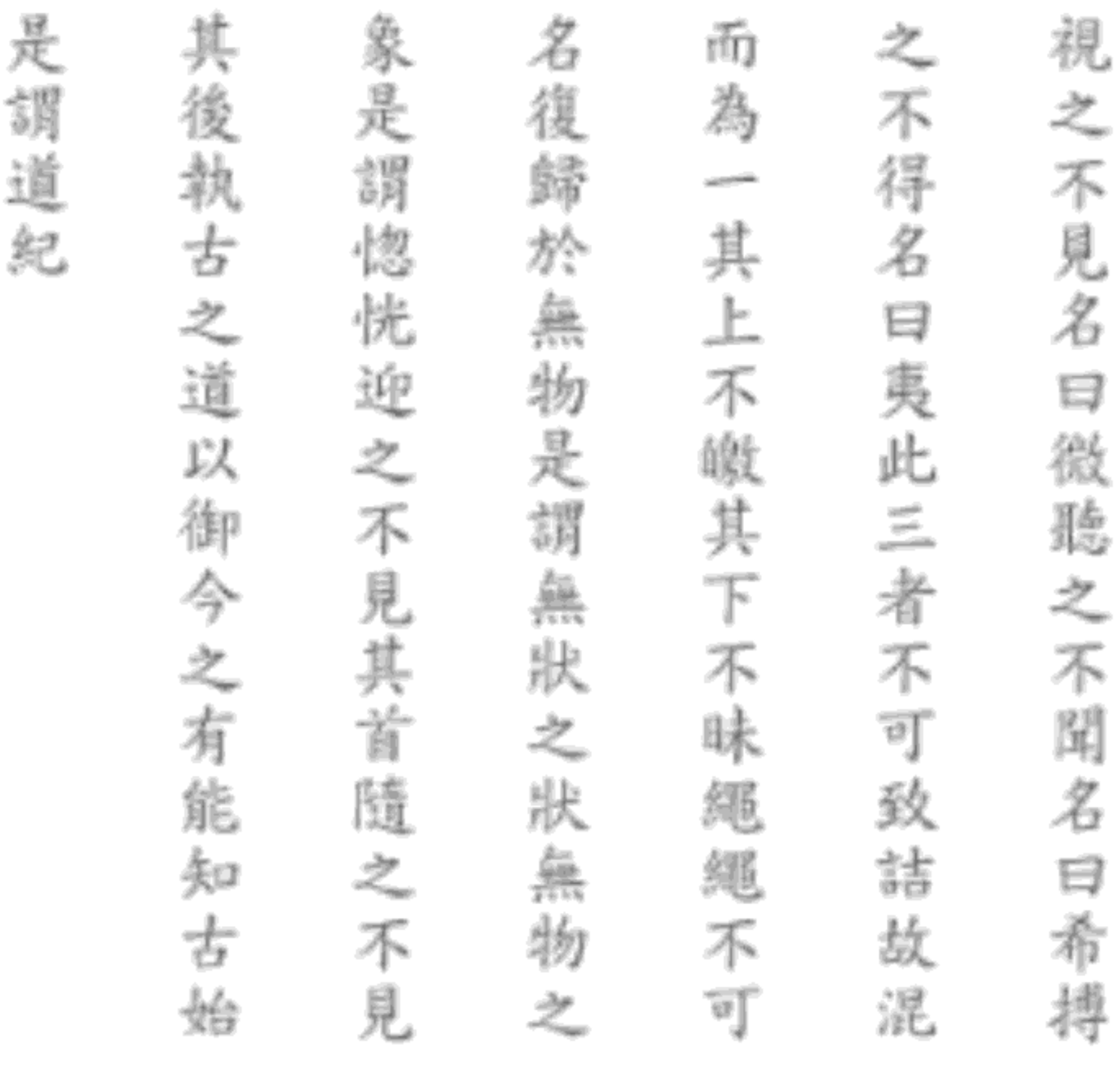
The general theme is the necessity of employing physical perspective while valuing broader perspective. Devalue your self/ego (your personal perspective/sense of self) so that you may come closer to being fully human/humane. You might note the kinship of these ideas with those of Chapter 7.

Interpretive notes

The main subject of this chapter is, the *self* or the *ego*, 身 *shen.* The ego part of our self, is intertwined with our personal/physical perspective. Most people don't think of the *self* as something other than simply being *themselves*. The author, however, is viewing the *self* as being separate from our humanity (or at least becoming separated from our original humanity) because we are so caught up in our points of view that we become ignorant of others and therefore selfish. We have viewpoints and we rely upon them, but our value and overvalue of them causes us to devalue anything (physical or mental) or anybody beyond our personal viewpoint. Due to our value of personal perspective, we come to view our egos as more valuable than everything beyond our selves. This is, no matter how understandable, essentially shortsighted and a detriment to the world we share.

14 章

Looked at, it cannot be seen; the name I call it is *infinitesimal*.
Listened for, it makes no sound; the name I call it is *inaudible*.
Seized upon, it cannot be apprehended; the name I call it is *smooth*.
These three, individually, are unable to argue their case.
As it happens, they merge and act as One.
Upon rising it does not shine;
Upon setting it does not darken.
Measure upon measure, unable to define,
Again it returns in consideration for no-thing-ness.
This is called its *shapeless shape*,
The image of no-thing.
This is called *vague semblance*.
Approach it and you do not see its face.
Follow it and you do not see its back.
Hold to age-old Tao
In order to direct today's existence.
The ability to understand ancient beginnings
Speaks to Tao's historical record.


視之不見名曰微聽之不聞名曰希搏之不得名曰夷此三者不可致詰故混而為一其上不皦其下不昧繩繩不可名復歸於無物是謂無狀之狀無物之象是謂惚恍迎之不見其首隨之不見其後執古之道以御今之有能知古始是謂道紀

Form From the Formless

Much like the first chapter, this chapter takes us back to ontology; how no-thing comes to be realized as things. The author tries to give us a feel for the wonder and importance of reality *as it was*, *as it is*, *and as it always will be* before our senses define it down and separates things from each other as well as from our *selves*. We learn what this means for us psychologically and how our understanding might temper our thoughts and alter our attitudes so we might better surmise what we all have in common. Once again, we can consider all of this from a realistic or mystical perspective.

Interpretive notes

I 夷, today normally means *barbarian*. The character breaks down as 大, meaning *to expand* + 弓 *a bow*. Within this context we might consider what happens when pulling on the string; the bow expands and then the string smoothly slips away from your fingers, in much the same way a stealthy invader may be seized upon yet slips away without being apprehended. I interpret the character to mean *smooth*.

His 希 often means *infrequent* or *rare*. Here, it refers to sound; rare, infrequent, *inaudible*.

Various versions of the text, mix and match the characters at the ends of the first three lines. Most often these read: 夷 *i* 希 *hsi*, 微 *wei*. But here they are ordered as: 微 *wei*, 希 *hsi*. 夷 *i*. This is how they are ordered in the earlier Ma-wang-tui texts. This, to me, makes the most sense in their paring with the corresponding characters.

Sheng 繩, means *rope*. Rope, in this sense, is used for measurement. In various contexts, 繩 *sheng* may be used to bind, or its knots may be used to calculate.

In this chapter, *darken* 昧 *mei*, gives us the visual of a window obscured by soot, rather than the darkness that is 玄 *hsüan*, the *abstruse*.

15 章

The ancients were good at becoming intelligent.
They were subtle, clever, abstruse, open, deep; deep and unable to recognize.
Themselves unrecognizable
Thereby forces us to serve up their countenance:
Careful—like crossing a stream in winter.
Still—like in fear as if closely surrounded.
Polite—they seem like guests.
Expansive—like ice ready to melt.
Sincere—they seem plain and simple.
Wide open—they seem like a river delta.
Blended—they seem like muddy waters.
Who, capable of murkiness, will accord with calmness and slowly clear?
Who, capable of calmness will accordingly stir and slowly come to life?
Those holding to Tao; who lack ideals and excess.
Only those lacking excess can thereby be covered yet come up fresh.

古之善為士者微妙玄通深不可識夫
唯不可識故強為之容豫兮若冬涉川
猶兮若畏四鄰儼兮其若客渙兮若冰
之將釋敦兮其若樸曠兮其若谷混兮
其若濁孰能濁以靜之徐清孰能安以
動之徐生保此道者不欲盈夫唯不盈
故能蔽而新成