

TAO now

A NEW INTERPRETATION AND COMMENTARY
ON THE TAO TE CHING OF LAO TZU

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WHO WAS LAO TZU, AND WHAT IS THE TAO TE CHING?

The short answer is that Lao Tzu was an old Chinese guy, and the Tao Te Ching was a book that he wrote.

A little longer explanation is this:

Lao Tzu was a Chinese sage who we think lived somewhere between 600 BC and 400 BC. In his own lifetime he was widely known and regarded as being very wise and spiritually enlightened.

A common story is that in his old age Lao Tzu desired to withdraw from the hubbub of the royal court, where he worked, and devote himself to seclusion and contemplation. So, he left his home and traveled westward, perhaps towards the spiritual center of India, we don't know.

Eventually he reached the frontier of the small kingdom where he lived and worked. The keeper of the pass-station (a kind of customs agent) recognized him and, on learning of Lao Tzu's intention to become a recluse, asked him for a favor. He asked Lao Tzu to put his wisdom into written word so that, in his absence, the people would have something to guide them.

Lao Tzu seemed to think that was a reasonable request. He retired to a room to write, came out three days later, handed a manuscript to the pass-keeper, and then went on his way (apparently never to be heard from again).

The manuscript was short, but Lao Tzu clearly felt if was complete enough to be useful to anyone who would read it. It later became known as the Tao Te Ching.

So what had Lao Tzu written?

Well, he had a problem. The world is huge. China is big. Time passes. Things change. There are many, many people. Every person's experience is different. Every person needs individual guidance to attain contentment and inner peace. What knowledge could he give that would encompass all of that? None.

He knew the task would be impossible. But because the very nature of being, of the Tao, is unity, he knew that the Tao would inevitably pull everyone into its bliss. Individuals choose only how quickly or how slowly they are guided towards oneness with the Tao. Lao Tzu's task, then, was not to guide per se, but to instill in his readers a desire to be guided. Nature, the Tao, would do the rest.

The Tao Te Ching is really an introduction to eternal bliss. He's telling the people that it exists, what its benefits are, and that they can have it if they're willing to make a small effort.

Who wouldn't be interested in that?!

SOME QUICK NOTES ON THIS INTERPRETATION:

THE TRANSLATION (S):

I do not speak or read Chinese, so for this interpretation of the Tao Te Ching I have had to rely on the combined and compared translations of 9 other authors (one of whom did two different translations). The wording for this interpretation is mostly my own, based upon my personal grasp of Lao Tzu's intent and my 54-plus years of meditation. But if I have thought another author's wording of a line to be particularly correct, concise, or beautiful, then I have quoted and inserted it. In those cases, the line appears in bold, in quotes, and is followed by a superscript number denoting which author produced it. The 9 authors (and their works) are:

1. TAO TE CHING: THE BOOK OF THE WAY AND ITS VIRTUE
translated by J.J.L. DUYVENDAK
published by JOHN MURRAY, LONDON 1954
2. TAO TE CHING
translated by CH'U TA-KAO
published by GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD, LONDON, 1959
3. TAO TE CHING: A NEW ENGLISH VERSION
by STEPHEN MITCHELL
published by HARPER PERENNIAL MODERN CLASSICS EDITION, NEW YORK, 2006
4. LAO TZU TAO TE CHING: A BOOK ABOUT THE WAY AND THE POWER OF THE WAY
by URSULA K. LE GUIN
published by SHAMBALA, BOSTON 1998
5. TAO TEH CHING
translated by JOHN C.H. WU
published by BARNES & NOBLE BOOKS, NEW YORK, 1997
6. THE WAY OF LAO TZU
translated by WING-TSIT CHAN
published by THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY, INC., NEW YORK, 1963
- 7a. LAO-TZE'S TAO-TEH-KING
translated by DR. PAUL CARUS
published by THE OPEN COURT PUBLISHING CO., CHICAGO, 1898
- 7b. LAO-TZE'S TAO-TEH-KING (**TRANSLITERATION**)
translated by DR. PAUL CARUS
published by THE OPEN COURT PUBLISHING CO., CHICAGO, 1898

8. THE TÂO TEH KING
translated by FRIEDRICH MAX MULLER
from: THE SACRED BOOKS OF THE EAST, VOLUME 39,
THE SACRED BOOKS OF CHINA, PART 1
reprint of the 1891 edition published by CLARENDON PRESS AT OXFORD
published by ELIBRON CLASSICS, 2005
9. THE WAY AND ITS POWER, A STUDY OF THE TAO TE CHING AND ITS PLACE IN
CHINESE THOUGHT
translated by ARTHUR WALEY
published by GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN LTD, LONDON, 1934

VERY IMPORTANT VOCABULARY: “self” and “Self”.

There are two words used extensively throughout the Tao Te Ching and my commentary that we all need to understand. They look the same, but they mean two very different things.

The first is the word “self” (with a small s). This word indicates our physical body and unenlightened mind. It is what most people in the world think of as who they are, their identity. In their perception there is me, my “self”, and there is everything else.

The second word is Self (with a capital S). This word indicates the Tao. It is the universal awareness, the eternal creative intelligence, the single, unified field out of which all of creation and all the other selves arise.

CHAPTER NUMBERS:

Lao Tzu did not break the Tao Te Ching into chapters. The creation of chapters was done later by one of his followers. I would be inclined to leave the chapter numbers out, but they're very useful for pointing one to particular areas of the Tao Te Ching. So, I'm going to leave them alone.

The commentaries are mine alone.

THE TAO TE CHING

CHAPTER 1:

The Tao that can be described is not the Eternal Tao.

“The name that can be named is not the Eternal Name.” 3, 6, 7a, 7b

Nameless non-existence, the Tao, is the source of both our subtle and gross material universe.

It gives birth to the material diversity which we identify and name. For all time, those living without desire have understood its nature, while those living with desire have understood only its manifestations. Both the subtle and gross material universe come from the same Tao, but once they are manifested we call them by different names.

How they can be at once the same and yet different is a profound mystery, and understanding that mystery opens the gate to all spirituality.

COMMENTARY:

In his very first words, Lao Tzu challenges a thousand years of Chinese thought.

Chinese spiritual life had long been a combination of ancestor worship, divination, and appeasing the nature spirits to gain either their help or at least their non-interference. Actions were taken and results were expected, and all of that happened right here in the material world. The Tao was known of, but most people understood it to be a particular set of actions, a way of living, or a way of thinking designed to bring one benefits in the material world.

The Tao, says Lao Tzu, is **not** actions. It is **not** a particular way of thinking. It is **not** for the purpose of increasing material achievement. It is **not** even describable. It is completely spiritual, un-manifested, and eternal. It is so ethereal that even the process of naming it removes you from it. Yet from this non-existence, this nothing-ness, comes everything that we are usually aware of. This was an interesting claim and doubtless caught people's attention.

People would surely wonder: “How could everything possibly come from nothing? And even if it were so, how could anyone possibly know or understand *nothing*? Everything that is known is *something*! It exists!”

Yet Lao Tzu assures us that it is possible to understand the very nature of the un-manifest Tao. It is possible to rectify the coexistence of nothingness and manifested creation; and that doing so opens within us the heretofore closed gate to real spiritual growth.

CHAPTER 2:

“When people see some things as beautiful, other things become ugly.”³

“When people see some things as good, other things become bad.”³

Thus existence indicates the presence of non-existence, in the same way that difficult and easy, long and short, high and low, sound and voice, and before and after go together and cannot be separated.

The Sages, established in non-doing, carry on their business and teach by their example.

Whatever comes to them or goes from them they accept with equanimity.

Whatever they accomplish, they claim no ownership of and expect no recognition for.

They perform actions, but understand that it is not themselves doing the actions.

As the unattached actors, they are able to forever enjoy the results.

COMMENTARY:

All of the manifested world and manifested life as we usually understand it is experienced as dualities. When we know any one aspect of the world, we simultaneously know its opposite. They are linked together. Since most people grasp the fact that they exist, the presence of non-existence becomes understandable to them. If we believe that only existing gives us the power to do things in and to the material world, then we reason that non-existing must mean that we lose that ability.

For most of us, the idea of non-existence seems terrifying. We believe it means an end to us as beings. But Lao Tzu tells us that is not the case. The Sages, those people established in non-doing, in the state of non-existence, in the Tao, have learned how to bring the power of the un-manifested non-existence and the manifested creation into coexistence within themselves.

Doing so produces notable changes. The Sages, embodying the ultimate source of all of physical creation, understand that all worldly experiences are simply different expressions of the same unbounded, eternal unity and that they are limited in time and space. Thus they can accept it all with equanimity and are beyond suffering.

When they act, the Sages understand that they themselves are simply expressions of the Tao and that, as such, it is really the Tao that is accomplishing and the Tao that should be recognized for doing so.

Being unattached to actions and to their results, the Sages can experience life much as an audience member or an actor might experience a play. It may be full of excitement, joy, action, sorrow, fear, conquest, laughter, and even death; but when it is over they go back to being themselves and quietly relax in their homes. The rest of us do that as well. The difference is that the Sages are aware that they are separate from the play, and we are not.

CHAPTER 3:

If we do not recognize what is most worthy in life,
then people have nothing to emulate.

"If you overvalue possessions, people begin to steal."³

If people do not view objects as desirable, then their hearts do not become troubled.

Therefore the Sages direct spiritual growth by emptying the people's hearts and filling their bellies, by lessening their desires and increasing their resolve to grow, by giving them the experience of unthinking, desire-less awareness (the Tao).

When they do so, those functioning only from the material level of life are unable to interfere.
Established in the Tao, life flows effortlessly.

COMMENTARY:

It is human nature for people to learn how to do things by copying those around them. The same is true for developing one's moral character. If those around you are focused only on their material existence and care nothing for their spiritual development, then what guide does anyone have to improve themselves in meaningful ways? If *things* are all that matter, then even theft becomes acceptable to obtain them.

From a spiritual viewpoint, the *idea* of "theft" is laden with greater meaning than just possessing something that isn't yours. The Sages embody the unity of the Tao and reflect the ultimate reality that everything *is*, and belongs to, the Tao. It matters not if some individual person thinks something belongs to them alone. In time both they and the item will pass from the scene and the Tao will reclaim both of them.

Unlike most people, the sages realize this and understand that, in reality, because everything belongs to the Tao and because they *are* the Tao, everything belongs to them as well. When you know that you already possess everything, there can be no desire for further possessions. You are fulfilled.

The Chinese thought that the heart was the seat of desire. Without desires, there is fulfillment and the heart is at peace. With desires the heart is troubled. The focus of spiritual growth is to establish unity with the Tao. In that way you bring fulness to your being and empty the heart of desires. To say that a person desires something that is not theirs is to acknowledge that they are not experiencing the Tao.

The Chinese thought that the stomach was the seat of the mind. So when Lao Tzu says the Sages fill the people's bellies, he means that they also help the people experience, first hand, the state of no-desire. In this way they have direct knowledge of its importance and become resolute in seeking it permanently in their lives.

As this experience becomes more and more rooted in the individual, there is a natural reduction of desires in the heart and a concurrent growth of feeling fulfilled in their minds.

As people become more established in the Tao, the attractions of the material world lessen and those who are still captured by its ephemeral nature become less and less able to sway those seeking the Tao.

CHAPTER 4:

The Tao is empty, un-manifested, yet can never be filled or diminished.
It is eternally void, yet contains infinite possibilities.
Dull and sharp, fettered and free, bright and dim, all of material existence
and all of un-manifested eternity exist within it.
It is eternally deep and still.
We do not know from whence it came, but it is older than God.

COMMENTARY:

As the unbounded, un-manifested field of consciousness from which all of creation arises, the Tao is simultaneously empty (of anything manifest) and yet full (of the infinite possibilities of manifestation). Because it cannot be defined in space or time, and because it holds an infinite number of latent archetypes of manifestation, it can flow to produce anything material at any moment, for any length of time.

Not only does it contain the *plans* for all forms of matter, it also contains the full range of its own expression in the material world. Sentient creatures may be totally unaware of the Tao's presence within them, or they may be clearly and sharply aware of its existence. They may be overwhelmed and bound by the illusion that the material world controls them, or they may have freed themselves from that idea and begun to express the unboundedness of the Tao. They may merely express a simple state of unenlightened existence, or they may shine with the infinite, life-supportive energy of the Tao within them, acting as a conduit for its expression on earth. All of these are equally the expression of the Tao, the eternal, conscious source of all creation.

Yet the Tao, in its one-ness and its purity, is eternally silent, omnipresent, unmoving, and un-manifested. It does not, itSelf, overtly act as the ongoing creative force behind our manifest universe. Instead, with just the slightest intention, it produces a wave of consciousness on its infinite ocean of Self. This wave of consciousness is the finest relative, material expression of the Tao's creative force. **That** acts as "the creator". It channels the silent, infinite, un-manifested power of the Tao towards creating and thus becomes what many of us think of as God. As a wave on the conscious ocean of the Tao, it shares the Tao's depth, silence, infinity, eternity, consciousness, intelligence and power; bringing those characteristics into the material expression of the universe. It both *is* the Tao and it *comes from* the Tao. In this way the Tao is older.

CHAPTER 5:

Material existence is not compassionate and benevolent.

The material world functions with dispassionate equality,
and living beings are treated the same as straw dogs.

Likewise the Sages do not take sides, both good people and sinners are welcomed,
and both are treated equally.

The un-manifest space between heaven and earth is very much like a bellows.

It is empty, yet what issues forth is inexhaustible.

As much as it moves into creation, there is more yet available.

“No amount of words can fathom it; Better look for it within you.”⁵

COMMENTARY:

The material world as humans think of it, lacks sufficient consciousness to express compassion and benevolence. Those are qualities reserved for sentient beings in varying degrees as they progress up the ladder of awareness. Most of nature treats everything around it with simple equality. The flower, the wild animal, and the human being are all warmed, chilled, made wet, dried out, crushed, burned, blown away, grown or eaten with indifference. This is how the creative force keeps the material world moving and developing.

The Sages, reflecting the Tao, behave in like manner insofar as they will accept and teach both good and bad people who have a sincere desire to know and reflect the Tao. And we have the added benefit that they will do so compassionately and benevolently.

The Tao, though it appears empty to us, is inexhaustibly full of the ability to create. This is lucky for us because, as the Sages guide us into expressing the Tao more and more, it is able to continue creating little material versions of itSelf within us for however long and to as great a degree as we are able to experience. Eventually, we will be able to experience the whole unity of the Tao by looking within ourselves.

NOTE: The straw dogs mentioned in the above verse were imitation dogs made of grasses, which were used in religious sacrifice by the common people and afterwards disposed of.

CHAPTER 6:

The Valley-Spirit is the eternal Tao in its finest material expression. We call her the mystical Mother, and through her gate comes an infinity of worlds. **"It is always present within you. You can use it in any way you want."**³

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu often likes to describe the Tao as being like a valley because, being empty and being a low point in the landscape, all streams run to it, just as all of creation returns to the Tao. Thus, Lao Tzu is here explaining the deeper meaning of a common belief. The valley-spirit is a combination of both the valley (the Tao) and spirit (the expression of Tao as it first begins to manifest as the material world). Müller, in notes to his translation, explains it by saying: "The spirit of the valley has come to be a name for the activity of the Tao in all the realm of its operation."

In Chapter One, Lao Tzu pointed out that as things first begin to appear from within the Tao they are expressed in subtly manifested forms. At that point we are first able to identify them and give them names. Whether we call this finest material expression of the creative power of the Tao God, or the *Valley-Spirit*, or the *Mystical Mother*, or something else is irrelevant. It all denotes the same thing. That thing is the creative aspect of the Tao, pouring forth and making the universe. Through this gate all things come.

And being part of that, we ourselves can contain that power and are capable of likewise using it for creative purposes.

CHAPTER 7:

The material universe exists for eons.
How does it last for so long?
It is because it does not live for itself.
Therefore the Sages put their selves aside and allow
the Self, the Tao, to come forward.
In so doing they partake in the eternity of the Tao.
“Why let the self go?”⁴
“To keep what the soul needs.”⁴

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu is explaining an important concept: The closer one comes to fully possessing the Tao, the more you reflect it and the more you share in its eternal nature. Becoming closer to the Tao is a matter of removing the sense of self which separates us from the universal Self. Doing so brings the Tao into our conscious awareness.

Non-sentient things such as galaxies, planets, elements, and rocks have no real awareness and no sense of self between themselves and the Tao. As such, they are simple expressions of the Tao's creativity, closer to it in origin and so, in their simplicity, exist for longer periods of time.

But sentient things such as animals and humans **do** have a sense of self, whether it is rudimentary or more developed. In their world-awareness, there is a separation between themselves and the rest of creation. There is a “me” and there is a “that”. That separation is caused by the sense of self which puts distance between us and the universal one-ness of the Tao.

Happily, humans have a more developed sense of self-awareness which goes a bit beyond the simple sense of “me”. They also have an awareness of who they think that “me” is. They are aware of things like their human-ness, their nationality, their sex, their age, their health, their thoughts, their likes and their dislikes. These are all awarenesses that other animals don't have. Because our awareness is more developed and complex, it can be more flexible. Because it can be more flexible, it has the ability to bend away from the limiting sense of self and bend towards the universal, eternal sense of Self ... the Tao.

And as we leave the self behind and embrace the Self in our awareness, we absorb more and more of the Tao's characteristics; not merely its longevity, but also its creativity and power. Our bodies, temporary and material expressions of the Tao's creativity, may wither and pass away; but we ourselves become eternal.

CHAPTER 8:

The best people are like water in that they nourish all things without effort.

They are content with the low places that other people would avoid.

That is why they are so near to the Tao.

The best people in their dwellings love the earth.

in their thoughts value stillness,

in their hearts value depth,

in their friendships value humanity,

in their words value honesty,

in running their daily affairs value order,

in doing their jobs value skill,

in their every movement value timelessness.

And because they contend with no one, they are respected.

COMMENTARY:

“The best people ...” is here referring to the Sages, but does not imply that they are somehow better than other people. Rather, it means that they have become the best that they as individuals are capable of being. They have embraced the Tao. Every other person is equally capable of becoming their own best.

The simple presence of those who have become their best is able to nourish and uplift all around them.

Being “content with the low places” that others avoid means that where other people might see something as less desirable or of lesser value than something else, be it an item, a place, a situation, an action, even another person, the Sages view them all equally. To the Sages, all things are equally expressions of the Tao and equally worthy of being accepted as they are. Whether (and how) the Sages interact with any particular expression of the Tao will depend on how the Tao guides them. But they have no personal resistance to whatever direction the Tao gives.

These “best” people naturally express life’s most nourishing values: respect for nature, inner stillness, loving hearts, close friendships, honest interactions, ordered thoughts and actions, skill and ease of labor (i.e. of actions), appreciation of each moment of life, and non-aggression.

CHAPTER 9:

But there is disadvantage in trying to fill oneself too quickly with the Tao; just as a blade which is continuously being sharpened will soon be ground away, just as a house which is filled with gold and jewels will invariably lose its wealth to thieves, and just as wealth and status coupled with pride brings about its own downfall.

To properly accomplish the acquisition, one must experience the Tao and then withdraw.
That is the way to the Tao.

COMMENTARY:

Growing to fully embrace the Tao takes some period of time, depending on the individual, because our physical bodies and mental awareness are not initially acclimatized to the expansiveness of the Tao. It's a bit like being born and living your whole life in a cold, dark cave and then suddenly, one day, being brought out into the heat and brightness of the noonday sun. Nothing can be seen or understood, and one would be inclined to run back into the cave and never come out again.

Therefore, like sharpening a blade, sharpening our awareness and perception is done gently so as not to overwhelm us and grind us away.

We must have time to learn how to preserve our accumulating spiritual wealth and not foolishly let it be taken by the still-present attractions of our material surroundings.

And we must learn to bear the gift of our spiritual growth with humility so that our selfish pride does not cause us to leave the path of continuing expansion.

The way to do all of this is to each day experience just a little of the Tao, and to bring that experience back into our daily lives and use it. A small amount always remains with us when we do this and as the days go by we slowly accumulate more and more of its expansiveness until we are eventually able to reflect its full glory.

CHAPTER 10:

How do the seekers of the Tao achieve that experience?

They entice the wandering mind from its restlessness in order to experience the Whole.

They regulate the breath until it is as soft as a newborn child's.

They clear their inner vision until they see what is, and not what they wish.

They love the people and govern their state while practicing non-action.

“Opening and closing the gates of heaven he can be like a mother-bird.”^{7a}

Penetrating the four quarters of the cosmos, they are fully aware yet without thoughts.

When thoughts arise they accept them as expressions of Tao and do not cling to them.

When acting they have no expectations of the result.

They preside over their actions, but understand it is Tao producing them.

“This is called profound virtue.”^{7b}

COMMENTARY:

So how does one experience just a little of the Tao each day?

Humans call it *meditation*, and there are many, many forms of it located in all of the different spiritual pathways of humankind.

This chapter is a lovely explanation of what a daily, effective meditative practice would be like for a practitioner and what some of their internal experiences would be like as a result. It is **not** trying to teach us HOW to meditate. Each spiritual path has its own teachers who are capable of guiding individuals. Rather, it is reassuring us that the process is easy, expanding, and liberating.

The process begins by enticing the wandering mind from its restlessness. Enticing is the perfect word because it indicates that no force or effort is needed for this. The restless mind is merely given something which it has always wanted: a way and an opportunity to experience peace, bliss, and wholeness. When that happens, physiology begins to settle and breath becomes shallower, yet inner awareness becomes sharper. This improved inner perception allows us to comprehend the world as it is in reality rather than as we wish to see it with all of our personal “baggage”.

With this clarity of perception, the self temporarily falls away. We get an experience of the fulfillment and bliss of the Tao (Self with a big S), and our state (i.e. the body in which we live and the different systems which inhabit it) begins to experience “non-action”. At this point, breath is at its finest and rest is at its deepest while awareness is at its sharpest; like a mother bird, immovable on the nest, constantly alert to protect her children.

Awareness expands to become boundless, yet without thoughts. One is aware simply of the fact that one is aware. Because we are not very experienced with this practice, thoughts eventually arise again in the mind. When they do we simply accept them as harmless expressions of the Tao, do not allow them to trouble us, and again take up the inner path to bliss.

After a time, we cease the practice, and come back into activity. When we do, a little of the experience of the Tao comes with us. Over time, with daily practice, the fulfilling bliss of the Tao becomes stronger and we eventually understand that it is actually the Tao that is running the show, not us. With this perception, we are able to enjoy all actions (like the actor commented on in Chapter 2) without being worried about or overwhelmed by the results of those actions.

Our desires are the Tao's desires, and we are free from all the binding influences and worries of the material world.

NOTE: “The gates of heaven” is a Taoistic phrase for the nostrils as the organ of the breath.

CHAPTER 11:

We put many spokes together to make a wheel,
but it is the empty hole in the middle around which the carriage moves.

We mould a lump of clay to make a pot,
but "**It is the empty space within the vessel that makes it useful**".⁵

We make doors and windows in the walls of a room,
and by means of these empty openings we are able to use the room.

Therefore, It is because we use non-existence that we have the benefits of the material world.

COMMENTARY:

This concise little chapter is actually making two important points.

The first is a reminder of how central the Tao is to the material world, in spite of the fact that most of us perceive of it as nothingness. It is when we are able to apply this nothingness to our daily lives that we receive its benefits.

The second point is more subtle, but further expands on the first point.

Look at the three examples given, and realize that they are all connected to action. It is the nothingness that allows the carriage to move. It is the nothingness that allows us to use the pot. It is the nothingness of the doors and windows that allows us to put the room to many uses.

The Tao, we are being told, does not just express as manifest physical things. It also expresses as all forms of non-physical things such as actions, thoughts, forces, etc., both subtle and gross, from a simple feeling to moving a mountain.

If we were to use a baseball analogy to explain this, it would go thus:

The pitcher, the baseball, the batter, the bat, the catcher, the mitt, the umpire, and the attending crowd are not the only creative expressions of the Tao in this scenario. The unseen, non-physical, creative expressions of the Tao also include: the pitcher's calculation to throw a curve ball, the flight path of the ball, the swing of the bat, the catcher's movement to catch the ball, the umpire's vocal cry of "you're out", and the roar of the crowd.

Everything, both physical and non-physical, which exists in our universe is a form of manifested Tao.

CHAPTER 12:

Colors blind people's eyes.
Sounds dull people's hearing.
Flavors confuse people's palate.
Over-indulgent activities make people's minds weak.
The lust to obtain rare objects corrupts their conduct.
That is why the Sages attend to the inner life and not the outer.
They allow things to come and go while embracing the Tao.

COMMENTARY:

Too much attention to the five senses and their indulgence causes us to lose our attention to the Tao. As we focus on the multitude of manifestations of the Tao, we lose sight of their underlying unity.

Note the progression in this chapter from passive to more and more active distraction. Lao Tzu is not suggesting that some distractions are less troublesome than others. He is pointing out that even seemingly innocent distractions are still distractions, and that we must be mindful of them, and be on guard so they do not overwhelm us.

Our eyes behave very passively. Simply opening them leads us away from inner quietness to an inrush of colors and distractions with no effort on our part. All the colors come from the one white light yet, on the material level, they act to attract us and blind us to the ultimate unity from which they come.

Sounds may also be passive in that they intrude on our attention without much effort on our part. But more often it is we who have purposely sought to make or receive particular sounds. Music and speech are the most common forms, and both are often intended to influence us in various ways, keeping our attention in the outer material world and thus away from our daily experience of the soothing sound of inner silence.

Satisfying our sense of taste takes even more effort and physical activity on our part, activity which is in contrast with the experience of blissful non-action we experience when resting in the Tao.

Too much activity and focus on the material world makes our minds weak, not because activity, per se, is a mind-weakening force, but because too much activity means there is less time and opportunity available for the daily experience of one's meditative practice. Without the grounding and spiritually-strengthening effects we get from those practices, our focus becomes erratic and our ability to think in a clear and life-supporting manner becomes weaker.

With weaker thinking comes the belief that material objects, especially objects that others think of as scarce or rare, have great value. When such a foolish view is held, the unifying Tao is forgotten and our conduct degrades as we attempt to satisfy our desire for such unfulfilling items.

Sages make sure to attend to their contact with the Tao daily so that their focus remains one-pointed and their perception of the world remains clear. From this state they are best able to live life and help others.

CHAPTER 13:

Both favor and disgrace cause us to live in fear.

It is better we should view calamities and our body in the same way.

What do I mean by “favor and disgrace cause us to live in fear”?

When we gain favor, we believe it to be ours and we fear losing it.

When we become disgraced, we believe also that it is ours and we fear not losing it.

That is how they cause us to live in fear.

What is meant by “view calamities and our body in the same way”?

When we view our experiences as somehow separate

from our physical selves, then they cause us distress.

But when we understand that the body is separate from our Selves,
and is not really who we are, then how can our experiences cause us distress?

Therefore, the person who acts, viewing the body and the world as the same,
performs trustworthy action.

Such a person, reflecting the Tao, loves all equally, and is worthy of stewarding others.

COMMENTARY:

Much of the world lives in fear of either getting or not-getting something or other. All fears, ultimately, are reflections of our fear of losing the self because that is who we mistakenly think we are. The worst-case scenario of all fears is that we will die, that the self will disappear. You're right, it will, for all of us, no exceptions.

Lao Tzu tells us that the person who reflects the Tao is able to rise above the illusion of death as we mistakenly construe it. When we are established in the Tao, both the physical body and the external world (which it is very much a part of) have the same temporary value in our awareness, while we ourSelves have the eternal value of the Tao.

The question then becomes: are we going to become aware of and in possession of that part of us which is eternal and blissful (Self with a big S), OR are we going to hold on to the self-body, constantly experiencing our inevitable shifts in form with ignorance and terror?

Trustworthy action, guided by the Tao, is whatever action is necessary in the moment to accomplish the most good for creation.

CHAPTER 14:

When we look for it, it cannot be seen because it is formless.
When we listen for it, it cannot be heard because it is soundless.
When we reach for it, it cannot be grasped because it is intangible.
When we experience the finest states of relative existence and then step beyond,
then the material world merges into the Tao.
While it has no physical characteristics, yet in our awareness it is completely obvious.
Infinite and eternal, it can never be adequately described.
“And again and again it returns home to non-existence.”^{7a}
From this un-manifest state all manifest forms and images rise into our awareness.
This is the state of pre-thought, pure awareness.
We enter it and experience that it has no beginning and no end.
While we cannot explain it intellectually, we can still **be** it, and so be masters of our lives.
“Just realize where you come from, this is the essence of wisdom.”³

COMMENTARY:

Here is additional knowledge about the internal experience of an effective meditative practice which Lao Tzu began to explain in Chapter 10.

Having begun the practice as instructed by our spiritual teacher, our attention and awareness are effortlessly directed away from the outer world and inwards towards the unifying sense of Self.

Sights, sounds, and all other physical sensations begin to be more subtly experienced in our awareness until we reach their subtlest level of awareness. Subtlest level means: everything about the experience is understood in seed form. It's like those lovely times in our lives when a completely formed concept, story, plan, thought, or realization just explodes, in all its complexity, into our awareness and we immediately grasp its totality.

When that stage is reached, it is only a matter of continuing to take the next step, going beyond the experience of the material world, and merging into the infinity of the Tao. All physical, material bodily sensations cease. We are at complete rest, but our awareness is alive and vibrating with timeless boundlessness and bliss. While in this pre-thought state of awareness, we are experiencing the infinite, eternal source of all creation.

Our bodies, not yet able to sustain an extended experience of infinity, soon produce thoughts or sensations that we become aware of, thus pulling us back into the material level of perception. When we realize this is happening, we easily draw the attention back to the practice and once more step into the Tao.

We do this repeatedly, for as long as our spiritual teacher has directed us, and then come back into the active world (more rested, joyful, and wise) and once again take up our role-in-life until the next meditative session.

CHAPTER 15:

The Sages who have succeeded in becoming one with the Tao are subtle,
spiritual, profound and penetrating.

Their natures, like the Tao, are too deep to be fully comprehended.
Nevertheless, we can describe their characteristics as they interact with the world.

They are as careful as someone crossing a frozen stream,
as alert as someone surrounded by enemies,
as reserved as a houseguest,
as flexible as ice that is melting,
as full of potential as an uncarved block of wood,
as open and receptive as a valley,
and yet as opaque as muddy water.

By their tranquil natures they make the turbulent waters around them clear and,
in quietude, gradually bring the spiritually dead to life.

Established in Tao, they no longer seek fulfillment and are
“beyond wearing out and renewal”.⁶

COMMENTARY:

So what are some of the characteristics of the Sages? Are they anything that we would want?

Lao Tzu tells us the Sages are: sensitive, spiritually inclined, knowledgeable, perceptive, cautious, highly aware of surroundings, polite, flexible, unbound by preconceptions, receptive of others, and tranquil, yet simultaneously enigmatic.

In their presence, life become settled and ordered; and they naturally inspire others to spiritually improve their own lives.

They themSelves no longer need to seek fulfillment because, having attained the Tao, they are eternally fulfilled, blissful, and beyond the cycle of birth and death.

Sounds OK to me.

CHAPTER 16:

Go beyond thoughts. Remain in the essence of peace and quietness.
From there you can be aware of the whole world rising up around you,
and watch as it subsides back into the un-manifest.

Everything that arises and matures will return to its root, back to tranquility, back to the Tao.
This is our eternal destiny.

To know the Tao is called enlightenment.

When we do not know the Tao, we act blindly and create suffering.

When we experience the Tao, the source of all manifestation, our comprehension expands.

When our comprehension expands, we naturally embrace all that arises from the Tao.

When we embrace all that arises, we become unprejudiced and impartial.

As we become unprejudiced and impartial, our connection to creation becomes universal.

As our connection becomes universal, we more fully and more frequently experience the Tao.

Eventually, we become "**immersed in the wonder of the Tao**"³ and carry it with us always.

Established in Tao, we share in its eternity, and bodily death does not destroy us.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu is discussing in more detail the process of how the Tao is stabilized within our awareness.

When we meditate effectively, we go beyond the subtlest states of thought and experience the peaceful and quiet essence of the Tao. From within that state, which is the source of all manifested creation, we are capable of comprehending the process of the creation and dissolution of material existence. We experience that everything that arises from Tao returns to Tao; and we know that is our destiny as well.

It is important to fully know, experience, and live the Tao within ourselves because when we do not we act inappropriately and cause suffering for ourselves and others.

The process of stabilizing the Tao, according to Lao Tzu, appears to happen in steps.

As we repeatedly experience the Tao during meditation (as described in Chapters 10 and 14), our comprehension of it and of how it functions begins to expand.

As our comprehension expands, we are better able to appreciate its glory and we naturally come to accept and embrace all that emanates from it.

As we more and more accept and embrace what the Tao produces, we become less prejudiced towards things we heretofore rejected.

As we become less prejudiced, viewing all things coming from the Tao with the same love which the Tao has for them, our connection to the Tao's creation becomes stronger and more universal.

As our connection to the Tao's creation becomes more universal, we more frequently and fully experience the Tao (the creative source) until, at some point, we are able to fully experience and carry it with us even outside of meditation.

At that point our awareness shares the Tao's eternity. Small-s self has been replaced with big-s Self, and bodily death does not affect us.

CHAPTER 17:

Under the greatest Sages of the Tao, the people are hardly aware that they are being guided.
"Where there are lesser Sages, the people are attached to them; they praise them."^{7a}

"The still lesser ones - they fear them."²

The Sages least adept at holding the Tao are despised.
If the teachers do not sufficiently possess of the Tao,
then they cannot properly instill Tao in the people.

The greatest Sages of the Tao speak little and choose their words carefully
so that each will be effective.

When guidance is effective and action is completed,
the people feel that they have done it all themselves.

COMMENTARY:

It is a great misunderstanding within spiritual communities that only enlightened people can help others towards enlightenment. That's like arguing that only someone with a PhD in mathematics can teach that $2+2 = 4$.

The fact is that most of us are still on the climb up the mountain of realization. Even if they have not yet reached the top, anyone who is even one step above us is still able to help us up the next step. Only a fully-realized Master (one who has made the whole journey before us) can guide us to completion; but that doesn't mean that we'll be guided by that particular Sage for the entire journey. If we are lucky, yes; but many of us are not yet lucky.

Because of that, it would be helpful to have a kind of measuring stick to use so we can gauge (at least roughly) where our present spiritual guide is situated, how much trust they should be given, and when it might be time to look for a new guide. We can also use the same measuring stick, if we have enough Self-awareness, to gauge how trustworthy we are to those on the path who are looking up to **us**.

Lao Tzu isn't telling us this to belittle anyone. He is telling us this because the most important thing is to be moving forward and he understands that sometimes we can get stuck along the road. Remember, **who** your guide is is never more important than **how well** your guide is directing you.

CHAPTER 18:

If the Tao goes into decline, benevolence and righteousness arise to take its place.

If benevolence and righteousness decline, cleverness and knowledge appear
and there is great hypocrisy.

When the family members are not in harmony,
then filial obedience and paternal kindness will be invoked.

When society is disordered, it becomes full of loyalty and patriotism.

COMMENTARY:

Having touched on the different levels of Tao being expressed within teachers, Lao Tzu extends the explanation to describe (at least partly) the different levels of Tao being expressed in society. Since society is made up of individuals, we would expect to see the human collective consciousness of an area reflected in the human society of the area. Lao Tzu describes it in declining order:

The highest and most desirable state is for all the people to possess the Tao. Everyone would engage in “trustworthy action” (as described in the commentary of Chapter 13) and peace would reign.

If the Tao declines and the people no longer naturally do what is best, then kindness and righteousness are used to judge appropriate actions and responses.

If kindness and righteousness cannot be maintained, then being clever and knowing how to use loopholes becomes common, and hypocrisy becomes rampant.

Within individual families, the loss of harmony results in the parents demanding obedience in exchange for their care and kindness.

When disorder rises in society, then natural love and care for one’s country is replaced by demands for loyalty and patriotism.

Because society is the reflection of the collective consciousness of its individuals, that means that only the individuals themselves are capable of improving society. That can only be done on the personal level, by each of us, by ourselves, by strengthening our internal connection to the Tao. By reflecting the Tao and working to improve things from that level, we improve not only ourselves but also our world.

CHAPTER 19:

Stop *trying* to be holy and wise. Simple spirit and wisdom are greater.
Stop *pretending* to be kind and just. People's natural affections for others will come forth.
Stop *scheming and worrying* about money. Then you will stop being thieves and robbers.
But merely stopping these three things is not sufficient for complete spiritual growth.
One must grasp a higher and more reliable principle.
We must know and become the essence of simplicity, the expression of purity.
This happens when we return to the Self, causing our desires to diminish.

COMMENTARY:

This chapter is a continuation of the thoughts of Chapter 18:

However, there can be nothing *forced* or *phony* about this personal improvement. Forced and phony are definitely **not** what the Tao is. When we *try* to be holy and wise, we act as though the Tao can be wrangled to do our bidding if only we work hard enough at it. In reality, the Tao is only waiting for the simple vibration of genuine desire, and the willingness to set aside our self, before it flows into our awareness.

Pretending to be kind and just, especially if it means being kind and just to only the people you like, is another form of phony and it will block your experience of the Tao. But being genuinely kind and just to all people equally encourages the natural affection that people are inclined to have towards one another.

When we stop scheming and worrying about money (or any other material things, for that matter) we also stop having the minds of thieves, lusting after things which we don't realize we already have.

Lao Tzu makes a specific point of telling us not to think that if we stop trying, stop pretending, and stop scheming then we will be holy, kind, and unworried. Instead, he says, grasping the Tao comes first, and then holiness, wisdom, kindness, justice, and non-worry naturally follow. We must first know and live the essence of those qualities by letting go of the self and embracing the Self.

CHAPTER 20:

Stop intellectualizing and anxieties will disappear.

There is no real difference between “Yes” and “Of Course”.

The difference between what is “good” and what is “bad” in the world depends on where you stand and can never intellectually be set to rest.

There is no need to value what the majority of people value,
to fear what the majority of people fear.

All this philosophy is endless, and distracts us from the Tao.

The people, in their ignorance, believe themselves joyful,
as if attending a great celebration.

Only I remain tranquil, like a new-born babe who has not yet begun to experience the world.

The people see me as pitiful, as though I have no place to call my own.

In their minds they have plenty while I have nothing.

They see me as a foolish, ignorant man.

Oh, they are so smart, while I am so stupid!

“Common folks see differences and are clear-cut; I alone make no distinctions.”⁶

They think that I **“drift as a wave on the ocean, I blow as aimless as the wind.”³**

Most consider themselves to have an important purpose in life,
while I am considered to be an outsider.

I am different because I take my sustenance directly from the Mother of Creation (the Tao).

COMMENTARY:

This chapter gives us a glimpse of Lao Tzu, the man, as opposed to Lao Tzu, The Great Enlightened Master Of The Tao.

Some spiritual practices likely rely on keen and focused intellectualism as a path to enlightenment. We can't fault them for that because, technically, it is true. For **some** few people a purely intellectual path is not only possible, but preferable. However, that is not true for most people. Most people tend to be heart and action oriented and lack the intellectual stamina for long periods of focused mental gymnastics.

Unfortunately, in Lao Tzu's time, as it does today, the inclination to approach spiritual growth from an intellectual standpoint often predominates. We think that by our brains alone we can control our spirit. The reality is the other way around because it's spirit which gives rise to our brains. Spirit is greater. ((NOTE: “Mind/spirit” is **not** the physical brain. Mind is the non-physical, individualized, creative and intellectual awareness which we usually identify as our self, and which interacts with the material world by means of our physical brain. The brain is merely the interface between our non-physical, spiritual, conscious mind and the material world.))

Lao Tzu clearly didn't care much for intellectualism as a preferred path to the Tao, and certainly not for intellectual gymnastics that kept the mind preoccupied on the physical level and prevented it from settling down and experiencing the Tao. Even enlightened masters have preferences and personality.

The second part of this chapter is fun because we can almost see Lao Tzu, his eyes sparkling mischievously, as he playfully pretends to be the simpleton: “Everyone who does not possess the Tao thinks they're having a great time! Life's one big party! And here I am, poor

me, just a quiet wallflower who hasn't had any remarkable experiences. Everyone pities me because I don't seem to fit in anywhere. They have so much! And I have so little. They think I'm just a foolish, ignorant man. Oh, they're so smart! And me, I'm so stupid. Everyone knows that they're clearly different and better than others! Me, everyone just seems the same to me. They see me as aimless, adrift in the world, with no real focus. They all have important jobs and important positions! Me, I'm just a nobody.

I'm different because they seek fulfillment from the material world, while I seek fulfillment from the founder of the material world."

The implication is clear: Lao Tzu has thrown down the gauntlet and said, "You think you have everything, but your lives are empty and you are miserable inside! You think I have nothing, but I am full, content, and live in bliss. What are you going to do to improve yourselves?"

CHAPTER 21:

The greatest manifestations of spiritual force in the world will reflect the Tao
because that is from whence they come.

Though the Tao is completely un-manifest and incomprehensible, it contains the subtle,
latent archetypes for all forms and for the life essence that courses through them.

This life essence, this being-ness, is very real and can be directly experienced.

As long as people have been, this knowledge and experience of the Tao has been available.

By merging with the Tao, we too can experience the beautiful unfolding of manifestation.

How do I know this? By direct experience.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu reminds us that all of existence, both physical and non-physical, comes from the Tao. In somewhat the same way that DNA contains the blueprints for each particular life form in the material world, the Tao contains the blueprints for all expressions of material existence in the universe and for the life energies they may contain.

We can experience this foundational being-ness directly.

CHAPTER 22:

To yield to the Tao is to be made whole.
Your distorted materialistic desires become straight.
The emptiness inside you becomes filled with Tao.
The worn-out life within you is renewed.
Your lost exuberance of life is restored,
and you wonder how so much perplexity could have befallen you.
“So wise souls hold to the one, and test all things against it.”⁴
When you give up the sense of self, you shine with the Self of the Tao.
When you give up your sense of self-importance, the importance of the Tao comes through
you.
When you stop praising your own greatness, the greatness of the Tao is recognized.
When you know that your successes are not really yours,
then the success of the eternal Tao gives you eternal success.
If there is no one against whom you would quarrel, then quarreling does not exist.
“When the ancient Masters said, ‘If you want to be given everything, give everything up,’
They weren’t using empty phrases.”³
Unite with the Tao and gain true wholeness.

COMMENTARY:

No commentary needed.

CHAPTER 23:

Nature seldom speaks, but when it does it speaks concisely.

A violent wind blows through and is gone.

A violent rain inundates for a short while and then subsides.

Great Nature produces both of them and yet even Great Nature cannot persist.

If Great Nature cannot persist, then how much less so can a simple person?

Therefore, the rational people attach themselves to the Tao.

In this way, when they act with power they become powerful.

When they act as a failure, they fail.

When they embrace the Tao, the Tao embraces them.

Whatever roles they play, as a powerful or ineffective person, or anything else,

the Tao perpetually supports them and brings them success.

Acting from the spiritual level of the Tao, all desires are fulfilled.

COMMENTARY:

Intelligent people want to be one with the Tao because they realize that being able to act from the level of the Tao brings success in all worldly endeavors.

Just as a great actor or actress can successfully portray a rich and powerful person or a penniless tramp, access to the power and support of the Tao allows one to live life successfully, fully, and blissfully in whatever role they happen to be in.

When a person is one with the Tao, when the self has been abandoned and the Self of the Tao guides all, then all the desires one may have are effectively the desires of the Tao and in alignment with the direction of the Tao. Since everything proceeds from the Tao, if it moves in a particular direction, then that desire cannot help but be fulfilled.

CHAPTER 24:

Reaching too far beyond yourself causes you to loose your balance.
Living with a foot in each of two camps does not allow you to move forward in either.

“You can’t shine by showing off or get ahead by pushing.”⁴

A man who must boast about himself has few friends who can do it for him.

A conceited person cannot grow.

“Such stuff is to the Tao as garbage is to food or a tumor to the body,”⁴
obnoxious and disliked by all.

Therefore, the person established in the Tao is unlikely to associate with them.

COMMENTARY:

If you try to overextend yourself, you usually find that things are not working out in the way you would like them to. When you try to do two opposing things at the same time, you find that progress is stymied for both of them. All manifested things (including actions) have limits beyond which they cease being beneficial and life-supporting.

When the self tries to advance and promote itself at the expense of others, that limit is quickly reached.

A Sage fully possessing the Tao, though acknowledging the conceited person as being equally capable of spiritual growth as anyone else, is unlikely to associate with them because their conceit does not allow them to drop the self and begin the journey.

The person has chosen to remain at their present spiritual level for a time, and the Sage complies.

CHAPTER 25:

Before the material universe existed, the pure, undifferentiated state of Being was.

It is one, serene, boundless, and eternal.

It pervades everything and yet remains one.

From it the entire universe arises.

It is too infinite for a name, yet we call it the Tao.

Forced to further try to define it, we can only say it is the thing above all others.

Being the progenitor of the universe, it is in a constant flow of creation.

Flowing out to create everything, it nevertheless remains in its silent, unmoving, unity.

All of Heaven and all of Earth and all of mankind contains the Tao.

Because they contain the Tao, people are able to share in the Tao's Greatness; for the Self-reflective nature of the Tao flows from it to the material universe, to the earth, and to humanity.

COMMENTARY:

Here the Tao is clearly identified as the undifferentiated state of pure Being, what science thinks of as the Unified Field. **Everything** comes from it.

We humans also come from it. Because most of us are developed enough to have self-awareness, creativity, and greater intelligence than most sentient creatures on the planet, we have a latent capability to experience, express and use the Tao in ways that they cannot. Lao Tzu has already touched on some of those ways in previous chapters.

We have only to move from self-awareness to Self-awareness so that we, small pieces of the Tao, may fully know the Tao from whence we come.

CHAPTER 26:

Just as we must know what heaviness is in order to appreciate lightness,
so we must know rest in order to appreciate activity.

The Sages, even if they are active all day long, maintain composure.

“Although he may have magnificent sights, He calmly sits with liberated mind.”^{7a}

It is important that a person of great responsibility should be stable and composed, not flighty.

If they are too easily influenced and swayed, then they lose the trust of those around them.

If they become too agitated, they lose their quiet connection to the Tao and to its sustenance.

COMMENTARY:

Rest is the basis of activity. To maintain our connection to the Tao and conduct beneficial and responsible activity in life we should daily experience the deep rest we receive from contact with the Tao. With a rested and clear mind we are better able to discern the best course of action that the Tao would want from us.

CHAPTER 27:

Skillful travelers leave no evidence of their passage.

Skillful speakers convey their ideas without causing confusion.

Skillful accountants can add and subtract in their head.

The best gate, though not locked, is impossible to open.

“The best knot’s not in a rope and can’t be untied.”⁴

In an equally skillful way, the Sages will guide whoever seeks spiritual growth.

Being one with the Tao, they work with both the good and the bad, accepting each as worthy.

In this way they give bodily form to the nature of the Tao.

The Sage instructs the seeker, and the seeker provides the Sage with material to more perfectly express the Tao on earth. Thereby, both continue to mature.

If you do not appreciate the beauty of this teacher/seeker relationship, then you are lost; for it is the essential truth of the Tao: it is Self-generating and Self-reflective.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu tells us about three kinds of skill in teaching that the Sages possess: subtlety, clarity, and awareness.

With subtlety the students are guided in ways they are not even aware of, providing direct experiences and spiritual growth without the need for cumbersome intellectual analysis beforehand ... though that can come later if it is desired.

With clarity the students are provided with the necessary directions, explanations, or activities in a way that they easily understand and which will be most effective to achieve the goal of spiritual growth.

With awareness the Sage intuitively knows how certain directions will help (add to) or hurt (subtract from) a desired goal for each student.

The gate between us and enlightenment is not locked, but without proper guidance it cannot be opened.

Although the knot which connects us to the Tao can never be untied, we must still seek the one who tied it if we want release from our material concerns.

The Sages are best positioned to help us do those things. Whether we have been good or bad in life will not matter to the Sage as long as we have a sincere desire and willingness to do what is needed to improve. In this manner they give bodily form to the Tao through themselves and create further opportunities for the Tao to express through their students. Thus, both continue their spiritual growth.

This is how the Tao generates itSelf in new forms in the material world and how it is able to reflect itSelf back to itSelf in new knowledge.

CHAPTER 28:

The person who holds within themselves both silence and activity as the same,
becomes as a valley into which all the essence of manifestation flows.

They embrace the Tao and become as a newborn child: aware without activity.

Those who hold within themselves both the un-manifest and the manifest worlds as the same,
become as a model of the world.

They reflect the Tao and partake in its creative essence.

Those who know the Self of the Tao and the self of their own manifestation as the same,
know forever the simple unity of existence.

"When Primal Simplicity diversifies, It becomes useful vessels,"⁵

and the Sage, in shaping them, turns them into greater spiritual beings.

Thus, the un-manifest Tao creates the most while doing the least.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu continues his explanation of the blending of the un-manifest and manifest sides of creation.

We are capable of simultaneously holding within our awareness the deep, unmoving silence of the Tao and the manifested, fluctuating activity of the relative world. When we have realized that capability, then we become a conduit through which the manifesting power of the Tao flows to the creation around us.

By embracing the Tao through our meditative practice we become restfully aware and slowly integrate that into our daily, material lives until both exist together. We then reflect the unmoving, creative essence of the Tao and serve as a model for other seekers to emulate.

In knowing the Self of the Tao and the self of its creation, we come to know the simple truth of the unity of all existence.

The primal unity and awareness of the Tao diversifies into creation by producing enlightened Sages, who work to create more Sages, who work to create more Sages, who work to create more Sages, etc. Each Sage expands the expression of the unbounded, silent awareness within manifest creation.

CHAPTER 29:

Those who try to shape the world to match their vision always come to grief.

Because the manifest world is but a reflection of the un-manifest Tao,
it can only be changed from the level of the un-manifest.

Tampering with it on the manifest level only mars it on the surface.

The harder you try to effect exterior change, the more you lose control.

In creation, at any given moment, some things lead and some things follow;
some things are in action, some things are at rest;
some things are strong, some things are weak;
some things are successful, some things fail.

The Sage sees things as they are and does not try to control them.

COMMENTARY:

This chapter explains to us **why** the integration within our awareness of the un-manifest Tao with the manifest world is important. It is because that is really the only way in which we are able to conduct beneficial and life-supporting actions for ourselves and the world around us.

All actions done primarily for the self and with a small-s self-awareness are doomed to be incomplete and ineffective because the self is simply unable to comprehend the totality of effects from any given action. Only the Tao can do so. So we need the Tao to be guiding us. We need to be able to take our hands off the steering wheel and let the auto-pilot take over.

CHAPTER 30:

Those who, possessing the Tao, are moved to assist a worldly leader,
never do so with a force of arms.

They know that **“For every force there is a counterforce.**
Violence, even well intentioned, always rebounds upon itself.”³

Where armies are stationed, the land is blighted.

In the aftermath of war, bad years follow.

So the Sages purposefully only do what is needed to ease the situation, nothing more.

They know that they do not control the Tao, and that trying to take victory
rather than giving relief will end badly.

They can be resolute in their goal without being boastful, bragging, or haughty.

They do only what needs to be done because they can't avoid it.

They do what needs to be done without violence.

They know there is a cycle of existence and that
whatever is against the Tao will soon perish.

COMMENTARY:

For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. As you sow, so shall you reap. Do not do unto others what you would not have them do unto you. Treat others the way you would like to be treated. These are just different ways of stating The Golden Rule, and there is a reason this knowledge is front and foremost in all the major spiritual paths. It is an acknowledgement of the basic unity of creation.

The reason your actions come back to you is because no matter where you send them **is** you. All of creation is your Self in different forms, so what you do to creation you also do to your self.

Willful violence in any form against creation, any attempt to force self desires upon the manifest world, inevitably results in an equal backlash. It's like pounding your own thumb with a hammer. Only a fool follows such a path.

But also true is that whatever goodness you do comes back to you as well. Hence, everyone who is aware of this natural aspect of the Tao will resolutely (but not boastfully) lean away from violence and towards more life-supportive actions.

For the enlightened Sages, that resolution is not merely a mental exercise done in the hopes of gaining some amount of karmic credit (though even such a mental exercise would be preferable to the alternative of violence). For the enlightened Sages, the resolution is simply an inescapable part of their innate natures as reflectors of the Tao. They cannot behave otherwise any more than could the Tao.

Our material existence is limited in time and space, and actively working against the expression of the Tao shortens our own limited expression.

CHAPTER 31:

Even beautiful weapons are ugly tools, loathed by decent people;
and the Sage does not like to use them.

Their use runs against the nature of the Tao;
and they are poorly suited to express the Tao's manifestation.

So only under the direst circumstances and the direction of the Tao would the Sages use them;
and they do so "with a calm, still mind, without enjoyment."⁴

They do not delight in victory, for rejoicing at the slaughter of people
removes one from the Tao and shatters inner peace and contentment.

COMMENTARY:

Would a Sage **ever** engage in violent action? Nothing is impossible but, being an enlightened reflection of the Tao, the circumstances would need to be very dire and the direction from the Tao to do so would need to be unmistakable.

In such a circumstance, the enlightened Sage would be able to complete the action with a calm and still mind, without enjoyment or distaste, and without any concern about whether the action was immediately successful or not.

Also, the Sage, having a material body which is still subject to the natural law of action/reaction, would still experience any negative effects of such violence coming back to them. But, being established in the eternal unity of the Tao, the Self of the Sage would be unconcerned and unaffected and would not suffer as a result of that experience.

NOTE: In eight of the ten translations used in this interpretation, the line: "... removes one from the Tao" is followed by a number of additional lines explaining how/why the left hand is a good omen and the right hand is a bad omen. Two of the translators left them out completely, judging that these additional lines were likely meant as a commentary that was added later and was not part of the original text. Because they feel discontinuous from the part preceding them and do not add genuine meaning to the text, I agree. Hence, I have also left them out. However, for the readers to be able to better judge for themselves, I include here the transliteration of the lines from Dr. Paul Carus, printed in 1898:

"In propitious affairs we honor the left.
In unpropitious affairs we honor the right.
The assistant army leader sits to the left.
The superior army leader sits to the right.
(This) means (that) occupying a superior position then
According to the funeral ceremony is managed it.
The killing of people multitudes, many
With sorrow (and) lamentations (we ought to) weep for them.
(When) in war a victor according to the funeral ceremony
Must be treated he."

CHAPTER 32:

The eternal Tao is un-manifest, imperceivable.

“Smaller than an electron, it contains uncountable galaxies.”³

If the leaders could embody it within themselves,
all of creation would honor them and Peace would reign on earth.

“Without law or compulsion, men would dwell in harmony.”⁹

In creating, the un-manifest Tao coalesces into the
archetypal impression of something manifest.

It is then that the *something* can be conceived of and given a name.

Once given a name, it becomes manifest,
and its material nature and purpose is established.

Once established, the Tao stops and returns to its
eternal and serene state of restful alertness.

Likewise, by knowing when to stop and experience the Tao,
we can preserve ourSelves from being pulled into the creative eddy
of the manifest world.

Just as all streams and rivers eventually reach the seas,
we should inevitably return to the Tao.

COMMENTARY:

Though being so small as to be un-manifest, the Tao produces and manages the whole universe. If the leaders could embody this, they would have access to the infinite creative force of the Tao. In such a state they would be able to rule so effectively that everyone would live in peaceful harmony on their own accord.

The Tao's creative process follows a certain order. This was elaborated a bit in the commentary on Chapter 4.

First comes the generation of an intermediate *creator*, the expression of intelligent, creative awareness which is at the finest relative level of the manifest universe.

Next, that intelligent, creative force, draws upon the latent archetypal impressions within the Tao and coalesces them to produce a nascent impression of something manifest.

At this level the *something* becomes conceivable and can be given a name (or otherwise identified).

The process of naming something solidifies it in our awareness and gives it further manifestation; and its innate nature and purpose within the relative world becomes established. The Christian and Hebrew scriptures reflect this idea in their creation stories. After being created, Adam is called upon to name all the lesser creatures of the manifest world, solidifying their nature and purpose in life.

Having set the *something* on its independent course, the creative force stops its generative activity and settles back into the Tao's state of restful alertness. This is kind of like throwing a ball. Enough engagement and activity is needed to set the ball in motion, but once it leaves the hand it's on its own so to speak, and the thrower can then settle back into restfulness. If the thrower were to try to run alongside the ball or make attempts to keep it moving and airborne, then the state of restfulness would never be regained or maintained.

In like manner we, as seekers of the Tao, should be returning to its silent, restful alertness at intervals. This will help to ensure that we are not pulled so far into the experience of manifest creation as to lose awareness of the Self.

CHAPTER 33:

“He who knows others is wise; He who knows himSelf is enlightened.”⁶

He who overcomes others is strong; he who overcomes himself is powerful.

“He who knows contentment, is rich.”¹

He who stays on the path to the Tao is steadfast.

“He who stays where he has found his true home endures long.”⁵

And he who dies possessing the Tao lives forever.

COMMENTARY:

For most people, the experience of knowing others happens only on the material level of existence. They learn various superficial or personal things about them, depending on the amount of affinity they have for each other. If someone garners enough connections to enough different people, then certain patterns or tendencies in the behaviors of others begin to become apparent. That person is more easily able to interact effectively with them, and is often considered wise.

But the person who knows their own Self has access to the totality of pertinent knowledge about the basic nature of all humans (and all of the rest of creation as well). That person knows best how to interact with others in any circumstance in a life-supporting manner. Possessing and reflecting the Tao in this manner is enlightenment and contains within it the lesser status of being wise.

To overcome others on the material level of creation takes strength. But such strength is always relative (there is always someone stronger than you), and always temporary. But to overcome yourself and replace it with the Self gives one the support and power of the infinite and eternal Tao.

To be content is to always have enough. Even ultra-rich people in the world do not feel that they have enough. Contentment slips through their fingers the harder they grasp for more material wealth. Thus, truly contented people actually have more than the materially rich do.

Those who have become one with the Tao have found their true home, the place which eternally provides peace and solace and from which, if they wish, they can venture out any number of times on adventures and return always to a loving welcome. Though they experience changes, they never experience death.

CHAPTER 34:

The Great Tao is omnipresent, even within the bad as well as the good.
All of the material world relies upon it, and it never refuses.
For all that it accomplishes it never asks for recognition.
Though nourishing all of creation, it never acts like a master.
Because it has not even a desire, we may think of it as humble.
Yet because all of creation eventually dissipates back into it,
we may think of it as great.
In like manner, the Sage, never assuming any greatness,
reflects the nature of the Tao and achieves great things.

COMMENTARY:

No commentary needed.

CHAPTER 35:

To those who possess the Tao, the whole world is given.
They cause no harm and exude peace, serenity, and security.
Hence, all creation feels drawn to them.
Sensual pleasures cause many who are on the path to stop and partake.
After all, talking about the Tao produces no taste, looking for the Tao produces
nothing to see, and listening for the Tao gives us nothing to hear;
but experiencing the Tao, *that* gives us eternity.

COMMENTARY:

The Tao creates and holds the material world. He who possesses the Tao possesses what the Tao possesses.

He who possesses the Tao reflects the Tao's characteristics and creation is drawn to them just as it is drawn to the Tao.

On the manifest, material level of life, the Tao shows few traits to attract the attention of people seeking sensual pleasures. Thus many of them become distracted and turn away from the path.

But the inner experience of the Tao gives us eternal bliss.

CHAPTER 36:

Contraction always follows expansion.

Weakness always follows strength.

Ruin always follows building up.

Deprivation always follows endowment.

“Herein is the subtle wisdom of life:”⁵

“The weak and the tender overcome the hard and the strong.”⁶

Everything should be allowed to remain as it is meant to be.

Threats of violence cannot change the inevitable.

COMMENTARY:

All of material existence runs in cycles. Like a clock pendulum, it is always moving between one side and the other. Even violence and force cannot prevent these cycles from happening.

Knowing this should give us encouragement. If our present condition is not what we would prefer, we can rest assured that a change will eventually come. It should also give us pause for reflection. If our present condition is better than we anticipated, that too will someday change.

In chapter 13, Lao Tzu explained how both benefit and loss create fear within us. But if we possess the Tao sufficiently to recognize that benefit and loss (or any of the dualities of any of life’s cycles) are merely anticipated points along the same cyclical motion, then we can surrender ourselves to what is inevitable without suffering any loss in our bliss or our integrity.

CHAPTER 37:

The Tao is always at rest, and yet nothing that needs to be done remains undone.

**“If powerful men and women could center themselves in it,
the whole world would be transformed by itself, in its natural rhythms.”³**

If some of the people yet remain bound and restless by material desires,
then teach them how to acquire the Tao.

Thus being freed from their material desires, they too would be at rest,
and the world would be at peace.

COMMENTARY:

From the eternal, restful alertness of the Tao arises all of the necessary activities of material creation. Everything gets done while the Tao remains at rest.

Humans emulate each other, and they especially tend to emulate those in various positions of power. So if even a small handful of influential people attain the Tao and reflect that in their daily lives, many people will desire to emulate them. In doing so they will naturally improve their situation. And if some, from their past natures, remain caught up in excessive worldly desires, then specifically teaching them how to attain the Tao would lessen those effects and bring them rest and peace.

CHAPTER 38:

A person possessing the Tao feels no need to bring attention to their status.

A person not possessing the Tao will display their holiness
so that others will recognize them.

A person possessing the Tao feels no need to act,
but when guided by the Tao acts without pretension.

A person not possessing the Tao will act or not act to display their holiness to others.

A person possessing the Tao will be kind for kindness' sake.

A person not possessing the Tao will be kind so that others may see it,
And they will be righteous so that others may know they are righteous.

A person not possessing the Tao, when no one recognizes or responds to their pretensions,
Will even try to force others to accept and recognize them.

When Tao begins to be lost, the first thing to appear is virtue.

If virtue cannot be sustained, it is replaced by kindness.

If kindness cannot be sustained, then comes righteousness.

If righteousness cannot be sustained, then there is manners, propriety, ritual, and obedience.

All of those are merely superficial expressions of loyalty and good faith
and are the beginning of ignorance and disorder.

The person who defends those actions as necessary is merely flashing a flower of the Tao
before your eyes and ignoring the living seed. It is the beginning of stupidity.

A Master of the Tao remains concerned with the seed of creation,
and not with any one of its many expressions.

COMMENTARY:

Persons possessing the Tao, see no real difference between that and themselves. For them, the Tao, the world, themselves, are all the same and of equal status. Since they perceive nothing about their status that is better than anything else, they feel no need to draw attention to it.

In the second part of the chapter, Lao Tzu expands our understanding (from Chapter 18) of how the loss of Tao within society is expressed. And because society is a reflection of us, its constituents, we can see the same different levels of expression in our own personal awareness.

The greatest state is to have, know, and live the Tao in our daily lives. In this state, the unity of all creation exists in our awareness. In any given situation, we effortlessly act in the most beneficial way for all of creation.

The least state of awareness is one of ignorance and disorder. Actions are performed only for oneself. Any negative effects generated by those actions (for both oneself and for others) are ignored in favor of small, short-term material gains. Disorder for everyone is the result.

In between those two states are recognizable steps of lesser and greater awareness which give rise to corresponding levels of expression in life.

If we have not yet gained permanent possession of the Tao and we begin to move downwards towards greater ignorance, the corresponding steps in awareness/actions are:

virtue,
kindness,
righteousness,
being clever,
manners/propriety/ritual/obedience,
loyalty and patriotism.

In Lao Tzu's eyes, once we have reached the level of relying on loyalty and patriotism alone for our sense of self, then we have become completely subjugated by the material world and lost all awareness of our place in the cosmic scheme. It is a sad condition to be in.

But all steps that go down, also go up, and anyone with the genuine desire is capable of merely turning around and taking an upward rather than downward direction. When that happens, the indicative steps in our awareness and actions reverse.

This rudimentary guide can help us gauge where we are on the ladder of awareness and, if we are smart, point us in the direction we ought to be moving.

CHAPTER 39:

In the beginning, these things were given expression by the Tao:
The Heavens and light were expressed by the Tao.

The earth was expressed by the Tao.

The spiritual essence of the creation was expressed by the Tao and became animated.

The waters of the earth were separated from the land by the Tao.

All the creatures of the earth were expressed and brought into being by the Tao,
repeating and renewing themselves.

Human beings, expressed by the Tao and possessing it,
became the stewards of earthly creation.

Without the expression of the Tao:

The Heavens and light would return to primal darkness,

The earth would dissipate,

The spirit of life would become still,

The waters would evaporate,

The living creatures would cease to exist,

And the possessors of the Tao would again merge into its serene awareness.

Knowing this, the Sages recognize their lowly and dependent status
and continuously guard their humility so as not to risk losing the Tao.

Better to be thought an ordinary stone and retain the Tao
than to be thought a valuable piece of jade and lose the Tao.

COMMENTARY:

Doesn't this sound a lot like the creation story that most of us are familiar with? Yet it pre-dates the Torah by about 100 years, and the Bible by about 500 years.

CHAPTER 40:

Every movement the Tao makes is a movement of returning to itSelf.

Every deed the Tao does is done softly.

All of material existence is produced from Pure Being.

Pure Being is produced from the un-manifest Tao.

COMMENTARY:

There is the truism stating: "If you are standing at the north pole, then no matter what direction you go in, you're going south." Everything *is* the Tao, and all of material creation is just an expression of the Tao. So no matter what wave of awareness or creation arises from its eternal depths, that is merely the Tao simultaneously going out from and returning to itSelf. There is no other place it can come from or go to.

The Tao does not need to do anything with force. The laws of nature easily and quietly continue to function. If we have developed the ability to flow with them instead of continually fighting them (like a swimmer trying to fight a rip current) then we are able to master life and live in peace and contentment.

CHAPTER 41:

When someone with superior wisdom hears about the Tao,
they immediately learn to practice it.

When someone of average knowledge hears about the Tao,
they are unsure if it is true or not.

When a foolish person hears about the Tao, he laughs at it and thinks it is silly.
If it could not be laughed at, it would not really be the Tao.

So it is said:

The path to enlightenment may seem unknowable.
All your steps forward may feel like they're going nowhere.

The simple process may look undo-able.

But having experienced the Tao, both the highest and lowest virtues are seen as equal.

Compared to it, the purest whiteness of the world seems dull,
the greatest virtue in the world appears poor and lowly,
the strongest power in the world appears flimsy,
and the truest steadfastness feels fickle.

There are many methods for attainment,
and such a great project takes time;
but to hear the silence of the Tao, and to sense its formless infinity,
is inexpressible.

Though hidden from our physical senses, it is the Tao alone which gives us
the knowledge of ItSelf and brings us completeness.

COMMENTARY:

The infinity and completeness of the Tao makes it immediately comprehensible in some way to everyone. **How** it is comprehended will depend on the degree to which they have developed the Tao within themselves. Various levels of development (and comprehension) are perfectly natural as the Tao continuously creates new sentient beings and those beings mature and expand their awareness on the path to enlightenment.

Because all of creation and all these beings **are** the Tao, the whole process is really one of the Tao playing and experiencing the infinite number of ways it could be.

To us not yet enlightened, the whole affair of raising our awareness to become one with the Tao seems muddy, slow, and difficult. Yet, compared to the eternal existence of the Tao, it actually happens rather quickly. The end result of reuniting our awareness with the Tao is inevitable; but we have the free will to choose whether to speed the process along by our desires and actions, or to slow it down by merely existing and letting nature take its course.

And what are the inevitable results of experiencing the Tao in our daily lives? We understand intuitively that all states of existence, from bad to good, are steps of equal value in the process of reuniting our awareness with the Tao. The full glory of the Tao (and all its creations) becomes apparent, surpassing and outshining all previous concepts we had of what was highest or best in the relative, material world.

There are many paths to enlightenment. Pick one that resonates with you and begin the journey.

CHAPTER 42:

The unmoving, eternal Tao gives rise to the unitary creative force.

The unitary creative force gives rise to duality,
and in that process creates trinity.

That trinity then creates the material universe.

In this way all material things contain within them the light of the Tao,
and the blending of the life-force with their materiality achieves harmony.
To be considered lowly, destitute, or unworthy is what most people hate.

Yet the possessors of the Tao embraces this,
understanding that they are one with creation.

What is a loss to one man is a gain to another.

Other teachers have taught this, and it bears repeating:
“A man of violence will not die a natural death.”

COMMENTARY:

The commentary on Chapter 4 discussed the beginning of the Tao's process of creation. Here Lao Tzu expands a little on his information. The Tao itSelf is unmoving, eternal, pure awareness (the unified field spoken of in physics). How does that unchanging unified field of pure awareness diversify into the whole, temporary, material universe that we exist in?

According to this chapter, the process begins with itSelf, the being-ness of pure eternal awareness, as *the knower*. It is aware, but not aware of anything in particular because, in this scenario, there is not yet any material thing to be aware of.

The Tao then becomes aware of itSelf, aware that it exists. This makes it both *the knower AND the known*. The unity has given rise to duality. It still maintains its underlying unity, but now there is a small wave of itSelf rising up which, though still itSelf is also a little different. *The process* of the knower coming to know what is known is the finest expression of the creative act and completes the trinity that Lao Tzu speaks of. We now have the knower, the known, and the process of knowing. Those three together become the first, most refined, material expression of the non-material Tao. They act as the continuing force for the creation of the material universe. The Christian concept of the *trinity* also reflects this idea, where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are representative of the Knower, the Known, and the Process Of Knowing. It's a representation of how the underlying unity of existence becomes the diversity of the universe. Similar concepts appear in Hinduism.

All beings thus come directly from the Tao. Their life-force (ch'i) gives them the awareness needed to eventually harmonize their materiality with Tao's unity and attain enlightenment.

Most people, caught up in their material lives, seek status, wealth, and importance. But the Sage, understanding that all those things come from the Tao, rejects them and chooses to seek the highest state first. Others may see the Sages as lowly and unsuccessful, but the Sages find themSelves eternally fulfilled and content.

“A man of violence will not die a natural death” is another way of saying: He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword. That is another form of: As you sow, so shall you reap. Lao Tzu is reminding us that the material world works on the principle of action-and-reaction. If we allow ourselves to be caught up in that cycle, which most people refer to as *karma*, then we extend the time it takes us to raise our awareness and enjoy the eternal benefits of living with the Tao.

CHAPTER 43:

The finest manifestations of the Tao are but latent archetypes
which can coalesce into the universal matter.

They are without material existence and thus penetrate where nothing else can.
Hence, being aligned with them has advantages.

**“Few things under heaven are as instructive as the lessons of Silence,
Or as beneficial as the fruits of Non-Ado.”⁵**

COMMENTARY:

In the first stage of creation, a small wave of awareness begins to rise on the infinitely still ocean of the Tao. This small wave, the finest manifestation of the creative force, is the latent archetype (the blueprint, if you will) that will coalesce into the fully-formed creative aspect of the Tao and from there develop further into all of the physical, material universe.

A blueprint is conceptual, but it is still something. It is the intermediate state between something that does not exist and something that does exist. It shares a bit of both states. From that intermediate state it can enter into and become *anything*. This is how the Tao, which is un-manifest, is able to penetrate and become part of the manifest, material world.

In like manner, the Sages who possess the Tao are, if needed, still able to teach by their actions without speaking. They can even teach by their existence without acting.

CHAPTER 44:

Which is dearer to you, fame or your personal integrity?

Which is more valuable to you, money or your personal happiness?

Which do you find more painful, gaining something or losing something?

If your happiness depends on fame and money, then you are destined to lose both, and experience great suffering.

But if you can be content with what you have, there is no one who can take that from you.

Those who know to abide with the Tao, can never actually perish.

“He is forever safe and secure.”⁹

COMMENTARY:

Those who understand that they should express the Tao in their lives, and who know how to do so, have the full, eternal nature of the Tao behind them. Their temporary body may pass away, but they themSelves continue on just as the Tao does: safe, secure, and eternal in the knowledge of who they really are.

CHAPTER 45:

What is most perfect (the Tao) appears to be incomplete, yet it is eternally producing;
and though appearing empty, it can never be exhausted.

We may see straightness as crookedness, skill as clumsiness, eloquence as stammering.

The heat of activity can overcome the cold;

and the coolness of stillness can overcome the heat.

All the dualities of the world are rectified by Tao's purity and quietude.

COMMENTARY:

Although the Tao appears to our senses to be so empty as to be non-existent, it nevertheless contains and is constantly creating all of the external existence that we can experience.

Whatever dualities or conflicting expressions we experience, they all come from the same Tao; and they all work equally to maintain balance within the material expressions that the Tao creates.

All dualities and conflicts are made smooth within the Tao. Hence, possessing the Tao brings balance to one's life.

CHAPTER 46:

“When a country is in harmony with the Tao, the factories make trucks and tractors.”³

When a country loses the Tao, the factories make tanks and bombs.

There is no greater sin than to encourage desire.

There is no greater misery than to be discontented with one's situation.

There is no greater precursor to evil than greed.

“Only he who knows what is enough will always have enough.”⁵

COMMENTARY:

Without the balance in life gained from possessing the Tao (described in the commentary of chapter 45), we experience unhappiness and disharmony. The dichotomies in life seem important and in conflict with each other, rather than necessary balancing attributes that arise from the same unity. In our ignorance we identify with one or another of them, thus creating within ourselves the belief that there is an *us* and a *them*.

Because, even in our ignorance, we are still expressions of the Tao, it is perfectly natural for us to seek the completeness, fulfillment, and the serenity that comes from union with the Tao. Having created a distance between ourselves and the Self of the Tao, we are filled with a desire to again experience our source.

But our tendency is to try to attain that fulfillment through the material world that we have become identified with. If the things we have are not making us happy and contented, then we reason that we must need more of them. If we think the people we interact with are not making us happy, then we reason that the only solution is to remove or destroy them. In our search for happiness, this greed for material excesses of all kinds only leads to life-destructive actions and misery for ourselves as we vainly try harder and harder to attain our desires. And if, in attempting to garner material wealth and benefits, we encourage others to do the same, then we have doubly sinned. Not only have we sinned against ourSelves, but also against others because we have encouraged them to turn away from their own spiritual growth.

Our real need is to turn within, to gain possession of the Tao. We need to experience complete awareness of the unity and balance which is its (and our) basic nature. The Tao is enough because the Tao *is* everything. Does anyone need more than everything?

CHAPTER 47:

Without leaving one's house, one can know the whole world.

Without looking out one's window, one can see the Tao.

The further away one gets from one's Self, the less one knows.

"Thus, the Sage knows without traveling, Sees without looking,"⁵

and accomplishes what the Tao accomplishes, without effort.

COMMENTARY:

People have long held the idea that if one is able to understand the underlying basic nature of something, one is able to know how to affect it. That is the idea behind science. We wish to know something so that we can manipulate it to our advantage. If we know a little bit about it, we can manipulate it a little bit. If we know a lot about something, we can manipulate it a lot. But if we knew *everything* about something, we could manipulate it in any way we wish.

The Tao contains the latent archetypes, the blueprints, for everything that exists in the material world. It is, in its essence, the complete knowledge of *everything*. If we align ourselves with the Tao, and become one with it, we raise the status of our awareness to that of the universal Self which is the Tao. From that vantage point we are able to reflect the Tao's universal knowledge and creative force.

Without moving from our seat, we can know anything that is necessary for us to know. Without looking around us we can see in our mind's eye anything that it is necessary for us to see. We have access to all the awareness that the Tao has and we are able to use it, as necessary, to further the expression of the Tao in material creation.

CHAPTER 48:

One who seeks to study the material world will grow larger daily.

One who seeks to study the Self will grow smaller daily.

By daily decreasing, and again decreasing their self,
they finally experience the Self of non-action.

In this serene state, they do nothing. All is done by the Self, and everything gets done.

To gain mastery over self, one must let go, do nothing, and allow the Self to guide.

Those who try to run things themselves will never succeed.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu continues to elaborate on what he said in the previous chapter.

If we make it our business to study and understand material creation only from the level of material creation, then we will have to gather more and more and more information every day. We will have to investigate finer and finer and finer aspects of creation on the one hand, and we will have to investigate larger and larger and larger aspects of creation on the other hand. Soon both hands will be full, our brains will be full, our libraries will be full, and our computers will be full; and there will still be more that we don't know or understand. We would spend so much of our time expanding our physical knowledge and investigating creation that we would have no time to correctly apply it to our benefit, and it would not bring us the bliss and peace which we all long for.

But if we make it our business to study and understand the Self, the basis from which all of creation arises, then the opposite happens. We turn inwards, towards our own basis, towards the basis which we share with the rest of creation. As the self grows smaller in our awareness, the Self grows larger. By repeatedly doing so each day we are able to eventually experience and express the full glory of the Self (the Tao).

In that state, our awareness *is* the Tao's awareness. We turn ourselves over to the will and creative power of the Tao. We do nothing. The Tao does everything through us; and everything that needs to get done gets done.

Those who cling to the small-s self, will never succeed in finding lasting peace, contentment, or fulfillment no matter how long or hard they try.

CHAPTER 49:

The Sages are not concerned with any personal interests of their own.
Steeped in the Tao, they work with the hearts and minds of those around them as they are.
Whether they are good people or not good, the Sages treat them all the same
so they may become better.
Whether they are trustworthy or not, the Sages treat them all with trust
so they may become more responsible.
The Sages mingle with the world and keep their hearts and minds impartial towards all.
The people look to them for instruction and they guide them
like a mother guides her children.

COMMENTARY:

The Sages, possessing the Tao and reflecting its serene fulfillment, no longer search for their own self-happiness. They hold forever all that they could wish for.

As pure reflectors of the Tao, their attention turns to working for the sake of the Tao, to help others attain its fulfillment.

Anyone who genuinely desires to attain the Tao is welcomed by the Sages. Whether the person has been good or bad previously in life makes no matter, for who of us (including the Sages) has not been bad at some point in our lives?

The genuine desire to throw off the old unhappiness and seek eternal fulfillment is enough. Those who have that desire will be trusted with the knowledge they need to move in that direction.

CHAPTER 50:

We come from the Tao into life, and at death we return home to the Tao.

About a third of people try to grasp and extend all of physical life;

about a third of people are unhappy with life and await death;

and about a third of people, while wanting to live, still act so as to shorten their lives.

Why is this so? Because they view these short, material lives as being all that exists.

And yet it is said that: For those who know how to live best, they walk without fear of the tiger or rhinoceros, and meet soldiers without fearing their weapons.

For them, “**The rhinoceros has no place where to insert its horn. The tiger has no place where to put his claws. Soldiers have no place where to let enter their blades.**”^{7b}

How can that be? Because those who live in the Tao are beyond the reign of death.

COMMENTARY:

Those who grasp at this physical life and try to extend it to its utmost length are afraid of the death of the material body.

Those who are deeply unhappy and unfulfilled and long for physical death are afraid of the continuation of the material body.

Those who behave in ways so as to shorten the natural extent of their life, view the material body only as a means to bring them satisfaction.

All three types of people view our material lives as all that exists. Hence, they perceive the physical body (which is our interface between ourSelves and the physical world) to be something which must be extraordinarily extended, quickly gotten rid of, or abused.

But once we possess the Tao in our awareness, we understand that we ourSelves are much greater than the temporary physical bodies that we take on and dispense with in the same way that we would put on and take off a coat.

Possessing the Tao, we are aware of our eternal natures, and our physical bodies become useful tools to help express the Tao to others. We neither fear death, nor seek death, nor behave so as to shorten our allotted time in this particular life.

Things which others fear as dangers to their existence, we understand to be harmless to our eternal being, and thus we behave accordingly.

CHAPTER 51:

The silent Tao produces all things from within itSelf.

The vital force of the Tao nourishes their outward growth.

The physical forms take shape according to their inherent nature,
and they are completed by the environment into which they emerge.

In all creation there is nothing which does not spontaneously honor and esteem the Tao.

Though the Tao gives them life, it makes no claim of ownership.

Though it provides all things necessary for them, it does not seek credit for doing so.

Though it guides their growth, it makes no attempt to control them.

This is the mystic nature of the Tao.

COMMENTARY:

That all things come from the Tao and are part of the Tao has already been stated (and we'll be reminded of it again). But here Lao Tzu focuses on the loving and supportive nature of the Tao toward manifest creation.

One might think, given its great creative power and awareness, that the progenitor of all of manifest creation might harbor at least some *small* sense of possession or control over what is created. After all, isn't that what **we** do?

But Lao Tzu assures us that is not the case. The Tao provides all of living creation (whatever its level of awareness) with all the vital forces and the environment necessary to grow and evolve. Everything, in reflecting and utilizing those vital forces, quietly honors and esteems the Tao; for what greater honor can one return to a gift-giver than to use well the gift they have given.

Yet the Tao, for all its generosity, makes no requirement for thanks, makes no claim to possess any of the living creation it has made, and desires no credit for what it has done. The Tao is eternally fulfilled and blissful. It simply has no need for such recognitions. After all, it is *both* the creator and the created.

With love and joy, living creation is set free to desire, experience, learn and grow as it wishes. The Tao will lovingly guide creation to its eventual reunion with itSelf; but how that happens and how long that takes is up to the living beings themselves. It is the Tao's joy to set them free and await their return.

The Hindus have a term for this. They call it *lila*, "divine play".

CHAPTER 52:

As the un-manifest Tao begins to manifest,
it becomes existence and gives rise to all things.

When one truly knows the mother, one knows all things that arise from her.
If one truly knows her children and yet continues to hold her qualities within themselves,
though their body may decay, they will never perish.

Withdraw your senses from the material world, experience the Tao,
and your life will be untroubled.

Wallow in activity, concern yourself with worldly affairs, and you will never know peace.

“Who beholds his smallness is called enlightened.”^{7a}

Who remains aware of life's tenderness is strong.

**“Who uses Reason's light and returns home to its enlightenment
does not surrender his person to perdition.”^{7a}**

This is called cultivating the eternal.

COMMENTARY:

The Tao is One. All diversity comes from and is part of the One. All diversity contains the completeness of the One within it.

Thus, if a person truly and completely knows the Tao, then they can also know the material world that arises from the Tao. Likewise, if they truly and completely know any portion of the material world, then they will also know the Tao, because the two are merely different expressions of the same Oneness.

In this way, the daily meditative experience of the Tao is able to bring the Tao's serenity into our relative, material lives. We need only become aware of what is already there. Doing so allows us to tap into the Tao's eternal existence and realize that we also are that.

CHAPTER 53:

“He who has the least scrap of sense, once he has got started on the great highway has nothing to fear so long as he avoids turnings.”⁹

The path to the Tao is plain and easy, but people are quickly distracted. For them, the outer world is full of splendor but the inner world holds little appeal. Fancy clothes, sharp weapons, excessive eating and drinking, wealth, and material possessions feel like abundance; but they are only robbing themselves. They are indeed not on the path to the Tao.

COMMENTARY:

Because the benefits to our material lives of possessing the Tao are so clear, and because it leads to eternal bliss, anyone with even a little sense will be drawn to pursuing it.

But beware, because we are often distracted and enticed away from the path by our material lives. Every temporary, material thing that we pursue robs us of some experience of the infinite. A simple, daily meditative practice keeps you on the path. Be sure not to neglect it.

CHAPTER 54:

“Whoever is planted in the Tao will not be rooted up.”³

Those who embrace the Tao firmly will not be separated from it.
Their children and grand-children will reap spiritual benefits from their steadfastness.

The cultivation of the Tao on the individual level produces genuine virtue.

The cultivation of the Tao on the family level produces abundance.

The cultivation of the Tao on the city level produces security and durability.

The cultivation of the Tao on the country level produces prosperity.

The cultivation of the Tao on the world level produces universality and peace.

Once established in Tao, we can use our own experience to gauge the expression of Tao in others.

Likewise we can use the expression of Tao in our family
to gauge the expression of Tao in other families.

We can use the expression of Tao in our town
to gauge the expression of Tao in other towns.

We can use the expression of Tao in our country
to gauge the expression of Tao in other countries.

And we can use the expression of Tao in our world
to gauge the expression of Tao in other worlds.

How do I know all this is true? By personal experience.

COMMENTARY:

As we become more and more established in the Tao, the seductions of the material world seem less and less attractive to our awareness. Eventually we come to prefer the experience of the Tao's bliss and contentment.

Lao Tzu tells us that when we become established in the Tao, the effects of that extend beyond merely ourselves and help to benefit every level of material creation for some time to come (even children and grandchildren will reap spiritual benefits).

Moreover, as the Tao becomes more established on various level of material creation (as a result of more and more people embracing the Tao) the beneficial effects become apparent. People become virtuous, families become abundant, cities become secure and resilient, countries become prosperous, and the world becomes welcoming and peaceful.

In Chapters 18 and 38 Lao Tzu denoted some of the effects on the material world from the loss (or gain) of the Tao. He pointed out that we could use that knowledge to roughly gauge how far along the path to enlightenment we might be and in which direction we should be moving.

In this chapter he reiterates those ideas, but also adds another piece of knowledge. Up to this point we have been, in our unenlightened awareness, using the minor reflections of the Tao in the material world to try to measure how close or far those material thing were from fully expressing the Tao.

Here, being “planted” in the Tao and “firmly” embracing it indicates full possession of the Tao in our awareness: enlightenment. From previous chapters we have established that in that state our awareness and the Tao's are one and the same. So Lao Tzu is here shifting our point of view and letting us know that once we have become one with the Tao, we no longer gauge the Tao from its expression in the material world (i.e. from the outside, looking in). Rather, we gauge the material world from our personal experience of the Tao (i.e. from the inside, looking out).

That's a sizable shift because it means we are no longer treating the material world as being in any way separate from the Tao. Instead, we **are** the Tao, contemplating its Self, and gauging its own expression in various forms of material creation.

CHAPTER 55:

One who embodies the Tao is akin to an infant child.
Insects don't sting it, wild beasts don't seize it, and birds of prey don't strike it.
The infant's bones are weak, its muscles are tender, but its grip is strong.
"Ignorant of the intercourse of man and woman,
Yet the baby penis is erect. True and perfect energy!"⁴
He can cry all day and yet never becomes hoarse because
he embodies perfect harmony between body and energy.
To possess such harmony is to touch the eternal,
and touching the eternal is called enlightenment.
Others believe that extending one's lifespan is a blessing and that
controlling the emotions preserves the vital breath force.
But things fully matured are destined to decay, and forcibly trying to control
the life-force is the antithesis of the Tao. Both are doomed to failure.

COMMENTARY:

The reason that dangers tend not to approach an infant child is not because the child has any magical powers or superior strength or intellect. It is because the infant child is protected by its mother who watches carefully over it. In like manner, being in possession of the Tao provides us with several benefits for our protection. In the material body we gain expanded awareness and the natural tendency to act in accord with whatever is most life-supporting at any given moment. This provides a shield of sorts to help us avoid, as much as possible, situations that endanger our material existence. Beyond that, it gives us clear knowledge that no matter what happens to the physical body, we ourselves will remain unscathed and eternal.

With the nature of the Tao flowing through us, we live an harmonious and effortless life, always balanced perfectly between the manifest and the un-manifest.

But being perfectly balanced between the manifest and un-manifest does not extend our maximum allotted time in the material world. It only helps to ensure that we do not foolishly shorten it (which is possible for us to do). Any attempts to extend our lifetimes beyond their natural length are doomed to failure.

NOTE: Yes, male infants can have erections. No, it is not sexual. It's just normal biology. The Chinese believed these were indications of the strength of the vital life-force in the child and a good omen.

NOTE: Waley, in his notes on this chapter, says: "The emotions were thought by the Chinese to make call upon and use up the original supply of breath which was allotted to a man at birth and constituted his life-spirit."

CHAPTER 56:

Those who know do not speak. Those who speak do not know.
They close both their mouth and the gates of incoming sensations.
They pause the discriminatory tendencies, let go of the tangle of thoughts,
dim the intellectual activity, and bring their awareness to the common unity of all creation.
“This is the primal identity. Be like the Tao.”³
In this state, one cannot be swayed by attachment or rejection,
by benefit or harm, by honor or humiliation.
This is the highest and noblest state one can attain.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu is here describing aspects of the meditative process.

“Those who know ...” here means persons who are deep in the meditative state. At that time, the experience is only of the pure transcendent Self, and all awareness of the material world is gone. In such a state, speech cannot happen. In order to be aware of and respond to external stimuli the person must first reconnect with material awareness. For those who have not yet permanently attained the Tao, it is not possible to hold both the un-manifest Tao and the manifest world in our awareness simultaneously. Hence, for the spiritual aspirant, when one is able to speak, one is not fully experiencing (knowing) the Tao.

The proper process of meditation, regardless of which spiritual tradition is teaching it, always involves the pausing of the material physical sensations in some way and the turning within to directly experience the basic nature upon which all of creation relies.

In that state, we are unaffected by any conditions of the material world (by any of the dualities that most people normally recognize) and cannot be moved by any attachments, rejection, harm, benefit, honor, or humiliation.

CHAPTER 57:

The state is properly administered with righteousness.

A war can be won by doing the unexpected.

The empire can be gained by doing nothing.

How do I know this is so? By direct experience.

The more the physical world is governed by restrictions and prohibitions,
the poorer the people become.

The more clever people there are, the more disorder the state is in.

The more cunning and crafty people are, the more pernicious will be their actions.

"The louder the call for law and order, the more the thieves and con men multiply."¹⁴

Therefore the Sages determine:

"As I practice non-doing, the people will eventually be transformed.

The stillness of the Tao, emanating out to them, will help them become righteous,
and their righteous actions will help them become prosperous."

"If I practice being without desires, the people will of themselves become simple."¹

COMMENTARY:

It is commonly understood that Lao Tzu was a minister in the royal court of the small kingdom where he lived. He was familiar with the government and would naturally lean towards speaking and writing using the government as an example. Here he is using the state (the place where we live) as a metaphor for our physical bodies (also where we live).

Righteousness means being in accord with the natural laws of creation. It means, among other things, being aware of the unitary nature of creation and the unerring law of reciprocity (as you sow, so shall you reap). It means having the Tao firmly in one's awareness. Hence, we properly administer ourselves by possessing the Self.

Wars on the material level are won by great exertion and strife. We normally think that that is what is necessary for gaining possession of a country and its resources. But the war to gain possession of the Tao is done quite differently. We must do the unexpected. We must do nothing. That means we must turn aside from normal, daily activity and turn within to the place of no action and full awareness. Lao Tzu tells us that this is his own experience.

As we pay more and more attention to our physical and material existence, we pay less and less attention to our Selves. What we tend to think of as freedom and acquisition actually becomes a great restriction that diverts our attention and prevents us from attaining true freedom, the freedom from worry and anxiety. We get only a poor, restricted, temporary existence. We become clever, cunning, and crafty to attain more on the outside while becoming stupid and unaware and losing a great deal on the inside. And the more we attempt to forcibly mold material things to our wishes, the more we fail.

The Sages and seekers, who know how the Tao functions and expresses itSelf, understand that the best action they can take is to gain full possession of the Tao and act to express it to the world in their daily lives. In this way, over time, all will eventually become enlightened.

CHAPTER 58:

When one functions in a reserved and simple manner, the results are simple.

When one functions in a confusing and complex manner, the results are confusing.

Any attempt to enforce happiness on the world only produces unhappiness.

Despite our best efforts, we cannot know how all our actions will interact with each other.

It is unfathomable.

For as long as we can remember, it seems that what is good one day is bad the next;
and what is unacceptable yesterday is normal today! It is so confusing!

But the master, at one with the unifying Tao, serves as an example of how to carve a path
without damaging, how to have integrity without offending,
and how to enlighten without blinding.

COMMENTARY:

Functioning in a “reserved and simple manner” means with the guidance and support of the Tao. With that guidance, attaining the best result is simple.

Because of the complexity of the material world and the unfathomable number of ways that material things can interact with other material things, it is impossible for even an enlightened master to know all the effects that will be produced by any given action.

But the awareness of the eternal Tao can know all of it because the Tao *is* all of it.

Those who possess the Tao in their awareness and are guided by it will **not** be able to comprehend the eternal totality of creation while holding a physical, material body. Our temporary physical form is too limited to contain eternal totality. But with the guidance of the eternal Tao, we can certainly move in a manner that will be as life-supporting as possible for any given situation. That is really all that creation asks of us.

CHAPTER 59:

To manage your life and serve heaven, it is best to practice moderation.
Make a habit, first thing in the morning, of moderating your thoughts and contacting the Tao.
In this way you accumulate vital energy and add a little of the Tao to your awareness.

Doing this every day has good cumulative effects, and soon
nothing will stop you from its practice.

As you increase your energy and embrace the Tao,
you will find yourself capable of things you did not know you could do.
As you do more, supported by the Tao, you become more responsible and
gain control over your own life.

Always be in possession of the Tao, and you will last long.
Tap the Tao with deep roots and your insight will grow.

COMMENTARY:

No commentary needed.

CHAPTER 60:

Running a great state is like cooking small fish.
And when the people hold the Tao firmly, the ghosts of their past actions do not bother them.
Not only do they not bother them, but they are unable to cause harm.
With the bad effects of past actions diminished, the positive effects of Tao-supported actions
become greater, and benefits accrue to all.

COMMENTARY:

Once again, as in Chapter 57, Lao Tzu is using a geographical state as a metaphor for the body we live in.

Cooking small fish is done carefully, with as little physical touching or turning as possible because, otherwise, they fall apart into a mush.

In the same way, when running our physical state (our body), we must use our selves as little as possible. Instead, we should be cultivating our awareness and possession of the Self (the Tao) to guide us into action that is as life-supporting as possible. In this way we become “a great state”.

As we consistently learn to behave in accord with the laws of nature, and more fully express the Tao, we find that our past actions (what eastern spiritual traditions call our *karma*) come back less and less to bite us in the butt. More and more over time, we are dealing with and removing any negative effects from our previous actions. Simultaneously, we are slowly building up life-supporting effects that reinforce our spiritual growth.

In this way we come to gather benefits for ourselves and others.

CHAPTER 61:

A great state “... must be like the low ground Towards which all streams flow down. It must be a point towards which all things under Heaven converge.”⁹

It must be the empire's wife.

Established in quietude and humility, putting the empire first, she is able to funnel its power through herself to the people.

Thus a great state, by humbling itSelf to the empire and its subjects, wins their respect and lifts them up.

And the small states, recognizing their limitations, bow to the great state to obtain its guidance and beneficence.

Some lower themSelves for the benefit of others, some lower themselves for the benefit of themSelves.

“The great state only wishes to unite men together and nourish them;”⁸

“A small state only wishes to be received by, and to serve, the other.”⁸

Each state gets what it wants, but the great state must first be firmly established in the Tao.

COMMENTARY:

Once we become a “great state”, once we are fully aware and possessing the Tao, then we become as low ground, the point towards which all spiritual streams converge and towards which all spiritual seekers are attracted.

We become as the empire's (the Tao's) wife: humble, serene, putting the empire first, and using our position to funnel the Tao's grace and power to the people.

By humbling ourSelf to all, we gain their respect and help uplift them spiritually.

And they, the small states, those who do not yet fully possess the Tao, comprehending their own limits and seeing in us what is possible, seek the Tao's guidance and grace.

But for all this to happen, we must first be firmly established in the Tao.

NOTE: In the Bible, Christ says something similar, Matthew 20:26 “ ... whosoever will be greater among you, let him be your minister.”

CHAPTER 62:

“The Tao is the center of the universe, the good man’s treasure, the bad man’s refuge.”³

Certainly you can convince the people of something with flowery words and promises;
but you will help them more with noble deeds.

“Even if a man is bad, when has (Tao) rejected him?”⁶

“Thus, when a new leader is chosen,”³

“Rather than present large pieces of jade preceded by teams of four horses,”^{7a}
it would be far better to quietly teach him about the Tao.

Why have people always prized the Tao so highly?

It is because those who seek it obtain it, and those who obtain it are freed of their sins.

“For this reason it has become the most valuable thing in the world.”²

COMMENTARY:

The “bad man” referred to in the first sentence is simply one who does not yet live in full possession of the Tao. For such a person, a place of refuge and solace is needed to sustain them as they inevitably make some mistakes on their path to enlightenment. But it is notable that the very refuge they turn to for solace is also the goal they seek for enlightenment. Remember, the Tao **is** everything. It’s only a matter of time until they realize that where they want to be is where they are right now.

Flowery words or promises can help dull the pain resulting from ignorance; but far better to use “noble deeds”, actions guided by the Tao, to remove the ignorance that is causing the pain.

No person who seeks the Tao is ever rejected.

Guiding genuine seekers towards the Tao, is the most noble and valuable action one can do because attaining the Tao frees them of their sins and gives them eternal bliss.

CHAPTER 63:

Experience the Tao in its greatness. Know it is serene, un-manifest, and infinitely omnipresent.

The smallest manifested item contains the Tao's infinity,
and the greatest manifested item is small within it.

For an injury, return kindness.

If you can recognize difficulties in their earliest manifestations, you can nip them in the bud.

All worldly difficulties have a beginning, and that beginning is small.

In this way the Sage, without doing anything great, achieves great things.

Those who do not possess the Tao may make rash promises,
but they will have trouble keeping their word.

What they thought was easy will quickly grow and become difficult.

That is why the Sage regards everything as potentially difficult, thus avoiding difficulties.

COMMENTARY:

We are able to experience the Tao through our meditative practice.

Even the smallest thing or action contains the Tao's infinity; and the largest thing or action is infinitely small compared to the Tao. When we experience and possess the Tao, we are able to comprehend how even the smallest thing may grow to be troublesome; and we are comforted to realize that even the largest trouble is minuscule compared to the Tao. This is valuable knowledge that helps us flow with the life the Tao gives us.

In the cosmic scheme of things, injuries are small. When we recognize this, we can respond with kindness and neutralize them before they become large and troublesome. In this way the Sage does little but achieves much.

Those who have not yet embraced the Tao, lacking this perception, tend to view things as easily manageable. They are unaware of developing difficulties, and do not act until trouble is upon them.

But the Sage, aware of how actions can unexpectedly mushroom, is careful to view everything as potentially difficult, thereby taking appropriate action early and heading off troubles.

CHAPTER 64:

What is motionless is easy to grasp, what has not yet appeared is easy to forestall,
what is weak is easily broken, what is small can easily be scattered.

“Treat things before they exist. Regulate things before disorder begins.”^{7a}

The largest tree began as a seed.

The tallest tower began as a few bricks.

The journey of a thousand miles began with a single step.

The person who acts for his own purposes, without the guidance and support of the Tao,
ultimately fails.

Those who grasp at the material world lose it.

The Sages take no action of their own and, because they desire nothing from
the material world, they have nothing to lose.

Because the common people are attached to their sense of self as doing and gaining,
their undertakings are often spoiled just when they are on the verge of succeeding.

Even if someone begins a project under the guidance of the Tao,
they often fail because self and ego intervene.

The Sages well-grounded in the Tao have no such sense of self as doing or gaining.

They have learned to unlearn.

“He simply reminds people of who they have always been.”³

In that way they assist people without interfering with their choices.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu continues to develop the idea presented in the previous chapter.

The Hindus have a saying: “Avoid the danger that has not yet come.” It does not mean that one should be timid or run away or avoid necessary activity out of fear that one will not like the results. Rather, it is an encouragement to embrace the full awareness of being, of the Tao, in order to appreciate action at its finest point of relative existence and become aware of how it will develop in the material world. With this awareness of the very first sprouting of the seed of any activity, one is able to easily regulate its growth into a life-supportive direction. The Sages are able to do this because, fully embracing the Tao, they have given up their self-desires and reflect only the guidance of the Self.

Without this experience and this knowledge, one can never be sure that one’s actions will ultimately be good for creation. And if one’s actions are conducted for selfish reasons, they are bound to have unintended consequences that interfere with their goals.

By reminding people that they are actually reflections of the Tao and encouraging them to embrace that, the Sages are able to guide them towards right action without interfering with their freedom of choice.

CHAPTER 65:

In olden times, the best possessors of the Tao did not use it to enlighten the people by intellectual means, but rather to enlighten them through the heart and devotion.

“When they think that they know the answers, people are difficult to guide.”³

That is because, not yet possessing the Tao, one is likely to think they are clever enough to conduct their life effectively without it. Therefore, simplicity is best.

Govern the self with the guidance of the Tao, not with the intellect.

The Sages, who knew that, understood the effectiveness of the Tao and were thus able to greatly help the people.

By keeping to a simple and consistent practice, profound virtue is attained.

This profound virtue is deep and far-reaching and effortlessly leads one back to the Tao.

“And so it attains perfect peace.”²

COMMENTARY:

If one wishes to guide as many people as possible into beneficial, life-supporting activity, then trying to instill a highly-developed intellect is not the way to go. Most of us do not **have** highly-developed intellects (despite what we think); and many of us are not yet capable of achieving a highly-developed intellect. Even those who **are** highly-developed intellectuals are not necessarily able to behave beneficially. As the astrophysicist, Carl Sagan, once put it: “Being a genius is no guarantee against being dead wrong.”

Therefore, the simple meditative techniques that the Sages have found most effective and useful for instilling the Tao into people’s awareness are those that utilize the pathways of the heart and people’s sense of devotion. Everyone, in their hearts, love at least some people and want to be loved in return. Everyone is devoted to at least some concepts or some people.

These simple, yet profound, techniques lead one back to the Tao (back to pure creative awareness) and to the attainment of inner peace.

CHAPTER 66:

**“All streams flow to the sea because it is lower than they are.
Humility gives it its power.”³**

In like manner, the material world flows to the Tao.
Hence, the Sages, reflecting the Tao, gain the respect of the people
by humbling themSelves in their speech.
They lovingly guide the people along the paths that they (the people) have chosen.
In this way the Sages dwell in the people’s hearts without burdening them,
and the people seek their guidance without feeling manipulated.
Everyone is grateful for the Sages’ presence; and because they strive against no one,
no one is able to strive against them.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu has established that every individual, manifesting as they do from the Tao, desires the eternal peace, contentment, and happiness in life that comes from reuniting their full awareness with the Tao. But that does not mean that we all follow exactly the same path or that we all become alike.

Each of us is different in many ways from everyone else and each person has had many different life experiences, resulting in a unique physical expression that longs for connection to the Tao. Thus each person’s desires, perceptions and experiences on the path to the Tao will be different. The end result of supreme peace and contentment will be the same for all of us, and yet it will be personally experienced and shaped by our individual awareness. It is like a thousand vases of different shapes, sizes, colors, and materials each dipped into the same ocean and filled to the brim. All are full of the same ocean and complete, and yet each remains different.

Knowing this, the Sages respect the life pathway that each person chooses and lovingly allow them to travel it. They will always provide the sincere seekers with whatever supportive guidance they are able to give them. Should a seeker choose to turn in a direction that is inappropriate for their spiritual growth, the Sages will issue a loving warning but allow them to do so. They also allow them to experience the repercussions of that action. In this way the seeker eventually learns the best path for their individual needs and, applying their meditative technique to the experience, quickly complete their course to enlightenment.

Because the Sages respect the individuality of each seeker and guide them without manipulation, they are held in esteem.

CHAPTER 67:

Many people believe the Tao is Great, but incorrectly think that embodying it is unlikely.

It is only because the Tao is so Great that possessing it appears unlikely.

If it was small and mediocre, would you want it?

I have three treasures which I guard and keep;
they are: compassion, moderation, and modesty.

The person who is compassionate has the nerve to be brave.

The person who is moderate knows best how to be generous.

The person who is modest is best able to guide others.

Those who behave bravely without compassion, are generous without moderation, or who lead others without being modest are merely acting in their own self-interest.

They do not possess or follow the Tao, which leads to death.

But those who are compassionate in life's battles will conquer, their defense will be firm,
and the Tao will likewise reflect their compassion back upon them.

COMMENTARY:

Many people are attracted to the idea of possessing the Tao but worry that the path to attaining it will be too difficult. Lao Tzu points out that in life it is common for most people to work hard to attain things that they desire. The more desirable the thing is, the harder they are willing to work for it. When that is the case, why would you **not** persevere to possess the greatest thing possible: the Tao?

The three treasures of Lao Tzu are direct reflections of the Tao and its nature. To be able to hold and value them shows a strong presence of the Tao in one's awareness.

Compassion (concern and pity for the suffering of others) is reliant upon viewing "the other" as equal to oneSelf. It results from the sense of interconnectedness and one-ness that grows as one experiences more and more of the Tao. With this sense, bravery is natural because who is not brave in protecting themselves when needed.

Moderation, here, refers to the serenity and peace that comes from the daily meditative practice of moderating the hectic thought process and connecting one's awareness to the expanded awareness of the Tao. The more connectedness one has with the Tao's awareness, the more one has to share with others and the better one knows how to do so.

Modesty means the process of lowering oneself and allowing the Self to guide. Guiding others is easy and fruitful when the Tao is guiding you.

The three treasures of Lao Tzu are also reflected in the Buddhist declaration of faith, the Tri-Ratna. Taking refuge in the Buddha represents compassion, taking refuge in the Dharma (or teachings) represents the daily practice of moderation, and taking refuge in the Sangha (the monastic order) represents the modesty of lowering oneself to allow greater knowledge and experience to flow.

Note that the three treasures also reflect the avenues of expression of the Tao in the material world: compassion reflects the outward expression of the Tao, moderation reflects the inward expression of the Tao, and modesty reflects the path of the Tao to connect the inward and outward.

Bravery without compassion, generosity without moderation, and leadership without modesty reflect a lack of Tao in one's awareness. This results in repeated cycles of death and rebirth as one struggles with the effects of their past actions.

CHAPTER 68:

The best warrior is not warlike.

The best fighter is never angry.

“The best conqueror does not take part in war”²

“The best businessman serves the communal good.”³

This is the power of non-engagement.

Thus the power to guide people to their best expression comes from joining the Tao
and reflecting its infinite capacity.

This has always been the highest principle.

COMMENTARY:

In Chapters 30 and 31 Lao Tzu discussed the circumstances in which the Sages might engage in warlike behavior. They are few, compelling, and completed with the full understanding that the Sages themselves will experience karmic repercussions from them. Still, they are clearly required.

In this chapter Lao Tzu discusses a different kind of warrior, the best warrior, whose firm connection to the Tao allows them to overcome their opponents and provide the people with the best possible protection: possession of the Tao.

The result of the battle between the infinite bliss of Tao’s pure awareness on one hand, and the limited, unfulfilling experiences of the material world on the other hand is never really in question; but it can still be surprisingly complex. For this, the best champions are needed: the Sages who possess and reflect the Tao into the physical world.

Their actions do not need to be warlike because they have developed the ability (Chapter 64) to cultivate the seeds of action into a purely life-supporting direction. This helps prevent the accumulation of negative energies and unnecessary struggle in life.

They are never angry because they have no reason to be. Anger arises when one feels thwarted in their desired goals; but the sages have no personal desires and stand firm in the knowledge that the Tao’s “goals” are, by nature, inevitable.

They do not need to take part in or instigate conflict in order to conquer anything, for they understand that there is really nothing to conquer. Everything *is* the Tao, and everything is being enticed to experience the Tao in its fullness. The best action they can perform is to serve the communal good under the guidance of the Tao and witness as the Tao slowly enfolds creation in its loving awareness.

CHAPTER 69:

An expert military strategist might say: I would never want to become a host,
I would prefer to become a guest.

I dare not to aggressively advance an inch,
choosing instead to retreat a foot.

This strategy is called marching forward without moving, threatening without arms,
attacking without hostility, seizing without using weapons.

There is no greater evil than to make light of the enemy.
Doing so will cause us to lose our treasures.

**“When two great forces oppose each other,
the victory will go to the one that knows how to yield.”³**

COMMENTARY:

The first requisite for being a proper host is to accept your guest as they are, to put aside your own inclinations in favor of their desires. If your guest is an active opponent, someone who is antithetical to what you reflect and busy trying to promote their own self interests, then such acceptance is, in effect, bowing to their demands and losing your own standing. If one is genuinely in possession of the Tao and reflecting its strength, then such a loss of standing is impossible. Thus to “never become a host” is to hold strongly to the Tao and never even entertain in your awareness the possibility of acting contrary to it. It is always better to be “the guest”, to be asked to come in for the pleasure, and spiritual growth, of the host.

Likewise, to advance even an inch in an aggressive manner, even if you are seeking to promote the Tao, is antithetical to how the Tao expresses in the material world. The Tao must always be sought and invited, never bowed down to in subjugation. Better to retreat a foot than to advance an inch in such a life-damaging manner.

This strategy allows one to overcome their opponent without violence or hard feelings.

There is a lovely anecdote about U.S. President Abraham Lincoln. He was urged by one of his advisors to be firmer and more bellicose with his opponents. The man said, in effect, “Sir, you must destroy your enemies!” Lincoln’s response was: “Is that not what I do when I make them my friends?”

The enemy in this case is whatever is material and non-Tao. To “make light of the enemy” means to view it as something other than oneSelf, and interact with it as though it has lasting reality. If we were to do that, we would step away from the Tao and lose our treasures (Chapter 67).

Victory goes to the one who knows how to yield to the Tao.

CHAPTER 70:

“My words are very easy to understand and very easy to practice,”^{7a}
“Yet your intellect will never grasp them, and if you try to practice them, you’ll fail.”³
The words and the technique for using them have been around for a very long time.
“The people have no knowledge of this. Therefore, they have no knowledge of me.”⁵

Presently very few people know what it means to possess the Tao,
and for that reason the common people hold such in high esteem.
To prevent misunderstanding, the Sages mingle with the common people as one of them
and hide their gifts from the people’s ken.

COMMENTARY:

“My words ...” means the teaching, the technique of meditating that will allow you to possess the Tao. And because Lao Tzu is here speaking as a representative of-sorts of the Tao, he is actually describing *all* proper and effective meditative techniques, regardless of which spiritual tradition is teaching it (See the commentaries for Chapter 10 and Chapter 56).

Such techniques are easy to understand and easy to practice, but must be learned from someone who is adept at their use. Every spiritual tradition has such people.

If, without such guidance, you attempt to intellectually analyze yourself into possessing the Tao you will never be able to do so. The very process of intellectual analysis (except in very rare instances) keeps the awareness from settling down to a level where the Tao can be perceived. And if you *try* to meditate, i.e. if you work to *force* the mind into a particular state, you will fail. A typical description for this process likens the mind to a monkey. You can try to fight and struggle with the scratching, biting monkey to force it to sit quietly, or you can simply hand it a banana, and it will immediately settle down and enjoy the fruit.

All these techniques have been around for a very long time and are passed from tradition to tradition as old religions fade away and new religions arise to meet the needs of the times. But often the people, caught up in their material lives, are almost unaware that this knowledge exists or what it truly means. To those people, the Sages who possess the Tao seem strange and somehow supernatural. They are certainly not seen as examples of what the common person could themselves become; and so the Sages are viewed as special and held at arms length.

To avoid this and encourage people to pursue spiritual maturity, the Sages tend to hide their status, mingle with their brothers and sisters, and guide them in quiet, unobtrusive ways.

CHAPTER 71:

“To realize that our knowledge is ignorance, This is a noble insight.”⁵

“To regard our ignorance as knowledge, This is a mental sickness.”⁵

It is only when we become sick of our ignorance that we can move towards mental health.

The Sage is the epitome of mental health because he recognizes and avoids the disease of ignorance.

COMMENTARY:

Our knowledge of the world is usually limited to physical, material things and, for some people, to non-material (but still manifest) things like emotions, ideas, and other mental constructs. Typically, the more someone knows about such things the more they realize how little they actually know. For them, material existence itself begins to seem genuinely unknowable. To have enough self-knowledge to recognize one's ignorance and limitations is a noble awareness.

Only foolish people believe that they know everything about anything. To have only limited knowledge about things in the material, manifest world and to believe such knowledge is complete is a form of mental illness.

The English word “health” is derived from the word “whole”. When we have only partial knowledge of the manifest world and no knowledge of the un-manifest world of pure creative awareness, then our knowledge is certainly *NOT* whole, and we lack complete mental health.

When we have sufficient knowledge that we lack awareness, and when we are sufficiently sick and tired of lacking it, then our move towards genuine mental health and wholeness begins.

The Sages, those who have fully embraced the Tao and dispelled their ignorance, are truly mentally healthy.

CHAPTER 72:

When we stop being afraid of physical death, the death of all our other fears will soon follow.

We ought not to be restricted to living just in these physical bodies.

We ought not to be limited to experiencing with only the material senses.

It is only when our awareness is expanded that suffering comes to an end.

The Sages know the Self but do not openly display the fact.

They cherish the knowledge, but do not think themselves superior because of it.

“He prefers what is within to what is without.”⁵

COMMENTARY:

To embrace the Tao fully is to understand our true immortality. Our physical bodies come and go, but we (the beings who inhabit the bodies), are unaffected. Once we recognize that, all fears fall away. We can live unencumbered by our bodies, and we can experience the full range of what the Tao can experience.

The Sages, knowing the Self, understand that that “knowing” is the inevitable state that we all will eventually achieve. Because, in their awareness, it feels so natural and common, they feel no need to display it or think themselves superior for having it.

CHAPTER 73:

Having the courage to act may produce negative results.

Having the courage to not-act may produce positive results.

It is the same virtuous courage, but sometimes it brings benefits and sometimes it brings harm.

It is impossible to know intellectually if our actions are in accord with the Tao.

“Even the Sage is baffled by such a question.”⁵

But the Tao overcomes obstacles without effort, responds without speaking,
and patiently charms creation into its fold.

Its net of influence is infinite, and though it may sometimes appear faulty to us,
nothing escapes it.

COMMENTARY:

Even someone who possesses the Tao may not intellectually be able to comprehend all the results and repercussions from any particular action that they perform. But the Tao knows all the results and repercussions because the Tao *is* all the results and repercussions.

Therefore, to have given up the self and to have attained the Self is enough. In that state of being one's desires are naturally and effortlessly in tune with the Tao's awareness, and all their actions (whatever they are) naturally produce the best possible results for the situation.

With our limited vision, we may not understand the whys or wherefores, but nothing escapes the Tao.

CHAPTER 74:

When the people no longer fear death, then of what use is it to threaten them with it?

And if they **do** still fear death, who is stupid enough to actually seize and kill them
for committing crimes?

The Tao presides over our physical death just as it does our physical life,
and it will eventually take you just as it will take the criminal.

If, not possessing the Tao, you presume to assume its duties, then you merely
act as an amateur, pretending to be a master carpenter,
and you are likely to cut off your own hand.

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu is not speaking of people who no longer fear death because they are enlightened. He is speaking of those who, not possessing the Tao, have become desperate to ensure physical existence and are willing to risk physical death to attain it. It is a conundrum no one should have to deal with.

And Lao Tzu is clear that if our answer to the problem is merely to give the offender the physical death they risked getting, then we are as unenlightened and stupid as they are. As the saying goes: we are cutting off our nose to spite our face. Both of us will continue to experience fear, loss, and physical deaths.

Better to align with the Tao and perform whatever action will work to ensure spiritual growth, the end of fear, eternal bliss, and immortality for everyone involved.

CHAPTER 75:

People starve when those above them take too much of their grain as taxes.
They become rebellious when the government becomes too meddlesome in their lives.
When those in power behave as though all that matters is this material life and nothing more,
then the people follow their example and pursue only material goals,
ignoring their spiritual death.

**“But those who don’t live for the sake of living
are worth more than the wealth-seekers.”⁴**

COMMENTARY:

When those in power pursue only material gains for themselves, they end up killing their followers both physically and spiritually.

The great value of enlightened Sages is that they act as constant reminders to others of what is possible with our human lives. They show us by example how to move in that direction. They live, not for the sake of living, but for the sake of expressing the Tao in the material world.

CHAPTER 76:

“Living people are soft and tender. Corpses are hard and stiff.”⁴

**“The ten thousand things, the grass as well as the trees,
are while they live tender and supple.**

When they die they are rigid and dry.”^{7a}

Hence, hard and rigid are expressions of death, and soft and pliable are expressions of life.

Those who rely on the strength of their force are unable to best the Tao;
just as a large, strong tree is unable to stave off the feller’s ax.

“The mighty and great will be laid low; The humble and weak will be exalted.”⁵

COMMENTARY:

Lao Tzu reminds us of some of the characteristics of material life and death, equating hard, rigid things to death and soft, pliable things to life.

But he is also leading us to the understanding that the same characteristics apply to the manifested, but non-material, spiritual part of our existence. Someone who is hard, inflexible, and controlling in life is functioning only on the material level of things, adrift without the Tao, and leading a spiritually dead and limited life. Someone who reacts to life softly, allows for change, and does not try to force life into the direction of their own self-interest is flowing with the Tao in their awareness and leading a spiritually active and unlimited life.

Material strength and force alone will never be able to conquer the Tao because both are limited and temporary while the Tao is unbounded and eternal.

This is why: “The mighty and great will be laid low; The humble and weak will be exalted.” About five hundred years after Lao Tzu said this, the Christian Saint Luke wrote: “ ... every one that exalteth himself shall be humbled; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” Lk 14:11.

CHAPTER 77:

The way of the Tao resembles a bow when it is stretched:
the top end is pulled down and the low end is pulled up.

The Tao expresses balance so, in life, whoever may have too much abundance,
the Tao diminishes them, while whoever may not have enough, the Tao raises them.

Man's way is not like that. Men take from those who do not have enough
in order to give more to those who already have too much.

No matter how much they get, even the very wealthy feel like they don't have enough.
So who has enough to fill this void in everyone? Only the Sages who possess the Tao.

The Sages, when they act, never worry if the results will be sufficient
because they act for the Tao.

When they succeed they never claim any credit because they know
it was the Tao's work.

And they do not wish to make their superiority known.

COMMENTARY:

Balance in life means perfect equilibrium and effortless flow of activity, no part exerting any kind of force on any other part. To be out of balance means to be incomplete in some way, to be missing something that needs to be replaced in order to make all things equal. The Tao itSelf is complete and eternal and thus always exists in balance within itSelf.

The creative awareness which underlies the material world and reflects the Tao, thus naturally seeks the same balance and will always move to adjust creation in order to replace anything necessary that is missing.

Humans who have not fully embraced the Tao will always feel empty, no matter how many material things they have, and so tend to increase their own imbalance in life as they strive to fill that void.

What to do to fix the situation? Learn to embrace and embody the Tao. The Sages show us the results of doing so. They act for the Tao, secure in the knowledge that the results will be sufficient and balanced and thus produce fulfillment. They do the Tao's work quietly, claim no credit for it, and seek no recognition for it.

CHAPTER 78:

Nothing in the world is more yielding or softer than water.
Yet nothing else is better able to wear away what is strong and hard while remaining unaltered.

“That the weak overcomes the strong, and the soft overcomes the hard,”⁵

Is well-known, yet almost no one is able to put it into practice.

Hence, the Sages can declare: Those who can accept another's sins and show them
how to easily remove them is a true master.

Those who destroy evils with the softness of their being are true lords of creation.

“True words seem paradoxical.”^{3,7a,7b}

COMMENTARY:

“... yet almost no one is able to put it into practice.” This is because those who do not possess the Tao view and react to the world only from the material point of view and within a material time frame . If they strike a rock with a hammer and it doesn't break in two, they think nothing has happened. If they trickle water onto the rock and it runs off, they think nothing has happened. But they themselves will quickly wear out from striking the rock, while the same water, if repeatedly poured onto the rock will eventually wear it away into a sand pile. Does it happen in a single human lifetime? Probably not. But the Tao operates in an eternal timeframe. A day of Tao-time might seem like a billion years to us. Our human lifetimes may appear long to us at the moment, but they are as micro-seconds to the Tao.

The Sages who possess the Tao are able to view life from a much broader perspective and timeframe. They know that another being's weaknesses are never permanent and they are able to guide them in the direction of embracing the Tao and attaining eternal bliss.

With their easy and soft approach they are able to wear down the rocks of our ignorance and guide us to enlightenment.

CHAPTER 79:

When reconciling a great animosity, there is often some bad feeling left.

If so, we cannot consider it successful or desirable.

To smooth this state of affairs, the Sages fulfill and keep private their part of the agreement,
but do not demand from others what they have agreed to.

Those possessing the Tao simply fulfill their obligations,
knowing that the Tao will supply life's requisites.

Those without the Tao forcefully pursue their claims,
fearful they will not have enough.

While the Tao has no preference for one particular individual over another,
it will always help the good person.

COMMENTARY:

The word “animosity” here is not limited to just a violent or angry interaction. It also includes any imbalance which leaves a feeling of inequality.

When moving through the world, we should endeavor to produce a sense of balance between our Selves and others. This is easily done when we possess the Tao because balance is one of the Tao's characteristics (Chapter 77) and we are reflecting the Tao.

In such a state, even if the situation appears to leave us with less than we deserve, we know differently. When possessing the Tao there can never really be any sense of imbalance in our awareness because we understand that ultimately everything (including us) is ONE, and the one is always in balance. Others, who don't possess the Tao, may feel themselves benefited or deprived, but that is based on a temporary and limited view of their existence, not on the eternal and omnipresent state of their true natures within the Tao.

When we possess the Tao, we possess everything that is needed for our eternal existence and contentment and can always count on the Tao's support.

CHAPTER 80:

Those possessing the Tao do not use their abilities to produce unneeded material possessions. They understand within themSelves the importance of death but, having eternal life, do not shy away from it.

Though they have the means to travel, being complete within themSelves, they have no desire to do so.

Though they have access to weapons, having established peace within themSelves, they have no reason to use them.

For them, the simplest communication is sufficient, and joy and contentment is found in their food, clothes, homes, and customs.

Self-sufficient within themSelves, they are not tempted from the Tao by the material world.

COMMENTARY:

When one is in possession of the Tao, one with the Tao, living in the Tao, then life becomes easy, simple, and smooth. We receive whatever material things we need to live, and we have abundance within us.

We understand the place and importance of death and are not afraid of it, living life to its fullest.

With all of creation expressed within us, we are content with our experiences and feel no need to seek adventure or change in the material world.

Established in eternal peace, we have no need for weapons of war.

Communication with others is straightforward, honest, and plain; and we enjoy the everyday things that make up our material lives.

We are Self-sufficient and remain unswayed and unharmed by the physical, material world.

CHAPTER 81:

Truth can be simple. Just because someone says something eloquently doesn't make it true.

"Wise men don't need to prove their point;

men who need to prove their point aren't wise."³

One may possess the Tao without being very learned, but he who shows off his learnedness does not possess the Tao.

Wise souls do not accumulate for their selves.

They work to improve others, knowing that doing so gives fulfilling expression to their Selves.

"The more he gives to others, the wealthier he is."³

Following the path of the Tao brings one great spiritual growth, never harm. Thus, the focus of wise souls is to simply do as the Tao directs without contending with anyone.

COMMENTARY:

"Wise men don't need to" Wise people simply make whatever point they need to make and then let it sink in with the fullness of time. Because the Tao works softly to gather living beings into its fullness, the wise person who possesses the Tao understands that the knowledge will be accepted when the time is right. Someone who does not possess the Tao feels driven by self interests to have their thoughts accepted quickly as a form of validation of their intelligence and superiority; but it's a sham.

Because the Tao is almost never acquired through intellectual exercise, intellectual achievement can never be a proper indicator of who possesses the Tao.

The wise souls who possess the Tao are already fulfilled and have no need to accumulate for themselves. Instead, they express the fulness of their Selves by helping others.

Leave the self behind, embrace the Tao, then simply help others do the same.

CHAPTER TOPICS

Some authors/translators have attached chapter headings to the Tao Te Ching. Lao Tzu did not. The ones I have seen appear, in my opinion, to be incorrect and confusing. Still, it may be helpful to some readers to be able to get a quick, broad, overview of what each chapter is talking about and to see how Lao Tzu progressively develops his thoughts in the Tao Te Ching. This is how I perceive them:

- 1 The true nature of the Tao.
- 2 How we can infer its presence. How it changes our internal perceptions.
- 3 How the sages help others encourage Tao's expression.
- 4 The foundational Unity of Tao and how it creates.
- 5 Because the nature of Tao is Unity, all its material expressions are equal.
- 6 As Tao manifests, we can name and use its manifestations
- 7 The closer manifest existence is to Tao, the more it reflects it.
- 8 Those who reflect Tao live simple, virtuous lives and are respected.
- 9 Growing to fully reflect the Tao is a gradual process.
- 10 What the process of experiencing the Tao is like.
- 11 The Tao expresses as both physical and non-physical things, and we can use both to our benefit.
- 12 In the midst of worldly, material experiences we must remain attuned to the Tao.
- 13 When we identify with the material world we lose contact with the Tao.
- 14 The personal experience of meditating on the Tao.
- 15 A description of those who have mastered Tao
- 16 How we stabilize the Tao within us.
- 17 Teachers of the Tao can be more or less adept at teaching.
- 18 Indicators of the loss of Tao in society.
- 19 The remedy is to embrace Tao's simplicity.
20. A purely intellectual path to the Tao is limited. Seek first the foundation of everything, then everything is yours.
- 21 All of existence arises from the Tao. This being-ness can be experienced.
- 22 Unite with the Tao and gain true wholeness.
- 23 Fulfillment of desires.
- 24 The Sage, established in the Tao, always acts in beneficial and life-supporting ways.
- 25 Relationship of the Tao to manifest creation.
- 26 Rest is the basis of activity.
- 27 To attain the Tao, seek guidance from those who possess it.
- 28 Learn to reflect the Tao, and hold the manifest and unmanifest as one.
- 29 We can only truly affect the manifest world from the unmanifest level.
- 30 In the manifest world, for every action there is a reaction.
- 31 Hence, weapons (violence) should be used as little as possible.
- 32 The importance of rest in the process of creation.
- 33 Know thy Self as an expression of the Tao.
- 34 The Sage reflects the nature of the Tao.
- 35 Why the Tao is preferable to the material world.
- 36 Existence runs in cycles.

- 37 Be like the Tao. Be at rest and accomplish all.
- 38 How possessing the Tao is characterised. How losing the Tao is characterised.
- 39 The manifested universe arises from the Tao.
- 40 The Tao is the source and goal of all creation.
- 41 All expressions of the Tao are of equal value and usefulness.
- 42 How the unitary Tao expresses diverse creation.
- 43 How the Tao penetrates the manifest world.
- 44 Abide with the Tao and be content and safe.
- 45 The Tao brings balance to our lives.
- 46 Not possessing the Tao invariably leads to unhappiness.
- 47 When one posses the Tao and knows the Self, one can know all.
- 48 To eventually possess the Tao one must daily transcend the experience of self (small s).
- 49 The love and impartiality of the Sage.
- 50 Possessing the Tao means having eternal life.
- 51 Loving characteristics of the Tao.
- 52 The underlying unity of all diversity.
- 53 Remain focused on possessing the Tao.
- 54 How cultivating the Tao benefits creation and clears our perceptions.
- 55 The Self (big s) as the protector of the small-s self.
- 56 The transcendence of the meditative state.
- 57 Attain the Tao first, and in that way work to bring the Tao to the world.
- 58 Be guided by the Tao and produce the best results in any given situation.
- 59 Some benefits of a meditative practice.
- 60 Overcoming the effects of Karma.
- 61 Being established in the Tao allows one to funnel the benefits of the Tao to all.
- 62 The Tao is so highly prized because it removes sins and promotes spiritual evolution.
- 63 Access the Tao and learn to avoid difficulties.
- 64 Avoid the danger that has not yet come.
- 65 A simple and consistent meditative practice works wonders.
- 66 Each person is able to follow their own individual path to enlightenment.
- 67 The three treasures are reflections of the Tao.
- 68 The best warriors for the tao.
- 69 Remain firm in the Tao and make all opponents your friends.
- 70 The techniques for possessing the Tao are ageless and easy and can be done by anyone.
- 71 Know the Self (big S) and attain perfect mental health.
- 72 Perfect mental health means an end to all fear and suffering.
- 73 Possessing the Tao results in effortlessly following the best course.
- 74 Judge not.
- 75 People mirror the leaders. We must be what we want others to be.
- 76 Those possessed of the Tao are spiritually soft, flexible, and selfless.
- 77 Any emptiness we feel can be filled by bringing balance to our lives.
- 78 Become the Tao, work with the Tao, and destroy sin and evil.
- 79 If you have the Tao, you have everything.
- 80 Eternal peace and contentment are the result of embodying the Tao.
- 81 Leave the self (small s) behind, embrace the Tao, then simply help others do the same.

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