

The Secret Teachings  
of the Tao Te Ching

Calligraphy in red and gold ink, likely representing the title in Chinese characters.



Mantak Chia  
and Tao Huang

Calligraphy in red and gold ink, likely representing the authors' names in Chinese characters.

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## Putting the Teachings into Practice

Chinese medicine and Chi Kung emphasize balancing and strengthening the body so that it can heal itself. The meditations, internal exercises, and martial arts of the Universal Tao are basic approaches to this end. This book contains descriptions of physical and spiritual practices that have been used successfully for thousands of years by Taoists trained by personal instruction. Readers should not undertake these practices without receiving personal instruction from a certified instructor of the Universal Tao because some of these practices, if done improperly, may cause injury or result in health problems. This book is intended to supplement individual training with a Universal Tao instructor. Anyone who undertakes these practices on the basis of this book alone does so entirely at his or her own risk. Follow the instructions for each exercise carefully. The Universal Tao and its staff and instructors cannot be responsible for the consequences of any practice or misuse of the information in this book.

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# Introduction: Conveying the Heart of Lao Tzu's Teaching

Based on the ancient Chinese sage Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching, *The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* is the result of collaboration between contemporary Taoist masters Mantak Chia and Tao Huang. The authors bring their deep knowledge and experience of Taoist philosophy and practice to this mystical scripture and illuminate its meaning for Western readers.

Tao Huang, with assistance from Edward Brennan, offers a new translation of the Tao Te Ching, and Mantak Chia and Tao Huang together offer penetrating discussion and meditation on the text. *The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* also provides a number of practices and meditations to enable the reader to vitalize the body and mind and open oneself further to the inner meaning of Taoist teachings. The authors at times bolster traditional Taoist perspectives with corroborating contemporary scientific knowledge. They also periodically draw on the wisdom of the ancient Chinese *I Ching*, or *Book of Changes*. Above all, they seek to bring the inner essence of the Tao Te Ching to life through transmitting the heart of Lao Tzu's teaching.

## LAO TZU AND THE TAO TE CHING

For over 2,500 years, the five thousand pictographs of the Tao Te Ching have been regarded as among the greatest treasures in the world. The scripture is the basis of Laoism (the Chinese philosophy expressed in the writings attributed to Lao Tzu) and Taoism (the religious tradition based on the philosophy that has developed over the centuries).

The Tao Te Ching, roughly meaning "Classic of the Way and Virtue," is popularly attributed to Lao Tzu, who, according to tradition, was an older contemporary of Confucius born in the sixth century B.C.E. Lao Tzu was born Li Er. His legendary name, Lao Tzu—meaning the "old philosopher" or the "ancient child"—rose from his mother's lips as she delivered him under a plum tree. His white hair gave him the countenance of an aged man, which elicited his mother's cry of joy upon seeing him emerge into this world.

During his lifetime Lao Tzu worked in the capital as an archivist in the Imperial Library of the Zhou Dynasty court. This enabled him to reconstruct the spiritual paths of many enlightened sages and holy men who came before his time. After having meditated for three years in a cave in northwest China (now known as Lao Tzu's Cave), he achieved his enlightenment.

According to legend, Confucius met Lao Tzu in Zhou, where Confucius was going to study the library scrolls. Confucius, over the following months, discussed ritual and propriety, the central tenets of Confucianism, with Lao Tzu. Lao Tzu criticized what he felt to be hollow practices. Taoist legend holds that these discussions proved far more fruitful for Confucius than all of his academic studies.

Lao Tzu eventually resigned from his post at the Imperial Library and retired to the mythical K'un-lun mountains. He transmitted his teachings to a border guard who convinced him to write down his wisdom before disappearing from society. The result was the Tao Te Ching.



This short and poetic work is one of the most influential of all Chinese philosophic and religious texts. Its influence has also spread widely outside the Far East and is probably the most translated Chinese book. The Tao Te Ching is divided into two parts, the *Tao Ching* and the *Te Ching*, and into eighty-one chapters. Each chapter is succinct, using few characters to poetically express subtle ideas. Many chapters lend themselves to multiple levels of interpretation, from guidance on political leadership to instruction on higher spiritual development.

## ESSENCE ILLUMINATED

Tao Huang, during a powerful spiritual experience that took place on the winter solstice in 1981, experienced a direct mind-to-mind transmission from the old master Lao Tzu himself. Tao Huang explains, “He came to me through meditation. It was the beginning of the heart-sealed teaching of my life, or direct spiritual initiation.”

In *The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching*, Tao Huang and Mantak Chia shed light on the essence of the Tao Te Ching through their in-depth and personal knowledge of Taoist philosophy and practice. It is the first book to integrate meditation, interpretation, and illustration in its illumination of the text. “The essence of this project is more experiential than conceptual in nature,” explains Tao Huang, “even though it is laced with all sorts of Taoist concepts. Taoism is all about experience.”

*The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* particularly deals with the nature, meaning, and practical ramifications of Tao and Te, two principles of utmost importance in Taoism. The word *Tao* does not have an English equivalent; it can be translated as God, creation, nature, universal essence, and its manifestation, or the Way of all life. *Te* is similarly difficult to translate; it refers to action, virtue, morality, beauty, and gracious behavior. *The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* examines the text of the Tao Te Ching in a different sequence than is typical. The authors discuss the text in an organic, flowing manner that presents the true meaning of the integration of heavenly power and human power in the mystic field within us.

This book is neither a strict translation of nor a commentary on the Tao Te Ching. While the teachings of Lao Tzu have been passed down for many centuries in literary form, their inner essence has to be transmitted through faithful devotion and practice, and illuminated through heart awakening. Faith opens the door to the wisdom mind, allowing the power of the teaching to be illuminated within the golden chamber of the heart.

The authors, as ethnic Chinese, have witnessed how the real meaning of the original text of the Tao Te Ching has become altered through personal, cultural, or literary filters. As Taoist masters destined to present the teachings of the Tao in the West, Mantak Chia and Tao Huang have the rare ability to transmit the true meaning of the Tao Te Ching to their Western students and readers.

Whatever the inherent limitations of words, they nonetheless can serve to convey the insights of an enlightened life experience—just like our physical bodies are vessels that can glorify God through their destined journeys. To this end, the authors have digested all the words of Lao Tzu’s teaching, knowing how they should be registered in the mind and echoed in the heart. Lao Tzu’s teaching opens the heart and charges the will. Its universal power transcends cultural distinctions.

## A FRESH TRANSLATION

The Tao Te Ching was written in classical Chinese, which is difficult even for modern native speakers of Chinese to understand completely. Additionally, many of the terms used in the Tao Te Ching are

deliberately ambiguous, and numerous important Chinese words and concepts have no equivalents in English. These factors have contributed to editors' and translators' enormous difficulty in preserving and conveying the original meaning of the text.

As noted above, *The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* relies on a new translation by Tao Huang and Edward Brennan. The translators have sought to bring the essence of Lao Tzu's text to life with immediacy and authenticity, for contemporary English readers. The entirety of the new translation is presented at the end of the book, and throughout the chapters that follow, sections of the reverse of the Tao Te Ching are presented in italic type. Chapter and verse numbers appear in abbreviated form. For example, chapter 3, verses 2–5 would be designated as (3:2–5).

James Legge, in his translator's preface to his 1882 translation of *I Ching, Book of Changes*, elucidates a special challenge of translating Chinese: "The written characters of the Chinese are not representations of words, but symbols of ideas, and the combination of them in a composition is not a representation of what the writer would say, but what he thinks." The characters of the Chinese language are pictographs or ideographs; they are graphical representations of abstract ideas. Legge explains that when the symbolic characters have brought the translator's mind "en rapport" with that of the author, the translator is free to render the ideas in another form of speech, in the best manner that he or she is able. "In the study of a Chinese classical book," he writes, "there is not so much an interpretation of the characters employed by the writer as a participation in his thoughts—there is the seeing of mind to mind." This seeing of mind to mind is the key to the power of the fresh translation presented here.

Further, the new translation avoids the distortions that have accrued over the centuries to the "standard version" established by Wang Bi in the third century C.E. The new translation relies directly on the Mawangdui manuscript, unearthed by Chinese archeologists in 1973. Tao Huang has great confidence in the originality and simplicity of the Mawangdui manuscript, and used the "standard version" only to fill in the blanks in cases where there are words or phrases missing in the Mawangdui text.

Throughout its history, the Tao Te Ching has been altered through a myriad of translations and commentaries. This process of translation, interpretation, and speculation has often defeated the illumination and application of wisdom and mystical truth offered by the text. Yet, regardless of how philosophers rationalize, leaders manipulate, military strategists deploy, scholars garble, meditators chant, and religious people worship, the essence of the text remains untouched and unscathed by time.

When comparing the Mawangdui text with other sources, Tao Huang found numerous problems. Throughout the centuries, the philosophical Laoists have tended to standardize the text as their own philosophy and dismiss its practical application, central to its essential meaning. Some, who have been influenced by Buddhism, have dismissed the Tao Te Ching as rife with tricks and sophistries. These configurations of the text reflect various biases and subsequently distort its meaning. Tao Huang of course discovered similar difficulties with the numerous English translations available.

In order to avoid these abundant distortions, English readers must endeavor to connect to Lao Tzu's original mind, not to others' mindless minding of Lao Tzu. They need the energetic vibration generated through Lao Tzu, not the linguistic interpretation. They need a direct spiritual sensation passed down by Lao Tzu. The authors respond to this deep societal need with *The Secrets of the Tao Te Ching*. They wish to capture the original state of Lao Tzu's conscious flow and to sense the vibration of the wordless uttering of the Tao.

# A Note on the Transliteration

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There are several different systems for transliterating Chinese words into English (representing spelling Chinese characters in the English alphabet). For this book, the authors have opted to use the Wade-Giles system, used in Mantak Chia's previous books, for most words. Thus, they use the spelling *Tao*, *Lao Tzu*, *Chi*, and *Ching*. (In the Pinyin system, these words would be spelled *Dao*, *Lao Zi*, *Qi*, and *Jing*.) Some Chinese words may appear in the Pinyin system.

## COSMIC BRIDGE

*The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* serves as a bridge or door, a conscious connection between oneself and the wonders of the universe, or God's creation. The "door" functions as a middle point between the internal world and the external world, between the information within and without—between those who have been initiated and those who have the gifts of God but have not yet established a cosmic bridge within themselves. The cosmic bridge or door becomes a necessary vehicle for people's communication on both sides—such as the teachers, who are always inside the door, and the students, if not initiated, who are wondering (or wandering) outside the door.

In order to open the door, one's heart must be ready, and one must have completed a purification process. Otherwise, the heart-sealed transmission of teachings between teacher and student cannot begin. Ultimately, the door refers to a specific realm of consciousness of God, a line connecting two sides, or a flowing river touching both sides of the riverbed.

As you go through the book, read the words as if you were listening to a storyteller. Hear your inner conscious dialogue talking back and forth dreamingly between your true self and God; the messages in the teaching will shine upon you.

The Taoist exercises presented throughout the book emphasize emptying the mind, vitalizing the stomach, softening the will, and strengthening the character—important physical/emotional/spiritual skills that will help you to open to the inner meaning of the Lao Tzu's teaching. "Emptying the mind" enables the mind to become tranquil and return to its childlike state. Only when the mind is empty will the body be full with love and the spirit be able to present itself. "Vitalizing the stomach" is filling the stomach with purified Chi. "Softening the will" discusses the process of fully accepting the body/mind and world by diminishing ego expectations and the will of self-deception/punishment. And finally, "strengthening the character" is standing up with one's authentic character—the true self—and allowing the mind to shine.

In *The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* the authors present their transmission of Lao Tzu's message. His words are now their words. You cannot read Lao Tzu here; he has died into their hearts. The transmission you will receive depends on how your own heart is driven by your faith. The Tao is always present, the Tao Te Ching is always alive, and Lao Tzu is always smiling upon us. The Tao is always open to those who wish to step into the mystery of life and beyond.

## AN EXTRAORDINARY COLLABORATION

The following chapters are the result of the collaborative efforts of two distinct Taoist masters who have different backgrounds and orientations in their practice of the Tao. In Taoist literature, there are eight famous "immortals," legendary Taoist masters, each of whom has a unique style of life and approach to the Tao. Yet they all share a commonality of experience as they evolved into the oneness of the eternal, universal void of the all-encompassing Tao. While masters Chia and Huang may have

attained different realms of expertise in their approach to the Tao, their ultimate destination is the same. We are fortunate to be the beneficiaries of their combined offerings.

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Master Chia is like an older brother, a more experienced teacher of the Tao in Western culture. He teaches an ascending range of practices designed to culminate in the Wu Chi (the origin or source of all things, the undifferentiated, primordial void) and spiritual immortality and physical/spiritual immortality. He is popularly known for teaching Taoist fundamentals for health and inner peace which include understanding, cultivating, and gaining mastery of sexual energy. Working with physical and spiritual energies is the main focus of Master Chia's approach to the Taoist path: Sense the Chi (vital energy or life force) and Jing (generative energy/sexual essence) and cultivate these energies; conserve them and refine them into Shen (spiritual energy). Use the Shen to enter the Wu Chi, to return to the Tao, and to attain immortality. His focus is on practical cultivation: "You do it, you get it!"

Tao Huang, the younger Taoist, has a more introspective approach to the Tao and an emphasis on emotional/psychological liberation. After his spiritual initiation through experiencing in meditation the direct transmission of Lao Tzu's teaching, he "received the Tao and was sealed internally with the power of the inner alchemy tradition." From that day forward he was surrounded by twenty-five hundred years of Taoist tradition and connected to the sacred teachings through the power of Lao Tzu. He was then initiated into the Dragon Gate school of Taoism, which emphasizes *neidan*, or inner alchemy practice. As a result of his particular path in Taoism, Tao Huang focuses more on the inner dimension of Taoist practice through dream yoga, *neidan*, and other meditation practices.

Tao Huang lays the foundation of *The Secret Teachings of the Tao Te Ching* with his commentary and practical information related to Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching. Mantak Chia provides complementary perspectives and practices refined from his extensive experience of teaching people from all over the world. The thrust of the book is directed to the practical significance and ramifications of cultivating the Tao (the Way of all life) and Te (Virtue). Mindfulness of the Tao and Te in our lives and in our cultivation practices transforms all that we are and all that we do.

### NOTE TO WOMEN READERS

The Tao Te Ching and the Taoist practices discussed in this book originated in a society vastly different from most modern societies. Ancient China was an overwhelmingly male-dominated society in which men possessed the political, civil, and monetary power and women had little or no opportunity for independent action or existence. While evidence of this imbalance may remain in some of the language of the ancient Taoist literature and discussion presented here, it is intended that the contents of this book be used to provide equal and mutual benefits for women and men.

## Wordless Uttering of the Tao

*The Tao that is voiced is no longer that of eternal Tao.  
 The name that has been written is no longer that of eternal name.  
 The nameless is the beginning of the cosmic universe.  
 The named is the mother of the myriad creatures.  
 Being at peace, one can see into the subtle.  
 Engaging with passion, one can see into the manifest.  
 They both arise from a common source but have different names.  
 Both are called the mystery within the mystery.  
 They are the door to all wonders.*

(1:1–4)

### DEFINING THE TAO

The word *Tao* (pronounced “dow”) is no longer a strange term in Western society; it is used with increasing frequency in English language and literature. However, the word *Tao* represents something that is profoundly subtle and impossible to grasp with the conceptual mind. For Lao Tzu, the Tao is a mysterious, numinous unity underlying and sustaining all things. It is inaccessible to normal thought, language, or perception.

Understanding its meaning is paramount to viewing the magnificence of the cosmos, tapping into the mystery of the universe, and searching for the origin of nature. It encompasses the vast, outer reaches of the universe; it is invisible, unfathomable, and unreachable; it is remote, ancient, and untraceable. It is beyond conception; it is too abstract to convey literally; it is mystical beyond comprehension. It remains forever silent, unmoved, and sublimely peaceful. Before the reality of the Tao, the voice can no longer utter sound, the eyes can no longer express their curiosity, and movement is halted in its forward journey. The veil of its mystery cannot be pierced. Philosophy cannot define its elusive meaning. Science cannot calculate its potential.

To define the Tao is to listen to silence, observe nakedness, and activate stillness. It can be likened to communicating with your inner voice, awakening your innate talent, finding a home with eternal beauty, and releasing your full potential. There can then be no alienation nor intimidation of your ultimate power.

To define the Tao is to catch your breath, focus your attention, calculate and refine your actions.

move with care, and make friends with the enemy. The breath is life's inspiration; attention forms concentration, and action results. Stepping forward is the reward. As the enemy recedes in the shadow, the Tao permeates your aura.

To define the Tao is to stand on the highest mountain peak, swim in an ocean of love, and soar with the dove in the valley of death. It is to connect with power. To sense the Tao is to stand in a cool spring shower; to view the Tao is to observe from a high tower; to smell the Tao is to breathe in a fragrant flower. It is to sleep peacefully behind a closed door, to peer through a window no more; to observe first the natural law, and to judge only the mind's intractable flaw.

To define the Tao can be anyone's individual response, but is no one else's business. To attempt to describe the Tao is a meaningless pursuit yet boundless in scope. To rationalize the Tao is futile. To reject the Tao is to render yourself powerless. To know the Tao is to leave one breathless; to understand the Tao is to be deathless; to walk the Tao is to be weightless; to ignore the Tao is senseless.

To define the Tao is to chant with Lao Tzu, to laugh with Chuang Tzu, to interpret Confucius, to understand Buddha, to love Christ, to listen to Muhammad, to follow Moses, to view the cosmos, and to embrace the ultimate.

## COMMUNICABLE TAO AND INCOMMUNICABLE TAO

### Communicable Tao

At the same time, the Tao is expressed in many ways through our gifted power of communication. Oral communication is primary, resulting from the power of the voice: the manifestation of inner consciousness and our spiritual trumpet. Verbalization is our first approach to living an independent life, finding the gateway to the Tao through the breath of life and vibration of sound. At the time that oral communication no longer served our human needs and expectations, letters and numbers were employed symbolically, marking the beginning of civilization as a cultural process.

The voice is a powerful force that can reach from one person (dead or alive) to the multitudes. The voice can express the will and permit the self to be expressed, to touch hearts, to justify morality, and verify deeds accomplished. Our inner justice is profoundly different from the legal practice of justice for the sake of justice. It is a direct spiritual communication that goes beyond ego-anticipation and social culture; it is an actualization process of human willpower.

Lao Tzu states: *The Tao that is voiced is no longer that of eternal Tao. The name that has been written is no longer that of eternal name.* The Tao that is voiced defines the origin of the universe through subjective expression. This is, in essence, the communicable Tao of inner self that connects deeply to both our microbiological and psychological self as well as our macrocosmic and celestial self. The name that has been written extensively objectifies any subjective expression of this inner voice. Anyone who has reached her or his prime can verbalize and name. Upon dying, the voice and name are extinguished by the will, enabling the person to enter into immortal and eternal life.

### Inner Voice

The inner voice is the most sacred spiritual vessel. Without this inner voice, God is not alive, the Tao is not present, and the self is not active. This inner voice expresses and characterizes the beautiful

meaning, and strength of life. It is sometimes silent; at other times it is immeasurably powerful. We often turn a deaf ear to this inner voice, refusing to abide by it or give it credence. We choose instead to rely on the external world, on external authority and discipline, to define our life as something meaningful, leaving us with confusion and distortion of our life's true meaning.

In order to establish a clear relationship with the sacred vessel of our inner voice, the first set of meditation practices in this book begins with finding, restoring, and listening to our inner voice in any given circumstance or crisis.

To develop your attunement to your inner voice:

1. Sit upright with your spine straight. Be simultaneously relaxed and alert. Place one hand on top of the other, and place both hands over your heart.
2. Listen intently to the sound of silence. You will begin to recognize a combination of spiritual voice and personal voice.
3. Pay attention to the most immediate direction and clear message. This is the manifestation of your inner voice.
4. Verbalize it inwardly, whether or not it makes sense to you.
5. Name it with no preconceived notion.
6. Meditate upon it as a part of the visualized journey of your life before it actually takes place.
7. Connect your own name with it. See how it conforms to you and your personality.
8. Make it work for you. It is the divine plan and your decision must be made now.



WHEN THE HANDS, HEART, AND MIND ARE UNIFIED, THE INNER VOICE SPEAKS

## Incommunicable Tao

We have discussed the first part of Lao Tzu's first two sentences: the Tao that is voiced and the name that has been written. The second part of the two sentences warns us that the eternal Tao cannot be voiced and the eternal name cannot be written. This demonstrates to us also that what has been voiced can never be the eternal Tao, and what has been written can never be the eternal name. The eternal Tao can never be expressed completely and comprehensibly; in attempting to do so, the Tao becomes lost. The mouth cannot express an image, a colorful vision, or an awareness of the total environment which is simultaneously penetrating the subtlety of the Tao. It is for this reason that voicing the Tao will automatically and instantly disconnect the utterance from the eternal Tao. When an inner message

verbalized, the speaker's true communication is lost and the listener will interpret the received message according to whatever she or he may desire, fear, or wish. The eternal name is thus lost.

Before something is named, it is subjected to how the observer regards it. Before Lao Tzu used the word *Tao*, many other words may possibly have been chosen. When something is named, changes occur due to the nature of the act of naming. Thus, the word *Tao* has become a fixed word with fixed meaning, far and away from Lao Tzu's initial vision, and it is forever changing. This is why the *Tao* has had many names, God has many names, and we have had many names. What has been expressed is not that which can be described. No matter how hard we try, we are bound to fail.

## Bridging the Communicable Tao and the Incommunicable Tao

*In the world,  
Everyone recognizes beauty as beauty,  
Since the ugly is also there.  
Everyone recognizes goodness as goodness,  
Since evil is also there.  
Since being and nonbeing give birth to each other,  
Difficulty and ease complete each other,  
Long and short measure each other,  
High and low overflow into each other,  
Voice and sound harmonize with each other,  
And before and after follow each other,  
Therefore the sage  
Lives in actionless engagement,  
And preaches wordless doctrine.*

(2:1–3)

Between the communicable Tao and incommunicable Tao, the mind and the heart, and the voice and the hand, there are three bridges we must navigate: the bridge of the inner voice, the bridge of mutual understanding between speaker and listener, and the bridge of language itself.

The first bridge is the inner voice, which is exemplified by the baby's voice. There is no thinking or reasoning involved, only the sound of the voice. It is the soul of the Tao, the true innermost spirit of that person at that moment in that particular place and in that state of mind.

The second bridge is the mutual connection, empathy, and understanding between the speaker and the listener. This link can be either verbal or nonverbal. At times, when two people hold an international phone conversation it is not the content that matters but the continuous connection.



between them.

The third bridge is the use of language. When the meaning is conveyed with clear and definitive language, there will be no misunderstanding. When the information communicated is clear and the listener understands the words, the purpose of language has been successfully served.

Throughout the history of human civilization—the course of mental objectification—we have evolved from the use of a single voice to the many-faceted forms of oral, written, and digital audiovisual communication. We have shortened vast spatial distances by means of global telecommunication. In communicating spiritual teachings, the methods have changed dramatically but not the source. We remain as we are. Each momentary flash of an idea differs from other moments, and each individual idea differs from others, yet all the ideas are but the manifestation of mind through the expression of soul being guided by spirit. The eternal, invariable, unwavering, enduring, and unchanging Tao is beyond expression.

How then can we know the Tao? Only through our own peace and desire can we open ourselves to its ever-present presence. When we have peace and serenity, we capture its subtlety. When we are attracted and seduced by the passion of desire, we limit it within our own boundaries and experience as individual or personal. When we are relaxed and free from passion and excitement, we see beyond the futile pursuit of games being played. To be lost in the passion and excitement of the game is a deviation from our connection with our center and inner balance. We are divided when we enact our little scenarios. We become as two: being and nonbeing, birth and death, beauty and ugliness, good and bad. *Being and non-being give birth to each other, difficulty and ease complete each other, long and short measure each other, high and low overflow into each other, voice and sound harmonize with each other, and before and after follow each other.* This is how the world is harmonized in great accord. This ancient teaching enables us to become nonjudgmental, nonprejudicial, and equanimous.

Between the pairs of opposites lies the hidden mystery. *The mystery within the mystery is the door to all wonders.* The mystery is where the unmoving center and the striving outward reach embrace, balance, and unify. The mystery is where perfection and competition face their opposites in a peaceful manner. The mystery is where beauty and ugliness no longer appear attractive or repulsive, where good and bad are no longer distinct.

## THE NATURE OF THE TAO

*Look for it and it can not be seen, it is called invisible;  
Listen to it and it can not be heard, it is called inaudible;  
Reach for it and it can not be touched, it is called intangible.*

(14:1)

*Look, but that is not sufficient for seeing.  
Listen, but that is not sufficient for hearing.  
Use it, but it is not exhausted.*

(35:4)

*Tao functions in empty harmony.*

*When used, it remains full.*

*For sure, this source is the very ancestor of the myriad things.*

*Blunting the sharp edges,*

*Unraveling the tangles,*

*Husbanding into the light,*

*Being as ordinary as the dust.*

*Ah! Limpid, it seems to exist forever.*

(4:1–4)

In order to understand the nature of the Tao we must first understand nature itself, since the Tao takes its origin from nature. Taoists approach nature with openness and not-knowing: “I don’t know why it is so, and I don’t know why it is not so; I cannot make it such, and I cannot make it not such.” The first part speaks of human comprehension and understanding, while the second encompasses human ability and capacity.

We can neither change a mountain into a river nor a river into a mountain. We cannot prevent the plate convergence that causes mountains to rise, nor can we reverse the eroding effects of wind and water on their surface. Our knowledge of nature must admit our inability to control it; we cannot change its true nature. Neither can we know nor name the ineffable Tao. Lao Tzu has explained succinctly that Tao is eternally nameless, is praised but is unnamable.

The Tao is formless and functions in empty harmony. This empty harmony cannot be grasped by the senses. Our human eyes and ears and hands are rendered helpless in this endeavor. *Look for it and it can not be seen, it is called invisible; listen to it and it can not be heard, it is called inaudible; reach for it and it can not be touched, it is called intangible.* Use it, but its use is inexhaustible. The Tao inexhaustibly creates all things in their beginning; it is the ancestor of all the myriad things in the world. When the Tao is spoken, it is very plain, with no excitement and no stimulation. It is close to silence and has no flavor at all. How can we become excited about silence or sense that which is beyond the senses?

We can be aware of the Tao when we are aware of self and universe. We can be aware of the Tao when we are one with the creative force. We can be aware of the Tao when we blunt sharp edges, unravel what is tangled, and become as ordinary as dust. We must see through that which is limpid; this is analogous to entering into the realm of the kingdom of light. *Blunting the sharp edges* means diminishing all the desires of the heart. *Unraveling the tangles* is dissolving and clarifying the constant puzzles generated by mind.

When the body returns to its infantile stage and the mind is completely cultivated, one is permeated with the limpid light. In the Taoist tradition this light embraces both universal light and bodily light through the transformation and purification within the trinity of Chi, Jing (sexual essence/energy), and Shen (spiritual energy). According to modern quantum theory, photons or particles of light have the ability to share their existence mutually. Electrons, on the other hand, have the ability to exclude each other from occupying the same space. When sexual electrons and light photons are joined, their union is transformed into a golden elixir. This is the meaning of *husbanding into the light*. As the spirit enters its limpid state, the body returns to its original quality: dust.

*The substance of Tao is boundless and unfathomable.*

*Unfathomable and boundless,*

*In its center there is form;*

*Boundless and unfathomable,*

*In its center there is an object;*

*Embryonic and dark,*

*In its center there is essence;*

*The essence is very pure,*

*In its center there is trust.*

*From now to the days of old,*

*Its name never dies,*

*Because it creates all things in their beginning.*

(21:1–2)

*The substance of Tao is boundless and unfathomable.* Since the substance of Tao is not a concrete form, it cannot be perceived other than in the symbolic sense. Yet as unfathomable and boundless as seems, there is form in it. It can be said that its form is the form of the world: the image appears but not yet apparent. The form is the matter at its center that looks embryonic and dark; there is essence (Jing) within. The essence is very pure and complete, and there is trust in it. Because of this trust, from now to the days of old, its name never dies even though its name cannot be defined in human terms.

From substance to form, from form to matter, from matter to Jing, and from Jing to trust, we encounter the various manifestations of the Tao. It is macrocosmically large and microcosmically small. Being as large as it is and as small as it is, it remains pure and limpid, and ineffable and immutable. What more do we need other than trust in the Tao?

*How do I know how the world is such?*

*Thus.*

(55:4)

It is this very trust in the Tao that connects Lao Tzu with the all-pervading sustenance of the Tao. Lao Tzu denies himself the comfortable life that can inevitably hold but one future: death. He gives up his mind—the identity of ego and its illusions. What he ultimately receives is *thus*—the thusness or suchness of pure being that is ever present and does not arise from, and is not affected by, conditions. Nothing more than thus and nothing other than thus. What an enormous, powerful, all-consuming, and all-sustaining thus this is!

*Tao moves by returning.  
Tao functions by weakness.  
All things under heaven are born of being.  
Being is born of nonbeing.*

(41:1)

*Tao gives rise to one.  
One gives rise to two.  
Two gives rise to three.  
Three gives rise to all things.*

(42:1)

*Humankind takes its origin from earth.  
Earth takes her origin from heaven.  
Heaven takes its origin from Tao.  
Tao takes its origin from Nature.*

(25:4)

The Tao functions as empty harmony. Harmony is where and how the matter of the Tao produces, promotes, regenerates, and renews itself in its constantly full state. Since the action of the Tao is in its nonformed state, or emptiness, its best harmony is within itself where nothing is yet produced and nothing can be lost. It also remains in its constant fullness, wholeness, and completion by preserving its unused and potential perfection. *When used, it remains full.* Even as the Tao is producing, promoting, preserving, and regenerating at the same time, it utilizes both heaven and earth in order to conceive its formless state of oneness: nothingness. It functions in its weakness and emptiness by preserving its fullness and perfection. This source is undoubtedly *the very ancestor of the myriad things.*

Because *all things under heaven are born of being and being is born of nonbeing*, being forms the creatures that result from the process of the Tao: from the Tao to one, one to two, two to three, and three to all things. The Tao of oneness is the Tao of all things. This is why we have the Tao of heaven, the Tao of earth, the Tao of human beings, the Tao of plants and animals, and the Tao of sand and rocks. All things are perfectly as they are. This is why competition of any sort has no value or reality; it is meaningless in the great scheme of things.

In our modern society, we have evolved from animal-eating predators into self-striving competitors. The gains and losses conceal each other; master and slave depend on each other. Wandering souls and hungry ghosts abound between heaven and earth. Stress is the consequence of our society, and anxiety and loss of self-esteem is the price we pay. Unless the awakened mind is recentered, the soul restored, kindness and virtue (Te) enriched, the self and society will never be whole and healthy.

*Tao moves by returning* points to the many actions of “returning”: body to its destiny, mind to its

creativity, and spirit to its oneness. Humankind returns to earth since *humanity takes its origin from earth*. Earth returns to heaven since *earth takes her origin from heaven*. Heaven returns to the Tao since *heaven takes its origin from Tao*. The Tao returns to Nature since *Tao takes its origin from Nature*. This is the ultimate reality: returning is the foundation of being Taoist. Only through the practice can we find the way, the one direction, the means to return to our source, to become one with the Tao. This is the unwavering path leading to the door of mystery.

*Nothing in the world is softer and more supple than water.  
When confronting strength and hardness nothing can overcome it.  
Using nothing simplifies.  
Using water overcomes hardness.  
Using weakness overcomes strength.  
There is no one in the world who does not know it, but no one can apply it.  
So it is a saying of sages that:  
Whoever can bear the disgrace of the country is the ruler of the country.  
Whoever can bear the misfortune of the world is the ruler of the world.*

(80:1–3)

What is the model of being one with oneself? How does one lose one's selfishness? Water is the answer. Water provides the life force for all creatures. It nurtures them, satisfies them, sacrifices itself, and once again purifies itself. Water, on earth, is life. Nothing can live nor complete its journey without water. This is the power and virtue of water. This is the material that resembles most closely the nature of the Tao.

Water is soft and gentle; nothing can compete with it. It occupies more area than anything on the face of the earth does. Water is weak and pliable, yet nothing can fight against its power. Water is clean and pure; nothing can contaminate it since it purifies other matter by purifying itself. Water is at peace with nature; nothing can surpass it as a tranquilizer, since its murky states are stilled by its innate tranquility. Water is inactive, yet nothing can be more active than water itself; it is everywhere ceaseless in its wanderings. Water is noncompetitive, yet conquers all.

Water is always happy in its present dwelling place. Pouring as rain and drifting as snow, water travels endlessly through the seasons. Forming dews, storms, and glaciers, existing as solid, fluid, and steam, it continues its endless forms. It washes away all toxic materials that harm living creatures. Being noncompetitive enables water to remain at peace at all times. Water joyfully speaks its truth with faith, but our poisonous understanding of it dispels its tranquil state. Water acts in its own right time, but we manipulate our affairs with an imaginary clock that destroys the natural rhythms of our bodies.

Water dwells within earthly creatures, and reveals itself as the largest substance on earth. There is no need to prove itself. The yielding strategy it employs enables it to be flexible, adaptable, and unattached. Water trickles or races on, returning to its destination with no need for strategy.

Lao Tzu concludes that *nothing in the world is softer and more supple than water. When confronting strength and hardness nothing can overcome it. Using nothing simplifies. Using water overcomes strength. Using weakness overcomes strength.* Everyone knows it, yet none can apply it. Following this, the sages' wisdom tells us: *Whoever can bear the disgrace of the country is the ruler of the country. Whoever can bear the misfortune of the world is the ruler of the world.*

*Matter is formed from chaos.  
It was born before heaven and earth.  
Silent and void.  
Standing alone, without territory,  
Able to be mother to the world.  
I do not yet know its name,  
I call it Tao.  
With reluctance I deem it to be Great.  
Great refers to the symbol.  
The symbol refers to what is remote.  
What is remote refers to returning.  
Tao is great.  
Heaven is great.  
Earth is great.  
Kingship is great.  
These are the four great things in the world,  
Kingship is one of them.*

(25:1–3)

Through the process of regaining his youth by transforming his life force into spirit, Lao Tzu expresses that *matter is formed from chaos*, which precedes heaven and earth. Silently and formlessly it stands alone, never changing. It is eternal, penetrating every area of the universe, never growing, never changing, and never dying. It is the mother of heaven and earth. Lao Tzu said to himself, "I don't know what name it has. With reluctance, I pronounce it Tao and deem it to be great." Yet it remains well beyond our mind's comprehension. Symbolically far-reaching, it penetrates the mind and spirit. We cannot grasp it, but it forever returns to us, like sky or ocean or earth. This Tao is truly great. Heaven is also great. Earth is equally great. Kingship is realistically great.

*Knowing that you don't know (everything) is superior.*

*Not knowing that you don't know (everything) is a sickness.  
So the sage's being without sickness is that he knows sickness as sickness;  
Thus, he is without sickness.*

(73:1–2)

Lao Tzu expresses the word *Tao* with great caution and meticulous care. The Tao is wordless, nameless, formless, and motionless. No one, not even Lao Tzu, can have a clear, concrete, precise, and absolute definition of the Tao. He is unable to summon up a portrayal because he understands that *knowing that you don't know (everything) is superior. Not knowing that you don't know (everything) is a sickness*. He rationally states that the best he can do is to call it *Tao*. The word Tao is simply a sound uttered through Lao Tzu's mouth. He doesn't create it; he states it arbitrarily. Clearly, Lao Tzu must employ a sound or a word. When the right understanding appears, words disappear; they are no longer necessary. When the right spirit appears, understanding disappears. Which would you choose?

## Chi and Taoist Inner Alchemy

*Chi* means “energy” or “life force”; *kung* means “work.” Traditionally, Chi Kung is the cultivation of the ability to conduct Chi for the purposes of healing and spiritual transformation. According to the Taoist view, there are three sources of Chi: cosmic Chi, universal Chi, and earth Chi. Cosmic Chi is born out of the original Chi of the Tao and literally carries the intelligence and essence of life. Guided by this intelligence, it spreads out into the universe and manifests in different densities and forms defined by the cosmic laws. This is how stars, planets, human cells, subatomic particles, and all other forms of life take form and are nourished.

Universal and earth Chi also have their genesis in the original energy of the Tao. The universal Chi is the radiating force of all galaxies, stars, and planets throughout the whole universe. It is the all-pervasive force that nourishes the life energy in all the forms of nature. The earth Chi is the third force of nature, which includes all the energies of mother earth. This force is activated by the electromagnetic field originating in the rotation of the earth. It is also integrated into all aspects of nature on our planet. The earth energy is accessed through the soles of the feet, the perineum, and the sexual organs. Earth energy nourishes the physical body. It supplies our daily life force and is one of the principal forces used to heal ourselves.

For the past five thousand years, practitioners of Chi Kung have used time-tested methods to tap into these unlimited reservoirs of Chi, greatly expanding the amount of energy available to them.

The Universal Tao system also speaks of two types of Chi operating in the human being: prenatal Chi and postnatal Chi. Prenatal Chi, which is a combination of universal Chi and Jing (generative energy/sexual essence), is inherited from the parents, and is visible as innate vitality. Postnatal Chi, which is the life force an individual cultivates in his or her lifetime, is visible as the light shining behind personality and self-awareness. To build their postnatal Chi, humans normally access Chi through food and air. Plants take the universal energies of the sun and the magnetic energies of the earth and digest and transform them, thereby making these energies available to all living beings.

Rather than connecting to this universal Chi only after it is processed through plants, however, Taoist practitioners of Chi Kung learn to go directly to the source of this primordial energy. The Taoist recognizes that human beings have a limited capacity for Chi. However, if we are able to connect with the sources of Chi within the universe, we gain an infinite capacity for Chi, and we constantly fill ourselves, within the limitations of our human nature, with the unlimited abundance of energy around us.

Taoist inner alchemy involves the three Tan Tiens, or energy centers in the body. It particularly focuses on the lower Tan Tien, which is the primary energy center of the body. It is the major generator and storage place for Chi energy in the body as well as the seat of awareness. The other two



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