

Tao  
Te  
Ching



LAO TZU

*Translated by*  
JONATHAN STAR

*The New Translation from Tao Te Ching: The Definitive Edition*

Tao

Te

Ching

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Version\_1

*To the one  
who shares her purity,  
reveals her wonder,  
and touches the moon in her dreams.*

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*by August Gold*

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# *Introduction*

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

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

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

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

*Heaven and Earth are not humane,*

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

Now Jonathan Star's translation:

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

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

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

**Here's what you can expect.** I have been a teacher of the Tao for nearly two decades, and since the day this text was put into my hands I have been teaching from it exclusively. It has brought me and thousands of my students over the years the pure and simple heart of the Tao Te Ching; and as a result it has fed our hunger, quenched our thirst, and ignited our desire to live our everyday lives in new ways—simply, deeply, richly, fully,

meaningfully. I believe this translation of the Tao Te Ching will lead you into a personal, direct, and even mystical experience of the Tao, which will uplift and transform your life in countless ways. Expect it to engage you not only intellectually, but emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. To put it even more plainly: this translation will positively change your life.

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

—AUGUST GOLD  
*Sacred Center New York*

## *Verse 1*

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

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

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

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

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

## *Verse 2*

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

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

名

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

## *Verse 3*

Putting a value on status  
will cause people to compete

Hoarding treasure  
will turn them into thieves

Showing off possessions  
will disturb their daily lives

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

He shows people how to be simple  
and live without desires

To be content  
and not look for other ways

With the people so pure  
Who could trick them?  
What clever ideas could lead them astray?

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

## *Verse 4*

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

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

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

## Verse 5

Heaven and Earth have no preference

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

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

徼

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

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

## *Verse 6*

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

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

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

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

## *Verse 7*

Heaven is ancient

Earth is long-lasting

Why is this so?—

Because they have no claims to life

By having no claims to life

they cannot be claimed by death

The Sage puts his own views behind

so ends up ahead

He stays a witness to life

so he endures

What could he grab for

that he does not already have?

What could he do for himself

that the universe itself has not already done?

## *Verse 8*

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

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

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

## *Verse 9*

Grabbing and stuffing—  
there is no end to it

Sharpen a blade too much  
and its edge will soon be lost  
Fill a house with gold and jade  
and no one can protect it  
Puff yourself with honor and pride  
and no one can save you from a fall

Complete the task at hand  
Be selfless in your actions  
This is the way of Heaven  
This is the way to Heaven

## *Verse 10*

Hold fast to the Power of the One  
It will unify the body  
    and merge it with the spirit  
It will cleanse the vision  
    and reveal the world as flawless  
It will focus the life-force  
    and make one supple as a newborn

As you love the people and rule the state  
    can you be free of self-interest?  
As the gates of Heaven open and close  
    can you remain steadfast as a mother bird  
    who sits with her nest?  
As your wisdom reaches the four corners of the world  
    can you keep the innocence of a beginner?



Know this Primal Power  
    that guides without forcing  
    that serves without seeking  
    that brings forth and sustains life  
    yet does not own or possess it

One who holds this Power  
    brings Tao to this very Earth  
He can triumph over a raging fire  
    or the freeze of winter weather  
Yet when he comes to rule the world

it's with the gentleness of a feather

## *Verse 11*

*Wu* is nothingness, emptiness, non-existence

Thirty spokes of a wheel all join at a common hub  
yet only the hole at the center  
allows the wheel to spin

Clay is molded to form a cup  
yet only the space within  
allows the cup to hold water

Walls are joined to make a room  
yet only by cutting out a door and a window  
can one enter the room and live there

Thus, when a thing has existence alone  
it is mere dead-weight

Only when it has *wu*, does it have life

## *Verse 12*

The five colors blind the eye  
The five tones deafen the ear  
The five flavors dull the palate  
Racing, hunting, and galloping about  
    only disturb the mind  
Wasting energy to obtain rare objects  
    only impedes one's growth

So the Sage is led by his inner truth  
    and not his outer eye  
He holds to what is deep  
    and not what lies on the surface

## *Verse 13*

“Be wary of both honor and disgrace”

“Endless affliction is bound to the body”

What does it mean,

“Be wary of both honor and disgrace”?

Honor is founded on disgrace

and disgrace is rooted in honor

Both should be avoided

Both bind a man to this world

That’s why it says,

“Be wary of both honor and disgrace”

What does it mean,

“Endless affliction is bound to the body”?

Man’s true self is eternal,

yet he thinks, “I am this body, I will soon die”

This false sense of self

is the cause of all his sorrow

When a person does not identify himself with the body

tell me, what troubles could touch him?

One who sees himself as everything

is fit to be guardian of the world

One who loves himself as everyone

is fit to be teacher of the world

## *Verse 14*

Eyes look but cannot see it  
Ears listen but cannot hear it  
Hands grasp but cannot touch it  
Beyond the senses lies the great Unity—  
invisible, inaudible, intangible

What rises up appears bright  
What settles down appears dark  
Yet there is neither darkness nor light  
just an unbroken dance of shadows  
From nothingness to fullness  
and back again to nothingness  
This formless form  
This imageless image  
cannot be grasped by mind or might  
Try to face it  
In what place will you stand?  
Try to follow it  
To what place will you go?

Know That which is beyond all beginnings  
and you will know everything here and now  
Know everything in this moment  
and you will know the Eternal Tao

## *Verse 15*

The masters of this ancient path  
are mysterious and profound  
Their inner state baffles all inquiry  
Their depths go beyond all knowing  
Thus, despite every effort,  
we can only tell of their outer signs—  
Deliberate, as if treading over the stones of a winter brook  
Watchful, as if meeting danger on all sides  
Reverent, as if receiving an honored guest  
Selfless, like a melting block of ice  
Pure, like an uncarved block of wood  
Accepting, like an open valley

謂

Through the course of Nature  
muddy water becomes clear  
Through the unfolding of life  
man reaches perfection  
Through sustained activity  
that supreme rest is naturally found  
  
Those who have Tao want nothing else  
Though seemingly empty  
they are ever full  
Though seemingly old  
they are beyond the reach of birth and death

## *Verse 16*

Become totally empty  
Quiet the restlessness of the mind  
Only then will you witness everything  
    unfolding from emptiness  
See all things flourish and dance  
    in endless variation  
And once again merge back into perfect emptiness—  
    Their true repose  
    Their true nature  
Emerging, flourishing, dissolving back again  
    This is the eternal process of return

To know this process brings enlightenment  
To miss this process brings disaster

Be still  
Stillness reveals the secrets of eternity  
Eternity embraces the all-possible  
The all-possible leads to a vision of oneness  
A vision of oneness brings about universal love  
Universal love supports the great truth of Nature  
The great truth of Nature is Tao

Whoever knows this truth lives forever  
The body may perish, deeds may be forgotten  
But he who has Tao has all eternity

## *Verse 17*

To know Tao alone,  
without trace of your own existence,  
is the highest  
Next comes loving and praising it  
Then fearing it  
Then despising it

萬

If one doesn't trust himself  
how can he trust anyone else?

物

The great ruler speaks little  
and his words are priceless  
He works without self-interest  
and leaves no trace  
When all is finished, the people say,  
“It happened by itself”

## ***Verse 18***

When the greatness of Tao is present  
action arises from one's own heart

When the greatness of Tao is absent  
action comes from the rules  
of "kindness" and "justice"

If you need rules to be kind and just,  
if you *act* virtuous,  
this is a sure sign that virtue is absent

Thus we see the great hypocrisy

Only when the family loses its harmony  
do we hear of "dutiful sons"

Only when the state is in chaos  
do we hear of "loyal ministers"

## *Verse 19*

Abandon holiness

Discard cleverness

and the people will benefit a hundredfold

Abandon the rules of “kindness”

Discard “righteous” actions

and the people will return

to their own natural affections

Abandon book learning

Discard the rules of behavior

and the people will have no worries

Abandon plots and schemes

Discard profit-seeking

and the people will not become thieves

These lessons are mere elaborations

The essence of my teachings is this:

See with original purity

Embrace with original simplicity

Reduce what you have

Decrease what you want

## *Verse 20*

The difference between a formal “yes”  
and a casual “yeah”—how slight!  
The difference between knowing the Truth  
and not knowing it—how great!

Must I fear what others fear?  
Should I fear desolation  
when there is abundance?  
Should I fear darkness  
when that light is shining everywhere?

Nonsense!

The people of this world are steeped in their merrymaking  
as if gorging at a great feast  
or watching the sights of springtime  
Yet here I sit, without a sign,  
staring blank-eyed like a child

I am but a guest in this world  
While others rush about to get things done  
I accept what is offered  
Oh, my mind is like that of a fool  
aloof to the clamor of life around me  
Everyone seems so bright and alive  
with the sharp distinctions of day

I appear dark and dull  
with the blending of differences by night

I am drifting like an ocean, floating like the high winds

Everyone is so rooted in this world  
yet I have no place to rest my head

Indeed I am different....

I have no treasure but the Eternal Mother

I have no food but what comes from her breast

## Verse 21

Perfect action,  
True virtue,  
Supreme power,  
This is how Tao is revealed  
through those who follow it completely

無

Though formless and intangible  
It gives rise to form  
Though vague and elusive  
It gives rise to shapes  
Though dark and obscure  
It is the spirit, the essence,  
the life-breath of all things  
“But is it real?” you ask—  
I say its evidence is all of creation!

名

From the first moment to the present  
The Name has been sounding  
It is the gate  
through which the universe enters  
The witness  
by which the universe sees

How have I come to know all this?  
That very Name has told me,  
That Name which is sounding right here,

right now

## *Verse 22*

“Surrender brings perfection”

The crooked become straight

The empty become full

The worn become new

Have little and gain much

Have much and be confused

So the Sage embraces the One

and becomes a model for the world

Without showing himself, he shines forth

Without promoting himself, he is distinguished

Without claiming reward, he gains endless merit

Without seeking glory, his glory endures

The Sage knows how to follow

so he comes to command

He does not compete

so no one under Heaven can compete with him

The ancient saying,

“Surrender brings perfection,”

is not just empty words

Truly, surrender brings perfection

and perfection brings the whole universe

## *Verse 23*

Speak little

Hold to your own nature

A strong wind does not blow all morning

A cloudburst does not last all day

The wind and rain are from Heaven and Earth

and even these do not last long

How much less so the efforts of man?

One who lives in accordance with the Truth

becomes the embodiment of Tao

His actions become those of Nature

his ways those of Heaven

It is through such a one

that Heaven rejoices

that Earth rejoices

that all of life rejoices

## *Verse 24*

On his tiptoes a man is not steady  
Taking long strides he cannot keep pace

To the self-serving, nothing shines forth  
To the self-promoting, nothing is distinguished  
To the self-appointing, nothing bears fruit  
To the self-righteous, nothing endures

From the viewpoint of Tao, this self-indulgence  
    is like rotting food and painful growths on the body—  
Things that all creatures despise  
So why hold onto them?  
When walking the path of Tao  
    this is the very stuff  
    that must be uprooted, thrown out, and left behind

## Verse 25

Something formless, complete in itself  
There before Heaven and Earth  
Tranquil, vast, standing alone, unchanging  
It provides for all things yet cannot be exhausted  
It is the mother of the universe  
I do not know its name  
    so I call it “Tao”  
Forced to name it further  
I call it  
    “The greatness of all things”  
    “The end of all endings”  
I call it  
    “That which is beyond the beyond”  
    “That to which all things return”

道

From Tao comes all greatness—  
    It makes Heaven great  
    It makes Earth great  
    It makes man great

Mankind depends on the laws of Earth  
Earth depends on the laws of Heaven  
Heaven depends on the laws of Tao  
But Tao depends on itself alone  
    Supremely free, self-so, it rests in its own nature

## *Verse 26*

The inner is foundation of the outer  
The still is master of the restless

The Sage travels all day  
yet never leaves his inner treasure  
Though the views are captivating and beg attention  
he remains calm and uninvolved  
Tell me, does the lord of a great empire  
go out begging for rice?

One who seeks his treasure in the outer world  
is cut off from his own roots  
Without roots, he becomes restless  
Being restless, his mind is weak  
And with a mind such as this  
he loses all command below Heaven

## *Verse 27*

A knower of the Truth  
travels without leaving a trace  
speaks without causing harm  
gives without keeping an account  
The door he shuts, though having no lock,  
cannot be opened  
The knot he ties, though using no cord,  
cannot be undone

同

The Sage is always on the side of virtue  
so everyone around him prospers  
He is always on the side of truth  
so everything around him is fulfilled

The path of the Sage is called  
“The Path of Illumination”  
He who gives himself to this path  
is like a block of wood  
that gives itself to the chisel—  
Cut by cut it is honed to perfection

Only a student who gives himself  
can receive the master’s gift  
If you think otherwise,  
despite your knowledge, you have blundered

Giving and receiving are one  
This is called,

“The great wonder”

“The essential mystery”

“The very heart of all that is true”

## *Verse 28*

Hold your male side with your female side  
Hold your bright side with your dull side  
Hold your high side with your low side  
Then you will be able to hold the whole world

When the opposing forces unite within  
    there comes a power abundant in its giving  
    and unerring in its effect  
Flowing through everything  
    It returns one to the First Breath  
Guiding everything  
    It returns one to No Limits  
Embracing everything  
    It returns one to the Uncarved Block

When the Block is divided  
    it becomes something useful  
    and leaders rule with a few pieces of it  
But the Sage holds the Block complete  
Holding all things within himself  
    he preserves the Great Unity  
    which cannot be ruled or divided

## *Verse 29*

Those who look down upon this world  
    will surely take hold and try to change things  
But this is a plan  
    I've always seen fail  
The world is Tao's own vessel  
It is perfection manifest  
It cannot be changed  
It cannot be improved  
For those who go on tampering, it's ruined  
For those who try to grasp, it's gone

Allow your life to unfold naturally  
Know that it too is a vessel of perfection  
Just as you breathe in and breathe out  
    Sometimes you're ahead and other times behind  
    Sometimes you're strong and other times weak  
    Sometimes you're with people and other times alone

To the Sage  
    all of life is a movement toward perfection  
So what need has he  
    for the excessive, the extravagant, or the extreme?

## *Verse 30*

Those who rule in accordance with Tao  
do not use force against the world  
For that which is forced is likely to return—  
Where armies settle  
Nature offers nothing but briars and thorns  
After a great battle has been fought  
the land is cursed, the crops fail,  
the Earth lies stripped of its motherhood

A knower of the Truth does what is called for  
then stops  
He uses his strength but does not force things  
In the same way  
complete your task  
seek no reward  
make no claims  
Without faltering  
fully choose to do what you must do  
This is to live without forcing  
to overcome without conquering

Things that gain a place by force  
will flourish for a time  
but then fade away  
They are not in keeping with Tao  
Whatever is not in keeping with Tao  
will come to an early end

## *Verse 31*

Even the finest warrior is defeated  
    when he goes against natural law  
By his own hand he is doomed  
    and all creatures are likely to despise him

One who knows Tao  
    never turns from life's calling  
When at home he honors the side of rest  
When at war he honors the side of action  
Peace and tranquility are what he holds most dear  
    so he does not obtain weapons  
But when their use is unavoidable  
    he employs them with fortitude and zeal

Do not flaunt your excellence  
Do not rejoice over victory  
With the loss of others  
    weep with sorrow and grief  
After winning a battle  
    do not celebrate,  
    observe the rites of a funeral

One who is bound to action, proud of victory,  
    and delights in the misfortune of others  
will never gain a thing  
    from this world below Heaven

## *Verse 32*

Tao is eternal, one without a second  
Simple indeed

    yet so subtle that no one can master it  
If princes and kings could just hold it  
All things would flock to their kingdom  
Heaven and Earth would rejoice  
    with the dripping of sweet dew  
Everyone would live in harmony,  
    not by official decree,  
    but by their own inner goodness

This world is nothing but the glory of Tao  
    expressed through different names and forms  
One who sees the things of this world  
    as being real and self-existent  
    has lost sight of the truth  
To him, every word becomes a trap  
    every thing becomes a prison

One who knows the truth  
    that underlies all things  
    lives in this world without danger  
To him, every word reflects the universe  
    every moment brings enlightenment

Rivers and streams are born of the ocean  
All creation is born of Tao  
Just as all water flows back to become the ocean  
All creation flows back to become Tao

## *Verse 33*

One who knows others is intelligent  
One who knows himself is enlightened

One who conquers others is strong  
One who conquers himself is all-powerful

One who approaches life with force  
surely gets something  
One who remains content where he is  
surely gets everything

One who gives himself to his position  
surely lives long  
One who gives himself to Tao  
surely lives forever

## *Verse 34*

The great Tao flows everywhere  
It fills everything to the left  
    and to the right  
All things owe their existence to it  
    and it cannot deny any one of them

Tao is eternal  
It does not favor one over the other  
It brings all things to completion  
    without their even knowing it

Tao nourishes and protects all creatures  
    yet does not claim lordship over them  
So we class it with the most humble  
Tao is the home to which all things return  
    yet it wants nothing in return  
So we call it “The Greatest”

The Sage is the same way—  
    He does not claim greatness over anything  
    He’s not even aware of his own greatness  
Tell me, what could be greater than this?

## *Verse 35*

Hold fast to the Great Form within  
and let the world pass as it may  
Then the changes of life will not bring pain  
but contentment, joy, and well-being

Music and sweets are passing pleasures  
yet they cause people to stop  
How bland and insipid are the things of this world  
when one compares them with Tao!  
One tastes, but the sweetness turns bitter  
One sees, but the colors grow faint  
One hears, but the sound fades into silence

One may look for fulfillment in this world  
but his longings will never be exhausted  
The only thing he ever finds  
is that he himself is exhausted

## *Verse 36*

Contraction pulls at that  
    which extends too far  
Weakness pulls at that  
    which strengthens too much  
Ruin pulls at that  
    which rises too high  
Loss pulls at life  
    when you fill it with too much stuff

The lesson here is called  
“The wisdom of obscurity”—  
    The gentle outlast the strong  
    The obscure outlast the obvious  
Hence, a fish that ventures from deep water  
    is soon snagged by a net  
A country that reveals its strength  
    is soon conquered by an enemy

## *Verse 37*

Tao does not act  
yet it is the root of all action  
Tao does not move  
yet it is the source of all creation

If princes and kings could hold it  
everyone under them would naturally turn within  
Should a doubt or old desire rise up  
The Nameless Simplicity would push it down  
The Nameless Simplicity frees the heart of desire  
and reveals its inner silence

When there is silence  
one finds peace  
When there is silence  
one finds the anchor of the universe within himself

## *Verse 38*

To give without seeking reward  
To help without thinking it is virtuous—  
    therein lies great virtue  
To keep account of your actions  
To help with the hope of gaining merit—  
    therein lies no virtue

The highest virtue is to act without a sense of self  
The highest kindness is to give without condition  
The highest justice is to see without preference

When Tao is lost one must learn the rules of virtue  
When virtue is lost, the rules of kindness  
When kindness is lost, the rules of justice  
When justice is lost, the rules of conduct  
And when the high-blown rules of conduct are not followed  
    people are seized by the arm and it is forced on them  
The rules of conduct  
    are just an outer show of devotion and loyalty—  
    quite confusing to the heart  
And when men rely on these rules for guidance—  
    Oh, what ignorance abounds!

The great master follows his own nature  
    and not the trappings of life

It is said,

“He stays with the fruit and not the fluff”

“He stays with the firm and not the flimsy”

“He stays with the true and not the false”

## Verse 39

From ancient times till now  
the One has been the source of all attainments

By realizing the One  
Heaven becomes clear, Earth becomes still  
spirits gain power and hearts fill up with joy

By realizing the One  
kings and lords become instruments of peace  
and all creatures live joyfully upon this earth

Without the One  
Heaven has no clarity and would crack  
Earth has no peace and would crumble  
spirits have no power and would lose their charm

Without the One  
hearts would dry up, empires would fall,  
all things would go lifelessly upon this earth

地

Long ago kings and lords called themselves  
“orphaned,” “lonely,” and “unworthy”  
What honor can there be without humility?  
What heights can be reached without being low?

The pieces of a chariot are useless  
unless they work in accordance with the whole  
A man’s life brings nothing  
unless he lives in accordance with the whole universe  
Playing one’s part  
in accordance with the universe

is true humility

So whether you're a gem in the royal court  
or a stone on the common path

If you accept your part with humility  
the glory of the universe will be yours

## *Verse 40*

The movement of Tao is to return  
The way of Tao is to yield

Heaven, Earth, and all things  
are born of the existent world  
The existent world is born of the nothingness of Tao

## *Verse 41*

When the best seeker hears of Tao  
    he strives with great effort to know it  
When an average seeker hears of Tao  
    he thinks of it now and again  
When the poorest seeker hears of Tao  
    he laughs out loud

Tao is always becoming  
    what we have need for it to become  
If it could not do this  
    it would not be Tao

母

There is an old saying,  
    The clear way seems clouded  
    The straight way seems crooked  
    The sure way seems unsteady

The greatest power seems weak  
The purest white seems tainted  
The abundant seems empty  
The stable seems shaky  
The certain seems false  
The Great Square has no corners  
The Great Vessel is never filled

A beginner may be clumsy  
    but after practice—what talent!  
A large drum may sit silently

but when banged—what noise!  
Tao lies hidden  
yet it alone is the glorious light of this world

## Verse 42

Tao gives life to the one  
The one gives life to the two  
The two give life to the three  
The three give life to ten thousand things

All beings support *yin* and embrace *yang*  
and the interplay of these two forces  
fills the universe  
Yet only at the still-point,  
between the breathing in and the breathing out,  
can one capture these two in perfect harmony



People suffer at the thought of being  
without parents, without food, or without worth  
Yet this is the very way that  
kings and lords once described themselves

Who knows what fate may bring—  
one day your loss may be your fortune  
one day your fortune may be your loss

The age-old lesson that others teach, I also teach—  
“As you plant, so you reap”  
“As you live, so you die”  
Know this to be the foundation of my teachings

## *Verse 43*

The most yielding thing in the world  
will overcome the most rigid

The most empty thing in the world  
will overcome the most full

From this comes a lesson—

Stillness benefits more than action

Silence benefits more than words

Rare indeed are those who are still

Rare indeed are those who are silent

And so I say,

Rare indeed are those

who obtain the bounty of this world

## ***Verse 44***

One's own reputation—why the fuss?  
One's own wealth—why the concern?  
I say, what you gain  
    is more trouble than what you lose

Love is the fruit of sacrifice  
Wealth is the fruit of generosity

Be content,  
    rest in your own fullness—  
You will not suffer from loss  
You'll avoid the snare of this world  
You'll have long life and endless blessings

## *Verse 45*

The Great Perfection seems imperfect  
    yet this world it creates is never impaired  
The Great Fullness seems empty  
    yet this world it creates is never lacking

Great truth seems false  
Great skill seems clumsy  
Great eloquence seems like babble

Keep moving and you'll miss the cold  
Keep silent and you'll beat the heat

Be tranquil like the rain of spring  
Be pure like the sheen of silk  
Then the Great Perfection will be perfect  
    and the Great Fullness will be full

## *Verse 46*

When Tao is present in the empire  
men follow their own nature  
and riding horses work the fields  
When Tao is absent from the empire  
men go astray  
and war horses breed on sacred ground

There is no greater loss than losing Tao  
No greater curse than desire  
No greater tragedy than discontentment  
No greater fault than selfishness

Contentment alone is enough  
Indeed, the bliss of eternity  
can be found in your contentment

## *Verse 47*

Without going outside  
one can know the whole world  
Without looking out the window  
one can see the ways of Heaven  
The farther one goes  
the less one knows

Thus the Sage does not go, yet he knows  
He does not look, yet he sees  
He does not do, yet all is done

## *Verse 48*

To become learned, gain daily  
To obtain Tao, reduce daily  
Reduce and reduce again  
    until all action is reduced to non-action  
Then no one is left  
Nothing is done  
    yet nothing is left undone

One who gives freely and without attachment  
    gets a full life in return  
One who gives with the secret hope of getting  
    is merely engaged in business  
Truly, they neither give nor receive  
    any of the treasure from this world below Heaven

## *Verse 49*

The Sage has no fixed heart of his own  
Those who look at him  
see their own hearts

Those who are good he treats with goodness  
Those who are bad he also treats with goodness  
because the nature of his being is good  
Those who are truthful he treats with truth  
Those who are not truthful he also treats with truth  
because the nature of his being is truthful

The Sage lives in harmony with all below Heaven  
He sees everything as his own self  
He loves everyone as his own child  
All people are drawn to him  
every eye and ear is turned toward him

## *Verse 50*

Again and again  
Men come in with birth  
    and go out with death  
One in three are followers of life  
One in three are followers of death  
And those just passing from life to death  
    also number one in three  
But they all die in the end  
Why is this so?  
Because they clutch to life  
    and cling to this passing world

I hear that one who lives by his own truth  
    is not like this  
He walks without making footprints in this world  
Going about, he does not fear the rhinoceros or tiger  
Entering a battlefield, he does not fear sharp weapons  
For in him the rhino can find no place to pitch its horn  
The tiger no place to fix its claw  
The soldier no place to thrust his blade  
Why is this so?  
Because he dwells in that place  
    where death cannot enter

## *Verse 51*

Tao gives all things life  
Te gives them fulfillment  
Nature is what shapes them  
Living is what brings them to completion  
Every creature honors Tao and worships Te  
not by force  
but through its own living and breathing

Though Tao gives life to all things  
Te is what cultivates them  
Te is that magic power that  
raises and rears them  
completes and prepares them  
comforts and protects them

To create without owning  
To give without expecting  
To fill without claiming  
This is the profound action of Tao  
The highest expression of Te

## *Verse 52*

That which creates the universe  
is the Mother of the world  
By knowing the Mother  
one knows her children  
By knowing her children  
one comes to know her  
Such is their unity  
that one does not exist without the other

Fully embrace your life  
and you will share in the glory of creation  
The Mother herself will be your guardian  
And all her creation will be your guide

Stay with the Mother, shut the mouth, close the gates  
and you are never in trouble  
Abandon the Mother, open the mouth, be busy with others  
and you are beyond all hope of rescue

Seeing your own smallness is called insight  
Honoring your own tenderness is called strength

The sun in all its glory  
reveals but a passing world  
Only the inner light illumines eternity  
Only that light can guide us back home

Have faith  
Follow your own shining

Be aware of your own awareness  
On the darkest nights you will not stumble  
On the brightest days you will not blink  
This is called  
“The Practice of Eternal Light”

## *Verse 53*

If I had the least bit of wisdom  
I could follow the path of Tao quite well  
My only fear would be trying to go my own way  
The Great Path is simple and direct  
yet people love to take the side-routes

See how magnificent the courts have become  
The women dress in colorful gowns  
The men carry well-crafted swords  
Food and drink overflow  
Wealth and finery abound  
Yet in the shadow of all this splendor  
the fields grow barren  
the granaries are all but empty

I say this pomp at the expense of others  
is like the boasting of thieves after a looting  
Surely it is contrary to Tao  
Surely it cuts against the grain of the whole empire

## Verse 54

Truth, once established, can never be uprooted  
Goodness, once imbibed, can never be stripped away  
    A sacrifice to a higher cause is never lost  
    An offering to an ancestor never goes to waste

When a person embodies Tao  
    his heart becomes true  
When a family embodies Tao  
    it thrives  
When a village embodies Tao  
    it is protected  
When a country embodies Tao  
    it prospers  
When the world embodies Tao  
    it reveals its perfection

Tao is everywhere  
    it has become everything  
To truly see it, see it as it is  
In a person, see it *as* a person  
In a family, see it *as* a family  
In a country, see it *as* a country  
In the world, see it *as* the world

How have I come to know all this?  
Tao has shown me—  
    Tao as all this!

## *Verse 55*

One who embraces Tao  
will become pure and innocent  
like a newborn babe  
Deadly insects will not sting him  
Wild beasts will not attack him  
Birds of prey will not strike him  
He is oblivious to the union of male and female  
yet his vitality is full  
his inner spirit is complete  
He can cry all day without straining  
so perfect is his harmony  
so magically does he blend with this world

Know this harmony—it brings the Eternal  
Know the Eternal—it brings enlightenment

A full life—this is your blessing  
A gentle heart—this is your strength

Things in harmony with Tao remain  
Things that are forced, grow for a while  
but then wither away  
This is not Tao  
Whatever is not Tao  
comes to an early end

## *Verse 56*

One who speaks does not know  
One who knows does not speak

Shut the mouth  
Close the gates  
Blunt the sharpness  
Loosen the knots  
Temper the glare  
Become one with the dust of the world  
This is called  
    “The Secret Embrace”

One who knows this secret  
    is not moved by attachment or aversion,  
    swayed by profit or loss,  
    nor touched by honor or disgrace  
He is far beyond the cares of men  
    yet comes to hold the dearest place in their hearts

## *Verse 57*

To rule the state, have a known plan  
To win a battle, have an unknown plan  
To gain the universe, have no plan at all

Let the universe itself  
    reveal to you its splendor  
How do I know this should be so?  
    Because of this—

The more restrictions, the more poverty  
The more weapons, the more fear in the land  
The more cleverness, the more strange events  
The more laws, the more lawbreakers

Thus the Sages say,  
    Act with a pure heart and the people will be transformed  
    Love your own life and the people will be uplifted  
    Give without conditions and the people will prosper  
    Want nothing and the people will find everything

## *Verse 58*

When the ruler knows his own heart  
the people are simple and pure  
When he meddles with their lives  
they become restless and disturbed

有

Bad fortune, yes—  
it rests upon good fortune  
Good fortune, yes—  
it hides within bad fortune  
Oh the things that Heaven sends—  
Who can know their final aim?  
Who can tell of their endless ways?  
Today the righteous turn to trickery  
Tomorrow the good turn to darkness  
Oh what delusion abounds  
and every day it grows worse!

But the Sage is here upon the Earth  
to gently guide us back  
He cuts but does not harm  
He straightens but does not disrupt  
He illumines but does not dazzle

## *Verse 59*

Rule the people and serve Heaven  
    yet hold nothing more dear than the Mother's harvest  
Let every thought and every breath  
    be the fruit of your offering—  
Do it now  
Let her power run thick in your blood  
    There will be no obstacle you cannot overcome  
    No limit you cannot surpass  
    No empire you cannot rule

Ah, but in all your glory  
    never lose sight of the Mother  
Without her  
    your empire will crumble  
    your power will waste away  
For the Mother brings the harvest  
    She alone causes all things to endure

We call this  
    “Deep roots and a solid trunk”  
    “The way of long life and lasting insight”

## *Verse 60*

Govern a nation as you would fry a small fish

卮

When Tao is present in the empire

dark spirits lose their power

It's not that they have no power

it's that their power can't harm anyone

When Tao is present

the people enjoy the blessings of Heaven

They find unity

They find peace

What's this about spirits doing harm?

The Sage is approaching

and they are rushing in to sweep his path!

## *Verse 61*

A great state is like a river basin  
that receives everything flowing into it  
It is the place where all things come to rest  
where all the world is welcomed

The low is greater than the high  
The still is greater than the restless  
The low country wins over its neighbor  
The still female wins over the male

The Sage wants to uplift the people  
The people want to follow the Sage  
only by being low does this come to be  
The Sage bows to the people  
The people bow to the Sage  
And when they lift up their heads  
only greatness remains

## Verse 62

Tao is the treasure-house  
the true nature  
the secret source of everything  
It is the great wealth of those who are awake  
the great protector of those still sleeping

If a person seems wicked  
do not cast him away—  
Awaken him with your words  
Elevate him with your deeds  
Requite his injury with your kindness  
Do not cast him away  
cast away his wickedness

欲

When the emperor is crowned  
or the three ministers installed  
they receive a gift of jade and horses  
But how can this compare  
to sitting still and gaining the treasure of Tao  
This is why the ancient masters  
honored the inward path of Tao

Did they not say  
“Seek and you will find”?  
“Err and you will be forgiven”?  
Within, within  
This is where the world’s treasure has always been

## Verse 63

Act without acting  
Give without giving  
Taste without tasting

Tao alone becomes all things great and all things small  
It is the One in many  
It is the many in One

Let Tao become all your actions  
then your wants will become your treasure  
your injury will become your blessing

後

Take on difficulties while they are still easy  
Do great things while they are still small  
Step by step the world's burden is lifted  
Piece by piece the world's treasure is amassed

So the Sage stays with his daily task  
and accomplishes the greatest thing  
Beware of those who promise a quick and easy way  
for much ease brings many difficulties

Follow your path to the end  
Accept difficulty as an opportunity  
This is the sure way to end up  
with no difficulties at all

## Verse 64

A still mind can easily hold the truth  
The difficulties yet to come can easily be avoided

The feeble are easily broken  
The small are easily scattered  
Begin your task before it becomes a burden  
Put things in order before they get out of hand  
Remember,  
A tree that fills a man's embrace grows from a seedling  
A tower nine stories high starts with one brick  
A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step

出

Act and it's ruined  
Grab and it's gone  
People on the verge of success often lose patience  
and fail in their undertakings  
Be steady from the beginning to the end  
and you won't bring on failure

同

The Sage desires that which has no desires  
and teaches that which cannot be taught  
He does not value the objects held by a few  
but only that which is held by everyone  
  
He guides men back to their own treasure  
and helps all things come to know

the truth they have forgotten  
All this he does without a stir

## *Verse 65*

The ancient ones were simple-hearted  
and blended with the common people  
They did not shine forth  
They did not rule with cleverness  
So the nation was blessed

Now the rulers are filled with clever ideas  
and the lives of people are filled with hardship  
So the nation is cursed

道

He who knows the play of Tao and Te  
knows the nature of the universe  
Tao brings forth Te from its own being  
Te expands in all directions  
filling every corner of the world  
becoming the splendor of all creation  
Yet at every moment Te seeks Tao  
This is the movement that guides the universe  
This is the impulse  
that leads all things back home

## *Verse 66*

Why do the hundred rivers  
turn and rush toward the sea?  
Because it naturally stays below them

He who wishes to rule over the people  
must speak as if below them  
He who wishes to lead the people  
must walk as if behind them  
So the Sage rules over the people  
but he does not weigh them down  
He leads the people  
but he does not block their way

The Sage stays low  
so the world never tires of exalting him  
He remains a servant  
so the world never tires of making him its king

## Verse 67

All the world talks about my Tao  
with such familiarity—  
What folly!  
Tao is not something found at the marketplace  
or passed on from father to son  
It is not something gained by knowing  
or lost by forgetting  
If Tao were like this  
It would have been lost and forgotten long ago

玄

I have three treasures that I cherish and hold dear  
the first is love  
the second is moderation  
the third is humility  
With love one is fearless  
With moderation one is abundant  
With humility one can fill the highest position  
Now if one is fearless but has no love  
abundant but has no moderation  
rises up but has no humility  
Surely he is doomed

Love vanquishes all attackers  
It is impregnable in defense  
When Heaven wants to protect someone  
does it send an army?  
No, it protects him with love

## *Verse 68*

The best warrior  
leads without haste  
fights without anger  
overcomes without confrontation  
He puts himself below  
and brings out the highest in his men

This is the virtue of not confronting  
of working with the abilities you have  
of complying with the laws of Heaven

This is the ancient path that leads to perfection

## *Verse 69*

The great warriors have a saying,  
“I dare not act as host  
    but would rather be a guest  
I dare not advance an inch  
    but would rather retreat a foot”

So advance but do not use your feet  
Seize but do not use your arms  
Cut but do not use your sword  
Fight but do not use your own power

There is no greater misfortune than feeling  
    “I have an enemy”  
For when “I” and “enemy” exist together  
    there is no room left for my treasure

Thus, when two opponents meet  
    the one without an enemy  
    will surely triumph

## *Verse 70*

My teachings are very easy to understand  
and very easy to practice  
Yet so few in this world understand  
and so few are able to practice

My words arise from that ancient source  
My actions are those of the universe itself  
If people do not know these  
how can they know me?

Those who follow my ways are rare  
and so I treasure them  
Even if they wear the clothes of a beggar  
they carry a priceless gem within

## *Verse 71*

Knowing what cannot be known—  
    what a lofty aim!  
Not knowing what needs to be known—  
    what a terrible result!

Only when your sickness becomes sick  
    will your sickness disappear

The Sage's illness has become ill  
    his renunciation has been renounced  
Now he is free  
And every place in this world  
    is the perfect place to be

## *Verse 72*

When the people do not fear worldly power  
a greater power will arrive

Don't limit the view of yourself  
Don't despise the conditions of your birth  
Don't resist the natural course of your life  
In this way you will never weary of this world

The Sage knows himself, but not as himself  
he loves himself, but not as himself  
he honors himself, but not as himself  
Thus, he discards the view of his own self  
and chooses the view of the universe

## *Verse 73*

Bold action against others leads to death  
Bold action in harmony with Tao leads to life

非

Good fortune, bad fortune  
One seems to bring benefit  
    the other to cause harm  
But Heaven rejects them both  
Both, in the end, tether men to this world

Who can know the reasons of Heaven?  
    Who can know its endless ways?  
Not even the Sage has an answer to this one

門

Heaven's way does not strive  
    yet it always overcomes  
It does not speak, yet it responds  
It is not summoned, yet it appears  
It does not hurry, yet it completes everything on time

The net of Heaven spans the universe  
    yet not the slightest thing ever slips by

## ***Verse 74***

If people do not fear death  
    why threaten them with it?  
But suppose they did fear death  
    and this was the fate handed to lawbreakers  
Who would dare to do the killing?

There is always a Lord of Death  
He who takes the place of the Lord of Death  
    is like one who cuts with the blade  
    of a master carpenter  
Whoever cuts with the blade of a master carpenter  
    is sure to cut his own hands

## *Verse 75*

Why are the people starving?—

Because their grain is being eaten up by taxes

That's why they're starving

Why are the people rebellious?—

Because those above them meddle in their lives

That's why they're rebellious

Why do the people regard death so lightly?—

Because they are so involved with their own living

That's why they regard death so lightly

In the end,

The treasure of life is missed by those who hold on

and gained by those who let go

## *Verse 76*

When life begins  
    we are tender and weak  
When life ends  
    we are stiff and rigid  
All things, including the grass and trees,  
    are soft and pliable in life  
    dry and brittle in death

So the soft and supple  
    are the companions of life  
While the stiff and unyielding  
    are the companions of death

An army that cannot yield  
    will be defeated  
A tree that cannot bend  
    will crack in the wind  
Thus by Nature's own decree  
    the hard and strong are defeated  
    while the soft and gentle are triumphant

## *Verse 77*

Heaven operates like the bending of a bow—  
the high it pulls down  
the low it brings up  
It takes from that which has too much  
And gives to that which has too little  
The way of man is otherwise—  
he takes from that which is depleted  
and gives to that which has too much

Who can offer an abundance to the world?—  
One who has Tao  
Such a one can give like the heavens

The Sage gives  
without relying on his own effort  
He completes  
without waiting for reward  
He illumines  
without stepping from the shadow

## *Verse 78*

Nothing in this world  
is as soft and yielding as water  
Yet for attacking the hard and strong  
none can triumph so easily  
It is weak, yet none can equal it  
It is soft, yet none can damage it  
It is yielding, yet none can wear it away

Everyone knows that the soft overcomes the hard  
and the yielding triumphs over the rigid  
Why then so little faith?  
Why can no one practice it?

So the Sages say,  
fulfill even the lowest position  
love even the weakest creature  
Then you will be called  
“Lord of every offering”  
“King of all below Heaven”

## *Verse 79*

After settling a great dispute  
    some resentment is sure to remain  
Being content with what you have  
    is always best in the end

The Sage always assumes the debt  
    as if holding the left side of a contract  
He gives and gives, and wants nothing in return

One with true virtue  
    always seeks a way to give  
One who lacks true virtue  
    always seeks a way to get  
To the giver comes the fullness of life  
    to the taker just an empty hand

Though the Tao of Heaven has no favorites  
    it always sides with one who has a pure heart

## *Verse 80*

Let every state be simple  
    like a small village with few people  
There may be tools to speed things up  
    ten or a hundred times  
    yet no one will care to use them  
There may be boats and carriages  
    yet they will remain without riders  
There may be armor and weaponry  
    yet they will sit collecting dust

The people must take death seriously  
    and not waste their lives in distant lands  
Let them return  
    to the knotting of cord  
Let them enjoy their food  
    and care for their clothing  
Let them be content in their homes  
    and joyful in the way they live

Neighboring villages are within sight of each other  
Roosters and dogs can be heard in the distance  
Should a man grow old and die  
    without ever leaving his village  
    let him feel as though there was nothing he missed

## *Verse 81*

Words born of the mind are not true  
True words are not born of the mind

Those who have virtue do not look for faults  
Those who look for faults have no virtue

Those who come to know It  
do not rely on learning  
Those who rely on learning  
do not come to know It

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The Sage sees the world  
as an expansion of his own self  
So what need has he to accumulate things?  
By giving to others  
he gains more and more  
By serving others  
he receives everything

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Heaven gives,  
and all things turn out for the best  
The Sage lives,  
and all things go as Tao goes  
all things move as the wind blows

## ***About the Author***

Jonathan Star has been widely acclaimed for his poetic and mystical translations of Rumi, Hafez, and the poet-saints of India. His previous works include *Rumi: In the Arms of the Beloved*, *A Garden Beyond Paradise*, and *The Inner Treasure*. He lives in upstate New York.



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