

About The Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching was written in China roughly 2,500 years ago at about the same time when Buddha expounded the Dharma in India and Pythagoras taught in Greece. The Tao Te Ching is probably the most influential Chinese book of all times. Its 81 chapters have been translated into English more times than any other Chinese document.

The Tao Te Ching provides the basis for the philosophical school of Taoism, which is an important pillar of Chinese thought. Taoism teaches that there is one undivided truth at the root of all things. It literally means:

道 = tao (the way)

德 = te (strength/virtue)

經 = ching (scripture)

The verses of the Tao Te Ching are written in ancient Chinese, which is very different from English. Abstraction and logic are not distinguishing marks of the ancient Chinese language, hence, it is less rigid than English and there are very few formal or grammatical structures. The classical Chinese word does not stand for a single concrete idea, but it evokes associations of different ideas and things. Quite a few Chinese words can be used as nouns, adjectives and verbs at the same time. Thus sentences composed of various signs have a sort of suggestive power, evoking emotions, ideas and pictures.

It is almost impossible to render an ancient Chinese text properly in English without losing some part. Different translations of the Tao Te Ching may appear as completely different texts. In order to understand the original text fully it is helpful to read various translations that consummate each other. The alternative is, of course, to learn Chinese. This document uses the translation of Tolbert McCarroll.

Yin And Yang



In Chinese philosophy, the rhythm of life, which pulsates through the universe, is the action of complementary principles Yin and Yang. The T'ai-chi T'u diagram (above) illustrates this principle. The symmetrical disposition of the dark Yin and the light Yang suggests cyclical changes.

Yin is the quiet, female, intuitive, receiving force that is associated with earth. The earth is the source of life; it provides us with what we need to survive. Yang is the strong, male, creative, giving force that is associated with heaven. The heaven above us is always in motion and brings about change.

When Yin reaches its climax, it recedes in favour of Yang, then after Yang reaches its climax it recedes in favour of Yin. This is the eternal cycle. The dots inside the white and black halves indicate that within each is the seed of the other. Yin cannot exist without Yang and vice versa.

The ideal state of things in the physical universe, as well as in the world of humans, is a state of harmony represented by the balance of Yin and Yang in body and mind.

Yin

- Night, Dark
- Rain, Water, Cold
- Winter, Autumn
- Odd Numbers
- The Moon
- North, West
- Right, Down
- Intuition
- Passive, Static
- Contraction
- Decreasing
- Conservative
- Traditional
- Valley
- River
- Curve
- Soft
- Solidifying
- Psychological
- Astral World
- Dragon
- Kidneys, Heart
- Liver, Lungs

Yang

- Day, Light
- Fire, Heat
- Summer, Spring
- Even Numbers
- The Sun
- South, East
- Left, Up
- Intellect
- Active, Dynamic
- Expansion
- Increasing
- Innovative
- Reformative
- Mountain
- Desert
- Straight Line
- Hard
- Dissolving
- Physical
- Visible World
- Tiger
- Bladder
- Intestines, Skin



1

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and Earth.
The named is the mother of the ten thousand things.

Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one sees the manifestations.

These two spring from the same source but differ in name; this appears as darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.

2

Under heaven all can see beauty as beauty only because there is ugliness.
All can know good as good only because there is evil.

Therefore having and not having arise together.
Difficult and easy complement each other.
Long and short contrast each other;
High and low rest upon each other;
Voice and sound harmonize each other;
Front and back follow one another.

Therefore the sage goes about doing nothing, teaching no-talking.
The ten thousand things rise and fall without cease,
Creating, yet not.
Working, yet not taking credit.
Work is done, then forgotten.
Therefore it lasts forever.

3

Not exalting the gifted prevents quarreling.
Not collecting treasures prevents stealing.
Not seeing desirable things prevents confusion of the heart.

The wise therefore rule by emptying hearts and stuffing bellies, by weakening ambitions and strengthening bones.

If men lack knowledge and desire, then clever people will not try to interfere.

If nothing is done, then all will be well.

4

The Tao is an empty vessel; it is used, but never filled.
Oh, unfathomable source of ten thousand things!
Blunt the sharpness,
Untangle the knot,
Soften the glare,
Merge with dust.
Oh, hidden deep but ever present!
I do not know from whence it comes.
It is the forefather of the gods.

5

Heaven and Earth are impartial;
They see the ten thousand things as straw dogs.
The wise are impartial;
They see the people as straw dogs.

The space between heaven and Earth is like a bellows.
The shape changes but not the form;
The more it moves, the more it yields.

More words count less.
Hold fast to the center.



6

The valley spirit never dies;
It is the woman, primal mother.
Her gateway is the root of heaven and
Earth.
It is like a veil barely seen.
Use it; it will never fail.

7

Heaven and Earth last forever.
Why do heaven and Earth last forever?
They are unborn,
So ever living.
The sage stays behind, thus he is
ahead.
He is detached, thus at one with all.
Through selfless action, he attains
fulfillment.

8

The highest good is like water.
Water give life to the ten thousand
things and does not strive.
It flows in places men reject and so is
like the Tao.

In dwelling, be close to the land.
In meditation, go deep in the heart.
In dealing with others, be gentle and
kind.
In speech, be true.
In ruling, be just.
In daily life, be competent.

In action, be aware of the time and the
season.

No fight: No blame.

9

Better to stop short than fill to the
brim.
Oversharpen the blade, and the edge
will soon blunt.
Amass a store of gold and jade, and no
one can protect it.
Claim wealth and titles, and disaster
will follow.
Retire when the work is done.
This is the way of heaven.

10

Carrying body and soul and embracing
the one,
Can you avoid separation?
Attending fully and becoming supple,
Can you be as a newborn babe?
Washing and cleansing the primal
vision,
Can you be without stain?
Loving all men and ruling the country,
Can you be without cleverness?
Opening and closing the gates of
heaven,
Can you play the role of woman?
Understanding and being open to all
things,
Are you able to do nothing?
Giving birth and nourishing,
Bearing yet not possessing,
Working yet not taking credit,
Leading yet not dominating,
This is the Primal Virtue.

11

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub;
It is the center hole that makes it
useful.
Shape clay into a vessel;
It is the space within that makes it
useful.
Cut doors and windows for a room;
It is the holes which make it useful.
Therefore benefit comes from what is
there;

Usefulness from what is not there.



12

The five colors blind the eye.
The five tones deafen the ear.
The five flavors dull the taste.
Racing and hunting madden the mind.
Precious things lead one astray.

Therefore the sage is guided by what
he feels and not by what he sees.
He lets go of that and chooses this.

13

Accept disgrace willingly.
Accept misfortune as the human
condition.

What do you mean by "Accept disgrace
willingly"?
Accept being unimportant.
Do not be concerned with loss or gain.
This is called "accepting disgrace
willingly."

What do you mean by "Accept
misfortune as the human condition"?
Misfortune comes from having a body.
Without a body, how could there be
misfortune?

Surrender yourself humbly; then you
can be trusted to care for all things.
Love the world as your own self; then
you can truly care for all things.

14

Look, it cannot be seen - it is beyond
form.
Listen, it cannot be heard - it is beyond
sound.
Grasp, it cannot be held - it is
intangible.
These three are indefinable;
Therefore they are joined in one.

From above it is not bright;
From below it is not dark:
An unbroken thread beyond
description.
It returns to nothingness.
The form of the formless,
The image of the imageless,
It is called indefinable and beyond
imagination.

Stand before it and there is no
beginning.
Follow it and there is no end.
Stay with the ancient Tao,
Move with the present.

Knowing the ancient beginning is the
essence of Tao.

15

The ancient masters were subtle,
mysterious, profound, responsive.
The depth of their knowledge is
unfathomable.
Because it is unfathomable,
All we can do is describe their
appearance.
Watchful, like men crossing a winter
stream.
Alert, like men aware of danger.
Courteous, like visiting guests.
Yielding like ice about to melt.
Simple, like uncarved blocks of wood.
Hollow, like caves.
Opaque, like muddy pools.

Who can wait quietly while the mud
settles?
Who can remain still until the moment
of action?
Observers of the Tao do not seek
fulfillment.

Not seeking fulfillment, they are not swayed by desire for change.



16

Empty yourself of everything.
Let the mind become still.
The ten thousand things rise and fall
while the Self watches their return.
They grow and flourish and then
return to the source.
Returning to the source is stillness,
which is the way of nature.
The way of nature is unchanging.
Knowing constancy is insight.
Not knowing constancy leads to
disaster.
Knowing constancy, the mind is open.
With an open mind, you will be
openhearted.
Being openhearted, you will act
royally.
Being royal, you will attain the divine.
Being divine, you will be at one with
the Tao.
Being at one with the Tao is eternal.
And though the body dies, the Tao will
never pass away.

17

The very highest if barely known.
Then comes that which people know
and love.
Then that which is feared,
Then that which is despised.

Who does not trust enough will not be
trusted.

When actions are performed
Without unnecessary speech,
People say, "We did it!"

18

When the great Tao is forgotten,
Kindness and morality arise.
When wisdom and intelligence are
born,
The great pretense begins.

When there is no peace within the
family,
Filial piety and devotion arise.
When the country is confused and in
chaos,
Loyal ministers appear.

19

Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom,
And it will be a hundred times better
for everyone.

Give up kindness, renounce morality,
And men will rediscover filial piety
and love.

Give up ingenuity, renounce profit,
And bandits and thieves will
disappear.

These three are outward forms alone;
they are not sufficient in themselves.
It is more important
To see the simplicity,
To realize one's true nature,
To cast off selfishness
And temper desire.

20

Give up learning, and put an end to
your troubles.

Is there a difference between yes and
no?
Is there a difference between good and
evil?
Must I fear what others fear? What
nonsense!
Other people are contented, enjoying
the sacrificial feast of the ox.

In spring some go to the park, and
 climb the terrace,
 But I alone am drifting, not knowing
 where I am.
 Like a newborn babe before it learns to
 smile,
 I am alone, without a place to go.
 Others have more than they need, but
 I alone have nothing.
 I am a fool. Oh, yes! I am confused.
 Others are clear and bright,
 But I alone am dim and weak.
 Others are sharp and clever,
 But I alone am dull and stupid.
 Oh, I drift like the waves of the sea,
 Without direction, like the restless
 wind.
 Everyone else is busy,
 But I alone am aimless and depressed.
 I am different.
 I am nourished by the great mother.



21

The greatest Virtue is to follow Tao
 and Tao alone.
 The Tao is elusive and intangible.
 Oh, it is intangible and elusive, and yet
 within is image.
 Oh, it is elusive and intangible, and yet
 within is form.
 Oh, it is dim and dark, and yet within
 is essence.
 This essence is very real, and therein
 lies faith.
 From the very beginning until now its
 name has never been forgotten.
 Thus I perceive the creation.
 How do I know the ways of creation?
 Because of this.

22

Yield and overcome;
 Bend and be straight;
 Empty and be full;
 Wear out and be new;
 Have little and gain;
 Have much and be confused.

Therefore the wise embrace the one
 And set an example to all.
 Not putting on a display,
 They shine forth.
 Not justifying themselves,
 They are distinguished.
 Not boasting,
 They receive recognition.
 Not bragging,
 They never falter.
 They do not quarrel,
 So no one quarrels with them.
 Therefore the ancients say, "Yield and
 overcome."
 Is that an empty saying?
 Be really whole,
 And all things will come to you.

23

To talk little is natural.
 High winds do not last all morning.
 Heavy rain does not last all day.
 Why is this? Heaven and Earth!
 If heaven and Earth cannot make
 things eternal,
 How is it possible for man?
 He who follows the Tao
 Is at one with the Tao.
 He who is virtuous
 Experiences Virtue.
 He who loses the way
 Is lost.
 When you are at one with the Tao,
 The Tao welcomes you.
 When you are at one with Virtue,
 The Virtue is always there.
 When you are at one with loss,
 The loss is experienced willingly.

He who does not trust enough
 Will not be trusted.



24

He who stands on tiptoe is not steady.
He who strides cannot maintain the
pace.
He who makes a show is not
enlightened.
He who is self-righteous is not
respected.
He who boasts achieves nothing.
He who brags will not endure.
According to followers of the Tao,
"These are extra food and unnecessary
luggage."
They do not bring happiness.
therefore followers of the Tao avoid
them.

25

Something mysteriously formed,
Born before heaven and Earth.
In the silence and the void,
Standing alone and unchanging,
Ever present and in motion.
Perhaps it is the mother of ten
thousand things.
I do not know its name
Call it Tao.
For lack of a better word, I call it great.

Being great, it flows
I flows far away.
Having gone far, it returns.

Therefore, "Tao is great;
Heaven is great;
Earth is great;
The king is also great."
These are the four great powers of the
universe,

And the king is one of them.

Man follows Earth.
Earth follows heaven.
Heaven follows the Tao.
Tao follows what is natural.

26

The heavy is the root of the light.
The still is the master of unrest.

Therefore the sage, traveling all day,
Does not lose sight of his baggage.
Though there are beautiful things to be
seen,
He remains unattached and calm.

Why should the lord of ten thousand
chariots act lightly in public?
To be light is to lose one's root.
To be restless is to lose one's control.

27

A good walker leaves no tracks;
A good speaker makes no slips;
A good reckoner needs no tally.
A good door needs no lock,
Yet no one can open it.
Good binding requires no knots,
Yet no one can loosen it.

Therefore the sage takes care of all
men
And abandons no one.
He takes care of all things
And abandons nothing.

This is called "following the light."

What is a good man?
A teacher of a bad man.
What is a bad man?
A good man's charge.
If the teacher is not respected,
And the student not cared for,
Confusion will arise, however clever
one is.
This is the crux of mystery.

28

Know the strength of man,

But keep a woman's care!
Be the stream of the universe!
Being the stream of the universe,
Ever true and unswerving,
Become as a little child once more.

Know the white,
But keep the black!
Be an example to the world!
Being an example to the world,
Ever true and unwavering,
Return to the infinite.

Know honor,
Yet keep humility.
Be the valley of the universe!
Being the valley of the universe,
Ever true and resourceful,
Return to the state of the uncarved
block.

When the block is carved, it becomes
useful.
When the sage uses it, he becomes the
ruler.
Thus, "A great tailor cuts little."



29

Do you think you can take over the
universe and improve it?
I do not believe it can be done.

The universe is sacred.
You cannot improve it.
If you try to change it, you will ruin it.
If you try to hold it, you will lose it.

So sometimes things are ahead and
sometimes they are behind;

Sometimes breathing is hard,
sometimes it comes easily;
Sometimes there is strength and
sometimes weakness;
Sometimes one is up and sometimes
down.

Therefore the sage avoids extremes,
excesses, and complacency.

30

Whenever you advise a ruler in the
way of Tao,
Counsel him not to use force to
conquer the universe.
For this would only cause resistance.
Thorn bushes spring up wherever the
army has passed.
Lean years follow in the wake of a
great war.
Just do what needs to be done.
Never take advantage of power.

Achieve results,
But never glory in them.
Achieve results,
But never boast.
Achieve results,
But never be proud.
Achieve results,
Because this is the natural way.
Achieve results,
But not through violence.

Force is followed by loss of strength.
This is not the way of Tao.
That which goes against the Tao comes
to an early end.

31

Good weapons are instruments of fear;
all creatures hate them.
Therefore followers of Tao never use
them.
The wise man prefers the left.
The man of war prefers the right.

Weapons are instruments of fear;
they are not a wise man's tools.
He uses them only when he has no
choice.
Peace and quiet are dear to his heart,

And victory no cause for rejoicing.
If you rejoice in victory, then you
delight in killing;
If you delight in killing, you cannot
fulfill yourself.

On happy occasions precedence is
given to the left,
On sad occasions to the right.
In the army the general stands on the
left,
The commander-in-chief on the right.
This means that war is conducted like
a funeral.
When many people are being killed,
They should be mourned in heartfelt
sorrow.
That is why a victory must be observed
like a funeral.



32

The Tao is forever undefined.
Small though it is in the unformed
state, it cannot be grasped.
If kings and lords could harness it,
The ten thousand things would come
together
And gentle rain fall.
Men would need no more instruction
and all things would take their course.

Once the whole is divided, the parts
need names.
There are already enough names.
One must know when to stop.
Knowing when to stop averts trouble.
Tao in the world is like a river flowing
home to the sea.

33

Knowing others is wisdom;
Knowing the self is enlightenment.
Mastering others requires force;
Mastering the self needs strength.

He who knows he has enough is rich.
Perseverance is a sign of willpower.
He who stays where he is endures.
To die but not to perish is to be
eternally present.

34

The great Tao flows everywhere,
both to the left and to the right.
The ten thousand things depend upon
it;
it holds nothing back.
It fulfills its purpose silently and
makes no claim.

It nourishes the ten thousand things,
And yet is not their lord.
It has no aim; it is very small.

The ten thousand things return to it,
Yet it is not their lord.
It is very great.

It does not show greatness,
And is therefore truly great.

35

All men will come to him who keeps to
the one,
For there lie rest and happiness and
peace.

Passersby may stop for music and
good food,
But a description of the Tao
Seems without substance or flavor.
It cannot be seen, it cannot be heard,
And yet it cannot be exhausted.

36

That which shrinks
Must first expand.
That which fails
Must first be strong.

That which is cast down
Must first be raised.
Before receiving
There must be giving.

This is called perception of the nature
of things.
Soft and weak overcome hard and
strong.

Fish cannot leave deep waters,
And a country's weapons should not be
displayed.

37

Tao abides in non-action,
Yet nothing is left undone.
If kings and lords observed this,
The ten thousand things would
develop naturally.
If they still desired to act,
They would return to the simplicity of
formless substance.
Without for there is no desire.
Without desire there is.
And in this way all things would be at
peace.



38

A truly good man is not aware of his
goodness,
And is therefore good.
A foolish man tries to be good,
And is therefore not good.

A truly good man does nothing,
Yet leaves nothing undone.
A foolish man is always doing,
Yet much remains to be done.

When a truly kind man does
something, he leaves nothing undone.
When a just man does something, he
leaves a great deal to be done.
When a disciplinarian does something
and no one responds,
He rolls up his sleeves in an attempt to
enforce order.

Therefore when Tao is lost, there is
goodness.
When goodness is lost, there is
kindness.
When kindness is lost, there is justice.
When justice is lost, there ritual.
Now ritual is the husk of faith and
loyalty, the beginning of confusion.
Knowledge of the future is only a
flowery trapping of Tao.
It is the beginning of folly.

Therefore the truly great man dwells
on what is real and not what is on the
surface,
On the fruit and not the flower.
Therefore accept the one and reject the
other.

39

These things from ancient times arise
from one:
The sky is whole and clear.
The earth is whole and firm.
The spirit is whole and strong.
The valley is whole and full.
The ten thousand things are whole and
alive.
Kings and lords are whole, and the
country is upright.
All these are in virtue of wholeness.

The clarity of the sky prevents its
falling.
The firmness of the earth prevents its
splitting.
The strength of the spirit prevents its
being used up.
The fullness of the valley prevents its
running dry.
The growth of the ten thousand things
prevents their drying out.

The leadership of kings and lords
prevents the downfall of the country.

Therefore the humble is the root of the
noble.

The low is the foundation of the high.
Princes and lords consider themselves
"orphaned", "widowed" and
"worthless".

Do they not depend on being humble?

Too much success is not an advantage.
Do not tinkle like jade
Or clatter like stone chimes.



40

Returning is the motion of the Tao.
Yielding is the way of the Tao.
The ten thousand things are born of
being.
Being is born of not being.

41

The wise student hears of the Tao and
practices it diligently.
The average student hears of the Tao
and gives it thought now and again.
The foolish student hears of the Tao
and laughs aloud.
If there were no laughter, the Tao
would not be what it is.

Hence it is said:
The bright path seems dim;
Going forward seems like retreat;
The easy way seems hard;
The highest Virtue seems empty;
Great purity seems sullied;

A wealth of Virtue seems inadequate;
The strength of Virtue seems frail;
Real Virtue seems unreal;
The perfect square has no corners;
Great talents ripen late;
The highest notes are hard to hear;
The greatest form has no shape;
The Tao is hidden and without name.
The Tao alone nourishes and brings
everything to fulfillment.

42

The Tao begot one.
One begot two.
Two begot three.
And three begot the ten thousand
things.

The ten thousand things carry yin and
embrace yang.
They achieve harmony by combining
these forces.

Men hate to be "orphaned,"
"widowed," or "worthless,"
But this is how kings and lords
describe themselves.

For one gains by losing
And loses by gaining.

What others teach, I also teach; that is:
"A violent man will die a violent
death!"
This will be the essence of my
teaching.

43

The softest thing in the universe
Overcomes the hardest thing in the
universe.
That without substance can enter
where there is no room.
Hence I know the value of non-action.

Teaching without words and work
without doing
Are understood by very few.