LAO TZU
TAO TE CHING
(Classic of the Way and how to live by it)

BY THE WAY

English translation with footnotes and illustrations by John Stubbs
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TAO TE CHING – Classic of the Way and how to live by it.

No one knows who wrote the Tao Te Ching. Historian Sima Qian (ca. 100 B.C.) said it was written by Lao Tzu (Old One), around 500 B.C. The earliest known text, written in Chinese ink on bamboo strips, has been dated to sometime before 300 B.C. That text was discovered in a tomb in Guodian, Hubei Province, in 1993.

The Tao Te Ching has two interwoven themes.
One theme describes the Way – the universe and the way it works. If we are created and supported by the Way, it makes sense to align with the Way in our living.

The other theme offers guidelines on how to live in alignment with the Way.
These guidelines are simple, straightforward instructions on how to behave: be compassionate, frugal and restrained; do not argue; be calm; flexible softness overcomes rigidity; the irritable lose their mastery, etc.

Although these instructions are simple enough, their widespread adoption has been thwarted by the difficulty readers have had understanding the first theme – the description of the universe and the way it works:

“The essence of creation is without form.
The mother of creation is in the form of all things.” (Ch.1)

“The Way always appears as nameless, unformed substance.
However insignificant it may seem, the world cannot control it.” (Ch.32)

All things under heaven originate in its form.
Form in turn originates in formlessness.” (Ch.40)

My premise is that these and similar statements are prophetic. They foretell an astonishing discovery that twenty-first century astrophysics is just beginning to grasp – we can only account for galactic motion and the continued expansion of the visible universe by postulating an enormous component of invisible dark matter and dark energy that we cannot detect. The universe has 25 times more energy and matter than all the galaxies and intergalactic gases put together, and 96 percent of it is invisible, formless dark matter and dark energy that interpenetrates everything, everywhere! We can’t detect it, but by inference, it must be there.

The invisible, undetectable dark energy that supports the cosmos is also the Way that supports human existence. Within that context, the Tao Te Ching offers simple, practical instructions for living in harmony with the Way.

The Tao Te Ching is not an intellectual exercise. It is an invitation to live in harmony with the Way, if you choose to do so.
道可道非恒道名可名非恒名
无名天地之始有名万物之母
故恒无欲以观其妙恒有欲以观其徼此两者同出而异名同谓之玄玄之又玄众妙之门

Chinese text of Tao Te Ching chapter one - John Stubbs, 2010
THE ETERNAL WAY

The eternal Way and its name are not known.

The essence of creation is without form.
The mother of creation is in the form of all things.

Focus on the eternally formless to perceive the essence.
Focus on the eternally formed to perceive the nature of things.

These two issue from one source, and differ only in name.
Call that source mystery.

Mystery of mysteries, gate of all wonder.

"Gate of all wonder"

"Tai Chi and the Eight Trigrams"

Chapter One is the cornerstone of the TAO TE CHING. The Way divides into the complementary duality of essence and form. The intimate union of these two produces the universe of all things seen and unseen.
DUALITIES

The world judges some things as beautiful,
so other things are ugly.
Because some are judged to be good, others are evil.

So the comparisons arise:
achieving and lacking in production,
difficult and easy in accomplishment,
long and short in measurement,
high and low in position,
voice and instrument in harmony,
first and last in sequence.

The wise avoid judgment
and teach without words.
They accept all things as they are,
produce but do not possess,
act without anxiety for results,
succeed but do not claim success.

Because they do not claim success,
success never leaves them.

Essence and form constitute a complementary duality. Subjective human judgment produces dualities of opposites such as beautiful and ugly, good and evil. The wise, those who follow the Way, refrain from making those judgments.
GOVERNMENT GUIDELINES

Do not exalt the worthy
and people will not contend for position.
Do not prize rare things and give them value
and people will not steal them.
Do not display desirable things
and people will not be tempted by them.

The wise govern by calming the hearts of the people
and reinforcing their centering.
They downplay personal ambition
and focus on strength of character.

When people are innocent and free from desire
the cunning dare not touch them.

The wise act, but do not interfere,
and the whole world is under control.

WEI WU WEI, act without interfering, appears here for the first time.
Because it seems self-contradictory, it has left many readers confused. In
the context of the whole of the Lao Tzu, it commands that action be pure
and clean, motivated only by the Way, free of human design and
manipulation.
HYMN TO THE WAY

The Way is a void filled with inexhaustible energy.
So deep!
The origin of everything.

It blunts sharpness and loosens knots,
softens glare and merges with the dusty world.

So serene and still!
It goes on forever.

I do not know whose child it is.
It is like a preface to God.

Does this chapter anticipate the recent scientific discovery that all of the known matter and energy of our universe is a mere four percent of what exists in the universe as a whole? Undetectable dark matter and dark energy account for the other ninety-six percent. In any event, both this chapter and that discovery help to put human activity in perspective.
NO FAVOURITISM

Heaven and earth are impartial.
They treat all creatures the same.
The wise are impartial.
They treat all people the same.

Within heaven and earth is a bellows,
empty yet not collapsing.
Its movement brings forth life in abundance.

Words cannot explain it.
Staying centered is the best you can do.

The Way supports all of its forms – predator and prey, parasites and those they bite, the just and the unjust. Those who live in alignment with natural law, prosper. All experience the consequences of their actions. In this way the body of life is self-regulating, and the health of the whole is preserved.

In the context of the Tao Te Ching, impartial means even-handed. It does not imply indifference.
VALLEY SPIRIT

The valley spirit never dies.
Call it female mystery,
Mother of heaven and earth.

Eternally present,
giving birth without labor.

“This Pines”

This chapter returns to the anthem tone that recurs throughout the Lao Tzu. It refers to the mother of all created things as the valley spirit, and confirms its eternal presence and constancy. Uncritical openness and acceptance, characterized by the valley image, is often used to describe the Way.
NO SELFISHNESS

Heaven is long lasting and the earth endures.  
This is because they do not live for themselves.

Such is the policy of the wise.  
They stay behind, yet lead.  
They remain outside, yet they are in.

Is it not a paradox?  
Only by letting selfishness go  
may the self be found.

Selfishness well describes the human condition. Returning to the wholeness of the Way requires letting go of self-centered selfishness, and experiencing the natural self. We are called to emulate heaven and earth, which endure because they do not live for themselves.
VALUE

High value is like water. Water has value because it is of benefit to all and does not contend.

Willing to occupy a lowly position, it is therefore close to the Way.


Those who do not contend remain free of contention.

This is the first use of water as a symbol of the Way. Water is an apt symbol for the Way because it adapts to every situation without objecting.
COMMON SENSE

Holding on to a thing beyond its time is a mistake.

An oversharpened blade does not keep its edge.

A hall full of valuables is difficult to guard.

Pride in wealth and position is asking for trouble.

Succeed and then step back.
That is the way of heaven.

“Jade Horse”

Chapter Nine contains a few maxims of self-evident wisdom. The secret here is not in knowing these things, but in acting in accordance with them.
NATURE OF THE WAY

Govern your human self. Hold to the One.
Can you do that without wavering?
Concentrate your spirit breath to become supple.
Can you be like a newborn?
Clean and purify your deepest vision.
Can you be without blemish?
Rule the country and care for the people.
Can you do that without scheming?
Be like the earth mother.
Can you open and close heaven's gate?
Clearly see everything that happens in the world.
Can you do that without interfering?

Bring things forth and help them to grow.
Produce but do not possess.
Act without anxiety for results.
Lead but do not manipulate.

Such is the subtle nature of the Way.

This series of instructions and questions must be read more with the heart than with the head. The key is living, not just memorizing principles.
SPACE

Thirty spokes may converge in the hub of a wheel, but the hole in the hub makes it useful on a cart. Clay is shaped to form a bowl, but its ability to contain something makes the bowl useful. Cut out doors and windows to make a room, but the space between the walls makes the room useful.

So it is that advantage is had by what is there and usefulness comes from what is not.

These are examples of the usefulness of physical space. A container is useful because it can contain something. This principle applies in a psychological sense to human beings. Ideas can only enter a mind that is open to receive them. A closed mind is a wheel with no hole in the hub.
NO DISTRACTIONS

An excess of images overwhelms the eye.
An excess of sound deafens the ear.
An excess of flavours dulls the palate.

Passionate pursuits lead to madness.
Desire for rare goods is a distraction.

The wise, therefore,
focus on their inner state and not externals.
They cleave to the one and let the other go.
NOTHING PERSONAL

Treat favour and disgrace as simply surprises. Taking them personally will bring you grief.

Why treat favour and disgrace as simply surprises? Favour brings elation and depression. Attaining it, one is elated. Losing it, one is depressed. It is better to treat them both as simply surprises.

Why does honour taken personally lead to grief? When honour is lost, my ego feels grief. When I am without ego, where did the grief go?

Therefore let your honour serve the world and you may be useful in the world. Love the world as yourself and you may be entrusted with the world.

The ups and downs of human emotions are unavoidable as long as the ego dominates. The last four lines contain Lao Tzu's prescription for dealing with the ego-self: it is transcended when we live a life of unconditional love and service.
FORMLESSNESS

You look but cannot see it. Call it invisible.
You listen but cannot hear it. Call it silent.
You reach out but cannot touch it. Call it intangible.

Although we cannot see it or hear it or touch it,
and it seems like a puzzle, we call it the One.

It is not dazzling above, nor is it dark below.
Forever nameless, returning always to the unmanifest,
we call it form without form, the formless image.

So it is elusive.
Go to meet it, you see no head.
Follow it, you see no back.

Cleave to the ancient Way to deal with the present.
Be aware of the ancient beginnings.
This is called the unbroken thread of the Way.

Lao Tzu again returns to the anthem tone, in a passage that must be read
with the heart as much as with the intellect. The chapter ends with an
invitation to live in harmony with this something that cannot be seen or
touched, yet is forever present.
HOW TO BEHAVE

Those of old who practised the Way
were subtle and deep in their understanding.
They did not display their strength.

They cannot be described, but I will try to describe them.

*Careful*, as if crossing a stream in winter.
*Cautious*, as if living in uncertain times.
*Correct*, like a polite visitor.
*Yielding*, like melting ice.
*Simple* as the uncarved block.
*Spacious* as a broad valley.
*Unfathomable* as the murky depths.

Their dignity spoke so loudly, that
even in a confusing situation
they could be quiet and slowly bring about clarity,
much as a woman uses pressure
to gradually give birth to a child.

These keepers of the Way did not seek fulfillment.
Whatever happened, they endured and were renewed.

Those who live by the Way do not seek recognition, and they work quietly.
They know how to bring clarity where there is confusion. The seven words
in **bold italics** correspond to the Chinese characters at the left, from the
original document. Not a bad credo for life in **these** uncertain times.
CYCLE OF DESTINY

Touch ultimate emptiness. Be perfectly still.
You will know that all things have one source;
you will understand return.

However great the profusion, all things return to their roots.
This is stillness, moving with the cycle of destiny.
Moving with destiny is eternal.
Enlightenment is knowing the eternal
Not knowing it invites disaster.

Knowing the eternal brings tolerance.
Tolerance is impartial.
Impartiality is wholeness. Wholeness is natural.
Natural is the Way. The Way is everlasting.

Thus life is without peril.

Lao Tzu rarely mentions technique, although this chapter is an exception.
Steady inner stillness opens the door to the realization of the oneness of all things, and the cyclical nature of life. Death holds no terror for those who harmonize with the cycle of destiny.
TRANSPARENCY

Superior leadership is transparent.
The next is honoured and loved.
The next, respected.
The lowest, despised.

Where trust is lacking, trust is not inspired.

But when the word comes gently
and the work is done,
the people all say, "We did it by ourselves".

Symbol of natural, uncontrived simplicity

This chapter deals with leadership. The highest leadership, like the Way, is transparent. It is simply there, aware of the situation and all of the factors involved, but never forcing things by arbitrary imposition. It extends trust, thereby inspiring trust in those who are led.
DISINTEGRATION

Abandon the great Way;
charity and morality arise,
followed by clever intelligence
and gross hypocrisy.

Natural relationships give way to dutiful observance.

The nation falls into confusion.
Loyal ministers appear.

"Feeling the time, the flowers are crying" – poem by Du Fu, 757 A.D.

When the natural Way is forgotten, people resort to humanly devised substitutes, such as duty and morality. But humanly devised systems erode over time, and lead ultimately to a confused and degraded state. Self-proclaimed loyalty is the ultimate irony of the human condition.
RETURN TO SIMPLICITY

Renounce piety, forget cleverness;  
the people will benefit a hundredfold.  
Renounce benevolence, forget justice;  
let people return to natural love.  
Renounce achievement, forget profit;  
thievery will cease.

And if these three ideas do not suffice,  
then live by these:  
  seek purity;  
  embrace simplicity;  
  reduce selfishness;  
  control desire.

Chapter 18 traces the decline from the wholeness of the natural Way to  
the husk of contrived form and mere existence. This chapter presents  
what must be done to return to naturalness: renounce humanly devised  
values, and focus on such things as purity, simplicity and unselfishness.
AWARENESS

Do away with mindless following:
a clear yes and servile acquiescence
are as far apart as good and evil.
To be forbidden to think for yourself
is to live in darkness.

Others are bright and shining, as if attending a great celebration
or enjoying prosperity and peace.
I alone am quiet, not yet begun, like a child before it laughs.
Drifting, with no place to call home.

Others all have in abundance, and I alone am lacking.
My mind appears vacant, confused.
Worldly people scintillate. I am dark and obscure.
Worldly people are sharp and exacting. I am dull and subdued.
Others all have useful pursuits, while I seem stubborn and far away.

I am different from others.
I am aware that I am nourished by the mother of all.

The complementary duality of essence and form creates this universe and
supports all of its forms. Those who follow the Tao never forget that.
Nothing can distract them from their awareness of being one with source.
NATURE OF THE FATHER

The expression of true character is yielded only to the Way.

The nature of the Way is full of awe and mystery.
Mystery! Awe! It contains the laws of heaven.
Awe! Mystery! It contains matter.
Secluded! Deep! It contains life seed.
That seed is absolute reality. It contains truth.

From of old until now, manifesting without end,
it holds us as one in the father of all.

How do I know the nature of the father?

By this.

The "life seed" is the essence of spirit that impregnates mother nature.
From the union of father and mother, the 10,000 things are born. The only way to know that things are like this is "By this", by moving in the flow that carries this understanding.
EMBRACE THE ONE

It
straightens the bent,
rights the wrongs,
fills the hollows,
renews the exhausted,
finds the missing,
perplexes the overblown.

Therefore the wise embrace the One,
and serve as a model for the world.

Not self-absorbed, they have vision.
Not self-righteous, they stand out.
Not self-serving, they are acclaimed.
Not self-important, they can lead.

Because they do not contend,
no one in the world can contend with them.

"It straightens the bent..." is an ancient saying.
Is it an empty phrase?

If you would be whole, follow it.

The Way uses its gentle power to restore natural balance in the world. The wise follow this example by living lives of unselfish service. They seek no credit or acclaim as they unobtrusively fulfill their commission. They do not argue.
RESTRAINT

Nature rarely speaks.
Gusty winds and sudden rains are brief.
Where do they come from? Heaven and earth.
If heaven and earth do not exceed their own nature,
how futile for man to try!

So it is that those who follow the Way become one with it.
Those who are true to their nature become natural.
Failures identify with loss.

The Way delights in those who follow it.
Nature welcomes those who are natural.
The abyss receives whoever falls into it.

Where trust is lacking, trust is not inspired.

Expression determines experience. If you express the qualities of the Way,
you become one with that. Express your true nature and you will become
one with that. Expressing failure leads to becoming a failure. We choose
our individual expression, and that establishes our experience. Trust the
Way, and discover the trust that the Way extends.
BALANCE

On tiptoe your stance is unsteady.
Long striding is no way to walk.
The self-absorbed lack vision.
Self-righteousness is not distinguished.
Self-praise has nothing to recommend it.
The self-important make poor leaders.

To those of the Way,
these are like excess food or wasted motion,
unnatural.

People of the Way avoid such things.

CREATIVE FUSION

A state of fusion preceded the beginning of creation.
Silent, infinite, unwavering, alone.
Bringing forth everywhere, inexhaustible,
Mother of all.

I do not know its name. I call it the Way.

Forced to describe it, I call it great.
Great means expanding.
Expanding means far-reaching.
Far-reaching means returning.

So the Way, heaven, earth and those who lead are all great.
Four greats reside at the center, and the leader is one of them.

Humans conform to the earth,
The earth conforms to heaven,
Heaven conforms to the Way,
The Way conforms to its own nature.

This chapter returns to the nature of the Way, the mystery of mysteries first mentioned in Chapter One. The Way moves in cycles, expanding, reaching out, returning. By conforming to their natural place in the pattern of things, humans conform to the Way.
PRIORITIES

The heavy is foundation for the light.
Calm is the master of irritation.

Those who know this can go anywhere
and not forget their priorities.
They remain calm in the midst of spectacular surroundings.

How could the commander of 10,000 chariots
set a frivolous example in the world?

The frivolous lose their foundation.
The irritable lose their mastery.

"Trent River Valley, Ontario"

Those who wear the mantle of leadership never behave in a frivolous manner. They can enjoy their surroundings without forgetting their responsibilities. They do not succumb to irritability. Their presence radiates a calming influence.
SAVING THINGS

Good roads have no ruts.
Good words are without error.
Good plans are not contrived.
A well-locked door has no visible bolt
and cannot be opened.
A well-made knot has no loose ends
and cannot be untied.

So it is that the wise are good at saving others
so that none are lost;
good at saving things, so that nothing is wasted.
This is called bearing the light.

Therefore the good are the teachers of those who are not.
Those who are not good are the responsibility of those who are.

Those who do not value their teachers,
or care for their responsibilities,
may consider themselves wise, yet know nothing at all.

Such is the essence of significance.

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This chapter defines good as competent and excellent, not morally superior. It then states that the wise are good at saving people and things, so that nothing is wasted. They accept the responsibility of teaching others by their example. Wise students value their teachers.
PRESERVING THE FORCE

Know the male, but abide in the female.
Be receptive,
and the eternal nature of things never leaves the world.
This is returning to childhood.

Know the bright, but keep the darkness.
Be an example,
and the eternal nature of things never wavers in the world.
This is returning to the infinite.

Know glory and fame, but remain in the background.
Be like the valley,
and the eternal nature of things
does not lose its foundation in the world.
This is returning to the simplicity of the unformed.

Simplicity differentiates itself into talents
which the wise use to manage the world.

By such means the integrity of the great force is maintained.

By their receptivity, the example of their own lives, and their unobtrusive presence, the wise ensure the continuation of the eternal nature of things at the level of human awareness. They use all things to serve the great force and manage the world.
LET IT BE

The world is an instrument that cannot be manipulated. I see that attempts to do so are doomed from the start. To try is to fail. To grasp it is to lose it.

In the natural order of things,
  some lead while others follow,
  some breathe softly while others blow loudly,
  some grow strong while others weaken,
  some prosper while others decline.

It therefore follows that the wise let go of inclinations to be extreme, or extravagant, or excessive.

“Washday”

Wise government is absolutely free of any manipulative intention. The wise live in the awareness that true government is never imposed. It is an inherent quality of the Way, and requires no human intervention.
NO FORCE

To serve your leader according to the Way, do not use force. Such action invites reaction.

Thorny brambles grow where legions dwell. Great armies leave disaster in their wake.

Those who are good have resolve yet are reluctant to use force. They are not given to boasting, display or pride. They do not seek to acquire or use power.

To cause what is flourishing to decline before its time is not in accordance with the Way. What is not in accordance with the Way does not endure.

The Way gives each created thing the space to fulfill its own natural destiny. The wise follow suit. They seek nothing. They ask for nothing. Their fulfillment comes from moving in harmony with the Way. They do not seek power or fame, and are content to go unrecognized in the world.
SHARP WEAPONS

Sharp weapons are instruments of bad fortune, abhorrent to nature. People of the Way avoid them. The refined favour the gentler left side. Warriors favour the right, the hand of action.

Weapons are instruments of bad fortune, not used by gentle people except with utmost restraint and as a last resort.

Victory in battle is not beautiful. Those who think it is, take pleasure in killing. Such people can never find fulfillment under heaven.

It is better to mark your victory with a funeral march.

This reinforces the hands-off approach of the previous chapter, offering special caution in the use of sharp weapons. The wise take no pleasure in either winning or killing, becoming involved in battle only as a last resort.
KNOW WHEN TO STOP

The Way always appears as nameless, unformed substance. However insignificant it may seem, the world cannot control it.

When leaders live by it, the 10,000 things take care of themselves. Heaven and earth unite to bring down sweet rain. People live in natural equality, of their own accord.

When substance begins to take form, and names and distinctions arise, take care. Know when to stop. It is dangerous to go too far.

Compare the Way in the world with valley streams that flow into rivers and seas.

The Way is naturally nameless and formless. It differentiates itself into forms to serve its own purposes. The wise know this, and refrain from interfering, or attempting to interpret the significance of things. They simply move with the flow, accepting things as they are.
KNOW THYSELF

Those who know others are intelligent.
Those who know themselves are wise.

Those who have mastery over others are powerful.
Those who have mastery over themselves are strong.

Those who are content are wealthy.
Those who persevere retain their focus.
Those who remain purposeful, endure.
Those who die without perishing, live out their years.

To see yourself clearly is a high form of knowing. To die without perishing is to let selfishness die while you are alive.
SUPPORT

The great Way overflows both left and right.
All things depend on it for growth, and it does not desert them.
Working perfectly, namelessly,
it clothes and nourishes all things without lording over them.

Absolutely without desire, it seems insignificant.
All things belong to it, yet it does not act as lord.
It can be called great.

Finally, because it claims no greatness,
its greatness is assured.

This is both a description of the Way, and advice to the wise. Be a fountain of energy, giving life to all. Be free from desire for fame. Everything you need has been provided from the beginning.
INEXHAUSTIBLE

Hold fast to the grand design.  
The world and its suffering fade away,  
leaving a great and level calm.

People are attracted by music and food,  
but the expression of the Way seems bland.

Look. It cannot be seen.  
Listen. It cannot be heard.  
Use it. It is never exhausted.

The grand design encompasses all things. We are invited to experience tranquility by turning from external distractions and centering in it. The steadfast heart finds its reward in this serenity.
CONTROL DESIRE

To control desire, it must first expand.
To weaken it, strengthen it.
To lay it low, raise it up.
To reduce its power, empower it.

Call this subtle insight.

Yielding softness overcomes inflexible strength.
As fish should not be taken from the water,
so you should not advertise your strategies.

“Northern Spy”
This revolutionary idea is based in the principle of strength in weakness and power in flexibility. Rather than suppressing desire by force of will, master it in use. Deliberate practice under control leads to mastery. Mere suppression by self-denial does not.
TRANSFORMATION

The Way never interferes, yet is never still.

When leaders live by it,
the 10,000 things are naturally transformed.
Transformed, yet still desiring,
I will calm them
with the unformed substance that has no name.
That substance also has no desire.

No desire brings peace.
The world comes to order of its own accord.

This is a practical application of the idea expressed in the previous chapter. Leaders who live by the Way influence all things under their care. Calm begets calm, and the world "comes to order of its own accord". Transcending subjection to desire is one of the qualifications of a true leader.
NATURAL BEHAVIOUR

True naturalness gives no thought to naturalness, so it is natural.
False naturalness never forgets naturalness, so it is not natural.
True naturalness neither interferes nor has any reason to do so.
False naturalness interferes, based on its own intentions.

High benevolence acts without motive.
High morality acts to serve itself.
If no one responds to the actions of high ceremony, it rolls up its sleeves and uses force.

Therefore, when the Way is forgotten there is naturalness.
When naturalness is forgotten there is benevolence.
When benevolence is forgotten there is morality.
When morality is forgotten there is ceremony.

Ceremony may have the appearance of truth, but it leads to confusion.
Divination may be a flower of the Way, yet it is the first step to folly.

So, to be truly great, focus on the substance and not the appearance; focus on the fruit and let the flower be.
Hold to the one and let the other go.

This chapter advocates natural behavior, a dominant theme of the Lao Tzu. It traces the degeneration from naturalness through self-conscious naturalness, benevolence, morality, convention, and finally, force. Lao Tzu here also inserts a caution against the practice of divination.
HARMONY WITH THE ONE

From olden time, through harmony with the One,
    heaven is clear,
    the earth is stable,
    beings have spirit,
    the valley is replenished,
    all creatures reproduce,
    leaders bring the world to rights.

Harmony with the One causes these things to be.

Without clarity, heaven would crack.
Without stability, the earth would burst asunder.
Without spirit, beings would cease to be.
Without replenishment, the valley would run dry.
Without reproduction, all creatures would expire.
Without fulfilling their mission, leaders would stumble and fall.

It is well known that humility is the root of honour
and the low is foundation for the high.
Leaders demonstrate this by their own expression.

Let your expression be honorable, but seek no fame.
Have no desire for gems;
jade ornaments are stones around your neck.

Here is a description of the natural result of harmony with the Way, and
the consequences of disharmony. This is followed by some specific
qualities of correct behavior: humility, honour, and freedom from
acquisitiveness.
CYCLES

The Way moves in cycles, making use of flexibility.

All things under heaven originate in its form.
Form in turn originates in formlessness.

“In Orcas Island”

In a sense, this brief statement says everything: all creation comes from formlessness, from non-being, and returns to it. Those who understand this move easily in the natural cycle of things.
PARADOX

When people hear of the Way,
the highest willingly move with it,
the average show interest, then lose it,
the vulgar laugh out loud.
If they did not laugh, it would not be the Way.

Hear some well-established words:

The way to brightness looks obscure.
The way ahead looks like retreat.
The way to level ground looks rough.

True nature seems empty.
Pure innocence seems flawed.
Natural power seems insignificant.
Natural maturity seems weak.
Natural worth seems worthless.

The great square has no corners.
Great talent is slow to mature.
The greatest sound is silence.
The great design appears to have no form.

Although it seems obscure and has no name,
the Way alone is master of fulfillment and support.

This chapter contrasts the qualities of the Way with human values. This understanding is not available to the intellect alone, but must be sensed with a different organ of perception. Lao Tzu always speaks to that other ear.
COSMOLOGY

Way produces one.
One produces two.
Two produces three.
Three produces all creation.

All creation accepts yin and embraces yang.
Centre in spirit to experience harmony.

So it is in nature:
what is depleted is filled;
what is full may then go down.

I teach what others teach:
The violent do not live out their years.
This is my most important lesson.

The Way produces ‘one’, love, symbolized by the circle.
Love differentiates into ‘two’, yang and yin, male and female principle.
The intimate union of yang and yin is the ‘three’ that produces all creation. The familiar symbol of yang and yin intertwined inside a circle elegantly portrays this idea.

We all experience rainy days and sunny days in our lives. The message here is to accept life’s yin moments and enjoy the yang. Both are part of living.
SILENT TEACHING

What yields most in the world easily overcomes the most rigid. The insubstantial enters where there is no crevice. By this I know the advantage of not interfering. Teaching without words and not interfering are among the world's rare attainments.

This follows the preceding chapter's message. If the wise never violate the natural order of things, what do they do? Their sole preoccupation is to be an accurate channel for the expression of the nature of the Way. They teach that by the example of their own quiet flexibility.
NO ATTACHMENTS

Is your body more precious than honour?
Do you value possessions more than yourself?
Does it hurt when you lose instead of win?

Those with strong attachments pay the highest price.
The more you hoard, the more there is to lose.

Yet be content; you will never know dishonour.
Know when to stop; you will stay clear of danger,
and may live out your years.

Lao Tzu invites us to be loving and caring, but without subjective human attachments. Attachments are the root of reactionary behavior. Letting go of attachments is a step to self-mastery, and a prerequisite for those who wish to live out their years in service to the Way.
TRUE GREATNESS

Great achievement may look unfinished, yet it never ends.
Great fullness may look empty, yet it is never used up.

Great straightness seems bent.
Great skill seems awkward.
Great eloquence seems slow of speech.

As movement overcomes cold,
and stillness overcomes heat,
so purity and calm bring order to the world.

“Looking South”
The greatness of the natural Way looks strange to busy human beings. How can we relate to an expanding universe, to the curvature of space, to its vast emptiness? By intentionally opening our hearts to purity and calm, we align with the power of the cosmos, and the natural order of things floods in to fill the world.
BE CONTENT

When the world is governed by the Way,
fast horses are put out to pasture.
When the Way is forgotten,
warhorses give birth at the border.

Discontentment is a great misfortune.
Wanting more is a great mistake.

But know how to be content with what you have,
and you will always be content.

Conflict immediately disappears when we are content with things as they are. Those who have this understanding strive for nothing, not even peace itself.
BE STILL

Know the world without leaving the house.
See the Way of heaven without looking out the window.
You may travel very far, and know very little.

So it is that the wise can know without going anywhere,
understand things without examining them,
be effective without taking any action.

“Camp”

Wisdom is an inherent quality that has nothing to do with the acquisition of knowledge. The light of understanding is available to anyone who is still enough to perceive it.
LET GO

Master learning by adding on each day.
Master the Way by daily letting go.

Let go and again let go,
to arrive at no interference.
No interference, yet nothing is not done.

Take hold of the world with total unconcern.
The moment you become subject to anything,
you are not fit to hold the world.

One who is a master in the Way has let go of all subjection to things. There is no impulse to interfere, because there is no thought of how things ought to be. Taking hold of the world with total unconcern means accepting responsibility for the world, in an attitude of unconditional love.
ALWAYS BE GENUINE

The wise keep an open mind
so they can relate to the hearts of the people.

I am good to those who are good.
I am also good to those who are not.
The nature of the Way is good.

I am genuine with those who are genuine.
I am also genuine with those who are not.
The nature of the Way is genuine.

The wise who are present in the world
harmonize their minds amidst the confusion.

People are drawn by their childlike wisdom.

The open receptivity of the wise lets them see clearly into people's hearts.
Their goodness and genuineness is offered freely to all. They maintain an inner harmony, which draws people to them.
LIFE AND DEATH

Exit life, enter death.

Of every ten people,
    three are living,
    three are dying,
    and three are moving from life to the place of death.

What makes this so? They waste life substance.

Yet the saying goes:
    Those whose goodness is one with life
    can travel the land
    without meeting tigers or wild buffaloes,
    and remain untouched by war.
    They are not vulnerable to weapon, claw or horn.

Why is this so? They have no place where death can enter.

This chapter deals with attitude. Nine out of ten go from the exuberance of youth to middle age stagnation, and finally a hardening that kills their life expression. The wise, on the other hand, never lose their resilient outlook, and in that sense never grow old.
LIFE CYCLE

Things are born of the Way and supported by its nature. Natural forces shape them and bring them to fruition.

This happens, because without being commanded, all things spontaneously honor the Way and treasure its nature.

So it is that the Way brings things forth, and its nature supports them, each according to the cycle of its life.

It produces things but does not possess them. It acts without anxiety for results. It leads, but does not manipulate.

Such is the subtle nature of the Way.

It is the nature of the Way to create. It is natural for creation to honor the Way. This primary relationship is essential for living in harmony with the Way.
RETURN TO THE MOTHER

All under heaven has a beginning, the mother of the world. Once you reach the mother, you know the child. Once know the child, return to mother's care. Then, though the body dies, there is no cause for fear.

Stop your involvement with things, and close your door; life will cease to be a struggle.

Open yourself to complete involvement with things; you will end up where no one can help you.

To see clearly, have an eye for detail. To be strong, stay flexible.

By means of this light, your insight is restored; your life is preserved from misfortune.

This is what it means to practise constancy.

This compares the creator-creation relationship to that of a mother and her child. Your child-awareness is naturally followed by awareness of the mother. Keep your heart firmly centered in the mother. Be alert and flexible in your outward expression. This insight is a compass for your life journey.
I AM A MESSENGER

I am a messenger who only knows
how to walk the great Way, revering that alone.

The great Way is very smooth,
yet people are addicted to the by-ways.

So courts are neat but fields are overgrown, stores empty.
Fine clothes, sharp swords, food and drink galore,
accumulated treasure: these are signs of gross corruption.

Such travesty is not the Way!

Lao Tzu here calls with a passion: walk the great Way, make that your
first love. All other roads lead to ruin.
VALUE IN CONSTANCY

What is well established is not uprooted.
What is well embraced is not abandoned,
and is practised for generations without end.

By cultivating the nature of the Way,
    you become genuine,
    the family thrives,
    the community prospers,
    the nation abounds,
    the whole world is transformed.

Consider each on its own merit –
    the person, the family,
    the community, the nation,
    the world.

How do I know the world's like this?

By this.

Starting with the individual who lives by it, the natural Way becomes indelibly ingrained into the culture, ultimately transforming the whole world.
RETURN TO INNOCENCE

Maintaining the substance of your inherent nature is being like an infant.

Immune to insect, beast or bird of prey,
it is soft-boned and relaxed, yet firm of grip.

It is virile without knowing sexual union.
It can yell all day and not get hoarse.
Its life force and vital harmony are intact.

To know vital harmony is to be eternal.
To know the eternal is to be clear.

They say it is good to help life along,
and controlling the breath brings strength.
Yet when things are overgrown, they must go down.

This is not the Way,
and what is not the Way soon ends.

The life force and vital harmony of the infant are intact without any external disciplines. As always, Lao Tzu emphasizes natural function. Contrived practices, even those intended to "help life along", go against the natural rhythm of life.
MEDITATION

Those who understand do not discuss it.
Those who discuss it do not understand.

Say nothing; close your gates.
Soften your brilliance; become like dust.
Loosen your bonds; unravel entanglements.

Enter mystic union.

You are then unmoved by either familiarity or being ignored;
Equally unaffected whether you win or lose;
Receiving praise and blame with equal calm.

You thus become what life created you to be.

My translation of Chapter 56 is based on the Guodian text version of the Lao Tzu, (see frontispiece), which specifically spells out these steps to meditation. The ‘standard’ version of the Tao Te Ching is not as clear, in my view.
HANDS OFF

Be correct in governing the country. Avoid the use of arms. Take hold of the world without involvement in its affairs.

How do I know this? By this:

Restrictions impoverish the people; sharp weapons confuse them; cunning strategies bear strange fruit; more laws produce more crime.

Hear the words of the wise:

I do not interfere, and people are naturally transformed. I remain calm, and people are naturally correct. I avoid involvement in the world's affairs, and people naturally prosper. I am without desire, and people return to natural simplicity.

The world cannot be brought to rights by cunning strategies, but by the influence of natural behavior: no interference, calm, uninvolved, absolutely without desire for change. Non-judgmental care is the sole context for transformation.
WISE GOVERNMENT

When the government is quiet, people are genuine and sincere. Too much government breaks their spirit.

Fortune and misfortune go round and round. Nobody knows where it will stop. That's right, isn't it? What looks right soon becomes wrong. Good omens become bad ones, leaving the people forever bewildered.

So it is that the wise are
  square but not cutting,
  watchful but not wounding,
  direct but not indiscreet,
  bright but not dazzling.

The policy of the wise, as described in the preceding chapter, applies also to governments.
CARING FOR THE HARVEST

Providing spiritual leadership is nothing less than caring for the harvest. This requires a willingness to serve, which builds spiritual substance.

Those with accumulated spiritual substance reach full power, and limitless understanding. They can thus assume responsibility for the motherland, which in turn will long endure.

This is called deep roots in a firm foundation, the longevity and lasting vision of the Way.

Spiritual substance and natural power radiate through those who serve. To serve is to assume responsibility for all things. Deeply rooted understanding comes to those who live true to this vision.
SPIRITUAL SUBSTANCE

Lead a great nation as you would cook small fish.

When the world is ruled by the Way, ghosts lose their power to harm. And since the wise do no harm, then neither one harms the other.

The free flow of spiritual substance is thereby restored.

“Quiet as falling snow”

Those who lead by the Way are interested in spiritual substance. When that flows freely, the form of things comes to order of its own accord.
NATIONS LARGE AND SMALL

A great nation is one that can bend to merge with the world, playing the female role. The female complements the male with stillness and humility.

If both of them practise humility, large and small nations may absorb each other.

The one becomes humble in order to merge. The other can merge because it is humble.

It is appropriate for a large nation to desire a merger in order to nurture the people, and for a small nation to desire a merger to expand its service to others.

For both to reach their common goal, the large nation must also be humble.

The recommendation that both great and small nations practise humility is consistent with the whole of the Lao Tzu. "Female", in this context, relates to female principle, or Yin, the quality of receptivity.
TREASURE OF THE WORLD

The Way is in the dark recesses of all created things.

It is the treasure of those who are good,
the protector of those who are not.

Fine words are respected in the marketplace,
and groups welcome those who know how to behave.
But what about those who are not so good?
Who will take the rejects?

The great pomp and ceremony
that marks the enthronement of the emperor
does not compare in significance
to sitting down and cultivating this understanding.

Why did the ancients treasure the Way?
Did they not say,
    seek and you shall find,
    your sins are forgiven?

Thus it is the treasure of the world.

The power of the Way interpenetrates and supports all things, rejecting none. It does not give to some and withhold from others, but lets each one determine its fate by its own actions.
MAINTAINING PERSPECTIVE

Act, but do not interfere.
Be busy, but do not get caught in busyness.
Be aware, but do not lose your sense of wonder.

Great or small, many or few in number,
always repay injustice with righteousness.

Plan for the difficult while it is easy.
Handle big things while they are small.

The world's most difficult business began as something easy.
The world's biggest affairs are made up of little things.
So the wise never try to do big things,
and can therefore accomplish them.

Those who make promises lightly can surely not be trusted.
They take what could be easy and make it difficult.

But because the wise treat nothing lightly,
for them, nothing is ever difficult.

Righteousness is the appropriate response in any situation, no matter what anyone else does. Dealing with issues when they are small prevents them from becoming big ones.
WORKING WITH ESSENCES

Things at rest are easily held.
Things not begun are easily planned.
Thin things are easy to melt.
Tiny things are easily dispersed.

Deal with things before they begin.
Establish control before confusion sets in.
The largest tree begins as a tiny seed.
A nine-story tower begins with a lump of earth.
A thousand-mile journey begins with a foot put down.

To interfere is to destroy. To grasp is to lose.
So those who are wise never interfere, and nothing is destroyed.
They never grasp, so nothing is ever lost.

People often spoil things as they near completion.
It takes care at the end as well as the beginning,
to ensure that nothing is spoiled.

The wise desire to be without desire,
not treasuring things that are hard to get.
They learn to unlearn, leading people back from the error of their ways.

In this way, they assist the 10,000 things to be natural,
and to refrain from interfering.

This reinforces the previous chapter, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to little things, but not interfering.
SIMPLICITY

It was not because of brilliant people
that the ancients were good at living by the Way.
Their simplicity was their protection.

Too much cleverness makes people hard to manage.
Those who rule by cleverness are thieves.
Those who rule without cleverness are a blessing.

To know these two things
is to know how to abide by the pattern of the eternal.
Abiding by the pattern requires mystic rectitude.

So profound and far-reaching,
returning to the nature of things,
reaching the great accord!

The message here is to those who would assume responsibility for providing spiritual leadership in the world. If they happen also to be in positions of political leadership, so be it, but the primary task is to lead the people into harmony with the Way, by example.
HUMILITY

Because they flow downward so well, rivers and seas rule the hundred valleys.

It therefore follows that if you would be above the people, you must lower your voice. If you would lead them, you must put the people ahead of yourself.

Therefore, when the wise are in high positions, the people do not feel their weight. They lead so well that no one suffers harm. So the world gladly yields, and does not object.

Because the wise do not argue, no one in the world can argue with them.

Humility, lightness of touch, refraining from argument – these are appropriate qualities for a leader.
MY THREE TREASURES

The whole world says my Way looks like an aberration.
In fact, it is great just because it seems an aberration.
If it looked normal, it would long ago have become insignificant.

Three treasures I hold and cherish: compassion, frugality, caution.

Compassionate, I can be bold.
Frugal, I can be generous.
Cautious, I can be a leader.

But to be bold without compassion,
or generous without frugality,
or to put oneself in front without caution –
the end is near!

One who is armed with compassion
is victorious in battle and secure in defense.

Whom heaven would save, it arms with compassion.

TZ’U – Compassion, Lao Tzu’s first treasure

Just as a three-legged stool is stable, so these three treasures –
compassion, frugality and caution – are a firm foundation for the wise.
The counterpoint of the last line is exquisite.
TRUE STATURE

A person of stature is never aggressive.
A good warrior does not give in to anger.
Those who can deal with opposition are masters of restraint.
It takes humility to make good use of people.

This is called the power of non-contention,
and using the other person's strength.

This strategy has stood the test of time.

“Dingman Barn, Castleton”
Practical advice on the importance of not contending. This attitude is essential for anyone interested in following the Way.
POWER OF THE HEART

In the words of the strategists,

"Rather than presuming to be in charge,
I choose a lower place.
Instead of the smallest risky advance,
I prefer to retreat a foot."

This is called marching without moving,
taking hold without using your arms,
casting away when no one opposes,
maintaining control without weapons.

Nothing is as dangerous as underestimating opposition.
I put my treasures at risk if I do this.
Therefore when opponents meet,
the one who feels deeply prevails.

The one who feels deeply has the ability to work with the subtle essence of things, described in Chapter 64 as "dealing with things before they begin". This chapter also re-emphasizes the importance of compassion, humility and caution.
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MY WORDS

My words are easy both to understand and to follow; yet the world can neither understand nor follow them.

My words have a source, these things have a master. Since this is not known, then neither am I.

Some few know me, and I treasure them. These wise ones may appear in coarse clothing. They carry a jewel within.

Preoccupation with self-satisfaction causes the world to be deaf to Lao Tzu's words. The Lao Tzu can only be known by those quiet enough to hear the voice of the master in their own hearts. What they hear becomes the jewel that they carry within.
KNOW THAT YOU DO NOT KNOW

It is best to know that you do not know. 
To think you know when you don’t is sick. 
Being sick of the sickness clears the sickness.

The wise are not sick, because they became sick of being sick. 
Therefore they are no longer sick.

Ch’an Patriarch Huey Neng

The admission of sickness is the beginning of healing. The admission of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom. Wholeness floods in to fill the emptiness of the one who is open to receive it.
GOVERNMENT

A government that is not feared can reach greatness.

Respect the people's position, and their lives. They give respect only when they receive it.

This happens when leaders are wise.
   They are self-aware but not self-preoccupied.
   They have self-love but not self-importance.

They hold to the one and let the other go.

This may apply to politics, but it essentially relates to qualities of spiritual leadership. The critical need in the world is for those who are willing to assume the mantle of spiritual leadership. No political appointment, or recognition of any kind, is necessary.
HEAVEN'S NET

The bold that take risks may die.
The bold that take no risks may live.
Of these two, either one may benefit, or come to harm.

Heaven determines which, but who knows the reason?
Even the wise say this is difficult to understand.

The Way of heaven –
   it wins without competing,
   answers without words,
   attracts things without calling them,
   effects its plans, but never in haste.

The net of heaven is vast, and reaches far.
Its mesh is coarse, yet not one thing slips through.

This chapter contains a beautiful metaphor. Heaven's net encompasses all, yet leaves each thing its space to live and grow.
CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

If people are not afraid of death, why threaten them with it? Or, suppose those in my charge are afraid of death, yet still misbehave. Would I dare to seize and execute them?

The master executioner is always present. Taking the place of that one is like wielding the carpenter's axe. You will most likely bloody your own hands!

A brief comment on matters pertaining to punishment, especially capital punishment.
TAXATION

People are hungry
because those above them take too much food in taxes.

People are unruly
because those above interfere too much.

People make light of death
because those above demand so much of their lives.

Only those who do not use life for their own ends
can understand the value of life.

In this and the preceding chapter, Lao Tzu has some specific suggestions for achieving a stable and ordered society. As always, the message is to care for the people without interfering with their lives.
FLEXIBILITY

The living are soft and flexible.  
The dead are stiff and unbending.

So it is with all things living, the grass and trees –
    yielding and supple when alive,
    dry and brittle when dead.
The soft and flexible are moving with life.  
The stiff and unbending are moving with death.

Just as dry wood comes under the axe,
inflexible policies meet their end.

The stiff and unbending go down.  
The soft and yielding rise above.

“Rutherford’s Hill”
The value of flexibility is a recurring theme in the Lao Tzu. What is flexible flows with life. What is unbending is cast down.
RESTORING THE BALANCE

The Way of heaven is like the pulling of a bowstring:
  it brings the top down, and pulls the bottom up.
So it is with heaven's Way:
  it takes from whatever has too much, and gives to those in need.

The way of the world is not like that.
It takes from those in need, and gives to those who have too much.

Who can manage the surplus, in service to the world?
Only those of the Way. This is because these wise ones
  can act without expectation, not looking for results.
They succeed, but desire neither advancement nor recognition.

How will balance be restored in the world? By those of the Way, whose
constancy and unselfishness makes them a clear channel through which
life's intention flows.
POWER OF WATER

Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water, yet in attacking what is firm and strong, it has no equal.

Because it can enter where there is no room, the weak can easily overcome the strong.

The whole world knows this principle, but nobody can do it.

Yet listen to the wise:

"Accept the nation's shame, and be lord of the land. Accept its unfortunates, and be its ruler."

This truth is a paradox.

Its flexibility makes water an appropriate symbol for the Way, and similarly appears in Chapter 8. Its soft and yielding nature notwithstanding, water is essential for all life.
TRANSCEIVING JUDGEMENT

When a great dispute is reconciled, some disagreement always remains. How can this be made right?

The wise do it by accepting a lesser position, and staying clear of finding fault. The wise propose solutions. The mean allot the blame.

The Way of heaven plays no favorites. It is always with those who have integrity.

Those with uncalculating righteousness look for no advantage and place no blame.
IDEAL COUNTRY

The ideal country is small, its people are few.
Let there be ten elders, who make no use of tools.
Let people respect life, and travel no great distances.
There are boats and carriages, but little need of them.
There are weapons of war, all kept out of sight.
They keep track of things by simple means.
Pleasant food, beautiful clothing, contentment at home, joyous customs.

Neighboring countries can see each other.
The crowing of roosters and barking of dogs are heard,
yet people live out their years without ever needing to go back and forth.

This picture of an ideal state may be intended more in a symbolic than a literal sense. Putting an end to meddling and busyness is, of course, literally consistent with the whole message of the Lao Tzu.
ACT, DO NOT CONTEND

Sincere words are not embellished.
Embellished words are not sincere.
The good do not argue. Those who argue are not good.
Those who know are not learned.
The learned do not know.

The wise do not store up.
The more they do for others, the more they have.
The more they give, the more they themselves possess.

The Way of heaven is to benefit and do no harm.
The Way of the wise is to act and not contend.

This summarizes the message of the Tao Te Ching. The Way supports all of life, never with harmful intent. The wise do the same by giving their lives in service, asking nothing in return. The concern of the wise is to act in harmony with the Way, always.
Co-incident with a long career as a business systems analyst, artist and art teacher, John Stubbs is a Sinophile. Ancient Chinese spiritual philosophy, poetry, calligraphy and painting have been a passion for more than fifty years.

Central in all this is the Tao Te Ching, the Classic of the Way and how to live by it. Never completely satisfied with the many translations he read, John took on the formidable task of doing his own translation of this 2500-year-old document.

“My goal has been to express the ideas of the Tao Te Ching in understandable English, without compromising the intent and language of the original text.”

This book is the result of his efforts.

The Chinese calligraphy in the book is by John and two acknowledged masters: Mr. William Fahn, John’s calligraphy teacher, and Yen Chen-ch’ing (709-785 A.D.) of the Tang dynasty.

John did the characters on the scroll in the above photo, but they are carefully copied and ‘painted’ rather than directly brushed in the traditional calligraphy method. See chapter 42 of this translation for the meaning of these characters in the context of the cosmology of the Tao Te Ching*.

The cover is a Stubbs painting, and several other examples of John’s art are interspersed as illustrations throughout the book.

*“Centre in spirit to experience harmony.”