

Dào Dé Jing



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DEDICATION

For our beloved spouses
who continually help to enlighten our paths
with their compassion and understanding

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First some basic concepts...

1. **Dào (道)**: “way”, “path”, “road”, or “avenue.” According to our poems, *Dào* is not expressible in words and is independent, unchangeable, and existing forever. *Dào* is the origin of the cosmos and all things contained within the cosmos; simultaneously, this origin guides everything as the first principle or universal law that ensures the evolution and development of the whole and its parts. *Dào* stipulates the way that all things should follow; nonetheless, we can also see that each particular entity has its own internal *Dào*. Therefore, we distinguish *the* *Dào*—encompassing and inexpressible—and *these* *Dào*, the particular and expressible process of each thing. The latter “ways” that are spoken and conceptualized demonstrate the temporal expressions of eternal *Dào*. For purposes of developing a better way for ourselves under-heaven (see below), we can speak of two comprehensive categories: the *Dào* of heaven and the *Dào* of humankind. The *Dào* of heaven is natural law and determines the order of the cosmos. The *Dào* of humankind is social law and provides norms and principles for human behavior.

For a few reasons, then, we will not be translating this central term. Among them is that the whole collection of poems and aphorisms is attempting to give us an insight into the notion (an 81 poem definition with examples). Moreover, despite spelling variations, it has become one of the myriad of foreign ideas—like Karma and Zen—that educated English speakers have taken up into their vocabulary.

2. **Dé (德)**: “virtue” or “excellence.” In *Dào Dé Jing*, *Dé* corresponds to *Dào* as the natural instincts of all generated things. In terms of *Dào* as social law guiding human behavior, *Dé* means human virtue or excellence. Yet whether we are speaking of the virtues of a thing or the virtuous person, our poems teach that the perfect situation of *Dé* is *no Dé*: “Magnificent *Dé*, acting without thinking of *Dé*, Acting thus is authentic *Dé*” (Chapter 38). Any action accomplished without thinking of *Dé* follows *Dào* directly; in so doing, there is no *Dé* at all. Again, we will not translate this notion to keep the connection and tension

that occurs between the concepts of *Dào* and *Dé* (which combined together as *Daode* give us the Chinese word for ethics).

3. **Wú wěi (无为)**: “non-doing”, contrasted with accomplishment, **Yǒu wěi (有为)**. We translate it as “without-doing” in this book. *Wú wěi* is not to act passively nor does it intend absolutely no action. Rather, the concept signifies accomplishment or completion without interference, or by **zìrán (自然)** – “naturally” or “by-its-nature” or “so of itself”. Thus, one would not be far off in considering a good English translation of *Wú wěi* as “spontaneously.” The concept is crucial because *Wú wěi* is the intrinsic character or feature of both *Dào* and *Dé*: “The honor of *Dào*, the value of *Dé*, do not come from interfering with them, but always in being spontaneous toward them” (Chapter 51).

4. **Tiān xià (天下)**: “under heaven”. A very important concept in Chinese philosophy, the notion appears regularly even to this day in speaking of the “great unification” or “collectivity” of the Chinese people. The concept basically means the encompassing world or entirety of the cosmos. However, *Tiān xià* can also denote the entire geographical area of ancient China as well as a more specific political region or homeland.

5. **Wàn wù (万物)**: “10,000 things.” This refers to all things or entities extant in the cosmos. Combined with “under-heaven,” and you have the phrase for all or everything. Think of this as someone today saying “the trillion things” or the infinite myriad of stuff that makes up the world.

6. **Pǔ (朴)**: “Uncarved block.” This term signifies simple, plain, or without modification. The concept is a direct contrast with *Huá (华)*, “gilding,” and therefore can also be translated as no-gilding. Herein we translate *Pǔ* as “simplicity” and “simple.” It not only refers to someone’s simple lifestyle but as well moral simplicity. By not gilding our world and our actions, we live in correspondence with *Dào*.

...Then a few introductory words

This masterpiece—by folklore the work of a profound scribe called “Old Man” or Laozi—divides into the Book of *Dào* (1-37) and the Book of *Dé* (38-81).

There are many ways to lay out this text for study. The majority of translations keep to the longstanding arrangement of the two books from 1 to 81. A few flip the books and read 38-81, 1-37.

In our version, we recommend a playful variation of the second:

1; 38-81; 1-37; 38 & 1.

Our specific target is to be respectful to the text while not encouraging our fellows to make of this wisdom some kind of idol. A good portion of those who pick up this text will have read at least one if not many of the more than 300 English translations already extant. For those returning to the poems, we want to offer not only a different translation but a possible way for re-thinking the contained wisdom.

In the case that this will be the reader’s first translation of *Dào Dé Jing*, we wanted to be careful to begin where we are all situated: in a world full of human beings trying to figure out how to live with each other, seeking after what makes for the best relation between human kind and the natural world.

We begin with a Prelude, Poem 1. This gives us a glimpse of *Dào*. Then we move on to the Book of *Dé* and its descriptions of the many issues arising from the degeneration of profound excellence: phoniness, self-righteousness, bad government, and war. After that, an interlude returning us to Poem 1 from whence we launch into the Book of *Dào*. Whereas *Dé* speaks to how we live, *Dào* gives us the principle through and by which everything comes into being and finds its proper place. Finally, to remind ourselves that we are doing this to have a flourishing life, we complete the readings by revisiting what often eludes us: the *Dé* of Poem 38 and the *Dào* of Poem 1.

As you see, in what we hope will not be an irritating structure, we ask you to play with the text. This is to encourage all of us to resituate ourselves as well as these poems in relation to that famous opening and guiding thought of Laozi:

The authentic cannot be spoken...

Come and let us hint at what can be grasped when we keep this caveat in mind.

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**BY WAY OF PRELUDE: Uncovering what
comes before**

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POEM 1.

Dào expressable in words
Is not eternal *Dào*;
 The name that can be named
 Is not the eternal name.
The Nameless is the origin
 of Heaven and Earth.
The nameable is the
 Mother of 10,000 things.
Therefore, always be
 without desire to
 observe this mystery;
Being with desire
 always observes the boundary.¹
These two things² come from
 the same but with different names,
Both are called profound.
Profound and again profound,
 the door of many mysteries.

¹ Laozi describes a mystery, literally something which can be hinted at but not actually observed. Therefore, desiring to see it as a phenomenon can only reveal the profiles and exterior boundaries. Taking the “named” boundary as [Dào] loses Dào.

² The nameless and the nameable.

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**THE BOOK OF *DÉ*: Contemplating Life-World
Boundaries
Poems 38 to 81**

POEM 38.

Magnificent *Dé*:

Acting without thinking of *Dé*:

Acting thus is authentic *Dé*.

Debased *Dé*:

Keeping up the

appearance of *Dé*:

Acting thus is inauthentic *Dé*.

Authentic *Dé* keeps

by doing-without-doing (*wěi-wú-wěi*)

with no deliberate

manifestation

of doing *Dé*.

Debased *Dé* keeps

doing and ever

manifests itself

doing.

Magnificent

benevolence

never boasts of

this benevolence.³

Yet magnificent

righteousness does boast

of this righteousness.

And magnificent

propriety takes

offense at improper

³ Beginning with this stanza, Laozi examples his meaning on the degeneration from authentic virtue to inauthentic virtue. The farther we go down on the list, the showier become the agent's actions.

response, ready to
roll up the sleeves.⁴

Thus, lose *Dào*
then comes *Dé*.

Lose *Dé*,
then comes benevolence.

Lose benevolence,
then comes righteousness.

Lose righteousness,
then comes propriety.

Propriety results
from insufficient
loyalty and faith
and results in the
first step to disorder.
Foresight puts *gilding* (*Huá*)
upon *Dào*
and is the beginning
of stupidity.

Thus, the authentic person
makes a *thick* dwelling
and dwells not in *thinness*.⁵
Hence, the authentic person
makes a *simple* (*Pǔ shi*) dwelling
and dwells not by *gilding*.⁶
Therefore, abandon
that and take this.⁷

⁴ With this example, Laozi incorporates what is still today a habit we see when someone takes umbrage: the insulted party rolls up his/her sleeve and gets ready to fight. This puts on a show of doing virtue.

⁵ This is one of those instances where going with what Laozi actually says will not make much sense to folks. But let us honor the Master by not "gilding" the translation. He means here with "thickness" that which has depth (profundity) and with "thinness" that which is only surface (shallowness).

⁶ The uncarved block (*Pǔ*) reappears in contrast to gilding (*Huá*). Another reason to be careful with how we translate the Master into English where words often require so many adjectives to distinguish them or render them carved as distinct (e.g. sexual love, spiritual love, puppy love, Platonic love, etc).

⁷ Laozi refers back to the previous stanzas: that = the thin, gilded dwelling; this = the thick, simple dwelling of the uncarved block.

POEM 39.

In the ancient days:
grasping one.

Heaven grasping one: clear and bright.
Earth grasping one, tranquility.
Spirit grasping one, effective.⁸
River valley grasping one, fullness.
10,000 things grasping one, growth.
Kings grasping one, leading under-heaven.
Draw this inference:
Grasp one.
Heaven without clarity and brightness, splitting open.
Earth without tranquility, shaking apart.
Spirit without effect, stopping.
River valley without fullness, drying up.
10,000 things without growth, going extinct.
Kings without nobility and dignity, falling.

Hence, the noble is the root of the simple.
The highest must be the root of the lowest.

For this the Kings call
themselves the orphaned,
the needy, (and) the ill-provided.
Is this not the root
of humility?
Is it not?
Thus, reaching for all
of the carriages

⁸ Effective, efficacious, lit. well-informed.

is not having a carriage.⁹
They do not need to
be carved jade yet still
are hard as stone.¹⁰

⁹ Laozi speaks here about the honors given to the great to denote high station, such as beautiful carriages. The sentence could be interpreted then as saying, “All that glitters is not gold” or “Great honors are no honor at all.”

¹⁰ The gilding of the exterior is not what makes jade valuable, lasting, or even beautiful. Rather, jade's lasting power (hardness, sustainability) is in its being a rock. What is the interior or foundational excellence that shines through? This is what will obtain in the object as well as in the Person.

POEM 40.

The motion of *Dào*:
returning.

The usage of *Dào*:
weakening.

10,000 things grow
by *having*.¹¹

Having generates
from not-having.¹²

¹¹ Having [有, **Yǒu**]: to have, to exist. We might put here “being” yet the character of **yǒu** better implies that the existence of something is what that thing has, what it carries. This works well in the notion of an entity moving on-the-way. It also gets at something hidden in our own term “existence” which literally means “to stand out from”. That which exists is that which has or carries characteristics allowing for it to be distinguished from other things.

¹² Not-Having [**Wú**] Recalling us back to the concept of wú-wěi.

POEM 41.

The worthy person
hearing *Dào*, practices it
assiduously.

The average person
hearing *Dào*, practices
it on occasion.

The least person
hearing *Dào*
laughs at it.

Yet, if it were not
laughable, it would not be *Dào*.

Thus, the old saying
goes this way:

Brilliant *Dào* seems dull.
Progressive *Dào* seems regressive.
Smooth *Dào* seems rough.

Magnificent *Dé*:
like a valley.

Infinite whiteness
like blackness.

Abundant *Dé*
like emptiness.

Vigorous *Dé*:
like idleness.

Simplicity and authenticity:
like turbulence.

Infinite squareness:
Without corners.

Magnificent minds:

Slow maturation.
Infinite sound:

Like silence.

Infinite image:

Without shape.

Dào: concealed and nameless.

Only *Dào* can help
and achieve fulfillment.

POEM 42.

Dào begets one.
One begets two.
Two begets three.
Three begets 10,000 things.
The 10,000 things
carry Yin on their backs
and embrace Yang.
Yin and Yang contest
Then blend each with the
Other in harmony.

People detest most
the orphaned, the needy, and
The ill provided.
However, Kings use
These as their names.
Therefore, sometimes things
decrease yet are increasing.
Sometimes things increase
yet are decreasing.

What others taught me,
I will teach to others.
The violent cannot
Achieve a proper death.
I take this as the
Father¹³ of all teachings.

¹³ Original principle.

POEM 43.

The softest
under heaven *gallops*¹⁴
through the hardest.
The intangible
Penetrates the *solid*.¹⁵

Therefore, I know the
the benefit of doing-without-doing (*wěi-wú-wěi*)¹⁶

The teaching without words.
The benefit of doing-without-doing (*wěi-wú-wěi*):
Few under-heaven
Keep pace with this.

¹⁴ Literally the term means “horse-too”

¹⁵ Literally “that without cracks”

¹⁶ Doing-without-doing, having-no-activity, taking-no-action.

POEM 44.

Fame or life:

Which is dearer?

Life or fortune:

Which is most valuable?

Gain or loss:

Which is more harmful?

Hence, excessive love

Is bound to great cost.

Too many possessions

is bound to great loss.

Knowing satisfaction,¹⁷

avoid humiliation.

Knowing when to stop,

keep away danger.

Thus, forever safe.

¹⁷ Temperance, moderation, "enough is enough"

POEM 45.

The most perfect seems
imperfect. Yet its use
is never exhausted.

The fullest seems empty
yet its use is never ending.

The straightest seems bent
The most skillful seems clumsy.
The most eloquent seems dumb.

Motion overcomes cold.
Stillness overcomes heat.
Pure stillness¹⁸ leads
all-under-heaven.

¹⁸ Suggests *wu-wei*; the two terms Pure Stillness and Doing-without-doing always come together in Chinese.

POEM 46.

Under-heaven having Dào:
The war horse returns to plowing.
Under-heaven not-having Dào:
War horses multiply and
are bred in the suburbs.

[Crime: no more than want.]
Disaster: no more than dissatisfaction.
Mistake: no more than want.

Therefore, the satisfaction
of knowing satisfaction
is eternal satisfaction.

POEM 47.

Never leaving your door,
know all-under-heaven.

Never looking out the window,
see the Dào of heaven.
The further one roams,
the less one knows.

Therefore, the Sage knows
without roaming,
sees the brilliance without looking,
[and] succeeds by doing-without-doing.

POEM 48.

Doing studies, increase day by day.

Doing Dào, decrease day by day.

Decreasing and decreasing
again and again
until arriving
at doing-without-doing.

Doing-without-doing

yet nothing undone.

Governing under-heaven

always do without interference.

Doing with interference,

no governance under-heaven.

POEM 49.

The Sage has no preconceived idea.
He takes the ideas of the people as his ideas.

I treat these good ones well.
I treat these bad ones well too.
 I receive the good.
These faithful ones, I trust.
These unfaithful ones, I trust too.
 I receive faith.

The Sage accepts all-under-heaven;
for the benefit of all-under-heaven,
he simplifies his heart.
 All people pay heed to his teachings.
 The Sage treats all people as his children.

POEM 50.

Go out [of the womb], live;
Go into [the grave], die.
 3/10 of people are long lived.
 3/10 of people are short lived.
 3/10 of people die from motion.¹⁹
Why? Because they treat their lives *thickly*.²⁰

It is said that the one
who is good at mastering life,
traveling on land, does not come
across rhinoceroses and tigers.
In war, he receives no wound
from weapons and armors.
 A rhinoceros has no place to attack with his horn.
 A tiger has no place to attack with his claws.
 A soldier has not place to use his blades.
Why? For the Sage there is no place for death.

¹⁹ You will note this is only 9/10. The rest of the poem deals with the 1/10 who follow Dào.

²⁰ The idea is of someone treating themselves very well, to all that makes life fat and large. The 9/10 are immoderate in their living. This leaves them to long, short, and accidental lives. The Sage lives moderately and with purpose by a refinement that is ungilded and “thin.”

POEM 51.

Dào begets them.²¹

Dé rears them.

Substance shapes them.

Situation accomplished them.

Hence, 10,000 things all honor

Dào and value Dé.

The honor of Dào,

the value of Dé

do not come from interfering
with them, but always in being
spontaneous toward them.

Hence, Dào begets them and

Dé rears them, leads them,

fosters them, ripens them, ends them,

supports them, protects them.

Begetting them without owning them.

Assisting them without relying upon them.

Leading them without ruling them.

This is profound Dé.

²¹ In this poem, “them” always refers to the 10,000 things or the infinity of stuff. Do not confuse “them” with *Dào* and *Dé*.

POEM 52.

All-under-heaven has a beginning.
Take this beginning as the Mother of under-heaven.
 Knowing the Mother, know the children.
 Knowing the children, retain the Mother
 without danger life-long.

Block the holes,
shut the door:
 Without toil lifelong.
Open the holes
and add many events:
 without life-long cure.²²

Discerning the smallest is called brilliance.
Guarding the weakest is called strength.
 Using the light to return to its brilliance,
 never bring disaster to the body.
This is called "inheriting eternity."

²² "Blocking the hole, shutting the door" intends cutting the senses down to minimum so the desires are kept under control. "Opening the hole" leads to busyness of events, like opening your door to every visitor who passes by.

POEM 53.

If I have a little bit of knowledge,
I walk on the Great Dào.
I only fear going astray.
Great Dào is very even
yet people like to take short cuts.

Government is very corrupt:
Farmland lies fallow,
grainaries are very empty.
Wear fancy clothing:
Carry a sharp sword.
Bored with good eating and drinking,
they have extravagant wealth:
These are the robber barons.
This is not Dào.

POEM 54.

The well established can be pulled out.
The strongly grasped can be pulled away.
If descendants keep and follow this,
 the ceremony of sacrifice
 would be endless.²³

Apply this to your self,
 your Dé will be true.
Apply this to your family,
 your Dé will be more than enough.
Apply this to your village,
 your Dé will be respected.
Apply this to your state,
 your Dé will be plentiful.
Apply this to your under-heaven,
 your Dé will be universal.

²³ Keeping in mind that our greatest accomplishments can be taken away from us, we should be thankful. The Sage is always ready to thank the Ancestors and thus realizes his connection to that time when the Great walked on *Dào*. The Sage promotes this behavior generation to generation.

Hence, through my self,
 I have insights about others.
Through my family,
 I have insights about other families.
Through my village,
 I have insights about other villages.
Through my state,
 I have insights about other states.
Through under-heaven,
 I have insights about under-heaven.
How can I know under-heaven's situation?

By this...²⁴

²⁴ The poem suddenly ends with the words "By this..."

POEM 55.

A person with magnificent Dé
is just like a new-born.
Poisonous creatures—bees, scorpions,
lizards, snakes—cannot harm him.
Savage beasts do not harm him.
Birds of prey do not attack him.
Weak bones, soft tendons:
 tight fist.
Never to have had sex,
 yet capable of sex:
Guarding always the life-force.
Crying all day, yet never getting hoarse:
 Guarding always the harmony.

Knowing harmony is called eternity.
Knowing eternity is called brilliance.
Enhancing life-force is called auspicious.

When desire leads spirit:
 flaunt one's superiority.
Creatures at the prime of life
 turn toward old age:
Call this not-Dào.
 Not-Dào will end early.

POEM 56.

The wise do not speak.
The speaker is not wise.
 Blocking the holes,
 Shutting the doors,
 Blunting the sharpness:
 Remove distractions.
Soften the light.
Blend with the dust.
This is called profound assimilation.

Hence, [for such a person]
There is no way to be intimate;
 there is no way to be estranged.
There is no way to be benefited;
 there is no way to be harmed.
There is no way to be valuable;
 there is no way to be debased.
Therefore, [such a one]
 is esteemed by all-under-heaven.

POEM 57.

Govern the country with integrity;
Win the struggle with unusual tactics:
 Take under-heaven without disturbance.
Why do I know it is like this?
 By this:

The more prohibitions under-heaven,
 the poorer people will become.
The more sharp weapons people have,
 the more chaotic the country becomes.
The more skill people develop,
 the more trinkets they make.
The more laws and statutes that arise,
 the more robbers and thieves there are.

Therefore, the Sage says,
“I do-without-doing (wú wěi)
 and people become civilized by themselves.
I prefer tranquility
 and spontaneously people become upright.
I do not disturb them
 and by themselves, people become rich.
I have no desire,
 and spontaneously, people become simple [Pǔ].

POEM 58.

When politics are moderate,
people are simple [Pǔ].
 Harsh politics makes for
 cunning people.

Good fortune leans on disaster;
 disaster stands over good fortune.
Who knows the extremes?
There is no standard.
Too much of the usual
 becomes the unusual.
Too much of the good
 becomes the bad.
This confused people
 for a long time.

Thus, the Sage is square
 but without cutting edges.
Sharp but does not stab.
Strict but is not aggressive.
Bright but having no dazzle.

POEM 59.

For ruling people
and to serve heaven,
 nothing compares
 to frugality.

Frugality simply
 means early preparation.
Early preparation means
 constant accumulation of Dé.
Constant accumulation of Dé
 means there is nothing he
 cannot overcome.
Nothing he cannot overcome
 means he knows no limitations.
Knowing no limitations,
 he can be entrusted
 to govern a country.
That country has
 principles and can
 achieve long periods
 of peace and stability.
Call this the way to
 deep rootedness,
 sturdiness, and *long life*.²⁵

²⁵ Here the character for longevity actually means “a long time to look [at things]”.

POEM 60.

Governing a large
country is like cooking
a small fish.²⁶

Governing under-heaven,
 use the Dào. Evil ghosts
 will be powerless.
The evil ghost, made powerless,
 has no evil will to hurt people.
Neither does the Sage
 have an evil will
 to hurt people.
The two do not hurt each other
 and both benefit the people.

²⁶ Chinese scholars use this as an example of doing-without-doing. Cooking a small item, especially a delicate fish, takes a great deal of care. Be mindful of the flame, do not turn it over too often, and do not season it too much: thus, you obtain the original flavor. And, of course, the original flavor is not of your doing.

POEM 61.

A great country,
like the lowest reaches
where all streams converge,
is a female under-heaven.²⁷

Female always conquers
male by stillness.
Take stillness as foundation.

Hence, a great country
humbles itself before
a small country, and
then can win the trust
of the small country.

A small country humbles
itself before a great one;
then it will have
forgiveness of great ones.

One must always get
underneath to do it.

One already is
underneath and does it.

²⁷ The term for female animal is used and evokes the idea of *Yin*.

The great country
should not desire
to annex the small ones.

Small countries should not
desire to comply with the great.

Both great and small can
satisfy their desires.

The great country,
in particular,
dwells best in
lowest position.

POEM 62.

Dào is the profound
mystery of 10,000 things;
the treasure of the
good man as well as
what the bad man
wants to hold.

Beautiful words
can buy respect.
Beautiful deeds
can make a man admired.
Thus, people who are unkind,
how can they be abandoned?
Therefore, on the
Emperor assuming
his throne and with
the installing of the
three ministers,²⁸
while there is precious
jade followed by a team
of four horses,
yet it is better to take
Dào as the seat.

²⁸ When an heir to the state was raised up to assume the throne of Emperor in the State of Zhou, there were three primary ministers who were also given prominent office: educator of the emperor (classics), assistant to the emperor (bureaucracy), and trainer of the emperor (martial arts).

Why do ancients
value Dào so much?

Is it not said,
“Because by it, they
could get what they wanted.”

And by it, one could be
exempt from guilt.

This is why it is valued under-heaven.

POEM 63.

Do-without-doing (wěi wú wěi)
Accomplish without accomplishing.
Taste without tasting.

Great – small:
many – few.
 [Return a grudge with Dé.]²⁹
Deal with difficulty
 by easiness.
Do the great
 by the small.
Under-heaven, difficult
 things must be done
 with ease.
Under-heaven, the great
 things must be done
 through the small.
Thus, the Sage never
 covets to be great
 and finally can
 achieve greatness.

²⁹ See also Poem 79. This line has to do with returning bad deeds by good deeds. It can also be translated as “Return unkindness with kindness.” As you will see in Poem 79, the structure has to do with how we give credit to even the person who harms us rather than succumb to *quid pro quo* propriety.

Those who make easy
promises will fail
to stay faithful.

Those who consider
something too easy
will make more difficulty.

This is why the Sage
always regards things
as difficult and never
has difficulty.

POEM 64.

Stability is
easy to maintain;
 without signaling [change],
 it is easy to plan.

Fragility is
easy to break.
 The smallest is most
 easily lost.

Do what has not been done.
 Govern when it is
 not yet disordered.

The tree that only
wide arms can encircle
grows from the smallest seed.
 A nine story building
 begins with a mound of soil
Journey of a 1,000 *Li*³⁰
begins beneath the feet.

[The one who does it, fails it.
The one who holds it, loses it.]

³⁰ A *Li* is approximately a ½ mile.

Thus, the Sage is without
failure because he
does-without-doing,
holds without holding.]

People who do something
often fail as soon as they near success.
Prudence at last,
prudence in the beginning:
Thus no failure.

This is why the Sage
desires what none
other will desire:
He does not value rare goods,
learns what others do not learn,
remedies others' faults--
in order to help 10,000 things
and naturally guard
from interference.

POEM 65.

In ancient times, those
who were good at Dào
did not use it to
brighten up the people,
but to keep them simple.

People are hard to rule
because they have too much
cleverness.

Therefore, if cleverness
is used to rule a
country, it will bring
harm to the country.

If cleverness is not used
to govern the country,
it is a blessing to the country.

Knowing these two
are the models:

keep applying the models
and call this, Mysterious Dé.

Mysterious Dé: So profound.

So far-reaching.

this will be counter to mere
things and then achieve
great accord with nature.

POEM 66.

Why can great rivers
and the wide seas be
places where 100 valleys
converge?

Because they are
good at taking lowest position,³¹
and thus can be
the Kings of Valleys.

Hence, the Sage who
wants to be above
people, must use words
to be below them.

And who wants to lead the people,
must go behind them.

Hence, a Sage: above
but without burdening;
ahead without harming.

Therefore, under-heaven
is happy to choose them
to support them, and
never to tire of them.

Because they never contend,
so under-heaven is
unable to contend with them.

³¹ Cf. poem 61.

POEM 67.

Under-heaven all
say my Dào is great.
Seems as though nothing
is really like it.
It's just great,
seems nothing is like it.
If something were like it,
long ago, it would
have become small.

I have three treasures:
hold and keep them.
First is mercy.
Second is frugality.
Third is never daring
to be foremost under-heaven.

From mercy comes courage.
From frugality comes generosity.
From never daring
to be foremost under-heaven
comes the leadership of things.

Today gives up mercy to seek after courage,
gives up frugality to seek after generosity,
gives up being behind to seek after being foremost:
This is death!

Mercy used in battle will win.
Used to defend, will be stable.
Heaven will save them

and use mercy to protect them.³²

³² Them, i.e. the 10,000 things.

POEM 68.

Those who are good at command
do not flaunt courage

Those good at fighting
do not get angry.

Those good at defeating enemies
do not enter into direct conflict.

Those good at employing people
humble themselves.

This is called the Dé
of non-contention.

This is called the ability
to employ people.

This is called being
in accord with heaven,
the ultimate principle of the ancients.

POEM 69.

Strategists have a saying,

“I dare not be *subjective*

but instead *objective*.³³

I dare not advance an inch

rather than retreat a foot.”

 This is called, arraying without arraying;

 wielding arms without wielding arms;

 facing enemies without facing enemies;

 holding weapons without holding weapons.

No disaster greater than

underestimating the enemy.

Underestimating the enemy

comes near to losing my treasures.³⁴

 Therefore, with two equal armies

in war, the one with *right passion*³⁵

is bound to win.

³³ Subjective::aggressive. Objective::defensive.

³⁴ The three treasures of poem 67: *mercy, frugality, and never daring to be foremost under-heaven*.

³⁵ This could be translated as righteous indignation; however, this would lose the fact that mercy and frugality call for sadness at having to fight in the first place. The righteously indignant believes that he has Just Cause to do battle. All conflict is to be treated as the degeneration of Dé and the forgetting of Dào, leading to disorder under-heaven.

POEM 70.

My words are easy to
understand—easy to practice.
 Under-heaven, no one can
 understand—no one can practice.

Words have a gist.
Deeds have a reason.
 Those who do not understand this
 do not understand me.

Those who understand me
 are few.
Those who learn from me
 are rare.
Therefore, the Sage wears
 coarse clothes yet carries
 *jade in his arms.*³⁶

³⁶ The excellences or virtues of living by the *Dào*. Call it *Dé*.

POEM 71.

To know your ignorance
is most upright.³⁷
Not knowing but pretending
to know is illness.³⁸

But consider shortcomings
only as shortcomings:
thus, no shortcomings.
The Sage has no shortcomings
because he considers
shortcomings as shortcomings:
hence, no shortcomings.

³⁷ The character is that one for “up”, so highest or best is intimated. This is another word sometimes translated as “wisdom.” Here, our English word “wise” rooted in the original term for vision does make sense. Knowing you are ignorant, as Socrates points out, is the beginning of being wise or able to see, an opening of the eyes and looking up. Ignorance itself as an English term means “not knowing where to start.” Both Laozi and Socrates remind us to start with admitting we do not know all. This would mean to start “up above” your own self, to see where you can go on the Way.

³⁸ This could be translated as “foolish.” Here, the fool would be the sick person who talks and acts as though he is moving up and about while all the time laying down in the sickbed of his own ignorance.

POEM 72.

When people no longer
fear authorities, then they
achieve the greatest authority.

Do not disturb their living places;
do not oppress their livelihoods.
Only without oppression
will there be no rebellion.

Therefore, the Sage knows himself
but does not praise himself.
He loves himself, but does not
honor himself.
Thus, discard that and take this.

POEM 73.

The courage to dare
leads to death.

 The courage to dare not
 leads to life.

These two: benefit or harm?

 What heaven hates,
 who knows the reason?

[Thus, also difficult for the Sage.]

The Dào of heaven does not contend
 yet is good at winning.

Is tight-lipped
 yet good at responding.

Does not beckon,
 yet things come along themselves.

Is sluggish,
 yet good at planning.

The net of heaven is boundless;
 although loose, nothing slips through.

POEM 74.

People are unafraid of death,
so why use death to frighten them?
If people really feared death,
then evil doers could be caught
and killed—who would dare?

There will always be one
tasked with execution.³⁹
If someone instead of him executes [another],
then this is like replacing the
master woodcutter who chops:
When those who replace the master woodcutter
begin chopping, very few will
not cut their own hands.

³⁹ Death is part of *Dào*. Things come into being and pass away from being. It is not for us to murder or to exterminate or to annihilate.

POEM 75.

People suffer from famine
because those above them
levy too many taxes.
Thus, people are famished.

People are difficult to govern
because those above them
want to do too much.⁴⁰
Thus, people are difficult to govern.

People make light of death
because those above them
are gluttons for life.
Thus, people make light of death.

Those who do not chase after an life of enjoyment
are superior to those
who over value “good living”.

⁴⁰ Yǒu wěi: the opposite of wú wěi.

POEM 76.

When alive, the man is soft and pliable.

When dead, he is hard and rigid.

10,000 things, like grass and trees,
while alive are soft and fresh.

When dead, dry and withered.

Hence, the hard and rigid is of a kind with death.

The soft and pliable is of a kind with life.

Thus, when the army flaunts its might
there can be no victory.

The tree is hard but will be cut down.

The great and the strong
are in lowest position;
the soft and the pliable
are in highest position.

POEM 77.

The Dào of Heaven
is it not like bending a bow?
The high, drag down
The low, lift up
The excessive, reduce
The deficient, increase.

The Dào of Heaven
Reduces the excessive
Increases the deficient

Yet the Dào of human being
is not like this
But reduces the deficient
In order to make offerings
To the excessive.⁴¹

Who can make an offering
of their excess
to All-Under-Heaven?

Only the person of Dào

⁴¹ Giving even more to those who already have too much.

Therefore, the Sage
 does without possessing.
 achieves without taking credit
Never wanting to flaunt his
 excellent abilities.

POEM 78.

Under Heaven nothing is as soft and pliable as water.
Yet to attack the hard and rigid nothing is as superior to water.
Because nothing can replace it.

The weak overcomes the strong.
The soft overcomes the hard.
None Under-Heaven are ignorant of this.
Yet none can implement it.

Therefore, the Sage says,
“Whoever takes the humiliation of the State, this one is the Lord of the State.
“Whoever takes the misfortune of the State, this one is the King Under-Heaven.

Straight words sound ironic.

POEM 79.

Dissolve a great (grudge)
and there must be still some resentment.
[Return a grudge with Dé]⁴²
How can this be proper?

Hence, the Sage keeps the stub of the contract
but never asks for repayment.⁴³
A person of Dé keeps the stub of the contract.
A person of No-Dé levies tax

The Dào of Heaven has no preference,
always helping the good man (?)

⁴² This is the same line from poem 63. It can also be translated as “Return unkindness with kindness.”

⁴³ This refers to the original form of paper currency which was a debt instrument. On the right side was the amount showing the debt. The person holding the “left-hand” tab or stub of the contract held the power to recall the debt or could transfer it to others. You can still see this practice in some stock and bond certificates as well as on some automobile deeds. David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (Melville House, 2011, Chapters 3 and 8) has an excellent discussion of this ancient practice.

POEM 80.

The State should be small and the population sparse.

Let there be ten hundred tools

but do not use them.

Make people attach importance to death

but not migrate to far places.

Although there be ships and carts

they have no need to take them.

Although there be armor and weapons,

there is no chance to display them.

Make people return to knotting ropes

and using them.

Eating delicious food

Wearing beautiful clothes

Living comfortably in the house

Delighting in their customs

Neighboring States can see each other

can hear the sounds of cocks and dogs in each other.

The people grow old and die

never coming at nor going at each other.

POEM 81.

Trustworthy words are not embellished.

Embellished words are not worthy of trust.

A good man does not argue.

Someone who argues is not good.

A knowledgeable man does not flaunt his knowledge.

Someone who flaunts his knowledge is not knowledgeable.

The Sage does not store up.

Attempting to do what is best for others,

He will have more;

Trying his best to give to others

He will get much more.

The Dào of Heaven benefits and does not harm.

The Dào of Sages does but does-not contend.

AN INTERLUDE BETWEEN THE PATHS

Recovering the ground

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POEM 1, to help you recenter

Dào expressable in words
Is not eternal *Dào*;
 The name that can be named
 Is not the eternal name.

The Nameless is the origin
 of Heaven and Earth.
The nameable is the
 Mother of 10,000 things.

Therefore, always be
 without desire to
 observe this mystery;
Being with desire
 always observes the boundary.

These two things come from
 the same but with different names,
Both are called profound.

Profound and again profound,
 the door of many mysteries.

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BOOK OF DÀO: Contemplating fundamental reasons

Poems 2 to 37

POEM 2.

Under-heaven all
know the reason why
the beautiful is
beautiful:
 the existence of
 the ugly;
all know the reason
why the good is the good:
 the existence of
 the bad.

Therefore, to-be and
To-not-be beget
One another,
 Difficulty and ease
 Complement one another,
Long and short
Measure one another,
 High and low
 Complete one another,
Note and voice
Harmonize one another,
 Front and back
 Follow one another.

Hence, the sage does by
doing-without-doing (*wěi-wú-wěi*),
teaches without words,
[aids] 10, 000 things
to grow without decreasing,
generates but

without owning,
does but without
possessing,
greatly achieves
but without taking credit.

*Never taking the
Credit, nothing is
Ever lost.⁴⁴*

⁴⁴ Very difficult phrasing here. Literally it says, "Only not taking credit, yet never losing." So that more time is not spent trying to understand the strange phrase, we offer the interpretation.

POEM 3.

Do not encourage
excellent abilities,⁴⁵
keep people from
contention;
do not value rare
goods, keep people
from stealing;
do not flaunt the
desirable, keep
people's hearts
undisturbed.

Hence, the governance
Of the sage
Empties their hearts
Fills their stomachs;
Weakens their wills,
Strengthens their bones.
Always keeps people
knowing nothing and
having no desire,
to make the wiseguys⁴⁶
dare *not* to do anything.
Do doing-without-doing,
Thus nothing cannot be governed.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Here the advice is to not be glorifying the person who has excellent abilities less they become unwilling to give from their excess. See #77.

⁴⁶ We are using the term "wiseguys" to differentiate between the wise person and those who know enough to be dangerous because they will meddle in the affairs of people.

⁴⁷ Chinese, like many ancient languages, allows for double negatives.

POEM 4.

Dào is empty
yet when used,
it seems never endless.

Bottomless,
Yet it seems like the progenitor
Of 10,000 things.

[Blunt the sharpness,
Remove the distractions,
Soften the light,
Blend with the dust.]⁴⁸

Formless,
Yet it seems like existence.

I do not know
Whose child it is,
It seems like it
Existed before the
[Great] Ancestor.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Possibly an interpolation from poem 56

⁴⁹ Probably the Yellow Emperor who in myth separates Heaven from Earth. We very much want to avoid saying that this is “god” because Laozi is careful to avoid theistic assertions. In fact, this poem implies that it precedes all entities including any deity.

POEM 5.

Heaven and earth
have no mercy,
treating the 10,000 things
as *straw dogs*;
 the Sage has no mercy,
 treating people as *straw dogs*.⁵⁰

The space between
Heaven and Earth
Just like bellows!
 Empty but never
 Exhausted, work it
 And some more comes out.

More words speed up failure,
No comparison with *keeping still*.⁵¹

⁵⁰ A kind of offering used by the ancient Chinese for the purpose of a sacrifice ceremony. Usually these were discarded and trampled upon after the ceremony.

⁵¹ 守中: Shǒu zhōng a term meaning “keeping the middle”, so stillness captures both making no sound and having no motion.

POEM 6.

The Grain Goddess never
dies; she is called
“the mysterious female”.

The door of the
mysterious female
is called “the root of
heaven and earth.”

Existing endlessly,
Use it and never
Be exhausted.

POEM 7.

Heaven is eternal
Earth is everlasting.
The reason why heaven
And earth can be eternal
And everlasting:
 Because they do not
 Exist for themselves,
 [They] thus can live long.

Therefore, the Sage makes
Himself go behind yet
He comes before;
 Considers himself
 Outside yet he is
 Sheltered.⁵²

Is it not because
He is so selfless?
Thus, achieving
his personal [target].⁵³

⁵² 存 Cún: this word means both to exist and to deposit. We have chosen shelter as signifying how being here (existence) is a way of being thrown or deposited in the world.

⁵³ This paragraph seems contradictory. Being selfless, the Sage nonetheless arrives or succeeds at his personal targets. This is not his accomplishment but the result of existing for others.

POEM 8.

The highest good is
like water:

water is good at
benefitting the
10,000 things yet
never contends.

Dwell in the place
That the majority
Dislikes; thus, be close
To *Dào*.

Be good at dwelling in place;
Be good at deepening heart.
Be good at benevolent conduct.
Be good at sincere words.
Be good at ordering politics.
Be good at effective deeds.
Be good at timely action.

Simply never contending,
Thus never making mistakes.

POEM 9.

Holding and filling it up,
no comparison to stopping it in time;
 Honing and sharpening it
 Cannot remain for a long time.

Gold and jade fill the hall,
Yet cannot be guarded.
 Riches and honor
 Yet arrogant,
 Brings disaster upon himself.

Successfully accomplish
then withdraw your body.⁵⁴
 The *Dào* of heaven!

⁵⁴ This probably means to absent your self as soon as you are done with an action.

POEM 10.⁵⁵

Body and soul integrated as one.

Inseparable?

Concentrate *qì*⁵⁶ to be supple.

Baby-like?

Wash and cleanse the
profound mirror.⁵⁷

Never blemish?

Love the people and
govern a country.

Do doing-without-doing?

The door of heaven

Opens and closes.

Yielding?⁵⁸

Brilliantly perceive

The four directions.

Without ignorance?

*[Give birth to it
and breed it, begetting
but without owning;
assisting without
relying upon;
leading without*

⁵⁵ In so many ways, this is probably the hardest poem to translate. It is a series of statements and questions. Literal translation would be almost non-sensical.

⁵⁶ 氣, Qì: this word has been diversely translated into English as energy, force, spirit, breath, etc. However, these translations are inadequate as they reduce the notion to one aspect or profile. The Chinese do not have a *standard* definition of the term, even in qì gōng.

⁵⁷ The heart.

⁵⁸ Literally, the question is “cannot female?” We interpret this to refer to Yin or the feminine principle which can be characterized as that which yields.

*ruling. This is called
“profound Dé”]*⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Interpolation carried over from poem 51 and it may not be an original part of this poem. Could very likely be added to help it even make sense to the ancient scribes collecting the poems.

POEM 11.

Thirty wheel spokes
sharing one hub.

The empty space in
The middle has the
Usefulness for a cart.

Kneading clay to
Make a Vessel.

The empty space in
The middle has the
Usefulness for the vessel.

Cutting the door and window to
Make a room,

The empty space in
The middle has the
Usefulness for the area.

Therefore, as having
Has utility,
Nothingness has
Usefulness.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ All things with an empty aspect as exemplified here by Laozi, “have” emptiness. Thus, nothing is useful.

POEM 12.

Five colors make a person blind,
Five sounds make a person deaf.
Five flavors make a person tasteless.⁶¹
 Gallop and hunt
 Make the heart go mad.
 Hard-to-get goods make
 a person behave badly.

Therefore, the Sage fills
The belly but not the eyes.
Thus, abandon that and take this.⁶²

⁶¹ Obviously, in this section Laozi indicates that when all colors, sounds, and flavors are present, nothing can be distinguished. While it is a very rare usage, we had to use the term “tasteless” here or else fall back on medical terminology which would lose symmetry with the previous two examples of “senselessness.”

⁶² That=the sensuous, hedonistic life; this=the simple, temperate life.

POEM 13.

Being favored and being humiliated,
each is a surprise.

Cherish big trouble
Like the body.⁶³

What does this mean,
“Being favored and being humiliated,
each is a surprise”?

Being favored is low:
Gained, it is a surprise.
Lost, it is a surprise.⁶⁴

It is called, “Being
Favored and being humiliated,
Each is a surprise.”

What does this mean,
“Cherish big trouble
like the body”?

The reason why I have
Big trouble is
Because I have the body.

If I do not have
The body, from what
Trouble can I suffer?

Therefore, the one who

⁶³ The term “big trouble” has a childlike connotation in English. We use this transliteration to capture to play with the way we felt when trouble would happen as children. And Laozi intends that all of our problems should be regarded as seriously as though they are our own bodies. As Jose Ortega y Gasset would say, “I am myself and my circumstances.”

⁶⁴ Favors do not come from our own self or body. Someone or something of a higher position grants us favors. They are given without expectation and taken away as easily.

cherishes the body
for all-under-heaven
Can be bestowed
With all-under-heaven.

The one who loves the
Body for all-under-heaven
Can be entrusted
With all-under-heaven.

POEM 14.

Look for it, yet it
is unseen; named the
colorless.

Listen for it, yet it
Is unheard; named the
Soundless.

Touch it, yet it is
Untouched; named the
Shapeless.

These three things cannot
Be scrutinized since
They blend into one.

Above it, no light.
Below it, no darkness.
Utter disorder
Cannot be named.

Return to nothingness.
This is called the
Shapeless shape,
Insubstantial image.

*Uncanniness.*⁶⁵

Facing it, cannot see
Its front. Following
It, cannot see its back.

Employ *Dào* of ancient times

⁶⁵ Hu huang: A word coined by Laozi. Not easily translatable even into contemporary Chinese which never uses the term. (Although it does include the transposition: huang hu). We are choosing uncanny because Laozi implies that what he is describing is not known or easily knowable. Some other translators use the notion "enigma".

To control present haveness.⁶⁶

Ability to know

The beginning of
the ancient, this is called
“the principle of *Dào*.”

⁶⁶ Existence: We cannot stress enough how much the term usually translated as “to exist” works from the implications of “to have.”

POEM 15.

The ancients who were
good at public service:⁶⁷

 Subtle, mysterious, profound, penetrating.
 Too deep to discern.
Because they are indiscernible
Describe them as they
happen to appear.

Hesitatingly,
 Like walking on ice
 In winter;
Vigilantly,
 Like fearing four neighbors.⁶⁸
Respectfully,
 Like a guest.
Yielding,
 Like ice melting.
Simple and honest,
 like the Uncarved Block.
Vast,
 Like a valley.
Turbid,
 Like muddy water.

⁶⁷ 士, Shì: “public servant”. The character is never separate from another character, denoting a kind of person who does some function like a warrior or court official. In ancient times, a person of ability would be picked from among his peers to learn all the skills to protect them and the cultural knowledge to educate them.

⁶⁸ Caught in the middle of a group, surrounded.

[*Quiet and deep*
like ocean;
Drifting,
Like endlessness.]

Who can make the muddiness
Settle down and gradually clarify?
Who can make the tranquil move
And gradually come alive?
The one who possesses this *Dào*
Never desires satisfaction.
Only dissatisfaction, therefore,
Can abandon the old and renew.

POEM 16.

Be extremely empty;
keep very still.

10,000 things grow up together;
I observe they go
And return in cycles.

All things are varied, and
Return to their own respective roots.

Returning to the root
Call that "stillness;"
This is the return to destiny.

Returning to destiny
call that "eternity."

Knowing eternity
call that "brilliance."

Not knowing eternity:
reckless action,
Going blindly to disaster.

Knowing eternity is hospitality.
Hospitality is impartiality.

Impartiality is King.
King is Heaven.

Heaven is *Dào*,
Dào is eternity.

For all life long,
never [any] danger.

POEM 17.

Of the highest, no one
recalls it being there.

The next [below], they praise.

The next, they fear.

The next, they disdain.⁶⁹

Not enough faith
leads to a lack of confidence.

Be easy and value words;
Accomplish tasks and get things done.

Then people will all say,

“We did it naturally.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Laozi reminds us that the most important and crucial things sink into the background and are forgotten about. Obviously he means Dào, but here alludes to Heaven, the Highest. We forget about the blue sky until it is cloudy. Then we pay heed to the cloud which is beautiful or praiseworthy. But when it becomes a storm, it is feared. And when it merely sprinkles rain on a dry, hot day, it is disdained.

⁷⁰ The notion is that those who guide people (Sages) should take time and leisure in speaking, stay hidden in doing. In this way, they become like the Highest. They are forgotten, and the people benefit from their guidance without feeling oppressed.

POEM 18.

Great *Dào* abandoned?
There is only benevolence and justice.
Next emerges intelligence and knowledge
And these develop the great crafts.⁷¹

When the six kindred relations⁷²
Are not harmonious,
There is love and filiality;
When the nation is dark and disordered,
there are loyal subjects.⁷³

⁷¹ Obviously there is an allusion here to #38. Note, however, the absence of Dé.

⁷² Three crucial social dyads (hence six relations): 1. Father-Son, 2. Elder brother-younger brother, 3. Husband-Wife

⁷³ Again, in conjunct with #38, we have here the breakdown of natural relation and social structure. The abandoning of Profound *Dào* and being without Magnificent *Dé* leaves only surface propriety. Probably, this is also a critique of the Confucian ethic.

POEM 19.

Discard cleverness
and banish knowledge:

 The people will
 benefit a hundredfold.

Discard benevolence
and banish justice:

 The people will
 become filial
 and love once again.

Discard skill and
banish profit:

 Robbers and thieves
 Will not exist.

When taking these three
as principles is not enough,
 allow them to have belongings;

Still, keep them pure and
Help them maintain
their simplicity.

 Reduce selfishness, decrease desire.
 [Banish sophistry: banish worries.]⁷⁴

⁷⁴ We choose to translate “learning, study” as sophistry in this poem because the context shows that Laozi is concerned about how the skillful thinkers can make “the worst appear to be the better.”

POEM 20.

[Banish sophistry: banish worries.]⁷⁵

Sincerity's "yes" and

Flattery's "yes":

How much difference

Is there between them?

Good and evil, how

much difference is

there between them?

What people fear, they

cannot not-fear.⁷⁶

So vast; how never endless it is!

People who are busy

and happy seem to enjoy

magnificent feasts.

As well they ascend

to a terrace for

a lovely spring scene.

Alone, I am indifferent

to fame and wealth.

Showing no sign,

[blank like] a baby

that has not yet smiled.

Weary, as without a dwelling for my return.

⁷⁵ For the use of sophistry see above. The phrase is repeated because in the collections, we are not sure whether the phrase end #19 or begins #20.

⁷⁶ Again, the use of the double negative in Chinese to drive home a negative aspect from which there can be no real separation. Laozi in this poem is highlighting apparent dualisms.

People all have more than enough
Yet alone am I lacking.
 What a heart of a
 fool have I!

[Dull like] vulgar
people are glorious.
 Yet alone am I muddleheaded.
Vulgar people can
be clever and harsh.
 Yet alone am I simple and honest.
 [Quiet and calm as the ocean
 yet the winds never stop.]

People all have goals
 Yet alone, am I
 ignorant and clumsy.
Alone am I different
from others, valuing
the Grain Mother.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Here, Laozi alludes to #6. The Grain Mother or Goddess recalls constant birth and death of that which nourishes us. This also implies the breast milk of the mother which flourishes for a season and then goes away having nourished the baby into an adult.

POEM 21.

The condition for
Great Dé relies only on *Dào*.

Dào as thing:
Indefinite and vague.

Though indefinite and vague,
there are images.

Though indefinite and vague,
things do happen.

Too small to see and
too deep to fathom,
yet there is *life-force*.⁷⁸

Their life-forces are
authentic; they are
always faithful.

⁷⁸ Jing: life-force or spirit or anima.

From the ancient days
to today, its name has
never been discarded.
Through this, we can observe
the generation of everything.
How do I know the generation of everything?

By this...⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Like Poem 54, this entry simply trails off, in a sense asking the reader/listener to experience the Dào as right before them.

POEM 22.

Sacrifice the part
and save the whole.
Bend that to make
this straight.
Hollow that to make
this full.
That withers, this blooms.
Lose that, gain this.
Determined then,
confused now.

Thus, the sages insist on the One
as archetype of under-heaven.

Don't show off,
and you will be seen.
Don't be a know-it-all,
and you will make good judgments.
Forego self-praise,
and you will receive great merit.
Forego self-importance,
and you will receive enduring advantage.

Not struggling,
no one can be a rival.
What the ancients called
"sacrifice the part & save the whole":
This is not empty talk.
Indeed... this saying is most whole,
returning to it [*Dào*].

POEM 23.

Speak as rarely as Nature.
Typhoons do not blow all morning.
Thunderstorms do not last all day.
Who makes these?
Heaven and earth.
If even Heaven and Earth
cannot sustain things for long,
even less a human being.

Those committed to *Dào* are on *Dào*.
Those committed to *Dé* achieve *Dé*.
While those who lose it are themselves lost.
Someone on *Dào*, *Dào* follows.
Someone expressing *Dé*, *Dé* follows.
And the lost are followed by loss.

[Insufficient in faith, there are none faithful]

POEM 24.

Someone who stands on tiptoes
Cannot stand well.
Someone who walks by leaping
Cannot walk well.

A show-off never learns.
A know-it-all never shines.
A braggart never achieves.
A boaster never gets ahead.

All of this is most unnecessary
seen from the viewpoint of *Dào*.
The person on *Dào* avoids all of this
Because such things are disgusting.

POEM 25.

There is a thing born of Nature
before Heaven & Earth.

Soundless, formless;
independent, unchanging;
always moving, never stopping.

Regard it: the Mother of All.

I do not know its name,
reluctantly I call it Great *Dào*.

Great means disappearing.
Disappearing means going far away.
Going far away means returning.

Therefore, *Dào* is great.

Heaven is great.

Earth is great.

The King is great.

Four greatnesses in the cosmos,
and the King is one.

People mimic Earth.

Earth mimics Heaven.

Heaven mimics *Dào*.

Dào mimics Nature.

POEM 26.

Heaviness is the root of lightness.
Tranquility masters recklessness.

Therefore, the Sage travels all day
careful to abandon nothing.
Even in the face of luxury,
like the swallow he flies undistracted.

Why is the King with 10,000 chariots
reckless with his kingdom?

When lightness loses its root,
recklessness loses the kingdom.

POEM 27.

The one who masters walking
leaves no footprints.
The one who masters speaking
makes no slips of the tongue.
The one who masters counting
needs no tally tools to count.
The one who masters shutting
the door needs no bolt,
yet it remains shut and
none can open it.
The one who masters binding
needs neither rope nor twine
but none can unbind
what he has bound.

Hence, the Sage is good
at saving people.
He never abandons anyone.
Thus, the Sage is good
at saving things.
He never abandons anything.
Call this intrinsic brilliance.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Or wisdom. Cf Poem 33 note 87.

Therefore, the skillful
is master of the unskilled.
The unskilled becomes
as a mirror to the skillful.
So when the unskilled
would offer no respect
to the skillful,
the skillful does not care
for the unskilled.
This appears intelligent
but really is great folly.
Such is an essential
and profound point.

POEM 28.

Knowing *power*, abiding in *modesty*,⁸¹
like a stream under Heaven.
Like a stream under Heaven-
never abandoning eternal Dé,
returning at last to *purity*.⁸²

Knowing white, abiding in black;
like this order under Heaven.
Like this order under Heaven-
never losing eternal Dé,
returning at last to infinity.

Knowing honor, abiding in humility;
like a canyon under Heaven.
Like a canyon under Heaven-
full of eternal Dé,
returning at last to *simplicity*.⁸³

⁸¹ A Yin/Yang allusion: Literally, “knowing male, abiding as female”—we are interpolating not so much for political correctness but so the point of the poem is not lost to contemporary ears.

⁸² Literally, “returning at last as a baby”—the poem obviously elicits the form of human procreation with male/female and baby.

⁸³ Pǔ, the uncarved block. Cf. “Important Concepts” at beginning of text.

Simplicity distributes all instruments.
The Sage uses this to become leader,
hence a perfect system is *indivisible*.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Keeps all together without hierarchy; all parts are necessary and important.

POEM 29.

Desiring to possess all-under-heaven by force
I think this never works.

*All-under-heaven is a sacred instrument.*⁸⁵

It cannot be taken over by force.

[It is uncontrollable.]

Possessiveness destroys;

Control loses.

[Hence, the sage "does without doing" (wú wěi)
and destroys nothing.

Controls nothing and loses nothing.]

Things are either leading or following

Either cursing or praising

Either strong or weak

Either stable or unstable.

Thus, a Sage sheds all excesses,
extravagances, and extremes.

⁸⁵ Elucidate "all-under-heaven" as powerful; also, the use of "sacred instrument".

POEM 30.

The minister who relies on *Dào*
Never threatens all-under-heaven with violence.
Surely such an action must lead to retaliation.
Wherever troops walk, weeds grow;
After the time of war, must come the time of famine.

The good strategist
Desires the fruit of struggle:
Tranquility.
He dares not rely upon violence.
He succeeds in the struggle
 But does not boast.
He achieves but does not brag.
He gains but is not proud.
He succeeds in the struggle
 And avoids violence until last resort.
He succeeds in the struggle
 Without showing-off.

For violent victory brings decay:
Such does not have *Dào*
and being off *Dào* is a quick death.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Laozi makes use here that *Dào* is “Way”. Rather than saying “without *Dào*” we keep to something more literal to denote being “off-the-Way” as becoming “off-the-track.”

POEM 31.

Powerful weapon:

Inauspicious instrument.

The person on *Dào*

Disapproves of such instruments.

Such are disgusting.

The worthy person in daily life

Respects the Left

As place of honor.⁸⁷

The person in time of war

Regards the Right

As place of honor.

Weapons are inauspicious

Instruments, not a tool

Of the worthy person.

When there remains no choice

But to use such tools,

Be most calm.

⁸⁷ Left hand/Right hand: This poem makes use of the standard practice in Chinese culture for seating at a banquet. The guest of honor always sits to the LEFT of the host. Here, Laozi uses a common trope to distinguish between the order of tranquil everyday life and the disorder that arises with war.

Win the victory,
But do not praise it.
The one who praises
Takes great delight in killing.
The one who takes great delight in killing
Can never achieve his ambition under-heaven.

In auspicious times,
people favor the left hand.
In inauspicious times,
people favor the right hand.
The Lieutenant stands on the left.
The General stands on the right
Which means:
Always consider war inauspicious.
Heavy casualties in war
should be attended by grief and remorse.
When comes the victory,
treat it as a funeral.

POEM 32.

Dào always and forever without name.
Simple and small.
Nothing under-heaven can rule over *Dào*.
If Kings obey this,
All-under-heaven will follow them spontaneously.

*Heaven and earth join together:*⁸⁸
Sweet dew will fall
Scattering down equally
Without consideration for people.

In the beginning,
Names are given.
Once names are given,
Boundaries are established.
Knowing the boundaries
prevents danger.

Compare *Dào* to under-heaven:
The stream flowing from mountain height
Through sheltering valleys to the wide sea.

⁸⁸ There is an intimation here of Yang and Yin being in harmonic accord.

POEM 33.

Knowing others: lucidity.
Knowing self: brilliance.⁸⁹

Defeating others: strength.
Defeating self: fortitude.

Contentedness: wealth.
Perseverance: will.

Never losing self: endurance.
Dead yet unforgotten: longevity.

⁸⁹ The characters translated in these two lines both contain the glyph for sun. Lucidity is the combination of "know" and "sun". Brilliance is the combination of moon and sun. Common translations for the two might be "intelligence" and "wisdom" respectively. Wenlong and I discussed the import of the sun being in each character. For that reason, we decided to use English terms that actually are rooted in words of light.

POEM 34.

Great *Dào* everywhere.

Left or right, all around.

On It, the *10,000 things*⁹⁰

Relying: nurturing, never rejecting.

Achieving completion

Without needing recognition.

Feeding the 10,000

Without being the master:

[Forever without desire.]

It can be called small.

The 10,000 return to it

And never is it their master:

It can be called great.

Never, ever considering itself great,

It is great.

POEM 35.

Grasping the great appearance:⁹¹
Under-heaven will come along
Following without quarrel.
Tranquility. Peace. Quiet.

Sweet music and good food
Catch the passersby like bait.
When *Dào* is spoken:
Dull and tasteless.
See it: not enough to be seen.
Hear it: not enough to be heard.
Yet use it: never exhausted.

⁹¹象; Xiàng: Image, phenomenon, surface form.

POEM 36.

To shrink it, expand it.

 To weaken it, strengthen it.

To demote it, promote it.

 To take it, give it.

Call this subtle brilliance:

 Flexibility and weakness

 Overcomes rigidity and strength.

Fish cannot abandon the depths.

 A state's sharpest instrument

 Should not be revealed to the people.

POEM 37.

Dào: always doing-without-doing
Yet doing all.

If kings can follow this,
The 10,000 things
Will grow and develop
Spontaneously.
During the course of
Growth and development,
Whenever arises
A desire to do...
I will suppress it
With the simplicity⁹²
Of the Nameless.
With the simplicity
Of the Nameless,
No desire.
Having no desire,
Achieving tranquility.
All-under-heaven
Achieves tranquility.

⁹² Pǔ, the uncarved block.

A POSTLUDE ON THE WAY

Rediscovering a path for ourselves

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POEM 38, bridging the Way and Excellence.

Magnificent *Dé*:

Acting without thinking of *Dé*:

Acting thus is authentic *Dé*.

Debased *Dé*:

Keeping up the

appearance of *Dé*:

Acting thus is inauthentic *Dé*.

Authentic *Dé* keeps

by doing-without-doing (*wú-wěi*)

with no deliberate

manifestation

of doing *Dé*.

Debased *Dé* keeps

doing and ever

manifests itself

doing.

Magnificent

benevolence

never boasts of

this benevolence.

Yet magnificent

righteousness does boast

of this righteousness.

And magnificent
propriety takes
offense at improper
response, ready to
roll up the sleeves.

Thus, lose *Dào*
 then comes *Dé*.
Lose *Dé*,
 then comes benevolence.
Lose benevolence,
 then comes righteousness.
Lose righteousness,
 then comes propriety.

Propriety results
from insufficient
loyalty and faith
and results in the
first step to disorder.
 Foresight puts *gilding* (Huá)
 upon *Dào*
 and is the beginning
 of stupidity.

Thus, the authentic person
makes a *thick* dwelling
and dwells not in *thinness*.
 Hence, the authentic person
 makes a *simple* (Pǔ shì) dwelling
 and dwells not by *gilding*.
 Therefore, abandon
 that and take this.

POEM 1, Recalling where we began

Dào expressable in words
Is not eternal *Dào*;
 The name that can be named
 Is not the eternal name.

The Nameless is the origin
 of Heaven and Earth.
The nameable is the
 Mother of 10,000 things.

Therefore, always be
 without desire to
 observe this mystery;
Being with desire
 always observes the boundary.

These two things come from
 the same but with different names,
Both are called profound.

Profound and again profound,
 the door of many mysteries.



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