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# TAO TE CHING

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THE CLASSIC BOOK OF INTEGRITY AND THE WAY

LAO TZU

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AN ENTIRELY NEW TRANSLATION BASED ON THE  
RECENTLY DISCOVERED MA-WANG-TUI MANUSCRIPTS.

Translated, annotated, and with an Afterword  
by Victor H. Mair

WOODCUTS BY DAN HEITKAMP

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FOR DAVE,  
who dances with the Tao.

1  
(38)

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The person of superior integrity  
    does not insist upon his integrity;  
For this reason, he has integrity.  
The person of inferior integrity  
    never loses sight of his integrity;  
For this reason, he lacks integrity.

The person of superior integrity takes no action,  
    nor has he a purpose for acting.  
The person of superior humaneness takes action,  
    but has no purpose for acting.  
The person of superior righteousness takes action,  
    and has a purpose for acting.  
The person of superior etiquette takes action,  
    but others do not respond to him;  
Whereupon he rolls up his sleeves  
    and coerces them.

Therefore,  
    When the Way is lost,  
        afterward comes integrity.  
    When integrity is lost,  
        afterward comes humaneness.  
    When humaneness is lost,  
        afterward comes righteousness.  
    When righteousness is lost,  
        afterward comes etiquette.

Now,

Etiquette is the attenuation of trustworthiness,  
and the source of disorder.

Foreknowledge is but the blossomy ornament of the Way,  
and the source of ignorance.

For this reason,

The great man resides in substance,  
not in attenuation.

He resides in fruitful reality,  
not in blossomy ornament.

Therefore,

He rejects the one and adopts the other.



6  
(43)

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The softest thing under heaven  
gallops triumphantly over  
The hardest thing under heaven.

Nonbeing penetrates nonspace.  
Hence,  
I know the advantages of nonaction.

The doctrine without words,  
The advantage of nonaction—  
few under heaven can realize these!

9  
(46)

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When the Way prevails under heaven,  
    swift horses are relegated to fertilizing fields.  
When the Way does not prevail under heaven,  
    war-horses breed in the suburbs.

No guilt is greater than giving in to desire,  
No disaster is greater than discontent,  
No crime is more grievous than the desire for gain.

Therefore,  
Contentment that derives from knowing  
    when to be content  
is eternal contentment.

10  
(47)

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Without going out-of-doors,  
    one may know all under heaven;  
Without peering through windows,  
    one may know the Way of heaven.

The farther one goes,  
The less one knows.

For this reason,  
The sage knows without journeying,  
    understands without looking,  
    accomplishes without acting.

11  
(48)

The pursuit of learning results in daily increase,  
Hearing the Way leads to daily decrease.

Decrease and again decrease,  
until you reach nonaction.

Through nonaction,  
no action is left undone.

Should one desire to gain all under heaven,  
One should remain ever free of involvements.

For,

Just as surely as one becomes involved,  
One is unfit for gaining all under heaven.

20  
(57)

Rule the state with uprightness,  
Deploy your troops with craft,  
Gain all under heaven with noninterference.

How do I know this is actually so?

Now,

The more taboos under heaven,  
the poorer the people;  
The more clever devices people have,  
the more confused the state and ruling house;  
The more knowledge people have,  
the more strange things spring up;  
The more legal affairs are given prominence,  
the more numerous bandits and thieves.

For this reason,

The sage has a saying:

"I take no action,  
yet the people transform themselves;  
I am fond of stillness,  
yet the people correct themselves;  
I do not interfere in affairs,  
yet the people enrich themselves;  
I desire not to desire,  
yet the people of themselves become  
simple as unhewn logs."

21  
(58)

When government is anarchic,  
the people are honest;  
When government is meddlesome,  
the state is lacking.

Disaster is that whereon good fortune depends,  
Good fortune is that wherein disaster lurks.  
Who knows their limits?

When there is no uprightness,  
correct reverts to crafty,  
good reverts to gruesome.

The delusion of mankind,  
How long have been its days!

For this reason, be

Square but not cutting,  
Angular but not prickly,  
Straight but not arrogant,  
Bright but not dazzling.



Sincere words are not beautiful,  
 Beautiful words are not sincere.  
 He who knows is not learned,  
 He who is learned does not know.  
 He who is good does not have much,  
 He who has much is not good.

The sage does not hoard.  
 The more he does for others,  
     the more he has himself;  
 The more he gives to others,  
     the more his own bounty increases.

Therefore,  
 The Way of heaven benefits but does not harm,  
 The Way of man acts but does not contend.

All under heaven say that I am great,  
 great but unconventional.

Now,  
 Precisely because I am unconventional,  
     I can be great;  
 If I were conventional,  
     I would long since have become a trifle.

I have always possessed three treasures  
     that I guard and cherish.  
 The first is compassion,  
 The second is frugality,  
 The third is not daring to be ahead of all under heaven.

Now,  
 Because I am compassionate,  
     I can be brave;  
 Because I am frugal,  
     I can be magnanimous;  
 Because I dare not be ahead of all under heaven,  
     I can be a leader in the completion of affairs.

If, today, I were to  
 Be courageous while forsaking compassion,  
 Be magnanimous while forsaking frugality,  
 Get ahead while forsaking the hindmost,  
     that would be death!

For compassion

In war brings victory,

In defense brings invulnerability.

Whomsoever heaven would establish,

It surrounds with a bulwark of compassion.

33  
(68)

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A good warrior is not bellicose,

A good fighter does not anger,

A good conqueror does not contest his enemy,

One who is good at using others puts himself below them.

This is called "integrity without competition,"

This is called "using others,"

This is called "parity with heaven,"

—the pinnacle of the ancients.

Human beings are  
soft and supple when alive,  
stiff and straight when dead.

The myriad creatures, the grasses and trees are  
soft and fragile when alive,  
dry and withered when dead.

Therefore, it is said:

The rigid person is a disciple of death;  
The soft, supple, and delicate are lovers of life.

An army that is inflexible will not conquer;  
A tree that is inflexible will snap.

The unyielding and mighty shall be brought low;  
The soft, supple, and delicate will be set above.

43  
(78)

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Nothing under heaven is softer or weaker than water,  
and yet nothing is better  
for attacking what is hard and strong,  
because of its immutability.

The defeat of the hard by the soft,  
The defeat of the strong by the weak—  
this is known to all under heaven,  
yet no one is able to practice it.

Therefore, in the words of the sage, it is said:  
“He who bears abuse directed against the state  
is called ‘lord of the altars for the gods of soil and grain’;  
He who bears the misfortunes of the state  
is called the ‘king of all under heaven.’ ”

True words seem contradictory.

44  
(79)

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Compromise with great resentment  
will surely yield lingering resentment;  
How can this be seen as good?

For this reason,  
The sage holds the debtor's side of a contract  
and does not make claims upon others.

Therefore,  
The man of integrity attends to his debts;  
The man without integrity attends to his exactions.

The Way of heaven is impartial,  
yet is always with the good person.

45  
(1)

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The ways that can be walked are not the eternal Way;  
The names that can be named are not the eternal name.  
The nameless is the origin of the myriad creatures;  
The named is the mother of the myriad creatures.

Therefore,

Always be without desire  
in order to observe its wondrous subtleties;  
Always have desire  
so that you may observe its manifestations.

Both of these derive from the same source;  
They have different names but the same designation.

Mystery of mysteries,  
The gate of all wonders!

When all under heaven know beauty as beauty,  
already there is ugliness;  
When everyone knows goodness,  
this accounts for badness.

Being and nonbeing give birth to each other,  
Difficult and easy complete each other,  
Long and short form each other,  
High and low fulfill each other,  
Tone and voice harmonize with each other,  
Front and back follow each other—  
it is ever thus.

For these reasons,

The sage  
dwells in affairs of nonaction,  
carries out a doctrine without words.

He lets the myriad creatures rise up  
but does not instigate them;

He acts  
but does not presume;

He completes his work  
but does not dwell on it.

Now,

Simply because he does not dwell on them,  
his accomplishments never leave him.

Not exalting men of worth  
prevents the people from competing;  
Not putting high value on rare goods  
prevents the people from being bandits;  
Not displaying objects of desire  
prevents the people from being disorderly.

For these reasons,

The sage, in ruling,  
hollows their hearts,  
stuffs their stomachs,  
weakens their wills,  
builds up their bones,  
Always causing the people  
to be without knowledge and desire.

He ensures that  
the knowledgeable dare not be hostile,  
and that is all.

Thus,

His rule is universal.

48  
(4)

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The Way is empty,  
    yet never refills with use;  
Bottomless it is,  
    like the forefather of the myriad creatures.  
It files away sharp points,  
    unravels tangles,  
    diffuses light,  
    mingles with the dust.  
Submerged it lies,  
    seeming barely to subsist.  
I know not whose child it is,  
    only that it resembles the predecessor of God.

49  
(5)

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Heaven and earth are inhumane;  
    they view the myriad creatures as straw dogs.  
The sage is inhumane;  
    he views the common people as straw dogs.

The space between heaven and earth,  
    how like a bellows it is!  
Empty but never exhausted,  
The more it pumps, the more comes out.

Hearing too much leads to utter exhaustion;  
Better to remain in the center.



50  
(6)

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The valley spirit never dies—  
it is called “the mysterious female”;  
The gate of the mysterious female  
is called “the root of heaven and earth.”  
Gossamer it is,  
seemingly insubstantial,  
yet never consumed through use.



51  
(7)

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Heaven is long and earth is lasting.  
Heaven and earth can be long and lasting  
because they do not live for themselves.  
Therefore,  
They can be long-lived.

For this reason,  
The sage  
withdraws himself  
but comes to the fore,  
alienates himself  
but is always present.

Is this not because he is free of private interests?  
Therefore,  
He can accomplish his private interests.

52  
(8)

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The highest good is like water;  
Water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures  
but also struggles  
to occupy the place loathed by the masses.  
Therefore,  
It is near to the Way.

The quality of an abode is in its location,  
The quality of the heart is in its depths,  
The quality of giving lies in trust,  
The quality of correct governance lies in orderly rule,  
The quality of an enterprise depends on ability,  
The quality of movement depends on timing.

Now,  
It is precisely because one does not compete  
that there is no blame.