

Selected Passages from the *Daodejing*

A topical index appears at the conclusion of the text

1

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant Way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.

The Nameless was the beginning of Heaven and earth;
The named was the mother of the myriad creatures.

Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets;
But always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe its manifestations.

These two are the same
But diverge in name as they issue forth.
Being the same they are called mysteries,
Mystery upon mystery -
The gateway of the manifold secrets.

2

The whole world recognizes the beautiful as the beautiful, and this is why ugliness exists;
the whole world recognizes the good as the good, yet this is why there is bad.

Thus Something and Nothing produce each other;
The difficult and the easy complement each other;
The long and the short off-set each other;
The high and the low incline towards each other;
Note and sound harmonize with each other;
Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words.

The myriad creatures rise from it yet it claims no authority;
It gives them life yet claims no possession;
It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude;
It accomplishes its task yet lays claim to no merit.

It is because it lays claim to no merit
That its merit never deserts it.

3

Not to honor men of worth will keep the people from contention;
Not to value goods which are hard to come by will keep them from theft;
Not to display what is desirable will keep them from being unsettled of mind.

Therefore in governing the people, the sage empties their minds but fills their bellies, weakens their wills but strengthens their bones.

He always keeps them innocent of knowledge and free from desire, and ensures that the clever never dare to act.

Do that which consists in taking no action, and order will prevail.

4

The Way is empty, yet use will not drain it.
Deep, it is like the ancestor of the myriad creatures.

Blunt the sharpness;
Untangle the knots;
Soften the glare;
Let your wheels move only along old ruts.

Darkly visible, it only seems as if it were there.
I know not whose son it is.
It images the forefather of God.

5

Heaven and earth are (not *ren*) ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs;
The sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs.

Is not the space between Heaven and earth like a bellows?
It is empty without being exhausted:
The more it works the more comes out.

Much speech leads inevitably to silence.
Better to hold fast to the void.

6

The spirit of the valley never dies.
This is called the Mysterious Female.
The gateway of the Mysterious Female
Is called the root of Heaven and earth.
Dimly visible, it seems as if it were there,
Yet use will never drain it.

9

Rather than fill it to the brim by keeping it upright
Better to have stopped in time;
Hammer it to a point
And the sharpness cannot be preserved for ever;
There may be gold and jade to fill a hall
But there is none who can keep them.
To be overbearing when one has wealth and position
Is to bring calamity upon oneself.
To retire when the task is accomplished
Is the way of Heaven.

10

When carrying on your head your perplexed bodily soul
Can you embrace in your arms the One and not let go?
In concentrating your breath can you become as supple
As a babe?
Can you polish your mysterious mirror
And leave no blemish?
Can you love the people and govern the state
Without resorting to action?
When the gates of Heaven open and shut
Are you capable of keeping to the role of the female?
When your discernment penetrates the four quarters
Are you capable of not knowing anything?

It gives them life and rears them.

It gives them life yet claims no possession;
It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude;
It is the steward yet exercises no authority.
Such is called the mysterious virtue.

11

Thirty spokes share one hub.
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart.
Knead clay in order to make a vessel.
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the vessel.
Cut out doors and windows in order to make a room.
Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the room.

Thus what we gain is Something, yet it is by virtue of Nothing that this can be put to use.

12

'The five colors make man's eyes blind;
'The five notes make his ears deaf;
'The five tastes injure his palate;
Riding and hunting
Make his mind go wild with excitement;
Goods hard to come by
Serve to hinder his progress.

Hence the sage is
For the belly
Not for the eye.

'Therefore he discards the one and takes the other.

13

Favor and disgrace are things that startle;
High rank is, like one's body, a source of great trouble.

What is meant by saying favor and disgrace are things that startle?
Favor when it is bestowed on a subject serves to startle as much as when it is withdrawn.
'This is what is meant by saying that favor and disgrace are things that startle.
What is meant by saying that high rank is, like one's body, a source of great trouble?
'The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body.
When I no longer have a body, what trouble have I?

Hence he who values his body more than dominion over the empire can be entrusted with the empire.
He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be given the custody of the empire.

14

What cannot be seen is called evanescent;
What cannot be heard is called rarefied;
What cannot be touched is called minute.

'These three cannot be fathomed
And so they are confused and looked upon as one.

Its upper part is not dazzling;
Its lower part is not obscure.
Dimly visible, it cannot be named
And returns to that which is without substance.

This is called the shape that has no shape,
The image that is without substance.
This is called indistinct and shadowy.
Go up to it and you will not see its head;
Follow behind it and you will not see its rear.

Hold fast to the way of antiquity
In order to keep in control the realm of today.
The ability to know the beginning of antiquity
Is called the thread running through the way.

16

I do my utmost to attain emptiness;
I hold firmly to stillness.
The myriad creatures all rise together
And I watch their return.
The teaming creatures
All return to their separate roots.
Returning to one's roots is known as stillness.
This is what is meant by returning to one's destiny.
Returning to one's destiny is known as the constant.
Knowledge of the constant is known as discernment.

Woe to him who willfully innovates
While ignorant of the constant,
But should one act from knowledge of the constant
One's action will lead to impartiality,
Impartiality to kingliness,
Kingliness to Heaven,
Heaven to the Way,
The Way to perpetuity,
And to the end of one's days one will meet with no danger.

17

The best of all rulers is but a shadowy presence to his subjects.
Next comes the ruler they love and praise;
Next comes one they fear;
Next comes one with whom they take liberties.

When leaders lack conviction, the people lack faith in them.
How thoughtfully do they choose their words!

When his task is accomplished and his work done
The people all say, 'We did it ourselves.'

18

When the great Way falls into disuse
'There are benevolence and rectitude;
When cleverness emerges
'There is great hypocrisy;
When the six relations are at variance
'There are filial children;
When the state is benighted
'There are loyal ministers.

19

Exterminate learning and there will no longer be worries.

Exterminate the sage, discard the wise,
And the people will benefit a hundredfold;
Exterminate benevolence, discard rectitude,
And the people will again be filial;
Exterminate ingenuity, discard profit,
And there will be no more thieves and bandits.

'These three, being false adornments, are not enough
And the people must have something to which they can attach themselves:
Exhibit the unadorned and embrace the Uncarved Block,
Have little thought of self and as few desires as possible.

22

Bowed down then preserved;
Bent then straight;
Hollow then full;
Worn then new;
A little then benefited;
A lot then perplexed.

'Therefore the sage embraces the One and is a model for the empire.

He does not show himself, and so is conspicuous;
He does not consider himself right, and so is illustrious;
He does not brag, and so has merit;
He does not boast, and so endures.

It is because he does not contend that no one in the empire is in a position to contend with him.

'The way the ancients had it, 'Bowed down then preserved', is no empty saying.

Truly it enables one to be preserved to the end.

25

There is a thing confusedly formed,
Born before Heaven and earth.
Silent and void
It stands alone and does not change,
Goes round and does not weary.
It is capable of being the mother of the world.
I know not its name
So I style it 'the Way'.

I give it the makeshift name of 'the great'.
Being great, it is further described as receding,
Receding, it is described as far away,
Being far away, it is described as turning back.

Hence the Way is great;
Heaven is great;
Earth is great;
The king is also great.
Within the realm there are four things that are great,
And the king counts as one.

Man models himself on earth,
Earth on Heaven,
Heaven on the Way,
And the Way on that which is naturally so.

27

One who excels in travelling leaves no wheel tracks;
One who excels in speech makes no slips;
One who excels in reckoning uses no counting rods;
One who excels in shutting uses no bolts yet what he has shut cannot be opened.
One who excels in tying uses no cords yet what he has tied cannot be undone.

Therefore the sage always excels in saving people, and so abandons no one;
Always excels in saving things, and so abandons nothing.

This is called following one's discernment.

Hence the good man is the teacher the bad learns from;
And the bad man is the material the good works on.
Not to value the teacher

Nor to love the material
Though it seems clever, betrays great bewilderment.

This is called the essential and the secret.

28

Know the male
But keep to the role of the female
And be a ravine to the empire.
If you are a ravine to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will not desert you
And you will again return to being a babe.

Know the white
But keep to the role of the sullied
And be a model to the empire.
If you are a model to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will not be wanting
And you will return to the infinite,

Know honor
But keep to the role of the disgraced
And be a valley to the empire.
If you are a valley to the empire,
Then the constant virtue will be sufficient
And you will return to being the Uncarved Block.

When the Uncarved Block shatters it becomes vessels.
The sage makes use of these and becomes the lord over the officials.

Hence the greatest cutting does not sever.

29

Whoever takes the empire and wishes to do anything to it I see will have no respite.
The empire is a sacred vessel and nothing should be done to it.
Whoever does anything to it will ruin it;
whoever lays hold of it will lose it.

Hence some things lead and some follow;
Some breathe gently and some breathe hard;
Some are strong and some are weak;
Some destroy and some are destroyed.

Therefore the sage avoids excess, extravagance, and arrogance.

32

The Way is forever nameless.
Though the Uncarved Block is small
No one in the world dare claim its allegiance.
Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it
The myriad creatures will submit of their own accord,
Heaven and earth will unite and sweet dew will fall,
And the people will be equitable, though no one so decrees.
Only when it is cut are there names.
As soon as there are names
One ought to know that it is time to stop.
Knowing when to stop one can be free from danger.

The Way is to the world as the River and the Sea are to rivulets and streams.

36

If you would have a thing shrink,
You must first stretch it;
If you would have a thing weakened,
You must first strengthen it;
If you would have a thing laid aside,
You must first set it up;
If you would take from a thing,
You must first give to it.

This is called subtle discernment:
The submissive and weak will overcome the hard and strong.

The fish must not be allowed to leave the deep;
The instruments of power in a state must not be revealed to anyone.

37

The Way never acts, yet nothing is left undone.
Should lords and princes be able to hold fast to it,
The myriad creatures will be transformed of their own accord.
After they are transformed, should desire raise its head,
I shall press it down with the weight of the nameless Uncarved Block.
The nameless Uncarved Block
Is but freedom from desire,
And if I cease to desire and remain still,
The empire will be at peace of its own accord.

38

A man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue.
A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue.
The former never acts yet leaves nothing undone.
The latter acts but there are things left undone.
A man of the highest benevolence acts, but from no ulterior motive.
A man of the highest rectitude acts, but from ulterior motive.
A man most conversant in the rites acts, but when no one responds rolls up his sleeves and resorts to persuasion by force.

Hence when the Way was lost there was virtue;
When virtue was lost there was benevolence;
When benevolence was lost there was rectitude;
When rectitude was lost there were the rites.

The rites are the wearing thin of loyalty and good faith
And the beginning of disorder;
Foreknowledge is the flowery embellishment of the Way
And the beginning of folly.

Hence the man of large mind abides in the thick not in the thin, in the fruit not in the flower.

Therefore he discards the one and takes the other.

39

Of old, these came to be in possession of the One:
Heaven in virtue of the One is limpid;
Earth in virtue of the One is settled;
Gods in virtue of the One have their potencies;
The valley in virtue of the One is full;
The myriad creatures in virtue of the One are alive;
Lords and princes in virtue of the One become leaders of the empire.
It is the One that makes these what they are.

Without what makes it limpid Heaven might split;
Without what makes it settled earth might sink;
Without what gives them their potencies gods might spend themselves;
Without what makes it full the valley might run dry;
Without what keeps them alive the myriad creatures might perish;
Without what makes them leaders lords and princes might fall.

Hence the superior must have the inferior as root;
The high must have the low as base.

'Thus lords and princes refer to themselves as 'solitary', 'desolate', and 'hapless'.
'This is taking the inferior as root, is it not?

Hence the highest renown is without renown,
Not wishing to be one among many like jade
Nor to be aloof like stone.

40

Reversal is the movement of the Way;
Weakness is the means the Way employs.

The myriad creatures in the world are born from
Something, and Something from Nothing.

41

When the best student hears about the Way
He practices it assiduously;
When the average student hears about the Way
It seems to him there one moment and gone the next;
When the worst student hears about the Way
He laughs out loud.
If he did not laugh
It would be unworthy of being the Way.

Hence the saying has it:
'The way that is bright seems dull;
'The way that is forward seems to lead backward;
'The way that is even seems rough.
'The highest virtue is like the valley;
'The sheerest whiteness seems sullied;
Ample virtue seems defective;
Vigorous virtue seems indolent;
Plain virtue seems soiled;
'The great square has no corners.
'The great vessel takes long to complete;
'The great note is rarefied in sound;
'The great image has no shape.

The Way conceals itself in being nameless.
It is the Way alone that excels in bestowing and in accomplishing.

42

The Way begets one;
One begets two;
Two begets three;
Three begets the myriad creatures.

The myriad creatures carry on their backs the *yin* and embrace in their arms the *yang* and are the blending of the generative forces of the two.

There are no words which men detest more than 'solitary', 'desolate', and 'hapless', yet lords and princes use these to refer to themselves.

Thus a thing is sometimes added to by being diminished and diminished by being added to.

What others teach I also teach.
'The violent shall not come to a natural end.'
I shall take this as my precept.

43

Exterminate learning, and there will no longer be worries.

The most submissive thing in the world can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world;
That which is without substance entering that which has no crevices.

That is why I know the benefit of resorting to no action.
The teaching that uses no words, the benefit of resorting to no action, these are beyond the understanding of all but a very few in the world.

45

Great perfection seems chipped,
Yet use will not wear it out;
Great fullness seems empty,
Yet use will not drain it;
Great straightness seems bent;
Great skill seems awkward;
Great eloquence seems tongue-tied.

Restlessness overcomes cold;
Stillness overcomes heat.

Limpid and still,
One can be a leader in the empire.

47

Without stirring abroad
One can know the whole world;
Without looking out the window
One can see the Way of Heaven.
The further one goes
The less one knows.
Therefore the sage knows without having to stir,
Identifies without having to see,
Accomplishes without having to act.

48

In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day;
In the pursuit of the Way one does less every day.
One does less and less until one does nothing at all, and when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone.

It is always through not meddling that the empire is won.
Should you meddle, then you are not equal to the task of winning the empire.

51

The Way gives them life;
Virtue rears them;
Things give them shape;
Circumstances bring them to maturity.

Therefore the myriad creatures all revere the Way and honor virtue.
Yet the Way is revered and virtue honored not because this is decreed by any authority but because it is natural for them to be treated so.

Thus the Way gives them life and rears them;
Brings them up and nurses them;
Brings them to fruition and maturity;
Feeds and shelters them.

It gives them life yet claims no possession;
It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude;
It is the steward yet exercises no authority.
Such is called the mysterious virtue.

52

The world had a beginning
And this beginning could be the mother of the world.

When you know the mother
Go on to know the child.
After you have known the child
Go back to holding fast to the mother,
And to the end of your days you will not meet with danger.

Block the openings,
Shut the doors,
And all your life you will not run dry.
Unblock the openings,
Add to your troubles,
And to the end of your days you will be beyond salvation.

To see the small is called discernment;
To hold fast to the submissive is called strength.
Use the light
But give up the discernment.
Bring not misfortune upon yourself.

This is known as following the constant.

56

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

Block the openings!
Shut the doors!
Blunt the sharpness;
Untangle the knots;
Soften the glare;
Let your wheels move only along old ruts.

This is known as mysterious sameness.

Hence you cannot get close to it, nor can you keep it at arm's length;
You cannot bestow benefit on it, nor can you do it harm;
You cannot ennoble it, nor can you debase it.

Therefore it is valued by the empire.

57

Govern the state by being straightforward;
Wage war by being crafty;
But win the empire by not being meddlesome.

How do I know that it is like that?
By means of this.

The more taboos there are in the empire
The poorer the people;
The more sharpened tools the people have
The more benighted the state;
The more skills the people have
The further novelties multiply;
The better known the laws and edicts
The more thieves and robbers there are.

Hence the sage says,
I take no action and the people are transformed of themselves;
I prefer stillness and the people are rectified of themselves;
I am not meddlesome and the people prosper of themselves;
I am free from desire and the people of themselves become simple like the Uncarved Block.

60

Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish.

When the empire is ruled in accordance with the Way,
The spirits lose their potencies.
Or rather, it is not that they lose their potencies,
But that, though they have their potencies, they do not harm the people.
It is not only they who, having their potencies, do not harm the people,
The sage, also, does not harm the people.
As neither does any harm, each attributes the merit to the other.

61

A large state is the lower reaches of a river:
The place where all the streams of the world unite.

In the union of the world,
The female always gets the better of the male by stillness.

Being still, she takes the lower position.

Hence the large state, by taking the lower position, annexes the small state;
The small state, by taking the lower position, affiliates itself to the large state.

Thus the one, by taking the lower position, annexes;
The other, by taking the lower position, is annexed.
All that the large state wants is to take the other under its wing;

All that the small state wants is to have its services accepted by the other.
If each of the two wants to find its proper place,
It is meet that the large should take the lower position.

65

Of old those who excelled in the pursuit of the Way did not use it to enlighten the people but to hoodwink them.
The reason why the people are difficult to govern is that they are too clever.

Hence to rule a state by cleverness
Will be to the detriment of the state;
Not to rule a state by cleverness
Will be a boon to the state.
These two are models.
Always to know the models
Is known as mysterious virtue.
Mysterious virtue is profound and far-reaching,
But when things turn back it turns back with them.

Only then is complete conformity realized.

66

The reason why the River and the Sea are able to be king of the hundred valleys is that they excel in taking the lower position.
Hence they are able to be king of the hundred valleys.

Therefore, desiring to rule over the people,
One must in one's words humble oneself before them;
And, desiring to lead the people,
One must, in one's person, follow behind them.

Therefore the sage takes his place over the people yet is no burden;
takes his place ahead of the people yet causes no obstruction.
That is why the empire supports him joyfully and never tires of doing so.

It is because he does not contend that no one in the empire is in a position to contend with him.

67

The whole world says that my way is vast and resembles nothing.
It is because it is vast that it resembles nothing.
If it resembled anything, it would, long before now, have become small.

I have three treasures

Which I hold and cherish.
'The first is known as compassion,
'The second is known as frugality,
'The third is known as not daring to take the lead in the empire;
Being compassionate one could afford to be courageous,
Being frugal one could afford to extend one's territory,
Not daring to take the lead in the empire one could afford to be lord over the vessels.

Now, to forsake compassion for courage, to forsake frugality for expansion, to forsake the rear for the lead, is sure to end in death.

Through compassion, one will triumph in attack and be impregnable in defense.
What Heaven succors it protects with the gift of compassion.

70

My words are very easy to understand and very easy to put into practice,
Yet no one in the world can understand them or put them into practice.

Words have an ancestor and affairs have a sovereign.

It is because people are ignorant that they fail to understand me.
'Those who understand me are few;
'Those who harm me are honored.

Therefore the sage, while clad in homespun, conceals on his person a priceless piece of jade.

75

'The people are hungry:
It is because those in authority eat up too much in taxes
'That the people are hungry.
'The people are difficult to govern.
It is because those in authority are too fond of action
'That the people are difficult to govern.
'The people treat death lightly:
It is because the people set too much store by life
'That they treat death lightly.

It is just because one has no use for life that one is wiser than the man who values life.

78

In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water.
Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it.
This is because there is nothing that can take its place.

That the weak overcomes the strong,
And the submissive overcomes the hard,
Everyone in the world knows yet no one can put this knowledge into practice.

Therefore the sage says,
One who takes on himself the humiliation of the state
Is called a ruler worthy of offering sacrifices to the gods of earth and millet.
One who takes on himself the calamity of the state
Is called a king worthy of dominion over the entire empire.

Straightforward words seem paradoxical.

80

Reduce the size of the population and the state.
Ensure that even though the people have tools of war for a troop or a battalion they will not use them;
And also that they will be reluctant to move to distant places because they look on death as no light matter.

Even when they have ships and carts, they will have no use for them;
And even when they have armor and weapons, they will have no occasion to make a show of them.

Bring it about that the people will return to the use of the knotted rope,
Will find relish in their food
And beauty in their clothes,
Will be content in their abode
And happy in the way they live.

Though adjoining states are within sight of one another,
And the sound of dogs barking and cocks crowing in one state can be heard in another,
yet the people of one state will grow old and die without having had any dealings with those of another.

81

Truthful words are not beautiful;
Beautiful words are not truthful.
Good words are not persuasive;
Persuasive words are not good.
He who knows has no wide learning;
He who has wide learning does not know.

The sage does not hoard.
Having bestowed all he has on others, he has yet more;

Having given all he has to others, he is richer still.

The Way of Heaven benefits and does not harm;
The Way of the sage is bountiful and does not contend.

[translated by D.C. Lau]

Topical Index

The revered scholar Wing-tsit Chan (1901–1994) compiled a helpful topical index to the *Daodejing*, reproduced here for the chapters included above:

Being and Non-being 1, 2, 11, 40

Dao: 1, 4, 16, 25, 32, 37, 40–42, 51

De: 10, 38, 51, 65

Desires: 3, 19, 37, 57

The Female, Water: 10, 25, 28, 52, 78

Government: 3, 17, 29, 57, 60, 61, 65, 75, 80

Humanity, Righteousness: 18, 19, 38

Knowledge: 3, 70

Name/Nameless: 1, 25, 32, 41

Natural, Spontaneous (*zi-ran*): 17, 25, 51

The One: 10, 22, 39, 42

Relativity, Paradoxes: 2, 36, 45

Reversal: 14, 16, 28, 40, 52

Simplicity: 19, 28, 32, 37, 57

Tranquility: 16, 37, 61

Weakness: 10, 22, 36, 40, 43, 52, 78

Wu-wei: 2, 3, 10, 37, 43, 48