

Laozi

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*An abridgment of the Daodejing. Verse references such as <sup>2:3</sup> indicate the original source of the text, but don't imply a full quotation.*

<sup>1:1</sup> The Way that can be put into words is not the constant Way.

<sup>2:1</sup> As soon as everyone in the world knows beauty as beauty, there is already ugliness. <sup>2</sup> As soon as everyone knows good as good, there is bad.

<sup>2:3</sup> Being and nonbeing produce each other; <sup>4</sup> difficult and easy complete each other; <sup>5</sup> long and short shape each other; <sup>6</sup> high and low fill each other; <sup>7</sup> note and voice harmonize with each other; <sup>8</sup> front and back follow each other: <sup>9</sup> these are constant.

<sup>2:10</sup> Therefore the sage dwells in the work of nonforced action, <sup>11</sup> and practices wordless teaching. <sup>12</sup> All things arise, but he doesn't start them; <sup>13</sup> he acts on their behalf, but doesn't make them dependent; <sup>14</sup> he succeeds, but

doesn't dwell on it. <sup>15</sup> It's only because he doesn't dwell on it, that it doesn't leave.

<sup>3:1</sup> By not elevating the worthy, you keep the people from contention. <sup>2</sup> By not valuing rare treasures, you keep the people from stealing. <sup>3</sup> By not displaying what is desirable, you keep the people from confusion.

<sup>3:4</sup> Therefore the sage governs by clearing the people's minds, but filling their bellies; weakening their ambitions, but strengthening their bones.

<sup>3:5</sup> He constantly keeps the people without cunning and without desires <sup>6</sup> so that the intellectuals won't dare to meddle. <sup>7</sup> Act without forcing, then everything is governed properly.

<sup>7:5</sup> The sage puts himself in the background yet finds himself in the foreground; <sup>6</sup> puts himself out of mind yet finds himself cared for. <sup>7</sup> Isn't it be-

cause he's selfless that <sup>8</sup> he's able to achieve his self-interest?

<sup>8:1</sup> The highest good is like water. <sup>2</sup> Water's goodness is that it benefits all things, <sup>3</sup> yet it strives to dwell in the places that the crowd hates, <sup>4</sup> therefore it comes close to the Way.

<sup>8:6</sup> In a dwelling, its goodness is location; <sup>7</sup> in a mind, depth; <sup>8</sup> in giving, being like Heaven; <sup>9</sup> in speaking, sincerity; <sup>10</sup> in government, order; <sup>11</sup> in handling affairs, ability; <sup>12</sup> in action, timeliness.

<sup>8:13</sup> Because there is no contention, there is no blame.

<sup>9:1</sup> If you hold and overfill a cup, it's not as good as stopping short. <sup>2</sup> If you hammer and oversharpen a blade, you can't maintain it for long. <sup>3</sup> If gold and jade fill your rooms, no one is able to protect it. <sup>4</sup> If status and wealth lead to arrogance, you bring disaster upon yourself.

<sup>9:5</sup> When the work is done, withdraw; this is the Way of Heaven.

<sup>11:1</sup> Thirty spokes come together at one hub, <sup>2</sup> but it's the emptiness inside the hub that makes it useful to the cart. <sup>3</sup> We form clay into a pot, <sup>4</sup> but it's the emptiness inside that makes the clay pot useful. <sup>5</sup> We chisel out doors and windows to make a room, <sup>6</sup> but it's the emptiness inside that makes the room useful.

<sup>11:7</sup> Therefore, what is present brings benefit, <sup>8</sup> but what is absent makes it useful.

<sup>15:1</sup> In antiquity, those who were good at the Way <sup>2</sup> were subtle, wonderful, mysterious, penetrating, and too deep to know. <sup>3</sup> Because they can't be known, we're forced to describe their appearance: <sup>4</sup> Hesitant, as if crossing a river in winter. <sup>5</sup> Alert, as if fearing the neighbors on all sides. <sup>6</sup> Solemn, like a visiting guest. <sup>7</sup> Yielding, like ice about

to melt. <sup>8</sup> Genuine, like uncarved wood. <sup>9</sup> Opaque, like muddy water. <sup>10</sup> Vast, like a valley.

<sup>15:11</sup> If muddy water is still, it gradually becomes clear. <sup>12</sup> If something at rest is moved, it gradually comes to life.

<sup>17:1</sup> With the very best rulers, those below only know that the rulers exist, <sup>2</sup> the next best are the rulers they love and praise, <sup>3</sup> next are the rulers they fear, <sup>4</sup> and the worst are the rulers they despise.

<sup>17:7</sup> When the task is accomplished and the work is done, all the common people say, "We did it ourselves."

<sup>18:1</sup> It's when the great Way is abandoned that benevolence and righteousness appear. <sup>2</sup> It's when learning and cleverness emerge that the great hypocrisy appears. <sup>3</sup> It's when family relationships are not harmonious that filial piety and parental compassion appear.

<sup>4</sup> It's when the country is confused and chaotic that upright officials appear.

<sup>19:5</sup> Demonstrate plainness, embrace simplicity, have little selfishness and few desires.

<sup>22:1</sup> Bent over then preserved whole; <sup>2</sup> crooked then straight; <sup>3</sup> hollow then filled; <sup>4</sup> worn out then renewed; <sup>5</sup> having little then satisfied; <sup>6</sup> having much then confused. <sup>7</sup> Therefore the sage holds to the one and becomes shepherd to the world.

<sup>22:8</sup> He doesn't promote himself, so he's acknowledged. <sup>9</sup> He doesn't display himself, so he shines brightly. <sup>10</sup> He doesn't brag about himself, so he has merit. <sup>11</sup> He's not boastful, so he can endure. <sup>12</sup> It's only because he doesn't contend that no one can contend with him.

<sup>23:1</sup> It's natural to speak rarely. <sup>2</sup> A violent wind doesn't last all morning.



<sup>3</sup> A torrential rain doesn't last all day.  
<sup>5</sup> If heaven and earth can't sustain it for long, how much less can man?

<sup>24:1</sup> He who blows hard can't stand.  
<sup>2</sup> He who promotes himself isn't acknowledged. <sup>3</sup> He who displays himself doesn't shine brightly. <sup>5</sup> He who brags about himself has no merit. <sup>6</sup> He who boasts about himself won't endure. <sup>8</sup> These are so despised that even those who want things don't abide them.

<sup>27:1</sup> A skillful traveler leaves no ruts or tracks. <sup>2</sup> A skillful speaker makes no slips or gaffes. <sup>3</sup> A skillful counter needs no tallies or papers.

<sup>27:6</sup> The sage is always skillful at saving people, and never abandons anyone; <sup>7</sup> with things, he never abandons valuable property.

<sup>27:9</sup> Skillful people are the teachers of skillful people; <sup>10</sup> unskilled people are the raw materials of skillful people. <sup>11</sup> He who doesn't value his teacher and

cherish his raw materials is greatly confused, no matter how clever he is.

<sup>29:1</sup> Those who want to take the world and rule it, <sup>2</sup> I see that they won't succeed. <sup>3</sup> The world is a sacred vessel, <sup>4</sup> and it can't be ruled. <sup>5</sup> Those who rule it ruin it. <sup>6</sup> Those who hold it lose it.

<sup>29:7</sup> It's the nature of things that some lead and some follow, <sup>8</sup> some blow hot and some blow cold, <sup>9</sup> some are strong and some are weak, <sup>10</sup> some cultivate and some deteriorate. <sup>11</sup> Therefore the sage avoids extremes, arrogance, and extravagance.

<sup>30:1</sup> Those with the Way who assist the ruler don't use the force of arms to conquer the world; <sup>2</sup> such methods would only backfire. <sup>3</sup> Wherever armies camp, brambles and thorns will grow.

<sup>30:5</sup> A skillful leader achieves results then stops, <sup>6</sup> and doesn't use the occasion to seize power. <sup>7</sup> He achieves

results without arrogance. <sup>8</sup> He achieves results without praising his deeds. <sup>9</sup> He achieves results without boasting. <sup>10</sup> He achieves results only as a last resort.

<sup>31:1</sup> The military is an ominous instrument. <sup>2</sup> It's so despised that even those who want things don't abide it.

<sup>31:5</sup> The military is an ominous instrument, <sup>6</sup> so only use it as a last resort; <sup>7</sup> with calm detachment is best. <sup>8</sup> Don't glorify it; <sup>9</sup> to glorify it would be to delight in killing people. <sup>10</sup> He who delights in killing people can't achieve his ambitions in the world. <sup>16</sup> When many people have been killed, <sup>17</sup> weep for them with sorrow. <sup>18</sup> When the war has been won, treat it like a funeral ceremony.

<sup>33:1</sup> He who knows others is intelligent; <sup>2</sup> he who knows himself is enlightened. <sup>3</sup> He who overcomes others is forceful; <sup>4</sup> he who overcomes himself is

powerful. <sup>5</sup> He who knows contentment is rich.

<sup>34:1</sup> The Way floats and drifts; <sup>2</sup> it can go left or right. <sup>4</sup> When the task is accomplished and the work is done, it claims no credit.

<sup>34:5</sup> All things turn to it <sup>6</sup> and yet it doesn't act as their master, <sup>8</sup> so it can be called a small thing.

<sup>34:9</sup> All things turn to it <sup>10</sup> and yet it doesn't act as their master, <sup>11</sup> so it can be called a great thing.

<sup>34:12</sup> That's why the sage is able to accomplish great things: <sup>13</sup> he doesn't try to do great things, therefore he accomplishes great things.

<sup>35:3</sup> Coming to you, the world suffers no harm, but finds safety and peace.

<sup>35:4</sup> Passing travelers will stop for music and food. <sup>5</sup> But if the Way were described, <sup>6</sup> it would seem insipid and without flavor. <sup>7</sup> When you look at it, it's not sufficient to be seen; <sup>8</sup> when

you listen to it, it's not sufficient to be heard; <sup>9</sup> yet when you use it, it can't be exhausted.

<sup>36:1</sup> If you want to shrink something, <sup>2</sup> it must first be expanded; <sup>3</sup> if you want to weaken something, <sup>4</sup> it must first be strengthened; <sup>5</sup> if you want to leave something, <sup>6</sup> it must first be joined; <sup>7</sup> if you want to take something away, <sup>8</sup> it must first be given.

<sup>38:1</sup> A man of superior virtue doesn't cling to virtue, <sup>2</sup> therefore he has true virtue. <sup>5</sup> A man of superior virtue acts without force, <sup>6</sup> and without an agenda.

<sup>38:16</sup> Therefore, after losing the Way there is virtue; <sup>17</sup> after losing virtue there is benevolence; <sup>18</sup> after losing benevolence there is righteousness; <sup>19</sup> after losing righteousness there is propriety.

<sup>38:20</sup> As for propriety, it's a thin veneer of loyalty and sincerity, <sup>21</sup> and the beginning of disorder.

38:24 Therefore a truly great man dwells in the thick substance, <sup>25</sup> not in the thin veneer; <sup>26</sup> in the fruit, not in the flower.

43:1 The softest, most pliable thing in the world <sup>2</sup> runs roughshod over the hardest, most solid thing in the world. <sup>3</sup> That which has no substance enters into that which has no openings. <sup>4</sup> That's how I know the benefits of nonforced action.

43:5 Teachings that use no words, <sup>6</sup> and the benefits of nonforced action: <sup>7</sup> few in the world can understand them.

44:4 Excessive attachment comes at great cost, <sup>5</sup> and great accumulation leads to heavy loss. <sup>6</sup> Therefore, knowing contentment avoids disgrace, <sup>7</sup> and knowing when to stop avoids danger; <sup>8</sup> thus you can endure for a long time.

46:1 When the world has the Way, <sup>2</sup> fine horses are relegated to fertilizing the

fields. <sup>3</sup> When the world lacks the Way, <sup>4</sup> warhorses are bred just outside the city walls.

<sup>46:5</sup> There is no greater crime than desire. <sup>6</sup> There is no greater disaster than being discontent. <sup>7</sup> There is no greater fault than wanting more. <sup>8</sup> Therefore the satisfaction that comes from being content is lasting satisfaction.

<sup>47:1</sup> You don't have to go out the door to know the world. <sup>2</sup> You don't have to peek out the window to know the Way of Heaven. <sup>3</sup> The farther you go, the less you know.

<sup>47:4</sup> Therefore the sage doesn't travel but knows; <sup>5</sup> doesn't look, but discerns; <sup>6</sup> and doesn't do, but succeeds.

<sup>48:1</sup> He who pursues learning gains something each day. <sup>2</sup> He who hears the Way loses something each day. <sup>3</sup> He loses, and loses again, until he acts without force. <sup>4</sup> He acts without force and yet nothing is left undone.

<sup>48:5</sup> If you want to rule the world, constantly avoid interfering with it. <sup>6</sup> If you interfere, you're unfit to rule the world.

<sup>49:1</sup> The sage constantly has no mind of his own. <sup>2</sup> He takes the mind of the people as his mind.

<sup>49:3</sup> He's good to good people <sup>4</sup> and also good to bad people, <sup>5</sup> thus he gains in goodness. <sup>6</sup> He trusts trustworthy people <sup>7</sup> and also trusts untrustworthy people, <sup>8</sup> thus he gains in trust.

<sup>53:1</sup> If I had the least bit of knowledge, <sup>2</sup> I would walk on the great Way <sup>3</sup> and my only fear would be straying from it. <sup>4</sup> The great Way is very much level, <sup>5</sup> but people very much prefer mountain trails.

<sup>53:6</sup> The court is full of splendor, <sup>7</sup> but the fields are full of weeds, <sup>8</sup> and the granaries are full of nothing; <sup>9</sup> their clothes are embroidered and colorful, <sup>10</sup> their belts have sharp swords, <sup>11</sup> they're



stuffed with food, <sup>12</sup> and have money and possessions in excess: <sup>13</sup> this is called robbery, <sup>14</sup> and robbery is certainly not the Way.

<sup>56:1</sup> Those who know it, don't talk about it; <sup>2</sup> those who talk about it, don't know it.

<sup>57:1</sup> Govern the state with justice, <sup>2</sup> deploy the military with surprise, <sup>3</sup> and take the world without interference. <sup>4</sup> How do I know this? From the following:

<sup>57:5</sup> The world has many prohibitions and taboos, <sup>6</sup> and yet the people are full of poverty. <sup>7</sup> The people have many beneficial tools, <sup>8</sup> and yet the state and family are increasingly faint. <sup>9</sup> People have many clever tricks, <sup>10</sup> and yet strange things increasingly happen. <sup>11</sup> The laws are increasingly publicized, <sup>12</sup> and yet there are many thieves and robbers.

<sup>57:13</sup> Therefore, in the words of the sage: <sup>14</sup> “I act without force, and the people transform themselves. <sup>15</sup> I enjoy quiet, and the people correct themselves. <sup>16</sup> I don’t interfere, and the people prosper themselves. <sup>17</sup> I have no desires, and the people simplify themselves.”

<sup>58:5</sup> Good fortune perches on misfortune; <sup>6</sup> misfortune lurks beneath good fortune. <sup>7</sup> Who knows where it will end?

<sup>58:8</sup> Nothing is obvious. <sup>9</sup> Obvious again becomes surprising; <sup>10</sup> good again becomes monstrous. <sup>11</sup> The people have been confused for a long time.

<sup>59:1</sup> In governing the people and serving Heaven, <sup>2</sup> there is nothing like frugality. <sup>3</sup> Only with frugality can you submit early. <sup>4</sup> Submitting early is called repeatedly accumulating virtue. <sup>5</sup> If you repeatedly accumulate virtue,

then there is nothing you can't overcome.

62:2 The Way is the treasure of a good man, <sup>3</sup> and the shelter of a bad man.

62:4 Beautiful words can buy honor, <sup>5</sup> and good deeds can raise you above others.

62:6 Even if a man is bad, how can you abandon him?

62:7 At the emperor's coronation, <sup>9</sup> offering jade discs brought in by a team of horses <sup>10</sup> is not as good as sitting still and offering this Way.

62:11 Why was this Way so valuable to the ancients? <sup>12</sup> Isn't it said, "Those who seek, with this will obtain, <sup>13</sup> and those who have guilt, with this will escape"? <sup>14</sup> Therefore it's the most valuable thing in the world.

63:1 Act without forcing, <sup>2</sup> serve without interfering, <sup>3</sup> savor the flavorless, <sup>4</sup> consider the small as great and the

few as many, <sup>5</sup> respond to resentment with virtue.

<sup>63:6</sup> Plan for something difficult while it's still easy. <sup>7</sup> Deal with something great while it's still small. <sup>8</sup> The difficult things of the world start off easy. <sup>9</sup> The great things of the world start off small. <sup>10</sup> Therefore, the sage never does great things, <sup>11</sup> and thus he is able to accomplish great things.

<sup>63:12</sup> He who makes promises lightly is sure to have little trust, <sup>13</sup> and he who treats many things as easy is sure to have many difficulties. <sup>14</sup> Therefore, the sage treats things as difficult, <sup>15</sup> and thus, in the end, nothing is difficult.

<sup>64:1</sup> It's easy to hold what is at rest. <sup>2</sup> It's easy to plan for what hasn't begun. <sup>3</sup> It's easy to break what is brittle. <sup>4</sup> It's easy to scatter what is tiny. <sup>5</sup> Deal with it before it happens; <sup>6</sup> manage it before it's chaotic.

<sup>64:7</sup> A tree that's thick enough to embrace rises from a tiny shoot. <sup>8</sup> A ter-

race that's nine stories tall rises from a heap of earth. <sup>9</sup> A wall that's three hundred yards high begins at the ground beneath your feet.

<sup>64:10</sup> Those who rule it ruin it. <sup>11</sup> Those who hold it lose it. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, the sage rules nothing and thus ruins nothing. <sup>13</sup> He holds on to nothing and thus loses nothing.

<sup>64:14</sup> People usually fail in their endeavors on the verge of success. <sup>15</sup> Therefore we say, "If you're as careful at the end as you are at the beginning, <sup>16</sup> you'll have no failure."

<sup>64:17</sup> The sage desires not to desire, <sup>18</sup> and doesn't value goods that are hard to obtain; <sup>19</sup> he learns not to study, <sup>20</sup> and returns to what the multitude has passed over. <sup>21</sup> He could help all things to be natural, <sup>22</sup> but dares not do it.

<sup>66:1</sup> The rivers and lakes are able to be the kings of the valleys <sup>2</sup> because of their skill at being low. <sup>4</sup> Therefore,

wanting to be above the people, the sage must speak to them humbly from below; <sup>5</sup> wanting to be before the people, he must put himself behind them. <sup>6</sup> Therefore, he dwells above them yet the people don't feel that he's a burden. <sup>7</sup> He dwells before them yet the people don't feel that he's an obstruction. <sup>8</sup> Everyone in the world delights in promoting him and never tires of him.

<sup>66:9</sup> It's because he doesn't contend <sup>10</sup> that no one in the world can contend with him.

<sup>67:4</sup> I constantly have three treasures which I hold and treasure: <sup>5</sup> the first is compassion, <sup>6</sup> the second is frugality, <sup>7</sup> the third is not daring to be preeminent in the world. <sup>8</sup> It's because of compassion that I can be courageous; <sup>9</sup> it's because of frugality that I can be generous; <sup>10</sup> it's because of not daring to be preeminent in the world that I can be head of all things.

<sup>67:11</sup> Now, abandoning compassion to be courageous, <sup>12</sup> abandoning frugality to be generous, <sup>13</sup> abandoning the rear to be in front: <sup>14</sup> this is courting death.

<sup>68:1</sup> A skillful warrior doesn't show his might. <sup>2</sup> A skillful fighter doesn't get angry. <sup>3</sup> A skillful victor doesn't engage his enemy. <sup>4</sup> A skillful employer places himself below others.

<sup>73:1</sup> Those who are brave in daring will die; <sup>2</sup> those who are brave in caution will live. <sup>3</sup> In these two cases, one is beneficial and the other is harmful. <sup>4</sup> Who understands why Heaven hates what it does?

<sup>73:6</sup> The Way of Heaven doesn't fight yet wins skillfully, <sup>7</sup> doesn't speak yet responds skillfully, <sup>8</sup> isn't summoned yet comes on its own, <sup>9</sup> is at ease yet plans skillfully.

<sup>73:10</sup> The net of Heaven is vast; it has a coarse mesh yet nothing slips through.

<sup>75:1</sup> The people starve because those above consume too much in taxes. <sup>2</sup> The people rebel because those above interfere. <sup>3</sup> The people scoff at death because those above demand so much from life.

<sup>76:1</sup> While living, a man is supple and soft, <sup>2</sup> but once dead, he is hard and rigid. <sup>3</sup> While living, all things, grasses, and trees are supple and crisp, <sup>4</sup> but once dead, they are withered and dry.

<sup>76:5</sup> Therefore it is said: those who are hard and rigid are the followers of death; <sup>6</sup> those who are supple and soft are the followers of life. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, a rigid army won't win, <sup>8</sup> and a rigid tree will snap.

<sup>77:1</sup> The Way of Heaven is like an archer drawing his bow. <sup>2</sup> If it's too high, he presses down; if it's too low, he lifts up; <sup>3</sup> if there is excess, he reduces it; <sup>4</sup> if there is not enough, he adds to it. <sup>5</sup> The Way of Heaven is also to reduce what



has excess and add to what doesn't have enough.

<sup>77:6</sup> The Way of man is different: <sup>7</sup> he reduces what doesn't have enough and offers it to that which has excess.

<sup>77:8</sup> Who can have excess and offer it to Heaven? <sup>9</sup> Only he who has the Way.

<sup>77:10</sup> Therefore, the sage takes actions without claiming the results; <sup>11</sup> he succeeds without dwelling on it; <sup>12</sup> similarly, he doesn't desire to make a display of his worthiness.

<sup>79:1</sup> When harmony is made after great resentment, <sup>2</sup> there is always some resentment remaining. <sup>3</sup> How can this be considered good? <sup>4</sup> Therefore, the sage keeps his part of the contract, but makes no demands on the other party.

<sup>79:7</sup> The Way of Heaven has no favorites, <sup>8</sup> it's constantly on the side of the good man.

<sup>80:1</sup> Let there be a small state with few people. <sup>2</sup> Let them have power-

ful tools and not use them. <sup>3</sup> Let the people take death seriously and not migrate far away. <sup>4</sup> There are boats and vehicles but no reason to ride them. <sup>5</sup> There are armor and weapons but no reason to parade them. <sup>6</sup> Let the people keep their records with knotted string again. <sup>7</sup> Their food is sweet, <sup>8</sup> their clothes are beautiful, <sup>9</sup> their homes are secure, <sup>10</sup> and their customs are enjoyable.

<sup>80:11</sup> Neighboring states can see each other, <sup>12</sup> they can hear each other's dogs and roosters, <sup>13</sup> yet the people grow old and die <sup>14</sup> without any dealings between each other.

<sup>81:1</sup> Credible words aren't eloquent; <sup>2</sup> eloquent words aren't credible. <sup>3</sup> The skillful aren't polymaths; <sup>4</sup> those who are polymaths aren't skillful. <sup>5</sup> Those who know aren't learned; <sup>6</sup> the learned don't know.

<sup>81:7</sup> The sage accumulates nothing. <sup>8</sup> The more he does for others, the

greater his possessions. <sup>9</sup> The more he gives to others, the greater his abundance.

<sup>81:10</sup> Therefore, the Way of Heaven is to benefit without harming. <sup>11</sup> The Way of the sage is to act without contending.