

Laozi

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

^{1:1} The Way that can be put into words is not the constant Way.

^{2:1} As soon as everyone in the world knows beauty as beauty, there is already ugliness. ² As soon as everyone knows good as good, there is bad.

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

^{2:10} Therefore the sage dwells in the work of nonforced action, ¹¹ and practices wordless teaching. ¹² All things arise, but he doesn't start them; ¹³ he acts on their behalf, but doesn't make them dependent; ¹⁴ he succeeds, but doesn't dwell on it. ¹⁵ It's only because he doesn't dwell on it, that it doesn't leave.

^{3:1} By not elevating the worthy, you keep the people from contention. ² By not valuing rare treasures, you keep the people from stealing. ³ By not displaying what is desirable, you keep the people from confusion.

^{3:4} Therefore the sage governs by clearing the people's minds, but filling their bellies; weakening their ambitions, but strengthening their bones.

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

^{7:5} The sage puts himself in the back-

ground yet finds himself in the foreground; ⁶ puts himself out of mind yet finds himself cared for. ⁷ Isn't it because he's selfless that ⁸ he's able to achieve his self-interest?

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

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

^{8:13} Because there is no contention, there is no blame.

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

^{9:5} When the work is done, withdraw; this is the Way of Heaven.

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

^{11:7} Therefore, what is present brings benefit, ⁸ but what is absent makes it useful.

^{15:1} In antiquity, those who were good at the Way ²were subtle, wonderful, mysterious, penetrating, and too deep to know. ³Because they can't be known, we're forced to describe their appearance: ⁴Hesitant, as if crossing a river in winter. ⁵Alert, as if fearing the neighbors on all sides. ⁶Solemn, like a visiting guest. ⁷Yielding, like ice about to melt. ⁸Genuine, like uncarved wood. ⁹Opaque, like muddy water. ¹⁰Vast, like a valley.

^{15:11} If muddy water is still, it gradually becomes clear. ¹²If something at rest is moved, it gradually comes to life.

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

^{17:7} When the task is accomplished and the work is done, all the common people say, "We did it ourselves."

^{18:1} It's when the great Way is abandoned that benevolence and righteousness appear. ²It's when learning and cleverness emerge that the great hypocrisy appears. ³It's when family relationships are not harmonious that filial piety and parental compassion appear. ⁴It's when the country is confused and chaotic that upright officials appear.

^{19:5} Demonstrate plainness, embrace simplicity, have little selfishness and few desires.

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

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

^{23:1} It's natural to speak rarely. ²A violent wind doesn't last all morning. ³A torrential rain doesn't last all day. ⁵If heaven and earth can't sustain it for long, how much less can man?

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

^{27:1} A skillful traveler leaves no ruts or tracks. ²A skillful speaker makes no slips or gaffes. ³A skillful counter needs no tallies or papers.

^{27:6} The sage is always skillful at saving people, and never abandons anyone; ⁷with things, he never abandons valuable property.

^{27:9} Skillful people are the teachers of skillful people; ¹⁰unskilled people are the raw materials of skillful people. ¹¹He who doesn't value his teacher and cherish his raw materials is greatly confused, no matter how clever he is.

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

^{29:7} It's the nature of things that some lead and some follow, ⁸some blow hot and

some blow cold, ⁹ some are strong and some are weak, ¹⁰ some cultivate and some deteriorate. ¹¹ Therefore the sage avoids extremes, arrogance, and extravagance.

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

^{30:5} A skillful leader achieves results then stops, ⁶ and doesn't use the occasion to seize power. ⁷ He achieves results without arrogance. ⁸ He achieves results without praising his deeds. ⁹ He achieves results without boasting. ¹⁰ He achieves results only as a last resort.

^{31:1} The military is an ominous instrument. ² It's so despised that even those who want things don't abide it.

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

^{33:1} He who knows others is intelligent; ² he who knows himself is enlightened. ³ He who overcomes others is forceful; ⁴ he who overcomes himself is powerful. ⁵ He who knows contentment is rich.

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

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

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

^{34:12} That's why the sage is able to accomplish great things: ¹³ he doesn't try to do great things, therefore he accomplishes great things.

^{35:3} Coming to you, the world suffers no harm, but finds safety and peace.

^{35:4} Passing travelers will stop for music and food. ⁵ But if the Way were described, ⁶ it would seem insipid and without flavor. ⁷ When you look at it, it's not sufficient to be seen; ⁸ when you listen to it, it's not sufficient to be heard; ⁹ yet when you use it, it can't be exhausted.

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

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

^{38:16} Therefore, after losing the Way there is virtue; ¹⁷ after losing virtue there is benevolence; ¹⁸ after losing benevolence there is righteousness; ¹⁹ after losing righteousness there is propriety.

^{38:20} As for propriety, it's a thin veneer of loyalty and sincerity, ²¹ and the beginning of disorder.

^{38:24} Therefore a truly great man dwells in the thick substance, ²⁵ not in the thin veneer; ²⁶ in the fruit, not in the flower.

^{43:1} The softest, most pliable thing in the world ² runs roughshod over the hardest, most solid thing in the world. ³ That

which has no substance enters into that which has no openings. ⁴That's how I know the benefits of nonforced action.

^{43:5} Teachings that use no words, ⁶ and the benefits of nonforced action: ⁷ few in the world can understand them.

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

^{46:1} When the world has the Way, ² fine horses are relegated to fertilizing the fields. ³ When the world lacks the Way, ⁴ warhorses are bred just outside the city walls.

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

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

^{47:4} Therefore the sage doesn't travel but knows; ⁵ doesn't look, but discerns; ⁶ and doesn't do, but succeeds.

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

^{48:5} If you want to rule the world, constantly avoid interfering with it. ⁶ If you interfere, you're unfit to rule the world.

^{49:1} The sage constantly has no mind of his own. ² He takes the mind of the people as his mind.

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

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

^{53:6} The court is full of splendor, ⁷ but the fields are full of weeds, ⁸ and the granaries are full of nothing; ⁹ their clothes are embroidered and colorful, ¹⁰ their belts have sharp swords, ¹¹ they're stuffed with food, ¹² and have money and possessions in excess: ¹³ this is called robbery, ¹⁴ and robbery is certainly not the Way.

^{56:1} Those who know it, don't talk about it; ² those who talk about it, don't know it.

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

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

^{57:13} Therefore, in the words of the sage: ¹⁴ "I act without force, and the people transform themselves. ¹⁵ I enjoy quiet, and the people correct themselves. ¹⁶ I don't interfere, and the people prosper themselves.

¹⁷ I have no desires, and the people simplify themselves.”

^{58:5} Good fortune perches on misfortune; ⁶ misfortune lurks beneath good fortune. ⁷ Who knows where it will end?

^{58:8} Nothing is obvious. ⁹ Obvious again becomes surprising; ¹⁰ good again becomes monstrous. ¹¹ The people have been confused for a long time.

^{59:1} In governing the people and serving Heaven, ² there is nothing like frugality. ³ Only with frugality can you submit early. ⁴ Submitting early is called repeatedly accumulating virtue. ⁵ If you repeatedly accumulate virtue, then there is nothing you can't overcome.

^{62:2} The Way is the treasure of a good man, ³ and the shelter of a bad man.

^{62:4} Beautiful words can buy honor, ⁵ 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, ⁹ offering jade discs brought in by a team of horses ¹⁰ is not as good as sitting still and offering this Way.

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

^{63:1} Act without forcing, ² serve without interfering, ³ savor the flavorless, ⁴ consider the small as great and the few as many, ⁵ respond to resentment with virtue.

^{63:6} Plan for something difficult while it's still easy. ⁷ Deal with something great while it's still small. ⁸ The difficult things of the world start off easy.

⁹ The great things of the world start off small. ¹⁰ Therefore, the sage never does great things, ¹¹ and thus he is able to accomplish great things.

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

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

^{64:7} A tree that's thick enough to embrace rises from a tiny shoot. ⁸ A terrace that's nine stories tall rises from a heap of earth. ⁹ A wall that's three hundred yards high begins at the ground beneath your feet.

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

^{64:14} People usually fail in their endeavors on the verge of success. ¹⁵ Therefore we say, “If you're as careful at the end as you are at the beginning, ¹⁶ you'll have no failure.”

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

^{66:1} The rivers and lakes are able to be the kings of the valleys ² because of their skill at being low. ⁴ Therefore, wanting to be above the people, the sage must speak to them humbly from below; ⁵ wanting to

be before the people, he must put himself behind them. ⁶Therefore, he dwells above them yet the people don't feel that he's a burden. ⁷He dwells before them yet the people don't feel that he's an obstruction. ⁸Everyone in the world delights in promoting him and never tires of him.

^{66:9} It's because he doesn't contend ¹⁰that no one in the world can contend with him.

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

^{67:11} Now, abandoning compassion to be courageous, ¹²abandoning frugality to be generous, ¹³abandoning the rear to be in front: ¹⁴this is courting death.

^{68:1} A skillful warrior doesn't show his might. ²A skillful fighter doesn't get angry. ³A skillful victor doesn't engage his enemy. ⁴A skillful employer places himself below others.

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

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

^{73:10} The net of Heaven is vast; it has a coarse mesh yet nothing slips through.

^{75:1} The people starve because those above consume too much in taxes. ²The people rebel because those above interfere. ³The people scoff at death because those above demand so much from life.

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

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

^{77:1} The Way of Heaven is like an archer drawing his bow. ²If it's too high, he presses down; if it's too low, he lifts up; ³if there is excess, he reduces it; ⁴if there is not enough, he adds to it. ⁵The Way of Heaven is also to reduce what has excess and add to what doesn't have enough.

^{77:6} The Way of man is different: ⁷he reduces what doesn't have enough and offers it to that which has excess.

^{77:8} Who can have excess and offer it to Heaven? ⁹Only he who has the Way.

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

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

^{79:7} The Way of Heaven has no favorites, ⁸it's constantly on the side of the good man.

^{80:1} Let there be a small state with few people. ² Let them have powerful tools and not use them. ³ Let the people take death seriously and not migrate far away. ⁴ There are boats and vehicles but no reason to ride them. ⁵ There are armor and weapons but no reason to parade them. ⁶ Let the people keep their records with knotted string again. ⁷ Their food is sweet, ⁸ their clothes are beautiful, ⁹ their homes are secure, ¹⁰ and their customs are enjoyable.

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

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

^{81:7} The sage accumulates nothing. ⁸ The more he does for others, the greater his possessions. ⁹ The more he gives to others, the greater his abundance.

^{81:10} Therefore, the Way of Heaven is to benefit without harming. ¹¹ The Way of the sage is to act without contending.