

Laozi

© 2021 The Authors

Permission is granted to use, copy, modify, and distribute this work for any purpose with or without fee.

This work is provided as-is without any express or implied warranty. In no event are the authors liable for any damages arising from this work.

An abridgment of the Daodejing. Verse references such as ^{1:3} 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 The name that can be named is not the constant name.

^{1:3} The nameless is the beginning of all things. ⁴ The named is the mother of all things.

^{1:5} Thus, being constantly without desires is how you observe the secrets of all things. ⁶ Being constantly with desires is how you observe the manifestations of all things.

^{1:7} These two emerge from the same source, but they have different names; together they are called profound. ⁸ The most profound of the profound, the door to all secrets.

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

y 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 a 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.

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

^{15:11} If muddy water is still, it gradually becomes clear. ¹² If 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, ² the next best are the rulers they love and praise, ³ next are the rulers they

fear, ⁴ and 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. ² It’s when learning and cleverness emerge that the great hypocrisy appears. ³ It’s when family relationships are not harmonious that filial piety and parental compassion appear. ⁴ It’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; ² crooked then straight; ³ hollow then filled; ⁴ worn out then renewed; ⁵ having little then satisfied; ⁶ having much then confused. ⁷ Therefore the sage holds to the one and becomes shepherd to the world.

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

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

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

27:1 A skillful traveler leaves no ruts

or tracks. ² A skillful speaker makes no slips or gaffes. ³ A skillful counter needs no tallies or papers.

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

^{27:9} Therefore skillful people are the teachers of skillful people; ¹⁰ unskilled people are the raw materials of skillful people. ¹¹ He 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, ² I see that they won't succeed. ³ The world is a sacred vessel, ⁴ and it can't be ruled. ⁵ Those who rule it ruin it. ⁶ Those who hold it lose it.

^{29:7} It's the nature of things that some lead and some follow, ⁸ some 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 who assist the ruler with the Way 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.

^{31:16} 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.

^{35:1} Hold to the great image and ² the world will come to you. ³ Coming to you they suffer no harm, but find 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. ³ A man of inferior virtue clings to virtue, ⁴ therefore he lacks true virtue.

^{38:5} A man of superior virtue acts without force, ⁶ and without an agenda. ⁹ A man of superior benevolence acts with force, ¹⁰ but without an agenda. ¹¹ A man of superior righteousness acts with force, ¹² and with an agenda. ¹³ A man of superior propriety acts with force, ¹⁴ and when no one responds ¹⁵ he rolls up his sleeves to make them comply.

^{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. ²⁷ Therefore he lets go of the one and takes the other.

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. ⁴ That'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.

44:1 Your reputation or your life, which is more dear? ² Your life or your possessions, which is worth more? ³ Gain or loss, which is more painful?

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.

^{54:4} Cultivate it in yourself, and its virtue will be genuine. ⁵ Cultivate it in the family, and its virtue will be overflowing. ⁶ Cultivate it in the village, and its virtue will be long lasting. ⁷ Cultivate it in the state, and its virtue will be abundant. ⁸ Cultivate it in the world, and its virtue will be pervasive.

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

^{56:3} Block up the openings, ⁴ shut the doors, ⁶ dim the glare, ⁷ settle the dust, ⁸ blunt the sharpness, ⁹ untie the knots.

^{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 misfor-

tune; 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.

^{62:1} The Way is the flowing together of all things. ² It's 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} Therefore, 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 is 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.

^{64:5} 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.

ing. 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} Therefore, 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. ⁶ Therefore, he dwells above them yet the people don't feel that he's a burden. ⁷ He dwells before them yet the

people don't feel that he's an obstruction. ⁸ Everyone in the world delights in promoting him and never tires of him.

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

^{67:4} I constantly have three treasures which I hold and treasure: ⁵ the first is compassion, ⁶ the second is frugality, ⁷ the third is not daring to be preeminent in the world. ⁸ It's because of compassion that I can be courageous; ⁹ it's because of frugality that I can be generous; ¹⁰ it'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, ¹² abandoning frugality to be generous, ¹³ abandoning the rear to be in front: ¹⁴ this is courting death.

^{68:1} A skillful warrior doesn't show his might. ² A skillful fighter doesn't get

angry. ³ A skillful victor doesn't engage his enemy. ⁴ A skillful employer places himself below others.

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

^{73:6} The Way of Heaven doesn't fight yet wins skillfully, ⁷ doesn't speak yet responds skillfully, ⁸ isn't summoned yet comes on its own, ⁹ is 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. ² The people rebel because those above interfere. ³ The people scoff at death because those above demand so much from life.

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

^{76:5} Therefore it is said: those who are hard and rigid are the followers of death; ⁶ those who are supple and soft are the followers of life.

^{76:7} Therefore, a rigid army won't win, ⁸ and a rigid tree will snap.

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

^{77:5} The Way of Heaven is also to reduce what has excess and add to what doesn't have enough. ⁶ The Way of man is different: ⁷ he 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? ⁹ Only he who has the Way.

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

79:1 When harmony is made after great resentment, ² there is always some resentment remaining. ³ How can this be considered good? ⁴ Therefore, 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, ⁸ it'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.