

# Tao-Te-Xing: The Book for All Ages

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## ***Acta non verba: How it all had begun***

If I had to pick a book to be placed at the very peak of the mountain of human knowledge, crowning the written history of human civilization, it would undoubtedly be Tao-Te-Xing. For, it is a book in which all seems to have been written, in an immaculately direct and simple, yet inexhaustibly profuse way. All required for one to live the life of wisdom and attain peace and harmony could be found in it. Although there may be more passages from the history of human literature that bear equally comprehensive messages of profound and all-encompassing ethical value, e.g., the Christ's Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel according to Matthew, the thirteenth chapter from St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians or Fyodor Dostoyevsky's story about the Grand Inquisitor, Tao-Te-Xing could be considered as the beginning and the end of human wisdom summed up in mere words. Yet, as all great ethical teachings do, the one of Tao-Te-Xing, too, stomps over its own language and value. In other words, the words imprinted in this fabulous book point away from finding fulfillment in them solely. They show us what the Christ and many other prophets taught humanity: namely, one has to "walk the talk" and live these symbolic guidelines rather than to find a perfect satisfaction and amusement in spinning them in the orbit around the enlightened, sunny core of one's mind in order to reach the ideal of perfection in one's emanations of the divine essence deeply engrained in one.

To emphasize in words that the final step on the road toward becoming a sage belongs to renunciation of words as the weapon in our struggle to enlighten and save the world, the very last song of Tao-Te-Xing starts with a verse that could be paraphrased as "real words need not be truthful words; truthful words need not be real words". The ending of this glorious book in which all the later books on sublime ethics of living seem to be condensed, thus, bears resemblance to the ending of Akira Kurosawa's movie Rashomon. In it, remember, three men hide from the rain under the Rashomon gate at the outskirts of Kyoto and, while waiting for the rain to stop, ruminate over the recent trial on a murder case in which all the witnesses involved had given mutually contradictory testimonies. Puzzled and perplexed, they are about to end the discussion without finding any solution to the problem when a baby is heard crying in the back. They realize that it was left by a negligent parent who, as they guess, must have had no means of feeding her. Two of the men back away, frightened by the idea that they would have to bring the baby home with them. Then the third man picks up the baby and as he carries her home, a glorious view of the deeply caring man holding the baby and of the Rashomon gate washed by the sunlight emerging from behind the clouds, right after the rain, brightens up the screen. The message of this final shot is simple, yet infinitely powerful: the world is not saved by elaborate conversations, eloquent comments and the verbal seeking of truth, but by lifting up the souls left alone by the ditches of this world: *acta non verba*, as it were. This, of course, might invoke a sweetest smile from Goethe's Dr. Faust, who had roamed the labyrinths of his own mind for his entire life, but to no avail, having found no key to spiritual satisfaction therein. Instead, only when he engaged himself in executing simple tasks together with his fellow humans did the angel descend on him and took him straight away to the higher, transcendental realm of being.

This may explain why Lao-Tzu, the author of this phenomenal book written in classical Chinese ideograms around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, belonged to those ancient masters who had, despite their immaculate teaching qualities, rarely relied on words to confine knowledge into and in such linguistic forms convey it to others. Somewhat like Jacques Tati's Monsieur Hulot, the Chinese sage may have preferred to incomprehensively mumble his name with a pipe in his mouth and then proceed to enlighten the world without a single word pronounced, all the while being aware of all the misunderstandings, hypocrisies and listless lifestyles, let alone deviations from the true meanings of life, that assignment of the ultimate purpose of communication to the verbal one entails. In that sense, he was much like Socrates, Confucius, Jesus of Nazareth and the prophet Mohammed: they allegedly did not write down a single word during their lifetimes, let alone devised anything practical, but this did not prevent them from nowadays standing forth as some of the most influential persons that the history of human race has known. As for Lao-Tzu, what we have now in front of us is the book in which all the systems of ethics comprising all the religions and traditional teachings of the world seem to be condensed and derivable from, to some extent similar to all the knowledge of the world that is being reflected in the glisteningly spinning ball of Aleph of which Jorge Luis Borges wrote in his popular essay.

We know now that a greatest wisdom attainable lies in recognizing sources of wisdom in all details of reality, irrespective of how miniscule and unimportant they may seem. The ultimate goodness and divine spiritedness are, likewise, reflected in the ability to recognize the ultimate goodness and divine spiritedness in each and every being and act in the world. What inescapably follows is the awareness that little things, soft flaps of butterfly wings right here, right now can redirect the evolution of the world upside down. In view of this, it comes as no surprise that it was by sheer luck that Tao-Te-Xing came into existence. Namely, while attempting to cross the border following a political turmoil in his state and planning never to return to the province in which he used to work as a librarian, Lao-Tzu got held up by a police guard, certain Vin Xi, as important in the story of the birth of Tao-Te-Xing as its very author. For an unknown reason, the guardian from this western pass did not want to let Lao-Tzu walk through the customs before he wrote down his entire lifelong philosophy. And so, Lao-tzu had no choice but to sit in a cabin in Louguantai Forest Park, at the foothills of Zhongnan Mountain, at the borderline, until he wrote a collection of 5,250 characters which came to be known as Tao-Te-Xing. As the legend has it, he did it in a couple of days, as if being driven by a William Blake's message: "Improvement makes strait roads, but the crooked roads without Improvement are roads of Genius". In such a way, he infused his work with improvisational spontaneity and thereby an eternal freshness, an art which jazz musicians have secretly kept close to their hearts ever since. After he handed over his work to Vin Xi and rode on his black ox off into the sunset, in the westward direction, like the sacred man of which he wrote, who "creates, but does not possess" (Tao-Te-Xing II), who "perfects, but asks for no recognition" (Tao-Te-Xing II), who "relinquishes so as to remain whole"<sup>1</sup>, all traces of his life were lost<sup>2</sup>.

### ***In vino veritas: Many mouths, many ways of expounding the truth***

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<sup>1</sup> See Bela Hamvas' The Melancholy of Late Works (*Melanholija poznih dela*), retrieved from [https://m.box.com/shared\\_item/https%3A%2F%2Fapp.box.com%2Fs%2F3zxxfyj9259v380yzjd9](https://m.box.com/shared_item/https%3A%2F%2Fapp.box.com%2Fs%2F3zxxfyj9259v380yzjd9).

<sup>2</sup> See Richard Wilhelm's Tao Te Xing: The Book of Meaning and Life, Translated by Ana Bešlić and Dragan Paripović, IP Babun, Belgrade, Serbia (1988).

Expressions uttered by means of one language are, strictly speaking, impossible to translate to another language and have their essence remain untouched. On one hand, this is because words used in verbal expressions stand only for a minor part of theirs that affects how they will be interpreted. Much more is being conveyed by means of body language and the voice intonation, believe it or not. Even if we think about attempts to translate written textual expressions, we should know that each word hides a subtle music in it and converting words from one language to another implies modifications of this music, which is why poetry is claimed as untranslatable *per se*. Whenever we come across translated poetry that sounds nearly as enticing as the original, we should be sure that the translator has not been perfectly faithful to the original version of the text. In a way, every good translator would find every sentence in each one of his works analogous to the appearance of the hospital of Don Juan Tavera in El Greco's painting Storm over Toledo, as described by the painter himself: "I found it necessary to reduce the size of the hospital of Don Juan Tavera, not just because it covered the gate of Bisagra, but also because its dome came up too high, passing the city's skyline. And so, since I've made it smaller and moved it, I think it is better to show its façade, rather than its other sides. As for its actual position in the city, you can see it in the map"<sup>3</sup>. Or, as pointed out by the Serbian novelist and the Nobel Laureate, Ivo Andrić, translated poetry (and prose too, many would add) is bound to be akin to a woman who "the more beautiful she gets, the less faithful it is, and *vice versa*"<sup>4</sup>.

Correspondingly, watching movies with subtitles has brought endless amusement to my mind because of the following: associating the translated lines of dialogue with the characters on the screen inadvertently modifies their personalities, oftentimes transforming an otherwise bland motion picture into something far more exciting, especially when the translation is done into my mother tongue, in which expressions become absorbed with the deepest chasms of my consciousness. For, no matter what, something of essential importance is being lost following every translation from one language to another. This, however, should be a catastrophe in its own right had it not been for the fact that this loss entails the gain of something unexpected, which ought to be taken advantage of by all possible means, as all inventive translators, committed to the fine balance between veracity and creativity, would surely agree with.

In addition, ever since the hermeneutic thoughts of earliest semioticians were expounded to the world, we have known that the meanings of individual words isolated from the sentences in which they figure are very volatile. It is contexts in which they are used and words that stand in their immediate surroundings that define their meanings. Yet, the result of translating verbatim, word-by-word a sentence or the line of a poem from one language to another will most of the time sound confusing and rarely ever meaningful.

With Tao-Te-Xing, which comprises 81 poems divided to two parts - Basic Teaching and Applications – the challenges faced by translators thereof are even greater. One of the most apparent additional difficulties related to its translation is that it was written in classical Chinese ideograms and as such intrinsically resists a straightforward translation to languages of the Western civilization. Classical Chinese greatly differs from the modern Chinese and is much more challenging to semantically interpret owing to its immense reliance on subtext, nuance and reference to a corpus of standard literary works of the ancient times. Many ideograms are drawn as overlaps of different symbolic meanings, and their overall meaning cannot be transferred into

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<sup>3</sup> See Apostolos Doxiadis' and Christos H. Papadimitriou's *Logicomix: An Epic Search for Truth*", Bloomsbury, New York, NY (2009), pp. 316.

<sup>4</sup> See Aleksandar Mandić's interview with Ivo Andrić from March 16, 1974, *Politika – kulturni dodatak* (July 26, 2014), pp. 3.

words that will convey the same level and type of ambiguity. Aside from its intrinsic ambiguities, Lao-Tzu's writing style has even more augmented the ambiguity of the original Tao-Te-Xing by using deliberately vague and antonymous symbolic overlaps, such as the one simplistically represented by means of Tai-Chi diagram. Also, since Tao-Te-Xing does not contain any punctuation marks, some linguists have observed that placing full stops at one place or the other can significantly alter the meaning of the text. Even when one translates a literary work from one language to its close linguistic relative, it often seems as if two separate works exist: the original and its translation, let alone when one attempts to convert a message that lies somewhere between sets of pictures and symbols, layered with multiple meanings, into a standard Western language. In general, it takes a virtue of the translator to avoid exerting too much of his own influence on the translated work, and yet this task is an impossible one. By merely making a choice between varieties of ways to translate a single thought based on like/dislike dichotomies, one has to leave the trace of one's personality and style on the final outcome of the translation. Intensive scholarly discussions have thus been going on for decades with regard to the various effects of personal taste and westernized perception of Oriental thought that have been inescapably infused to Tao-Te-Xing transcripts in English by its translators.

Henceforth, there are more than 250 translations of Tao-Te-Xing known to have been published all over the world to this day. A verse found in one of them does not guarantee that a verse with a similar meaning would be found in another. Many of them contain lines that are unique to a particular translation and cannot be retrieved from any other version. In view of this and the preceding argumentation, it is not preposterous at all to ask at this point whether all these different versions could be classified as completely different literary works. Is Tao-Te-Xing not one book, but rather an infinity of them, most of which are yet to be created through novel translation? Those who would nod their head to indicate assent might refer to unrelated and sometimes even literally antonymous meanings of identical poems in different "translations". Regardless of the definite answer, one rarely finds true likes of this work not to have singled out one of the versions as their favorite and the one that they are over and over again getting back to. In my case, it would be a translation to Serbo-Croatian language, with which I grew up. This translation, which I have retranslated to English hereby, was done by Svetozar Brkić in the 1960s and was published by the Belgrade publishers, Prosveta, in 1983. Although later I read many other translations, and particularly those in English, I have never found a version that would approach this one that I have ever since kept close to my heart. The drive to translate this version romanized to Serbo-Croatian to English originated from my hopes that thus I might be on the trail that leads to a perfect translation of Tao-Te-Xing in English. Invoking this enthusiasm though makes me bring to mind the words of Holmes Welch, a Taoist historian: "Tao-Te-Xing is a puzzle which everyone would like to feel he had solved". My possible success in this endeavor of mine is, however, not to say that the Serbo-Croatian version I have fancied for many years and the English one that resulted from my subsequent translation efforts would be objectively the best ones. The wisdom of Tao-Te-Xing would be the first one to silently laugh at such a flawed opinion. For, there are many ways of saying the same truths. The world looks special for every pair of eyes that looks at it, and each one of them carries a unique set of questions and wonders within them, requiring a unique set of answers thereto.

***Viva voce: Tracking careful whispers in the wind***

“Where the Mystery is the deepest is the gate of all that is subtle and wonderful”, says Lao-Tzu, according to James Legge’s legendary translation, in the final verse of the opening chapter of Tao-Te-Xing, whereas T. S. Eliot notices how “through the unknown, unremembered gate when the last of earth left to discover is that which was the beginning; at the source of the longest river the voice of the hidden waterfall and the children in the apple-tree not known, because not looked for but heard, half-heard, in the stillness between two waves of the sea”<sup>5</sup>. Now, it is through the mist of my childhood memories that I remember my earliest elementary school days and my classmates and me playing a game called “the deaf telephones”. A first kid in the chain would whisper an imagined word to the next person, and this whispering chain would continue all the way to the last person. Then, the initial and the ending results would be compared. Of course, the point was to convey the heard word in a faithful way, but silly me, I never could understand the basic rule of the game, thinking that it must be nonsensical to repeat exactly what was being heard. It was as if I personified Lao-Tzu’s words: “Rich people are (kind of) all-knowing, all is clear to them; only I am blunt, perplexed. The rich ones are wise, self-confident; only I am crestfallen” (Tao-Te-Xing XX). Hence, I always slightly modified the heard words. No wonder then that the original and the final word could never be identical so long as I was a part of the game. On the other hand, even when all the sentient members of this chain are to be committed to perfectly faithful, unmodified transmittance of information, the final outcome turns out not to be significantly different. As a matter of fact, to demonstrate the unreliability of news conveyed through the grapevine, via word of mouth, teachers in journalism classes may do one of their infamous tricks that involves sending five students out of the classroom and telling others a story. Then they would invite one of the students from the outside in and make a student from the class retell him the story. This student would then retell this retold story to another student who had not heard it in the original form, and thus all the way to the fifth student who had been sent out of the class. And then the first and the last story would be compared. The outcome of this comparison is usually such that it serves the purpose of illustrating the enormosity of the extent to which stories become modified, not only in style, but in the content and meaning too, as they become retold from one mouth to another.

Thus, when I look back now, I naturally arrive at the idea that whether we want it or not, we helplessly modify the meanings we absorb during communication with others, and in these reshaped and personally colored versions hand them to others. And this is not something to avoid at all costs. For, as pointed out by Tom Waits after he recollected the way his wife, Kathleen Brennan had always thought that Creedence Clearwater Revival sang about a “bathroom on the right” instead of “bad moon rising”, “You look forward to the brilliant mistakes. Most changes in music, most exciting things that happen in music, occur through a miscommunication between people”<sup>6</sup>. However, for most people who have been blessed with a clear, enlightening vision and wish to hand it over to the world in an untainted, original form, this inevitable semantic reconstruction upon construal comes as horrifying. For, even in the absence of a mean mediator of the message, such as the cop from the end of Godard’s revolutionary *À bout de souffle*, who conveys to the muse the final words of the poet, “I am a louse”, as if meaning “You are a louse”<sup>7</sup>, we should leave all hopes in the perfect veritableness of the message conveyance

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<sup>5</sup> See T. S. Eliot’s *Little Gidding*, In: *Four Quartets*, Harcourt, San Diego, CA (1943).

<sup>6</sup> “Innocent When You Dream: The Tom Waits Reader”, edited by Mac Montandon, Thunder’s Mouth Press, New York, NY (2005), pp. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Another version of the translation of the words slurred by dying Michel suggests that he said, “I am really disgusting”. When Patricia asks the policeman what Michel said, the answer was, “He said that you are a

process before we engage in any transmission or absorption of meanings in communication, regardless of the channel involved – vocal, textual, pictorial, musical, cinematic, gestural, emotional, spiritual, *et cetera*. For, truly, the ideals of objectivity sank deep into the sea of human knowledge long time ago. Even if we use Thesaurus to draw chains of synonyms of synonyms, after only a few substitutions we may end up with a word which is an antonym to the initial one. However, such an inability to reach the ideal of perfect mutual understanding is an inevitable feature of every communication, springing out from the partially subjective and partially objective nature of all experiences. These two can never be perfectly separated, as even the most elementary experiences, such as primary perceptions, already present inextricable intersections of qualities of a subject and those of an object. There is an essence of ourselves in everything we perceive, though we, our bodies, mindsets and ideas, also seem to be made of the forms found in the world around us. Subjectivity and objectivity are thus inseparably flowing one into the other, just like the black and the white in the ancient Tai-Chi-Tu diagram.

The mentioned game makes two separate insights spring in my mind like two trains of thought. Firstly, on the objective side, I am reminded of how Lao-Tzu wrote Tao-Te-Xing on lines of bamboo strips linked with silk threads. As this original carving had had to be replicated each time anew so as to be multiplied and spread through the world, the carvers did not always do their jobs with perfect precision, which has prompted some historians and linguists to claim how the original text had been altered during these transcriptions so much that some passages had become impossible to interpret in meaningful ways. Translating ideograms to words is, moreover, a process whereby the natural ambiguity of many of the original symbols becomes helplessly reduced on the account of imprinting more limited and linear meanings. Converting poems from one language to another, the process which often fully modifies the rhythm and the vocal charms of the poem, can thus be considered as a cakewalk compared to translation of Tao-Te-Xing to a Western language. Furthermore, to resist not adding things here and there in an attempt to decorate or clarify the script translated or merely transcribed is quite a challenge for most translators, especially the nonprofessional ones. As for the drastic changes in the semantics brought about by rewriting scriptures, we can always refer to the four canonical gospels as an example, that is, their evolution from the oldest one, according to Mark, very dry and factual, to Matthew's, most comprehensive and archetypical of them all, serving as the base for the subsequent ideological and crusading core of Christianity with its condemnatory character, to the one by Luke, far more joyous and trumpeting, probably most faithful to the literal meaning of Gospel as "good news", and, finally, to the newest, John's, most mystical, spiritual, cryptic and poetic of them all. Additionally, throughout the many centuries after the Gospels had been written, they never ceased to be reshaped according to the translators' and theologians' opinion with regard to what the original authors had meant to convey with their wordings. For example, the verse "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 1:11), picked from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century King James version of the Old Testament, carrying an almost Zen profundity within itself, transformed first to much simplified "Faith is assurance of things hoped for, a conviction of things not seen" with the release of the American Standard version of the Bible at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and then to thoroughly banal "Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" in the early 1970s, when the New International

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really disgusting person". See IMDb's FAQ for *Breathless* (1960), retrieved from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0053472/faq>.

version was issued<sup>8</sup>. In this case, the messages of some of the passages could be easily seen drifting in the opposite direction, that is, from ambiguous and mystical, interpretable in a plethora of possible ways, to dry and banal, cemented in a single, monotonous and oftentimes plainly erroneous form. Moreover, before the Christ's teaching was summed up in a narrative, almost biographical form in Gospels, the stories thereof circulated amongst people, having been conveyed orally for decades before some of his words came to be written down for the first time, mainly by St. Paul the Apostle, who, as we all know now, greatly enriched the essence of the Christ's creed with his own visions, for better or worse. To what extent the evangelists made up a fairytale out of historical evidence in their writings is, of course, impossible to untangle with perfect confidence. What is, however, certain is that both the Christ and his teaching depicted in the scriptures can be justly considered the products of imagination of people misconceiving the "good news" that they had gotten hold of before whispering them to another's ears as much as they verily were in reality. Secondly, on the subjective side, the game of tracking careless whispers in the wind is reminiscent of how I came up with my own translation of Tao-Te-Xing in this book. The original was first translated to Serbo-Croatian, inevitably involving concoction with a plenty of subjective taste, after which I translated this Serbo-Croatian version to English with a similar display of my individual taste. Apparently, both Lao-Tzu's message to humanity, objectively, and my eyes of humanity that glance it, subjectively, have traveled long ways and have changed thereupon before they could face each other in this meeting of two horizons, one drawn by the author and one drawn by the interpreter, as Hans-Georg Gadamer described the hermeneutic process intrinsic to the semantic interpretation of any text<sup>9</sup>.

My hometown, Belgrade, Serbia, has, in fact, found itself on the historic line that divided Eastern Roman Empire from the Western one and has ever since been a place on the map of the world in which unusual clashes of cultures and religions, often in tragic ways, have taken place. Hence, it certainly presents a peculiar steppingstone in this bringing the spirit of probably the most essential founding element of the Oriental philosophies to the Western world. Yet, as Serbian by origin, married to a Taipei-born Chinese and living in San Francisco, I may truly be equipped with the right senses to cope with everything that this challenging task brings. This translation endeavor of mine is thus markedly different from those accomplished by most other translators of Tao-Te-Xing, typically scholars with bases in Chinese language, history and philosophy who believed that their knowledge is a prerequisite for authentically rendering the original meaning of the text into English with utmost precision and faithfulness. Yet, that translations of translations carried out by translators unfamiliar with the original language in question can be considered masterful can be exemplified by the Princeton University professor of comparative literature, David Bellos, who translated the works by the Albanian writer, Ismail Kadare not from their original language which has been completely foreign to him, but from their former translations to French, and won the first Man Booker International Prize for translation in 2005 for his achievements. My way, overall, seems to have been rather long and winding compared to those adopted by the major translators of Tao-Te-Xing, but it may be the heart of what makes this translation unique.

In that sense, I draw on the screen of my mind two identical labyrinths, one found inside the San Francisco Grace Cathedral, near Keith Haring's triptych altarpiece and only a block or so away from the house in which I live while I write these words and do this translation, and one

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<sup>8</sup> See Christopher Lane's Faith According to the Bible(s), Huffington Post (May 11, 2012), available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-lane/faith-according-to-the-bibles\\_b\\_1496778.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christopher-lane/faith-according-to-the-bibles_b_1496778.html).

<sup>9</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer's Truth and Method, Continuum, New York, NY (1997).

found outside of it, as if signifying that all people, those outside of the privileged social circles and those inside of them have the roads that lead to glimpsing the lights divine open in front of them, all of the time. As one steps onto the labyrinth, one realizes that no traps exist in it; rather, the one and only road leads to its center. Yet, as one walks, the path alternately takes him close to the center and then away from it, so that the impressions of approaching the destination, satisfactorily, and distancing from it, disappointingly, constantly switch in the walker, quite akin to the story from Upanishads about a bird that tasted sweet and bitter fruits from the tree of knowledge and, without noticing it, managed to reach enlightenment due to its incessant wondering and bright visions set in front of itself. Walking on this mystical labyrinth, a copy of the one designed for the Chartres Cathedral in 1201, I immediately recollected what Paul Tillich said once, “Nature draws with crooked lines”, reconnecting the message with the aforementioned Will Blake’s thought and bringing to mind how travelling in circles, from the foundations of Love to the stars of Wonder and back, like the alchemical snake that bites its own tail, is the feature of all profound forms of thinking and being. Or, as very Lao-Tzu noticed, “the one who travels along the straight path of Tao appears as if descending and ascending” (Tao-Te-Xing XLI), while yet another fictive character that combined childlike lightness of the heart and sage-like wisdom of the ancients, Saint-Exupery’s Little Prince, would have maybe added that “by traveling only frontward, one does not travel far”. The shortest possible way to reach a solution in life is thus often misleading and we usually have to climb many a hill in the moments of hardship and slide down in lightness and joy and over and over again before we earn the laurels of wisdom. We learn on mistakes and all things hallowed in life precipitate from an inseparable concoction of struggle and relief, manifesting itself on the co-evolutionary plane as the entwinement of competitive and symbiotic relationships. The steps to wisdom, thus, lead not through serene and untroubled landscapes, but through belligerent fields of dialectical confrontations, the ruffled seas of adventure and paths filled with puzzling dilemmas and crossroads, depicted with the symbol of the crucifixion of the Christ who attained a perfect salvation through wretched, disconsolate and agonic compassion with the whole wide world. Hence, sometimes we need to climb to a mountaintop to realize the beauty of the sea that once swayed and sashayed right in front of our eyes. When divine messengers wave at us from literally everywhere, all the time, their falling into the blind spot of our cognition is inevitable and the only way to restore our ability to see them would be to step away, into a dark cosmic distance, before returning to them with fresh insight and resurrected spirit. The translation of this book has followed one such unusual, curvy road. Yet, it will hopefully manage to point at the immaculate beauty of simple things that glow with Tao, the spirit divine, right here, right now. What follows is my Chinese-to-Serbian-to-English translation of Tao-Te-Xing, the book in which, I claim, the entire wisdom of the human race has been inscribed.

## **Tao-Te-Xing (道德經)**

### ***The Principles of Tao***

I

A Way that can be marked

Is not the Eternal Way: Tao.

A name that can be uttered  
Is not the Eternal Name.

With no name, it is the source of Heaven and Earth.  
With the name, it is the Mother of all things.

Hence:

We often free ourselves from passions  
To see the Secret of Life.  
We often observe life with passions  
To see its shapes.

These two forms of Life  
(In essence) are One;  
In their external appearance  
They differ by name.

Both could be called the Cosmic Secret:  
And in an even Deeper Secret than that Secret  
The Doors to many a Mystery lie.

II

When all men on earth realize beauty,  
The awareness of ugliness is being born.  
When all men on earth realize goodness,  
The awareness of evil arises.

Hence:

Being and non-being bear each other;  
The heavy and the light complement each other;  
The long and the short are mutually demarcated;  
The tall and the short shifted;  
The tone and the sound harmonized;  
Before and after tied.

Here is why the sacred man:

Does the work without working;  
Teaches without words;  
Lets all emanate, whilst he does not reject anything;  
Gives life to it all, but does not claim any as his own;  
Works, but does not possess;  
Perfects, but asks for no recognition.

Because he asks for no recognition,  
The recognition could not be taken from him.

### III

Do not praise men of value  
    Lest the world be spoiled and in dispute;  
Do not value rare objects  
    Lest the world be prompted to steal;  
Do not look at things attractable  
    Lest the human hearts be disquieted.

The reign of the sacred man is therefore:  
    To create void in people's hearts,  
    To fill their bellies,  
    To weaken their will,  
    To strengthen their bodies.  
So that people could be without knowledge and desire  
And so that the smart do not dare to become involved.

He teaches the smart:  
    To stop acting,  
    To act the act of the Inner Life;  
    Then the Inner Life will reign over all.

### IV

Tao is an empty pan.  
    Its use is inexhaustible!  
What an abyss!  
    As if it is the source of all things.

It softens asperities,  
Resolves conditions,  
Harmonizes Light,  
Unites the dust.

Oh, how pure it is!  
    It seems as if it has existed from the eternity on.  
I do not know whose Son it could be,  
    An image of what was before the very God.

### V

Heaven and Earth are unbiased.  
    They look at all creatures as straw dog offerings.

The sacred man is unbiased.

He looks at all creatures as straw dog offerings.

The space between Heaven and Earth is like a bellow –  
Emptied, it loses no power;  
Utilized, it gives more and more breath.

Many words exhaust.  
Therefore stick to the core.

## VI

The Spirit of Valley never dies.  
We name it the Mystical Female.  
The door of the Mystical Female  
We name the Root of Heaven and Earth.

Constantly, constantly  
It feeds and sustains.  
Use it,  
You won't lack strength.

## VII

Heaven and Earth last long.

If Heaven and Earth last long,  
It is because they do not live for themselves.  
This is why they last forever.

Hence, by placing himself at the last place  
The sacred man finds himself at the first place.  
His body he considers accidental  
Yet his body stays protected.

Does he not realize himself  
exactly because he does not live for himself?

## VIII

The Heavenly Love is like water.

Water is the blessing of all things,  
It does not compete with them.  
It likes (low) places that all despise –  
Here, it gets close to Tao.

The sacred man likes to dwell on (low) land;  
In his heart, he likes bottomless depth;  
In his relationships, he likes generosity;  
In his speech, he likes sincerity;  
In his reign, he likes peace;  
In his business, he likes capability;  
In his work, he likes precision.

Because he does not fight,  
He is impeccable.

## IX

Stretch the bow until the end,  
    And you will wish you released it on time.  
Forge the sword until it is sharpest  
    And its blade won't last long.  
When you fill a palace with gold and jade,  
    You won't be able to save it.  
To be proud with richness and honors,  
    Means sowing the seeds of one's own fall.  
When you finish your work (no matter how great)  
    Withdraw yourself;  
Such is the heavenly Way.

## X

Accepting One with a whole soul,  
    Could you never leave Tao?  
Overcoming the force of life, until it gives way,  
    Could you become like a newborn?  
Washing and purifying the mystical vision,  
    Could you stream to perfection?  
Loving people and reigning over a kingdom,  
    Could you manage without meddling?  
Opening and closing the gates of heaven,  
    Could you act as a Female?  
Comprehending the entire knowledge,  
    Could you shun the knowledge for good?

Bearing, feeding,  
Bearing, but not possessing,  
Acting, but not acquiring,  
Leading, but not subordinating –  
That is the Mystical Virtue.

## XI

Thirty spokes around a nave,  
The usefulness of the wheel is in that inner emptiness.

Make a pot from clay,  
The usefulness of the pot is in that inner emptiness.

Drill the doors and windows in the walls of a house,  
Useful to the house will be their empty space.

With existence of things thus we gain,  
Whereas nonexistence of things endows us with their usefulness.

## XII

Five colors blind man's eyes;  
Five tones deafen man's ears;  
Five spices abate man's taste;  
Races, hunting and the gallop of horses madden human senses;  
Rare, precious objects perturb human actions.

The sacred man is therefore preoccupied with the inner, and not with the outer.  
He rejects the former and accepts the latter.

## XIII

“Mercy and mercilessness cause fear”;  
What we appreciate and what we are afraid of is in our body.

What does it mean:  
“Mercy and mercilessness cause fear”?  
Those who accept mercy from above  
Fear when they accept it  
And fear when they lose it.

What does it mean:  
“What we appreciate and what we are afraid of is in our body”?  
We fear because we have the body,  
When we do not observe the body as a body, what is there to be feared?

Therefore, the one to whom the kingdom is as precious as he, himself  
The kingdom could be given to,  
And the one who loves the kingdom as much as oneself  
Is worthy to govern it.

#### XIV

Observed, it is unseen –  
It is invisible;  
Listened to, it is unheard –  
It is inaudible;  
Touched, you do not feel it –  
It is impalpable.

These three (attributes) evade further description,  
Because they intertwine and blend in One.

Neither does light emerge with its rising,  
Nor darkness with its setting.  
It is constant, continuous,  
Nameless,  
It originates from where no being exists.

It can be said that it is the spiritual form of a form,  
That it is the spiritual image of an image:  
Indescribable, it everlastingly recedes.  
Should you move towards it, you won't see its beginning.  
Should you follow it, you won't see its end.

Only the one who firmly holds on to the ancient Tao  
So as to put together things from the present moment  
Is able to realize the Primordial Sources,  
The lasting thread of Tao.

#### XV

The ancient sages were inconceivably deep, natural, mysterious.  
So deep were they that we could not even comprehend them.  
And because we cannot comprehend them  
We have to describe them:  
Vigilant, as the one who steps over a creek in the wintertime,  
Awake, as the one who is afraid of neighbors,  
Continent, as a guest in front of a host,  
Ready to erase themselves, like the melting ice,  
Genuine, as a piece of coarse wood,  
Open, as a valley,  
Blended with others, like muddy waters.

Who can find peace in the muddy world?  
If you lie still, it clears up.  
Who can retain one's peace for long enough?

By the activity (of the Inner Life), it is retraced.  
The one who accepts Tao  
Does not want to be full, but empty.  
He is beyond decline and renewal.

## XVI

To achieve perfect emptiness,  
Persistently hold on to stillness.

Thousands of beings receive the form and move in acting,  
Yet I see them returning.  
They flourish strongly, like vegetation,  
Yet they return to their source.

To return to the source,  
Means stillness.  
Stillness, that is the fulfillment of the fate.  
To fulfill the fate, that is the Eternal Law.  
To meet the Eternal Law means to be enlightened.  
And not knowing the Eternal Law  
Means attracting misery onto oneself.

To meet the Eternal Law is to become bighearted.  
The one who is bighearted is the king.  
The king is like the sky;  
Similar to the sky, he is united with Tao;  
United with Tao, he lasts forever  
Should even his body disappear,  
For him, there is no danger.

## XVII

For the best monarchs from the ancient times  
People (only) knew that they existed;  
Those were approached only by those whom they respected and loved;  
Then by those whom they were afraid of;  
And then by those whom they despised.

When trust (in people) is limited,  
There is no trust (among them either);  
Then resort is found in oaths.

Those (who were the best) were serious, their words priceless,  
Honorable deeds of theirs were multiplied, businesses thriving  
And people were saying: "It is owing to us".

## XVIII

When the great Tao was left,  
(The doctrines of) “humaneness” and “justice” arrived.

When knowledge and skills appeared,  
They were closely followed by hypocrisy.

When six relationships ceased to live in peace,  
Praising of “good parents” and “kind sons” began.

When kingdoms, clans and families became hostile to each other,  
Praising of “faithful ministers” began.

## XIX

Renounce knowledge, give away scholarships,  
And it will be a hundred times more useful to people.  
Renounce “humaneness”, get rid of “justice”,  
And people will return to the love of sons and the gentleness of fathers;

Renounce “utility”, give away resourcefulness,  
And thieves and robbers will vanish.

Yet these three things are external, and are insufficient;  
Hence, let us try to notice simplicity,  
To embrace our prime nature,  
To suppress selfishness,  
And diminish our desires.

## XX

Renounce scholarship and disturbances will disappear.  
How tiny the difference is  
Between “yes” and “no”?  
How great the difference is  
Between “good” and “evil”?  
What people fear  
They should be afraid of;  
But – alas! – how distant awakening still is!

Many people rejoice and revel,  
As if they participate in a ceremonial feast,  
As if they climb onto a terrace from spring;  
Only I am quiet, like an unemployed one,

Like a newborn who does not know how to laugh yet,  
Aimless; like homeless.

Many people are like (living) in some abundance,  
I, as if secluded from that,  
Must have a fool's heart  
So muddleheaded, nebulous!

Rich people are (kind of) all-knowing, all is clear to them;  
Only I am blunt, perplexed.  
The rich ones are wise, self-confident;  
Only I am crestfallen.

Suddenly I am like on an open sea,  
I sail: an open sea, seemingly with no destination.  
Many people have some abilities,  
I am almost like a dumb simpleton.  
Only I differ from other people  
And suck the nectar from the Mother Nurture.

## XXI

The signs of great strength  
Issue from Tao only.

Here is how Tao is by nature:  
Obscure, indescribable.  
Obscure, indescribable,  
Yet all forms are (hidden) in it.  
Obscure, indescribable,  
Yet all beings are (hidden) in it.  
The spiritual essence is (hidden) in it;  
Its quintessence, full of truths,  
Lies in it as a testimony (for this).

From the ancient times until now  
Its name (the manifested forms) has not passed.  
The universe enters into existence through its doors.  
How do I know that the universe enters into existence through its doors?  
By means of it, itself.

## XXII

What is incomplete becomes complete.

A bend becomes strait,

Emptiness becomes filled,  
The worn-out becomes renewed,  
Who has not, yields;  
Who has, gets embarrassed.

This is why the sacred man accepts One  
And becomes a model for the world.  
He does not reveal himself  
And therefore he shines.  
He does not justify himself  
And therefore he is renowned.  
He does not boast  
And therefore he is rewarded.  
Because he does not fight  
No one in the world can oppose him.

Isn't it true what the ancients were saying:  
"What is incomplete becomes complete?"  
So is he saved too and the world rewards him.

### XXIII

Nature relies on little words:  
Which is why the hurricane does not last for a whole morning;  
Showers do not last for a whole day.  
From whence do they come?  
From nature.  
Even nature does not speak (its language) for too long,  
How shorter should then human beings (speak)?

The one who follows Tao identifies with it.  
The one who follows Te identifies with it.  
Who leaves Tao identifies with the leaving (of Tao).

The one who is one with Tao,  
Accepts Tao with joy.  
The one who is one with Te,  
Accepts Te with joy too.  
The one who is one with leaving,  
Leaving accepts with joy too.

The one who does not have (enough) faith,  
Cannot expect faith (in others).

### XXIV

The one who stands on tips of his toes does not stand (firmly).  
The one who stomps forward with big steps does not walk (well).  
The one who reveals oneself, does not shine,  
The one who justifies oneself, is now known afar.  
The one who glorifies oneself will not sustain for too long.

In the eyes of Tao  
    These are “spits and tumors of virtue”,  
And they are disgusting.  
Hence, the one with Tao inside  
    Does not want to follow them.

## XXV

Before there were Heaven and Earth,  
There was a single Being, already perfect.  
    Undying! Shapeless!  
    Alone. Changeless!  
It reached everywhere; inexhaustible.  
We can consider it the Mother of Universe.

I do not know its name,  
And denote it with the word Tao.  
Forced to name it, I call it the Great.  
Given great, it expands, flows,  
Flowing, it distances.  
Distant, it arrives (always into its starting point).

Hence: Tao is great  
    Heaven is great  
    Earth is great  
    And the king is great.  
Four things are great,  
Isn't the king one of them?

Man finds its law on earth,  
Earth in Heaven,  
Heaven in Tao,  
Tao only in itself.

## XXVI

“Heavy is the master of light;  
Stillness is the master of movement”.

Hence, the king's son,

Albeit travelling from dawn to dusk,  
Maintains bright seriousness  
In tributes and honors  
And lives undisturbed by them, indifferent.

How sorrowful would it be  
If the master of a thousand chariots  
Would think more about himself than of the kingdom?

In light mobility, the centerpiece is lost,  
In hurried acts, the reign (over oneself) is lost.

## XXVII

The one who walks in goodness does not leave a trace behind.  
The one who speaks in goodness does not leave space for attack.  
The one who calculates well does not need a calculator.  
Well closed doors do not need bolts,  
    And still you cannot open them.  
A well tied knot does not need a good rope.  
    And still you cannot untie it.

Hence, a good man converges to help people –  
    He does not reject anyone.  
He helps everything under the heavenly hat,  
    And that is why nothing is rejected.  
    That is called the theft of Light.

Hence, the sacred man is a teacher to the wicked one,  
And the wicked one is a man of an object lesson to the good one.

The one who does not appreciate teachers  
    Nor likes object lessons  
    Has truly digressed,  
    No matter how lettered he is.

Tao is a mysterious truth.

## XXVIII

To be aware of the Male  
But to retain female softness  
    Is to become the valley of the kingdom.  
When you are the valley of the kingdom,  
The eternal source (of the manifested) welcomes you,  
    You return like a child.

To be aware of the light,  
But to stick to the darkness,  
    Is to be a model for the kingdom,  
When you are a model for the kingdom,  
You possess an eternal, infallible strength,  
You return to Limitlessness.

To know of glory and retain humbleness,  
Is to be the valley of the kingdom  
When you are the valley of the kingdom,  
    You are an inexhaustible source (of the manifested),  
    You return to the always genuine simplicity,  
    The wholeness of an unfretted wood.

A fractioned tree becomes a multitude  
And the sacred man uses it,  
    Thus becoming a Manager for a long term  
    And manages without hurting anyone.

## XXIX

There are those who would like to beat the world  
And give it a form according to their fancy,  
    I can tell – they will not succeed.  
For the world is the sight of very god  
And human hand could not give it sight,  
    Would you like to give it a shape, you mess it up,  
    To detain it, you lose it.  
For: out of all beings  
    One stream forward  
    And others trail behind,  
    One breathe  
    And others shiver,  
    Some are strong  
    And some are weak,  
    One fall  
    And others are torn down.  
Hence, the sacred man avoids enjoyments, avoids glamour, avoids pride.

## XXX

The one who were to help the ruler of people by means of Tao  
Does not betake weapons to overpower the world.  
It returns.  
Where armies have fallen, neither thorns nor briars grow.

If you elevate people, bad years ensue.

Hence, a good general accomplishes his aim and lingers.

He cannot rely on the power of armory.

He realizes what he intends and does not glorify that.

He realizes what he intends and does not boast with that.

He realizes what he intends and is not proud for that.

He realizes what he intends and takes it as a sorrowful necessity.

When people apply force, they grow old,

Because that is contrary to Tao;

To be contrary to Tao

Is to die prematurely.

XXXI

Armory is a vicious tool.

All nations hate it,

Which is why the one with Tao within avoids it.

During peace the honorary place

Is on the left side of the prince-sage,

But during war, it is on the right (side).

Armory is a miserable tool,

It is not a tool of the man of Peace;

Even when armory cannot be avoided,

He appreciates tranquil continence over all.

There is no beauty in triumph.

If one were to call it beautiful,

One would enjoy in killing people.

And the one who enjoys in killing,

Will not succeed in ruling the world.

(During the times of happiness and peace, the honorary place is on the left,

While during the times of misfortune and war, the honorary place is on the right side;

In the war, the commander's assistant is on the left,

While the commander is on the right side,

Which is the same as at the funeral.)

Who kills many people,

Will shed many tears.

To the one who inflicts many wins in war,

As at the funeral, the place is on the right.

(The win should be celebrated as a funeral.)

### XXXII

Tao is eternal and has no name.

Although tiny, if pure,  
The one who serves it is liberated  
And has all powers of the universe upon oneself.

If monarchs unite with it,  
All will, all by themselves, confide thereto.

Heaven and Earth unite,  
So as the mellow dew could fall  
And away from the human spells  
To all nations equally.

In the very beginning of the difference, there was a name;  
With the name, being arose;  
In it, knowledge and obtuseness;  
If you know obtuseness,  
You can evade failure.

What valley creeks are  
To rivers and seas,  
All in the universe is  
To Tao.

### XXXIII

Who knows others is wise;  
Who knows oneself sees clearly.

Who beats others has strength (in muscles),  
Who beats oneself is strong.

Who is satisfied is rich;  
Who follows one's way has willpower.  
Who holds on to one's own place (the centerpiece), lasts;  
Who dies but still saves (strength) is of lasting life.

### XXXIV

The great Tao overflows everywhere.  
(Like a flood) it sprawls to all sides.

Millions of beings draw life from it  
And it gives it to them.  
When it finishes the work,  
It does not claim it as its own.  
With love it sustains and feeds millions  
And is not considered their master.

Always without passions and desires,  
It could be called small.

The home, to which millions of beings return,  
Without considering itself their master,  
Could have been named great.  
This is why the sacred man until the end does not consider himself great  
And thereby completes his greatness.

#### XXXV

Stick to the great symbol,  
You will thus attract all people,  
They will approach painlessly  
And gain health, abundance and peace.

Offer good food, music and a place to stay to the traveler  
And he will gladly stay with you.  
But when Tao flows from you to him  
He won't discern its tastes with his palate,  
Nor the shape with his eyes,  
Nor the voice with his ears,  
Should he use it, he'll see – inexhaustible it is.

#### XXXVI

If you want to breathe deeply,  
You need to first empty your lungs.  
If you want to be strong,  
You need to first learn how to be weak.  
If you want to occupy a high position,  
You need to accept a low position first.  
If you want to enrich yourself with presents,  
You first must bestow all that you have.  
That is called the Secret Enlightenment.

Tenderness overcomes strength.  
Let fish stay in the deep waters.  
And let the sharp weapons of the state

Stay where no one could see it.

### XXXVII

Tao is forever without acting,  
Yet, all is done by its means.  
If princes and dukes held on to Tao,  
People would transform all by themselves.  
Transformed, if leaning towards acting.  
Let them hold on to the nameless primordial Simplicity.  
The nameless Simplicity is freed from the desire (to fight).  
Freed from the desire, peace is attained  
And the world (thus) reaches it all by itself.

### *The Application of Tao*

### XXXVIII

Man of a sublime character is not aware of his character,  
Therefore, he has no character.  
Man of a less valuable character looks after not losing his character,  
Therefore, he is without character.  
Man of a sublime character never acts,  
Nor ever does anything with a final motive.  
Man of a less valuable character acts,  
And does that with a final motive.  
Man of sublime justice acts,  
But without a final motive.  
(However, when) a man of a sublime li acts and does not come across compliance,  
He rolls up his sleeves and forces it upon others.

Hence:

What Tao is lost, it is come to the idea of humaneness,  
When humaneness is lost, it is come to the justice,  
When justice is lost, it is come to li,  
And li is mincing of fidelity and of the honesty of heart.

And the beginning of chaos.  
Prophets are the blossoming of Tao  
And the beginnings of craziness.  
Hence, a noble man dwells in the solid  
And not in that which is thinning down.  
He dwells in the fruit,  
And not in the blossom (expression).  
Hence, he rejects the former and accepts the latter.

### XXXIX

Here are those who have retained One since the ancient times and following the beginnings:

By retaining One, the heavens lightened,  
By retaining One, the land has solidified,  
By retaining One, gods have become spiritual,  
By retaining One, the valleys have filled up,  
By retaining One, all things have thrived,  
By retaining One, princes and dukes have been noble.

- Only by Itself have they become as they are.

Without clarity, the heavens would darken,  
Without solidity, the land would shake,  
Without spirituality, gods would disappear,  
Unfilled, the valleys would shatter,  
Without the life-giving power, all would die,  
Without the ennobling strength, the princes and dukes would flounder.  
Hence, the noble ones depend on common people,  
And the sublime ones have their bases in those below.

Do not thence princes and dukes call themselves “orphans”, “the lonesome ones” and “unworthy ones”?

Isn't it true that they need the common man as the support?

Really, disassemble a car to its pieces  
And there will be no car.  
Rather to rumble like a rock  
Than to rattle like jade.

### XL

The one who returns was sent by Tao,  
The one who is weak is used by Tao.  
All things under the sky originate from the Being,  
And the Being from the Non-Being.

### XLI

When people of the highest quality hear of Tao,  
They try to follow it.  
When the mediocre ones hear of Tao,  
They sometimes hold on to it and sometimes not.  
When the lowest ones hear of Tao,  
They burst into loud laughter –  
But whether it is followed by people or laughed at,  
Tao remains active.

Hence, the already confirmed saying goes:

“The one who understands Tao appears blunt in comprehending,  
The one who has advanced in Tao appears as if traveling backwards,  
The one who travels along the straight path of Tao appears as if descending and ascending.”

The man of a sublime character appears like a hollow (valley),  
The very whiteness appears soiled;  
The man of great character appears blunt;  
The man of firm character appears weak;  
A pure quality appears spoiled.  
A great space has no angles.  
A great talent needs a lot of time to ripen.

A great music is hardly heard.  
A great form is formless.  
And Tao is hidden without name.

And only such Tao can yield (its power) and lead to fulfillment.

## XLII

From Tao, One is born;  
From One, two:  
From two, three;  
From three, the entire created universe.

The entire created universe evades the principle of stillness and darkness,  
It holds on to the principle of life,  
And with the breath of the Deep arrives at the harmony.

People do not like to be called “orphans”, “worthless”, and “loners”.  
And yet the princes and dukes call themselves those names.  
For, sometimes it is added by subtracting  
And subtracted by adding.

What others have taught,  
I teach too:  
“The death of the strong and the rough one will not be light.”  
That is the basis of my teaching too.

## XLIII

The softest substance in the world  
Penetrates through the hardest.  
What is shapeless penetrates through that which has no cracks.  
That is how I know the usefulness of not undertaking any activity.

Nothing in the universe can be compared with  
The wordless teaching  
And the usefulness of not undertaking any activity.

#### XLIV

Glory or your own being, what do you like more?  
Your being or the material wealth, what is worth more?  
The loss (of oneself) or possession (of goods), what is a greater evil?

Hence: The one who loves most, gives most.

The one who accumulates a plenty, is at great loss.  
A satisfied man does not need to be afraid of shame;  
The one who knows where to stop is not threatened by danger –  
He can last.

#### XLV

The most complete perfection is like imperfection.  
Using it, you do not exhaust it.  
The greatest abundance seems like shortage –  
You use it, and it never fails.

That which is the straightest seems like an impasse.  
The greatest skill seems like sloppiness.  
The highest eloquence seems like stammering.

The movement overcomes coldness,  
(But) stillness overcomes heat.  
Who is familiar with the real secret of stillness,  
Becomes a model for the whole universe.

#### XLVI

When the world lives in harmony with Tao,  
The racing horses are used for towage.  
When the world does not live in harmony with Tao,  
A plenty of cavalry is on earth.

There is no curse greater than dissatisfaction.  
There is no sin greater than the desire to possess.  
Hence, to be satisfied implies perpetual adequacy.

#### XLVII

Without approaching the door,

I know what happens in the world.

Without opening the window,  
I see the heavenly Tao.  
The more I go out, the less I know.

Hence, the sacred man  
Arrives without departing,  
Realizes without looking,  
Perfects without acting.

#### XLVIII

Devoted to science, from day to day the knowledge is expanded,  
Devoted to Tao, from day to day the knowledge is diminished;

By incessantly diminishing,  
It is arrived to not-acting.  
With not-acting, all can be accomplished.  
The one who wins over the world often wins by not-acting.  
When a man is forced to act,  
The world is already beyond the scope of his win.

#### XLIX

The sacred man does not have specific opinions and feelings;  
He rather considers opinions and feelings of people as his own.

For the good ones, I announce that they are good,  
And for the bad ones, I announce that they are good:  
It is the goodness of the Virtue.  
To the honest I believe,  
To the liars I believe too:  
It is the faith of the Virtue.

The sacred man lives in the world peacefully, harmoniously.  
He brings all the people into a communion of the heart  
And considers them all as his real children.

#### L

Entering life means entering death,  
Thirteen are the companions of life;  
And thirteen are the companions of death.  
(Those) thirteen, in this life, send man to death too.

How come?  
Because of the powerful act of multiplication of life.

It is said that the one who is a good keeper of one's life  
Does not encounter tigers and wild bulls on earth,  
Is not injured by weapons on the battlefield,  
Neither could horns of wild bulls,  
Nor tiger claws harm the harmless in him;  
Nor do army weapons have an effect on him.  
How come?  
Because he is above death.

LI

Tao gives life to all creatures.  
Te (Virtue) feeds them.  
The material world gives them shape.  
The circumstances of the moment complete them.  
Hence, all in the universe adores Tao and uplifts Te.  
Tao is adored and Te uplifted  
Without anyone's order, spontaneously.

Hence, Tao yields life to all creatures,  
And Te feeds them,  
Enables their growth and development,  
Provides shelter, a place to live in peace,  
Sustains, perfects.

It gives them life, but does not claim them as its own,  
Assists them, but does not subdue them.  
It is over them, yet it sets them free.  
- That is called the Mystical Virtue.

LII

The universe had its beginning  
Which could be considered the Mother of the Universe.  
After the Mother we may know the sons.

Knowing the sons, we hold on to the Mother  
And nothing can then derange life.

Close the door of the mouth  
And the door of senses  
And life takes no hardship or strain:

Open mouth,  
Plunge into busyness  
And life is beyond redemption.

Who sees fine has got a clear sight;  
Who protects the weak is strong.  
Use light  
And return to clearness of sight –  
So as not to attract adversities later.

- That is called resting in the Absolute.

### LIII

If I came upon realization and have firm faith,  
I will take the Main Road (Tao).  
I will avoid sideways.  
It is easy to travel along the Main Road,  
Yet people like sideways.

A palace may glisten,  
While fields are uncultivated  
And barns empty.

Dressed up in fancy-work robes,  
With swords on belts,  
Fed up and drunk,  
Governors can swim in abundance too.

- That leads the world to thievery.  
That, indeed, is not Tao

### LIV

The one who is firm (in goodness)  
Cannot be uprooted.  
The one who watches after (goodness)  
Cannot be rejected.  
Sons, just as sons of their sons,  
Will offer it sacrifices incessantly.

Watched after in itself, the virtue will become true;  
Watched after in family, the virtue will expand;  
Watched after in village, the virtue will multiply;  
Watched after in state, the virtue will flourish;  
Watched after in the world, the virtue will become common.

Hence:

After the virtue of an individual, the individual is known.  
After the virtue of a family, the family is known.  
After the virtue of a village, the village is known.  
After the virtue of a state, the state is known.  
After the virtue of the world, the world is known.  
How I know that the world is such.  
After this.

LV

The one who is enrooted in Virtue  
Is akin to a newborn.

Poisonous insects do not bite him,  
The beasts do not attack him,  
Vultures do not peck him.

His bones are soft and muscles tender,  
Yet he can grasp firmly.  
He does not know of union of male and female  
Yet his organs are full,  
Which means that his strengths are intact.  
He cries for a whole day, yet he never goes hoarse,  
Which means that he carries a natural harmony within himself.  
Knowing harmony means knowing eternity.  
And knowing eternity means being enlightened.  
But to improve life is called an ominous foretoken.  
The life strength that bears human feelings is strong.  
The strong ones reach peak and then grow old.  
That is against Tao.  
And the one who is against Tao dies young.

LVI

Who knows, does not talk;  
Who talks, does not know.

He shuts the mouth  
And the door of senses.  
Ameliorates the sharpness,  
Resolves the conditions,  
Harmonizes the light,  
Unites the dust (people),  
- That is called the Mystical Unity.

Love and hate could not touch him.

Win and loss make him indifferent.  
Honors and depravity do not act on him.  
He is therefore admired by the whole world.

## LVII

To reign over a kingdom, use righteousness.  
To wage war, use tactics (of surprises).  
To reign over the world, use non-action.  
How do I know this is so?

Here is how:

The more bans,  
    The poorer the people.  
The more deadly weapons,  
    The greater the chaos in the state.  
The greater the technical skills,  
    The more (deadly) things are produced.  
The greater the number of laws,  
    The greater the number of thieves and bandits.

The sacred man therefore says:

If I do not act, people will change all by themselves.  
    If I love inaction, people will become righteous all by themselves.  
If I do not engage in businesses, people will become rich all by themselves.  
If I do not have wishes, people will become pure all by themselves.

## LVIII

When the government is irresponsible and careless,  
    People are not pampered.  
When the government is efficient and responsive,  
    People are dissatisfied.

Misery is the path of prosperity,  
(And) prosperity is concealment of misery.  
    Who would be able to know their final outcome?  
    (However, as it appears) there cannot be anything normal  
    That does not (immediately) turn into deceitful,  
    And good that does not transform into ominous.  
That is how humanity has been disillusioned.

The sacred man is therefore stringent (has firm and clear principles), and  
Has wholeness, but does not bring harm (to others),  
He is correct, but not unscrupulous,  
Shines, but does not dazzle.

## LIX

When you manage people's business, there is no better  
Rule than being moderate;  
To be moderate means to be ready in advance;  
To be ready in advance means to be fortified;  
To be ready in advance and fortified means to be always victorious.  
To be always victorious means to have limitless capabilities.  
The one who possesses limitless capabilities is capable of governing the earth.  
And Mother (principle) of the land governed will last forever.  
That is to be well rooted and draw strength from the depths,  
The Way to deathlessness and incessant realization.

## LX

Govern the land as if you fry little fish.

Who governs the land in harmony with Tao,  
Will see how (evil) spirits lose their power.  
Not only do spirits lose their power,  
As much as they stop causing trouble to people.  
And not only do they stop causing trouble to people  
But the sacred man (himself) does not cause trouble to people.  
When they do not cause trouble to each other,  
The prime virtue is back.

## LXI

A large land (should be) like the low ranges of a delta,  
The point of gathering of the world.  
(And) the Female of the world.  
Female always outrivals Male by stillness  
And occupies the valley by placidness.

Hence, if a large land submits itself to a small land,  
It will absorb it;  
(And) if a small land submits itself to a big land,  
It will absorb the big land.  
Hence some place themselves low so as to absorb (others),  
Some already stand low and absorb (others).  
What else a large land wants than to protect others,  
And what else a small land wants other than to be included and protected.  
Hence (since) both can have what they want,  
The large land should occupy a low (humble) position.

## LXII

Tao is the mysterious secret of the universe,  
The treasury of a good man,  
And a refuge of a man who is not good.  
    Nice sayings can be sold even at the marketplace,  
    Polished behavior can be donated as a gift.

If there are bad people,  
Why rejecting them?  
Therefore, when a king is crowned,  
And the three ministers inaugurated with him,  
Instead of bestowing them with jaded ornaments or horses for festivities,  
Ornament them with Tao instead.  
    By what means did the ancients appreciate Tao?  
    Didn't they say – "Seek the culprits  
    And forgive them?"  
    Tao is thus the treasury of the world.

## LXIII

    Complete non-action,  
    Carry out non-jobs,  
    Taste the untastable.  
    Be it big or small, recurrent or not,  
Respond to hate with virtue.  
    Deal with heavy while it is still light.  
    Deal with big while it is still small.  
Hard (problems) of the world  
    Should be dealt with while they are still small.  
Therefore, the sacred man, never dealing with the big (problems)  
    Attains the great.  
Who gives a promise easily  
    Will often find it hard to fulfill it.  
Who accepts things easily  
    Will face many hardships.  
Even the sacred man therefore takes things as hard  
    And therefore never encounters hardness.

## LXIV

What lies still is sustained lightly.  
    What has not been manifested yet is easily foreseen;  
What is fragile (like ice) melts easily;  
    What is tiny shatters easily.  
Consider a thing before it arrives.

Harness disorder before it matures.

A tree with a broad crown grows from a sprout;

A nine-story terrace starts from a lump of soil.

A thousand li journey begins with a step.

Who acts, spoils;

Who catches, drops.

Because the sacred man does not act, he does not spoil either.

Because the sacred man does not catch, he does not drop either.

People spoil their endeavors when they are a foot away from their fulfillment.

If you are as careful at the end as at the beginning,

You will repel failure.

The sacred man therefore wishes not to have wishes,

And does not value objects that are hard to reach.

Teaches what has not been taught yet;

And returns what the multitude has lost.

To help Nature in its flow

And to not meddle.

LXV

The ancients who knew to follow Tao

Strived (so as) not to enlighten people,

But to keep them in ignorance.

It is hard for people to live in peace

Because of too much knowledge.

Those who tend to govern the land by means of knowledge

Are the curse of a nation.

Those who do not tend to govern the nation by means of knowledge

Are the blessing of the nation.

Those who know these two (principles)

Know the old measure too,

And always knowing the old measure

Is called the Mystical Virtue.

When the Mystical Virtue becomes clear, far-reaching,

The things too return backwards (to their source).

Then and only then the Great Harmony emerges.

LXVI

How did rivers and seas become the masters of valleys?

By setting themselves low.

That is how they have become the masters of valleys.

Hence, to be a protagonist among people,

A man has to speak like those who are nowhere close to him.

To be among the leaders,  
He has to always trail behind.  
In such a way, the sacred man stands behind them,  
But people do not feel his burden;  
He goes ahead of them,  
And people do not wish evil thereto.  
And people of the world are happy for having him and being able to keep him forever.  
Because he does not fight,  
No one in the world can fight against him.

## LXVII

The whole world says: my teaching (Tao) looks like craziness.  
Because it is great, it looks like crazy.  
Had it not looked like crazy,  
It would have become miniscule long time ago!

I have three treasures;  
Keep them and feed them:  
The first one is – Love.  
The second one is – Never in excess.  
The third is – Never be the first in the world.

When a man has love, he has no fear.  
When he does not work too much, he holds an immense grasp (of strength, of reserves);  
When he does not try to be the first in the world,  
He can develop his talents and let them ripen.

If a man does not retain love and fearlessness,  
Continenence and reserves of strength,  
Ceases to go behind and streams forward,  
He is doomed!

Because love is victorious in attack  
And harmless in defense.  
Heaven protects with love those  
Whom it does not want to see destroyed.

## LXVIII

A brave warrior is not an offender.  
A good soldier does not lose saneness;  
A great conqueror does not fight (for small things);  
Who uses people lucratively places himself behind.  
- That is called the Virtue of Not-Fighting,  
The ability to use people

In accordance with the very heaven,  
With the most sublime ancient wisdom.

### LXIX

Army strategists have this maxim:

Rather than attacking first, I prefer being attacked.

Rather than moving an inch forward, I prefer moving a foot backwards.

That means to march with no formation,

To not roll up the sleeves,

To not attack frontally,

To arm with no arms.

There is no more guaranteed debacle than underestimating the opponent.

Underestimation of the opponent can lead to a loss of treasure.

Hence, when two equal armies meet,

The man of sorrow is the one who wins.

### LXX

My teaching is very easy to understand and very easy to apply,

Yet no one understands it and no one applies it.

In my words there is a principle.

In human endeavors there is a system.

Because they do not know that,

They do not know about me either.

Because there is a small number of those who know me,

I am revered.

Therefore, the sacred man wears a hair garment,

And keeps jade in his chests.

### LXXI

The one who knows that one does not know is the greatest.

The one who (pretends that one) knows what one does not know is of ill spirit.

And the one who sees that spiritual illness as an illness is not of ill spirit.

The sacred man is never of ill spirit.

Because the sacred man sees a spiritual illness as an illness,

He is not of ill spirit.

### LXXII

When people have no fear of force,

Then a great force (usually) lands on them.

Do not despise their dwelling,

Do not hate their kin,

Because you do not hate it,

They won't hate you either.  
Hence, the sacred man knows himself, but does not show off,  
Loves himself, but does not raise himself.  
Therefore, he rejects the former (force) and accepts the latter (weakness).

### LXXIII

Who is brave in daring, you kill him.  
Who is brave in not-daring, you leave him alive.

From this

One thing is useful, the other is tragic.  
(Even if) Heaven loves someone less,  
Who would know (who needs to die) and why?  
Therefore, even the sacred man considers this question hard.  
The Heavenly Way (Tao) triumphs without battle,  
It rewards (vice and virtue) without words,  
It appears uninvited,  
It accomplishes (aims) without an obvious plan.  
The heavenly net is spacious, wide,  
And its holes are big, though still nothing escapes it.

### LXXIV

If people are not afraid of death,  
Why threatening them with death?  
And, if we say that they are afraid of death  
Even if we can catch and kill the felon,  
Who would dare to do that?  
Often the perpetrator is killed.  
But to take the role of perpetrator is  
Like when you try to carry out the task of a main woodcutter.  
Who attempts to carry out the task of a main woodcutter,  
Rarely ever does not cut his hands with the blade.

### LXXV

When people are hungry,  
They are hungry because those who govern them  
Eat a plenty of wheat collected through taxes.  
Therefore, the felony of people  
Is the consequence of the governors' interfering with the people's matters.  
People accept death lightly,  
Because they struggle to live.  
That is why they accept death lightly.  
Those who do not meddle (who act inwardly),

They wisely elevate life.

#### LXXVI

When man is born, he is soft and weak;  
When he dies, he is tough and rigid.  
When plants and trees are alive, they are soft and flexible;  
When they are not alive, they are fragile and dry.  
Hence – hardness and rigidity and the companions of death,  
Whereas softness and flexibility are the companions of life.

Hence – when armies become tough, they will lose the battle.  
When a tree grows up and toughens, it will attract an axe.  
What is big and strong belongs to the bottom.  
What is tender and weak belongs to the top.

#### LXXVII

Tao (the Way) Heavenly,  
Does not it look like stretching a bow?  
What is tall is bowed downwards,  
What is low is lifted up.  
What is in excess (of length) is diminished,  
What is lacking (in width) is enhanced.  
The Heavenly Tao (Way) takes away from those who have too much  
And gives to those who have too little.  
Not that the way of man is such.  
Man takes away from those who do not have  
And as a donation gives to those who have too much.  
Who can give out of his abundance to the whole world?  
Only the one who holds Tao.  
Hence – the sacred man acts, but does not claim the fruits as his own,  
Perfects without expecting recognition,  
With no desire to appear wise he is.

#### LXXVIII

Out of all worldly things  
There is nothing weaker than water,  
Yet nothing overcomes what is hard like it does.  
That weakness overcomes strength  
And tenderness overcomes rigidity,  
There is no one who does not know that;  
Yet no one adjusts one's behavior to this.

The sacred man therefore says:

“Who accepts calumnies of the world upon oneself  
Will save the state.  
Who accepts the sins of the world upon oneself  
Will become the king of the world.”

These truthful words appear paradoxical.

#### LXXIX

When we want to patch up some immense hate, some of the hate remains,  
Could this satisfy?  
Hence the sacred man withholds the left side of the tally,  
And does not assign guilt to the other side.  
The man who possesses virtue wishes reconciliation;  
A sinister man is for clause of guilt;  
However – “The Heavenly Way is unbiased;  
It is always only on the side of a good man”

#### LXXX

Let's say that there was a small country with a handful of citizens,  
And with such plenitude that it could never exhaust it.  
Let then people realize the seriousness of life and do not stray afar.  
Albeit there is a plenty of cars and boats,  
No one will be ridden;  
Albeit there is a plenty of weapons and armaments,  
No one will use them (except for the parade);  
Let people again tie the knotted cords for calculating,  
Let them enjoy in their food,  
And in the beauty of their clothing,  
And in the comfort of their homes,  
And in the lure of their customs.  
The (country's) neighbors will be able to see one another,  
They could hear dog barks and rooster crows from their neighbors,  
And the people won't leave their countries till the end of their lives.

#### LXXXI

The truthful words need not be well chosen words;  
Well chosen words need not be truthful words.  
A good man does not debate,  
The one who debates is not a good man.  
A wise man does not know many things,  
The one who knows many things is not wise.

The sacred man does not collect (for himself):  
He lives for other people,

And becomes ever wealthier;  
He gives to other people,  
And lives in an ever greater abundance.

The Heavenly Tao  
Blesses, but does not bring harm.  
The Way of the sacred man  
Improves, but without battle.