

Tao Te Ching

a modern interpretation of Lao Tzu
perpetrated by Ron Hogan
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FOREWORD

"Ancient Chinese Secret, Huh?"

In the spring of 1994, I was handed a master's degree in film studies and politely invited not to return to graduate school in the fall. So I went to work at Dutton's, a fantastic indie bookstore in Brentwood, less than a mile from the Simpson condo, but that's another story. Doug, the owner, lets his employees borrow books from the inventory, on the principle that you can sell books better if you know them better, and that's how I discovered the Tao Te Ching (or TTC, as I'll abbreviate it from now on).

Oh, I knew about the book beforehand. I knew it existed, anyway, and I knew it was a classic of Eastern philosophy. But that's all I knew. Not that there's that much to know after that, about all anybody can really say about Lao Tzu is that according to legend, about six centuries before Christ, he got fed up with the royal court's inability to take his advice and decided to leave. Then, the story goes, he was stopped at the Great Wall by a guard who begged him to write down some of his teachings for posterity, and the result was this slim volume. Once I actually started to read the thing, I was hooked. Here was a book that managed to say with clarity what I'd been struggling to figure out about spirituality for several years.

The TTC I found at Dutton's was written by Stephen Mitchell, a version which remains popular nearly twenty years after its original composition. Having read a couple dozen translations since, it's still one of the most accessible versions I've seen, but even then, I found his style a bit too refined, too full of a certain "wisdom of

the ancients" flavor. For example, here's how Mitchell starts the first chapter:

"The Tao that can be named
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name."

At the time, I was newly infatuated with the writing of Quentin Tarantino and David Mamet, so my dream version of a TTC reflected the simplicity and grit of their dialogue:

"If you can talk about it, it ain't Tao.
If it has a name, it's just another thing."

Anyway, I grabbed a couple other translations and started looking at the different ways they expressed the same sentiments--or, as I quickly discovered, how much poetic license Mitchell and other translators were willing to take with the original text. I don't think this necessarily matters all that much; many current English-language versions are by people who don't know Chinese well, if at all, and I can't read or speak it myself. To that extent, then, we're *all* (unless we're fluent in Chinese, that is) at the mercy of, at best, a secondhand understanding of what Lao Tzu said.

Once I thought I had a rough idea what was behind the words, though, I went about rephrasing the chapters in my own voice. My guiding principle was to take out as much of the "poetry" as possible, to make the text sound like dialogue, so the reader could imagine someone telling him or her what Tao's all about. You can't take the "poetry" out completely, because the TTC is always going to have those lines about Tao being an

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"eternal mystery" and whatnot.

But the beauty of the book isn't in its language, at least not for me--it's in the practical advice Lao Tzu offers us about how to live a productive, meaningful life on a day to day basis. What I wanted to do was to make that advice as clear to a modern American reader as it would have been to the guard who first asked Lao Tzu to write it down.

I worked through the first twenty chapters, then put the rough draft up on my website under a pseudonym I used online back in those days. A bunch of fan mail came in, so I kept plugging away at the text, then my hard drive collapsed and all my files were completely erased. I was freelancing pretty steadily then, and what little free time I had I spent building my own website, so the TTC went on hold. I got an occasional email asking about the other chapters, and I developed a stock answer. When it was time for me to finish the job, I told people, I would.

Years went by. I'd left LA for San Francisco, then moved up to Seattle, chasing after big dotcom money. It was great for a while, but as Lao Tzu says, "If you give things too much value, you're going to get ripped off." In the middle of the worst of the frustration, I rediscovered the Tao Te Ching, and realized I needed to finish what I started.

I dug out all my old copies of the TTC and went shopping for more versions, some of which were even better than the ones I'd found the first time. Brian Browne Walker's translation comes close to the modern oral quality I was striving for, though his voice is still much more of an "Eastern sage" voice than mine. David

Hinton is somewhat more poetic, but I think he does a wonderful job of capturing what Lao Tzu may have actually sounded like to his contemporaries. And Ursula K. LeGuin strikes a balance between the modern and classical voices that gave me a new perspective on Tao; her commentaries on several chapters are enlightening as well.

I wish I could say that I wrote the remaining sixty-one chapters in a hurried creative frenzy, but things took a little longer than I thought. I got distracted by the decision to move to New York City, and though I did get some work done on the book, it was a little over a year later, when (and, yes, I know how cliched this sounds) the planes crashed into the World Trade Center and I realized I'd still been wasting too much of my life on things that didn't pan out. Instead of talking about getting serious about my life, it was time to actually do it. (Living through the following two and a half years has also made me appreciate chapters 30 and 31 a lot more, for reasons that will become readily apparent.)

So here you are--with my own name attached, as the pseudonym has long since fallen away. From a scholar's point of view, this TTC is unfaithful to the original text on more than one occasion, if not in every single line. Case in point: in chapter 20, Lao Tzu didn't exactly say, "Don't spend too much time thinking about stupid shit." For all the liberties I've taken with his words, however, I've made every attempt to stay true to his message, and I hope you'll find something useful in my efforts.

--Ron Hogan
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PART ONE

TAO (THE WAY)

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1.

If you can talk about it,
it ain't Tao.
If it has a name,
it's just another thing.

Tao doesn't have a name.
Names are for ordinary things.

Stop wanting stuff;
it keeps you from seeing what's real.
When you want stuff,
all you see are things.

Those two sentences
mean the same thing.
Figure them out,
and you've got it made.

2.

If something looks beautiful to you,
something else must be ugly.
If something seems good,
something else must seem bad.

You can't have
something without nothing.
If no job is difficult,
then no job is easy.
Some things are up high
because other things are down low.
You know you're listening to music
because it doesn't sound like noise.
All that came first,
so this must be next.

The Masters get the job done
without moving a muscle
and get their point across
without saying a word.

When things around them fall apart,
they stay cool.
They don't own much,
but they use whatever's at hand.
They do the work
without expecting any favors.
When they're done,
they move on to the next job.
That's why their work is so damn good.

81.

The truth isn't flashy.
Flashy words aren't true.

Educated people
aren't always smart.
Smart people
don't always have an education.

Good people don't argue.
People who argue aren't good.

The Masters don't hang on to things.
They're always doing something
for other people,
so they always have more to give.
They give away
whatever they have,
so what they have is worth more.

If you want to get right with Tao,
help other people, don't hurt them.
The Masters always work with people,
never against them.

80.

Lao Tzu had a dream
about a small country
with very few people.

They didn't need machines
to get their work done faster.
They took their lives seriously,
and stayed close to home.

They may have owned
boats and carriages,
but they never went anywhere.
They may have owned weapons,
but they kept those weapons
locked up, securely hidden.
They had so few responsibilities,
they never had to make a To-Do list
to remember what had to be done.

They enjoyed simple foods,
dressed plainly,
lived comfortably,
and kept their traditions alive.

And even though
their neighbors were so close
they could hear
the dogs barking at night,
they had no interest
in leaving their homes,
where they grew old peacefully
and died.

3.

If you toss compliments around freely,
people will waste your time
trying to impress you.
If you give things too much value,
you're going to get ripped off.
If you try to please people,
you'll just make them pissed.

The Master leads
by clearing the crap
out of people's heads
and opening their hearts.
He lowers their aspirations
and makes them suck in their guts.

He shows you how to forget
what you know and what you want,
so nobody can push you around.
If you think you've got the answers,
he'll mess with your head.

Stop doing stuff all the time,
and watch what happens.

4.

How much Tao is there?
More than you'll ever need.
Use all you want,
there's plenty more
where that came from.

You can't see Tao, but it's there.
Damned if I know where it came from.
It's just always been around.

79.

Sometimes,
when an argument is settled,
feelings of resentment still remain
on either side.
What's the point of carrying a grudge?

The Masters care
about what they owe other people,
not what other people owe them.

People who are in touch with Tao
do their duty.
People who aren't
try to force others into submission.

Tao doesn't play favorites.
But if you do right by Tao,
Tao will do right by you.

78.

Nothing is softer
or more yielding
than water.
Yet, given time,
it can erode even the hardest stone.
That's how the weak
can defeat the strong,
and the supple
can win out over the stiff.

Everybody knows it.
So why don't we apply it to our own lives?

Lao Tzu used to say:
"Take on people's problems,
and you can be their leader.
Deal with the world's problems,
and you'll be a Master."

Sometimes the truth makes no sense.

5.

Tao's neutral:
it doesn't worry about good or evil.
The Masters are neutral:
they treat everyone the same.

Lao Tzu said Tao is like a bellows:
It's empty,
but it could help set the world on fire.
If you keep using Tao, it works better.
If you keep talking about it,
it won't make any sense.

Be cool.

6.

Tao is an eternal mystery,
and everything starts with Tao.

Everybody has Tao in them.
They just have to use it.

77.

Lao Tzu said using Tao
was like pulling on a bowstring:
The top bends down,
the bottom bends up,
and all the energy
is focused in the middle.

Tao takes energy from where it is,
and sends it where it needs to be.
But most people take from those
who don't have enough,
so those who have too much already
can have more.

So who in this world
is truly generous to others?
People who are in touch with Tao.
They do their work
without taking credit.
They get the job done and move on.
They aren't interested in showing off.

76.

A baby's body is soft and gentle.
A corpse is hard and stiff.
Plants and trees are tender
and full of sap.
Dead leaves are brittle and dry.

If you are rigid and unyielding,
you might as well be dead.
If you are soft and flexible,
you are truly alive.

Soldiers trained to fight to the death will die.
A tree that cannot bend with the wind
will snap.

Here's a useful saying:
The harder they come,
the harder they fall.

Here's another:
The meek shall inherit the earth.

7.

Tao never stops. Why?
Because it isn't trying to accomplish anything.

The Masters hang back.
That's why they're ahead of the game.

They don't hang on to things.
That's how they manage to keep them.

They don't worry
about what they can't control.
That's why they're always satisfied.

8.

"Doing the right thing" is like water.
It's good for all living things, and flows without thinking
about where it's going

...just like Tao.

Keep your feet on the ground.
Remember what's important.
Be there when people need you.
Say what you mean.
Be prepared for anything.
Do whatever you can,
whenever it needs doing.

If you don't
compare yourself to others,
nobody can compare to you.

75.

People starve
because the government
taxes them to death.
People rebel
because the government
tries to run their lives.
People act like life is meaningless
because the government
takes everything they have.

People who know how to enjoy life
are wiser than people who value their lives.

74.

If people's lives suck,
and they look forward to death,
what good does it do
to threaten to kill them?

If people are afraid to die,
and the wicked are condemned to death,
then who would dare to commit evil?

But that doesn't mean you or I
can just take life and death
into our own hands.
That'd be like walking up
to an industrial buzzsaw
and trying to use it
without any training.
We'd only end up hurting ourselves.

9.

If you drink too much, you get drunk.
The engine won't start
if you're always tinkering with it.

If you hoard wealth,
you fall into its clutches.
If you crave success,
you succumb to failure.

Do what you have to do,
then walk away.
Anything else will drive you nuts.

10.

Can you hold on to your ego
and still stay focused on Tao?

Can you relax your mind and body
and brace yourself for a new life?

Can you check yourself
and see past
what's in front of your eyes?

Can you be a leader
and not try to prove you're in charge?

Can you deal with what's happening
and let it happen?

Can you forget what you know
and understand what's real?

Start a job and see it through.
Have things
without holding on to them.
Do the job
without expectation of reward.
Lead people
without giving orders.
That's the way you do it.

73.

Those who dare to be bold die.
Those who dare to be careful survive.
So--what do you want to do?

Why is life like that, you ask?
I don't know.

This is how Tao works:
It doesn't push itself,
and it always succeeds.
It acts silently, and it always reacts.
It can't be summoned;
it comes whenever it's ready.
It can't be rushed; it's always on time.

"Heaven casts a wide net,
with big holes,"
Lao Tzu used to say,
"but nothing ever gets by it."

72.

When you show no fear at all,
the universe gives you something
to really be afraid of.

Don't try to fence people in
or grind them down.
Just let them be,
and they'll always be on your side.

The Masters know themselves,
but they don't reveal themselves.
They love themselves,
but they know
what their lives are worth.
They let go of all that
to concentrate on this.

11.

A wheel has spokes,
but it rotates around a hollow center.

A pot is made out of clay or glass,
but you keep things in the space inside.

A house is made of wood or brick,
but you live between the walls.

We work with something,
but we use nothing.

12.

Sight obscures.
Noise deafens.

Desire messes with your heart.
The world messes with your mind.

A Master watches the world
but keeps focused on what's real.

71.

If you know
what you don't know,
you're doing great.
If you don't know
what you don't know,
you're sick.

The only way
to get rid of that sickness
is to be sick of it.

The Masters aren't sick,
because they got sick of being sick.

70.

Lao Tzu's advice
was easy to understand
and easy to follow.
But nobody understood him
or did what he suggested.

His words
stemmed from ancient wisdom,
and his actions were highly disciplined.
People didn't get that,
which is why
they didn't understand him.
And the less they understood him,
the more meaningful his advice became.

That's why the Masters live simply,
hiding their wisdom deep within themselves.

13.

Winning can be just as bad as losing.
Confidence can mess you up
just as much as fear.

What does
"winning can be just as bad as losing" mean?

If you're down,
you might be able to get up.
But if you're up,
you can get knocked down real fast.
Don't worry about the score,
just do what you have to do.

What does
"confidence can mess you up
just as much as fear" mean?

Fear can keep you
from getting the job done,
but confidence
can get you in over your head.
Walk tall, but don't get cocky.

Know your limits,
and nothing can ever hold you back.
Deal with what you can.
The rest will follow.

14.

You can't see Tao,
no matter how hard you look.
You can't hear Tao,
no matter how hard you listen.
You can't hold on to Tao,
no matter how hard you grab.

But it's there.

It's in you, and it's all around you.

Remember that.

69.

There's an old military saying:
"I'd rather face an attack
than have to make one.
I'd rather retreat a foot
than try to advance an inch."

That's the secret to moving forward
while staying put,
preparing for battle
without revealing your strength.

When you defend yourself
without any show of force,
you give your opponent
nothing to fight.

Attacking an enemy
you've underestimated
is a costly mistake.
When two forces oppose each other,
the winner is the one most reluctant to fight.

68.

A true warrior never uses force
with an attitude of pride or anger.
A true victor
does not pursue vengeance.
A true leader shows humility.

This is the power of modesty.
It's the best way to deal with people.
It's always been an excellent way
to get right with Tao.

15.

The ancient Masters
were damn impressive.
They were deep. Real deep.
Words can't even begin to describe
how deep they were.
You can only talk
about how they acted.

They were careful,
like a man walking on thin ice.
They were cautious,
like a soldier behind enemy lines.
They were polite,
like a guest at a party.
They moved quickly, like melting ice.
They were as plain as a block of wood.
Their minds were as wide as a valley,
and their hearts as clear
as spring water.

Can you wait
for that kind of openness and clarity
before you try to understand the world?

Can you hold still
until events have unfolded
before you do the right thing?

When you act without expectations,
you can accomplish great things.

16.

Keep your head clear.
Stay calm.
Watch
as everything happens around you.

Everything reverts
to its original state,
which was nothing.
And when something becomes nothing,
it gets right with Tao.

If you don't understand that,
you're going to screw up
somewhere down the line.
If you figure it out,
you'll always know what to do.

If you get right with Tao,
you won't be afraid to die,
because you know you will.

If you want to get ahead,
show people compassion.
When other people attack you,
defend yourself with compassion.
It's the most powerful force in the universe.

67.

Everywhere I go, people tell me,
"Tao is so powerful, so immense,
it's inconceivable!"

But it's only powerful
because it's inconceivable.
If we could wrap our minds around it,
Tao would be just another thing.

The three most important qualities in life are
compassion, or showing kindness and mercy to others,
moderation, or knowing what a thing is worth, and
modesty, or knowing your place in the world.

Courage stems from showing
kindness and mercy to others.
Generosity starts with knowing
what a thing is worth.
True leadership begins with knowing
your place in the world.

But these days,
I see everyone trying to act courageous
without any trace of compassion.
They try to be generous
but they don't practice moderation
in their own lives.
They act like leaders,
but they have no sense of modesty.
No good can come of this.

17.

When a Master takes charge,
hardly anybody notices.
The next best leader
is obeyed out of love.
After that,
there's the leader obeyed out of fear.
The worst leader is one who is hated.

Trust and respect people.
That's how you earn
their trust and respect.

The Masters don't give orders;
they work with everybody else.
When the job's done,
people are amazed
at what they accomplished.

18.

When people lose touch with Tao,
they start talking about
"righteousness" and "sanctity."

When people forget what's true,
they start talking about
"self-evident truths."

When people have no respect
for one another,
they start talking about
"political correctness"
and "family values."

When the nation is unstable,
people start talking about "patriotism."

66.

An ocean is greater
than the hundred rivers
that flow into it,
and all it does is wait
to receive what they bring.

If you want to teach people,
don't talk down to them.
If you want to lead them,
find out where they want to go.

People love leaders
who make them feel safe
without smothering them.
They'll always support
a leader like that,
and because he doesn't try
to compete with anybody,
nobody is able to compete with him.

65.

In ancient times,
leaders who were right with Tao
didn't teach everybody
how to become enlightened.
They kept people's lives simple.

People who know too much
can't be taught anything.
Leaders who try to be clever
always screw things up.
Leaders who keep things simple
always make things right.

If you get that,
you'll understand
the mysterious power of Tao.

That kind of power is so deep,
so extensive,
it penetrates into every level of existence.

19.

Get rid of sanctity.
People will understand the truth
and be happier.

Get rid of morality.
People will respect each other
and do what's right.

Get rid of value and profit.
People will not steal
if they do not desire.

If that's not possible, go to Plan B:
Be simple. Be real.
Do your work as best you can.
Don't think about what you get for it.
Stay focused. Get rid of all your crap.

20.

Don't spend too much time
thinking about stupid shit.
Why should you care
if people agree or disagree with you?
Why should you care
if others find you attractive or not?
Why should you care
about things that worry others?
Call bullshit on all that.

Let other people
get worked up
and try to enjoy themselves.
I'm not going to give myself away.
A baby doesn't know how to smile,
but it's still happy.

Let other people
get excited about stuff.
I'm not going to hang on to anything.
I'm not going to fill my mind with ideas.
I'm not going to get stuck in a rut,
tied down to any one place.

Other people are clever;
I guess I must be stupid.
Other people have goals;
I guess I must be aimless.
Like the wind. Or the waves.

I'm not like other people.
I'm getting right with Tao.

The Masters try to be free from desire.
They don't collect precious things.
They don't cling to any beliefs.
They pay attention
to what everybody else ignores.
They help the world get right with Tao,
but don't try to change a thing.

64.

It's easy to maintain balance.
Trouble can be nipped in the bud.
Fragile things break easily,
and small things are easy to lose.

Deal with the situation
before it becomes a problem.
Keep everything straight
so it can't get messed up.

Every tree was once a seed.
Every skyscraper started out
with a shovelful of dirt.
And--stop me if you've heard this one before--
a journey of a thousand miles
begins with a single step.

When you try too hard,
you defeat your own purpose.
Cling to stuff,
and you will suffer loss.
The Masters make no effort,
so they never fail.
They aren't attached to things,
so they never feel loss.

People often screw up
when the job's nearly done.
Pay as much attention
to the finishing touches
as you do to the initial steps,
and you won't screw up like that.

21.

A Master stays focused on Tao.
Nothing else, just Tao.

But you can't pin Tao down--
you can't even see it!
How are you supposed to focus on something like that?

Just remember what Lao Tzu said:
The universe began as a void.
The void fills with images.
Images lead to the creation of objects.
And every object has Tao at its core.

That's the way it's been,
ever since the world began.
How can I be so sure?
I just know.

22.

Learn how to stand still
if you want to go places.
Get on your knees
if you want to stand tall.
If you want wisdom,
empty your mind.
If you want the world,
renounce your riches.
Push yourself until you're exhausted,
and then you'll find your strength.

You can go far
if you don't have anything to carry.
The more you acquire,
the less you can really see.

A Master takes this to heart
and sets an example
for everybody else.

She doesn't show off
so people take notice.
She's not out to prove anything
so people take her at her word.
She doesn't brag about herself
but people know what she's done.
She hasn't got an agenda
but people know what she can do.
She's not out to get anybody
so nobody can get in her way.

63.

Keep still.
Don't work so hard.
Learn to appreciate everyday life.
Pay attention to details.
Start small and work your way up.
When people give you trouble,
let it slide.

Break everything down to its essentials.
Get the job done
before it becomes a chore.

With the right preparation,
difficult tasks
can be completed with ease;
every major project
consists of simple steps.

The Masters don't take on
more than they can handle,
which is why
they can do just about anything.

Don't promise
more than you can deliver,
and don't underestimate the task:
You'll only make things harder for yourself.

The Masters are always aware
of the difficulties involved,
which is why
they never have to deal with them.

62.

Every living thing
gets its strength from Tao.
Good people respect the value of Tao.
The wicked and foolish don't,
but Tao provides for them anyway.

Some people gain power and prestige
through fancy words,
others through great deeds.
But Tao is available to everyone,
not just the powerful.
So don't look down on anybody.

When people become powerful,
and everybody lines up
to kiss their ass,
sit still and stay right with Tao.

Why have the Masters
always respected Tao?
Because when you get right with Tao,
you can always find
what you need to get by,
and trouble can never find you.

"Learn how to stand still
if you want to go places."
That's not as crazy as it sounds.
Get in touch with Tao,
and you'll see what I mean.

23.

When you have nothing to say,
you may as well keep your mouth shut.
The wind and the rain
don't go on forever.
If nature knows enough
to give it a rest sometimes,
so should you.

If you're ready for Tao,
you can live with Tao.
If you're ready to succeed,
you can live with success.
If you're ready to fail,
you can live with failure.

Trust your instincts,
and others will trust you.

61.

Power flows down
to every level of existence
like a river to the ocean.

Victory comes
from lying perfectly still
and waiting for power
to come your way.

If you yield to someone
less powerful than yourself,
you will be in a position
to influence them.

If you submit to someone
more powerful than yourself,
you create an opportunity
to get your own way.

So if you want to get ahead,
lay low and bide your time.
That way, everybody's happy.

60.

Being a leader
is like cooking a small fish;
get right with Tao,
and it's quick and easy.

When you're in touch with Tao,
you don't need to worry
about misfortune.
You can't make it go away, of course,
but you can keep it
from harming other people.

Also, as a wise leader,
you cause no harm to others,
so people won't have to worry
about getting hurt,
and they'll take the opportunity
to do the right thing.

24.

Keep your feet firmly planted
unless you want to fall on your face.
Learn how to pace yourself
if you want to get anywhere.
Don't call attention to yourself
if you want people to notice your work.

Nobody respects people
who always have excuses.
Nobody gives credit to people
who always take it.
People who hype themselves
have nothing else to offer.

Think of being in touch with Tao
like eating at a buffet:
Take only what you need.
Save some for everybody else.

25.

Something perfect
has existed forever,
even longer than the universe.
It's a vast, unchanging void.
There's nothing else like it.
It goes on forever and never stops,
and everything else came from it.

I don't know what else to call it
so I'll call it Tao.
What's it like?
I can tell you this much: it's great.

So great that it endures.
Something that endures
goes a long way.
And something that goes a long way
always comes back to the beginning.

Tao's great.
Heaven's great.
Earth's great.
And someone in touch with Tao
is great, too.
Those are the four greatest things
in the universe.

Someone who's in touch with Tao
is in touch with the earth.
The earth is in touch with heaven.
Heaven's in touch with Tao.
Tao's in touch with the way things are.

59.

Leadership is based on moderation.
Practice moderation,
and you'll get in touch
with the power of Tao.

If you get right with Tao,
nothing is impossible.
If you get right with Tao,
there's no limit to what you can do.
If you get right with Tao,
you can be a true leader.

Remember this advice
if you want to be a leader:
Plant deep roots in firm soil.
Get right with Tao,
and you'll always see things clearly.

58.

When a nation is ruled
with a light touch,
people lead simple lives.
When a government
is harsh and demanding,
people will spend their time
trying to outsmart it.

Happiness is rooted in misery,
and misery lurks beneath all joy.
Who knows what could happen tomorrow?

Everything is relative;
what's considered proper today
may become improper.
Correct appearances
may hide dishonesty and sinfulness.

No wonder so many people get confused.

The Masters have sharp minds,
not sharp tongues.
They are austere,
but never judgmental.
They are straightforward,
but not provocative.
They are brilliant,
but not flashy.

26.

To be light on your feet,
you need a steady mind.
If your body is active,
your mind should be relaxed.

A Master can travel long distances
and still see everything she owns.
She may be surrounded by beauty
but she isn't caught up in it.

Why run around thoughtlessly?
If you act lightly,
you lose your bearings.
If you act recklessly,
you lose your self-control.

27.

With enough practice,
you could come and go without a trace,
speak without stumbling over words,
do complicated math problems
in your head.

You could build a door with no lock
that nobody could open.
You could tie something down
with no knots,
without even a rope,
and nobody could pry it loose.

Masters have time to help everybody,
and ignore nobody.
They use their resources wisely,
wasting nothing.
Some people call this
"following the light."

Good people teach others
because they have the potential
to be good too.
Brains count for nothing
if you fail to respect your teachers
or to honor the potential in others.
That's one of the most important lessons of Tao.

57.

You can run a country
by sticking to principles,
and you can win a war
with strategy and tactics.
But you can gain the entire world
by doing nothing at all.

How do I know this?
I've seen it happen:
The more restrictions
a nation imposes,
the poorer its people become.
When a nation hoards weapons,
troubles arise from within
and from without.
When its leaders try
to be cunning and clever,
the situation spins
further out of control.
When they try to fix things
by passing more laws,
they only increase the number of outlaws.

A wise leader says to himself:
"I do nothing,
and people transform themselves.
I keep silent,
and they do the right thing
on their own.
I stay out of the way,
and they prosper.
I want for nothing,
and they lead simple lives."

56.

Those who know, don't talk.
Those who talk, don't know.

Shut your mouth.
Be still. Relax.
Let go of your worries.
Stay out of the spotlight.
Be at one with the world
and get right with Tao.

If you get right with Tao,
you won't be worried
about praise or scorn,
about winning or losing,
about honor or disgrace.
That's the way to be.

28.

If you are strong,
but remain sensitive,
power will flow through you.
With that power,
you'll always be right with Tao:
It's like a whole new life.

If you are idealistic,
but stay rooted in reality,
you are an example to others.
Set that example,
and you'll always be right with Tao:
There is no limit to what you can do.

If you are honorable,
but remain humble,
you will see things as they are.
If you see things as they are,
you'll always be right with Tao:
Your life will become simple,
yet full of potential.

Let Tao show you
how to get right with Tao,
so your slightest gesture
can change the world.

29.

Want to take over the world?
Think again.
The world's a holy place.
You can't just fuck around with it.
Those who try to change it destroy it.
Those who try to possess it lose it.

With Tao, you push forward,
or maybe you stay behind.
Sometimes you push yourself,
other times you rest.
Sometimes you're strong,
sometimes you're weak.
Sometimes you're up,
and sometimes you're down.

A Master lives simply,
avoiding extravagance and excess.

55.

A person filled with the power of Tao
is like a baby boy:
bees can't sting him,
wild beasts can't attack him.

A baby has soft bones
and weak muscles,
but a firm grip.
He hasn't had sex,
but he can get an erection.
That's because he's got lots of energy.
He can cry all day
and never lose his voice.
That's because he's at one with his world.

If you're at one with the world,
you know constancy.
And if you know constancy,
you've been enlightened.

It's not healthy
to try to prolong your life.
It's unnatural to impose the mind's will
upon the body.
People waste time and energy
trying to be strong or beautiful,
and their strength and beauty fade.
They've lost touch with Tao,
and when you lose touch with Tao,
you might as well be dead.

54.

Tao's power is so deeply entrenched
it can never be uprooted.
Tao's power clings so tightly
it can never slip away.
It will endure for generations.

If you get in touch
with the power of Tao,
it will become real.
If your family gets in touch
with the power of Tao,
the power will flourish.

If your community gets in touch
with the power of Tao,
the power will grow even stronger.
If your country gets in touch
with the power of Tao,
the power will become abundant.

If the world gets in touch
with the power of Tao,
the power will be everywhere.

How can I know this?
I just do.

30.

Listen up:
If you want to be a leader
who's in touch with Tao,
never use violence
to achieve your goals.

Every act of violence backfires.
An army on the move
leaves a trail of tears,
and a military victory
always lies in ruins.

The Masters do what needs doing
and that's all they do.
Do what you have to do
without arrogance or pride.
Get the job done
and don't brag about it afterwards.
Do what you have to do,
not for your own benefit,
but because it needs to be done.
And don't do it the way
you think it should be done,
do it the way it needs to be done.

The mighty will always lose their power
and any connection
they ever had to Tao.
They will not last long;
if you're not right with Tao,
you might as well be dead.

31.

Weapons are terrible things.
If you want to get right with Tao,
reject weapons.

The Master,
knowing all things came from Tao,
recognizes what he has in common
with his enemies
and always tries to avoid conflict.

But when there is no other choice,
he uses force reluctantly.
He does so with great restraint,
and never celebrates a victory;
to do so would be to rejoice in killing.
A person who would rejoice in killing
has completely lost touch with Tao.

When you win a war,
you preside over a funeral.
Pay your respects to the dead.

53.

If I had any sense,
I'd be trying to get right with Tao,
and the only thing I'd worry about
would be messing up.
It's not that hard to get right with Tao,
but people are easily distracted.

"When the king's palace is full of treasure,"
Lao Tzu said,
"ordinary people's fields
are smothered with weeds,
and the food supplies run out."

Today, you see sharply dressed people
carrying flashy weapons
and living the high life.

They own more
than they could ever use,
let alone need.

They're nothing
but gangsters and crooks.
That's not what Tao's about.

52.

Everything starts with Tao,
the mother of all things.
If you know the mother,
you know the children.
If you know the children
and remember the mother,
you have nothing to fear in your life.

Shut your mouth and keep still,
and your life will be full of happiness.
If you talk all the time,
always doing something,
your life will be hopeless.

It takes insight to see subtlety.
It takes strength
to yield gently to force.
Use that strength
to hang on to your insight,
and you will always be at peace.
That's how to get right with Tao.

32.

Tao is an eternal mystery,
so small you can never take hold of it.

If a leader gets right with Tao,
people will follow him on instinct.
All will be right with the world.
People will do the right thing
without being told.

Everything that comes from Tao
needs a name.
But once everything has its name,
you should make no other distinction between things.
This prevents you
from becoming trapped by them.

Everything in the universe is full of Tao
and leads to Tao,
just like the water in rivers
that flows into oceans.

33.

Knowing things makes you smart,
but knowing yourself makes you wise.
To rule others, you must be powerful,
but to rule yourself,
you must be strong.

If you have only what you need,
you have true wealth.
If you never give up,
you will find a way.
If you stay true to yourself,
you will never be lost.
If you stay alive your whole life,
you've really lived.

51.

Tao is the source of all living things,
and they are nourished
by Tao's power.
They are influenced
by the other living things around them,
and they are shaped
by their circumstances.

Everything respects Tao
and honors its power.
That's just the way it is.

Tao gives life to all things,
and its power watches out for them,
cares for them, helps them grow,
protects them, and comforts them.

Create something
without holding on to it.
Do the work
without expecting credit for it.
Lead people
without giving them orders.
That's the secret of the power of Tao.

50.

People who look
for the secret of long life
wind up dead.

Their bodies are the focus of their lives
and the source of their death,
because they think a healthy body
is all there is to life.

Lao Tzu used to say
a man who truly understood life
could walk through the jungle
without fear
or across a battlefield
without armor, totally unarmed.
Wild animals and weapons couldn't kill him.

I know, I know:
what the hell does that mean?
"Well, he couldn't be killed,"
Lao Tzu said,
"because his body
wasn't where he kept his death."

34.

Tao flows in all directions.
It's in everything,
but nothing can contain it.
Everything needs Tao,
so Tao provides,
and never expects anything in return.

Everything comes from Tao,
but Tao doesn't call attention to itself.
It wants for nothing.
Think nothing of it.

Everything leads to Tao,
but Tao doesn't call attention to itself.
Pretty impressive, huh?

It doesn't strive for success.
That's why it succeeds.

35.

When you get right with Tao,
everybody wants to be your friend.
When they're around you,
they can relax and enjoy themselves.

People can be easily distracted
by music or good food.
When we try to talk about Tao,
it seems boring by comparison.

It doesn't look like much.
It doesn't sound like much.
But no matter how much you use,
there's still plenty left.

49.

The Masters
don't make up their minds.
They turn their thoughts
to other people.

They are good to good people,
and they're good to bad people.
This is real goodness.

They have faith in the faithful,
and they have faith in the unfaithful.
This is real faith.

A Master throws himself
into the world completely,
forgetting everything he's been told.
People pay attention to him
because he lives a life of child-like wonder.

48.

Usually,
we try to learn something new every day.

But if we want to get right with Tao,
we have to let go of something every day.

We do less and less,
until we end up doing nothing.
And it's when we do nothing
that we get the job done.

Let events take their course,
and everything will turn out
in your favor.
If you act on your ambitions,
they will never pan out.

36.

To make something smaller,
you need to appreciate its size.
To make something weaker,
you must recognize its strength.
To get rid of something,
you need to hold it tight.
To take something,
you must give it up entirely.

To put it another way:
Sensitivity and weakness
overcome unfeeling strength.

37.

Tao never does anything
but nothing is left undone.

If our leaders
could get in touch with Tao,
the world would take care of itself.
Even if they wanted
to impose their own ideas,
they'd be drawn back to Tao's
nameless simplicity.

When our lives are that simple,
we want for nothing.
We can relax,
and the world becomes a better place.

47.

You don't have to leave your room
to understand what's happening in the world.

You don't have to look out the window
to appreciate the beauty of heaven.

The farther you wander,
the less you know.

The Masters don't wander around
They know.
They don't just look.
They understand.
They don't do anything,
but the work gets done.

46.

"When the world is right with Tao,"
Lao Tzu said,
"horses haul fertilizer to the fields.
When the world loses touch with Tao,
horses are trained for cavalry."

Nothing is more insidious than possession.
Nothing is more dangerous than desire.
Nothing is more disastrous than greed.

If you know when enough is enough,
you will always have enough.

PART TWO
TE (POWER)

45.

The greatest achievements
may look like mistakes,
but you will always be able
to build upon them.

The fullest reserves may seem empty,
but you will always be able
to draw upon them.

The straightest line looks crooked.
The most skilled people
come off as clumsy.
The most eloquent people
are usually silent.

When it's cold,
you can move around to stay warm.
When it's hot,
you should keep still and stay cool.
But whatever the weather,
if you stay calm,
the world will sort itself out around you.

44.

What's more important,
fame or your well-being?
What's worth more,
your money or your life?
What is more dangerous,
winning or losing?

If you are too attached
to your possessions,
they will bring you misery.
If you hang on to your riches,
you will suffer substantial loss.
If you know when you have enough,
you will never be disgraced.
If you practice moderation,
you can stay out of trouble.

And that's the secret to lasting success.

38.

People with integrity
don't even think about it.
That's how you can tell
they have integrity.
Other people talk about
how much integrity they have,
when they really don't have much.
If any.

Truly powerful people
don't do anything,
but they get the job done.
Other people are always busy
doing something,
but nothing ever gets done.

When kind people act,
they do so without thinking about it.
When the just act,
they're always sure
they're doing the right thing.
But when the righteous act,
and nobody reacts,
they try to force everyone
to do things their way.

If you're not in touch with Tao,
at least you can still have integrity.
If you don't have integrity,
there's always kindness.
If you don't have kindness,
there's always justice.
If you don't have justice,
all you have left is righteousness.

Righteousness is an pale imitation
of true faith and loyalty,
and always leads to trouble.
If you've already made up your mind,
you don't know the first thing about Tao,
and you never will.

The Masters pay attention
to what's beneath the surface.
They'll look at a tree's leaves,
but eat the fruit.
They turn all that down,
so they can accept this.

43.

The softest force in the universe
can overcome the hardest of objects.
Something without substance
can pass through the space between atoms.

That's how I know
about the power of doing nothing.

The silent teachings
and the power of doing nothing
can only be understood
by a few people.

42.

Chapter 42 starts out
with some cosmic mumbo-jumbo
about Tao making one,
one making two,
two making three,
and three making everything else.

I don't know what it means,
and, frankly,
I wouldn't worry about it too much.

Let's get to the practical part:
Men hate to be called powerless, insignificant, or
unworthy,
but that's how
Masters describe themselves.

Because when we lose, we've won.
And when we succeed, we've failed.

Other people will tell you
what I'm telling you now:
"Live by the sword, die by the sword."
That's pretty much what Chapter 42
boils down to.
(See Chapter 46 for more details.)

39.

Since time began,
this is what it's meant
to be in touch with Tao:

Tao made the heavens clear.
Tao made the earth solid.
Tao made our spirits strong.
Tao made the valleys fertile.
Tao gave all living things life.
Tao gave rulers authority.

Without Tao,
the heavens would collapse.
Without Tao,
the earth would crumble.
Without Tao,
our spirits would fade away.
Without Tao,
the valleys would dry up.
Without Tao,
all life would become extinct.
Without Tao,
rulers would stumble and fall.

Humility gives us power.
Our leaders should think of themselves
as insignificant, powerless,
unworthy of their stature.
Isn't that what humility is all about?

Be strong,
but pay no attention to hollow praise.
Don't call attention to yourself.
Don't make a scene.

40.

Tao is always heading
back to where it came from.
Tao advances by not pressing forward.

Things exist because they are.
They are because they once were not.

41.

When a wise person hears about Tao,
he gets right with it.
When an ordinary person
hears about Tao,
he tries to get right with it,
but eventually gives up.
When a fool hears about Tao,
he just laughs and laughs.
If he didn't laugh, it wouldn't be Tao.

Here's what they find so funny:
The path to enlightenment
seems covered in shadows.
The way forward
feels like taking a step back.
The easiest path seems difficult.
Those with the most virtue
seem debased.
Those who are most pure
seem to be grubby and soiled.
The deepest thoughts appear shallow.
The greatest strength
looks like weakness.
What is most real
strikes us as imaginary.
The largest space has no boundaries.
The greatest talent
seems to produce nothing.
The greatest voice is unhearable.
The greatest beauty is invisible.

Tao is hidden to us
and it has no name.
It is the source and the strength of all things.