

THE WRITINGS OF LAO TZU

The Tao which can be Told

In Nine Volumes

I The Tao which can be Told
Is Not the Constant Tao

Along with a New Commentary

In the Chinese tradition

Richard Bertschinger

2010



‘A book of rare scholarship and learning. Richard Bertschinger has created a traditional-style commentary to the old Chinese classic, the Tao-te Ching, based upon the original sources, with pictures and art works to illustrate the text...’

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Introduction

At around the time of the unification of China, over two-thousand years ago, a small text appeared. Revised and authorised by the later Han (c. 200 AD), during China's imperial expansion, it became the text of the Taoists, a motley crew – who could only have been born in China.

Taoism, which is the religion of the Tao, or Path, is the third of China's great religions after Buddhism and Confucianism – and it concerns how to live in harmony with nature, both within ourselves and the outside world, which the Chinese, rather decorously, call the place of 'the ten-thousand things'.

The 'middle Kingdom' of China is one of the world's eldest civilizations. Detailed records stretch back into the second millennium BC - and while the Egyptian, Sumerian and Indus cultures are of equal antiquity, it is only China which preserved a continuous, unbroken and responsive line. Locked in by the Himalayan massif, by northern deserts and southern jungles, it became a cauldron for the ferment of a very particular mind of human thought. At its center it adhered to a Neolithic model of respect for natural rhythms and ancestor worship, an agrarian model - planting by the seasons, the cycles of the sun and moon,

the primacy of the female and an outdoor intimacy with the natural world.

The *Tao-te Ching*, as it is preserved, exists in some eighty-one chapters (eighty-one is nine times nine, nine was the Heavenly number) and is divided into two halves – the first concerned with the Tao, the Way or Path, the second describing the Te, its virtue or power. Taoism points to something more than words - and this small book provides a key to a subtlety of thought, a gentleness of touch distinctly Chinese.

It is a work of inward cultivation, a spiritual tract giving instruction in breath-control and meditation, as well as a treatise on government. Later neo-Taoist ramifications spun a transcendental model which even reached Leibniz and Kant in the west, through Latin translation. Yet it also explains how to be a good ruler over the people, how to make a secure government and avoid war.

Tradition states that Lao Tzu (literally 'the old fellow') wrote the book in a single night, as he was passing out of China to the West. Disgusted at the extravagances of his world he travelled to a border-post in the mountains and there met the Gate-Keeper to the pass. It was this humble official who convinced him to record his wisdoms as he

passed through. We have to thank him for this work.

The story is no doubt fanciful. But it communicates exactly the right tone. 'The Tao which I can tell is not constant (one / *the body of the Tao*) for there is little the



Taoist feels he can communicate. Self-discipline and self-discovery are close to his heart. He embraces a quietism which believes in the

action of *wu-wei* (non-action). In other words that striving for political or societal change must be less effective than an inner radiance of the spirit. 'Cultivate virtue in yourself and it will be real, cultivate it in the family and it will abound, in the neighbourhood and it will endure, in the nation and it will be abundant, in the world and it will be everywhere (fifty-four / *cultivating vision*)'. And yet strangely this radiance is cultivated within silence and darkness, the Yang emerges from within the Yin – 'a darkness within a darkness, the gate to all that is

mysterious'. In a sense our self-nature is eminently reachable, yet unfathomable.

I commend this approach to the reader. Take time to dip into the text and savour it. Practice your qigong. In a troubled world, an ounce of good thought is worth a barrow-load of action.

Well then, what is the Tao? And what are Yin and Yang? Answer: On one side of the divide lie the Mother, the root, the Tao, no name, no form, not-having and *wu-wei*; while on the other side stand her children, Yin and Yang, the branches, the ten-thousand things, name, form, possession and action. But ultimately there are no sides or distinctions. There is only the One. In fact, whenever you separate, whenever you consider self and world, self and other, the idea of achievement is born and achievement means significant action, so you have lost!

Richard Bertschinger Montacute 2010

The Tao Which Can be Told

Part One / Tao and Way

*“...so then, teach me...to cast off
passion and eliminate desire...”*

one / the body of the Tao

THE TAO WHICH CAN BE TOLD
Is not the constant Tao,
The name which can be named
Is not the constant name.

Nameless is the beginning of Heaven and earth,
Named is the Mother to the ten thousand things.

Ever without desire, we gaze into the mysteries,
Ever desiring, we gaze at the manifestations.

These two came from the same source
But appear having different names.
Having the same source implies darkness.
Darkness within darkness,
The gate to all mysteries.

The Tao commonly spoken about is not the constant
Tao. On the contrary, the constant Tao uses *wu-wei*
(non-action) to nurture its spirit and bring about peace. It

extinguishes its light, conceals its splendour and hides any trace of its whereabouts - not even referring to itself as the Tao.

These are the words of Ho-shang Kung, the 'old fellow who lived by the river', a popular sobriquet for the first commentator on the *Tao-te Ching*. He believed in Taoist self-cultivation and set himself apart from the world. His work on the *Tao-te Ching* along with that of Wang Pi, most seminal of the late Han philosophers, formed the basis for this commentary.

Similarly the name which accompanies recognition, riches and high estate does not constitute the constant name, just as the Tao which is commonly spoken about is not the constant Tao. The constant name is our own, a name kept to ourselves. As we embrace our true nature we become as a little child not yet able to open its mouth and talk, like a chicken's egg before being cracked open, a pearl within the oyster or jewel in the rock.

The Tao which can be told and the name which can be named are *a construct of forms within this world*, but never its eternal aspect. It is *the nameless* which provides energy for the beginning of things. It is this energy which spits forth, gathering as a breath, scattering to all four

corners, as it constructs forms which emerge out of emptiness. This is the basis of everything that has a body, all that creeps, flies, wriggles or moves in Heaven and earth. This is also the root of *the constant*.

As *the nameless* gains a name for itself, it provides for the Mothering principle behind all things. Then they grow in number and spread, reaching maturity and then ripening of themselves.

This is to summarise the thought of Wang Pi. His ideas are cloaked in Buddhist terminology – where emptiness represents forms and forms represent emptiness. From now on I will not distinguish the thoughts of these two authors but blend them together into a single commentary on Lao Tzu's book.

It is fundamental to Taoist philosophy that all being, all material existence finds its beginning and reason for existing, in non-being or emptiness (forty / *the function of detachment*). Put simply, it is a wonder we are here! This is the beginning of a perception of the Tao. 'How deep it is! The ancestor of all things' (four / *it has no source*). Yet the moment any thing or person gains a name or identity, it is *the Mother* who "extends our life and rears ours, brings us to completion and maturity" (fifty-one / *the*

nourishment of virtue). We simply do not understand how or why this process happens. It is an unknown, a darkness – *darkness within darkness*.



This is the mystery which stands at the heart of the Way. If you can rest in this stillness and quiet, without knowing - *without desire* - you will gaze into the very heart of the mystery. Within this mystery lies ultimate stillness. And therein also lies the One.

Confronted by bodily desire, we gaze at once at the manifestations – which ultimately return us back into the cosmos and throng of the world.

Here is the mystery of the body, and our incarnation. It must be true that ‘ever without desire’ and ‘ever desiring’ have a similar source. They have a common origin; they only appear as having different names.

Ho-shang Kung would teach us to to cast off passion and eliminate desire but both 'ever desiring' and 'without desire' describes the human condition. In this chapter each is spoken of differently. *Without desire* we gaze into the mystery and are provided for; for generations beyond time. *Ever desiring* we gaze at the manifestations - all life is created and we celebrate body and soul.

We are in the world and yet not in the world. These two still have a common source. Body and spirit are not two, yet not one either. This paradox demands the teachings of a guide and master. It begins and ends in darkness, in quiet knowing. It has its whole existence in devotion, in self-effacement, in silent non-being, the source and Mother of the world. Even to call it 'dark' is a mistake, as this gives it both name and identity. Therefore it is called 'darkness within darkness'. It is *the gate to all mysteries*.

two / the cultivation of the inner self

UNDER HEAVEN, ALL KNOW THE LOVELY AS
LOVELY,

But it is actually the same as the ugly;
The whole world know the good to be good,
But it is actually the same as the not good.

Therefore having and not having generate each other,
Difficult and easy complement each other,
Long and short fit into each other,
Above and below are inversions of each other.
Tone and voice blend with each other,
Forward and behind follow one another.

Thus the sage manages his affairs through non-action,
He practices teaching without speaking.

All the myriad creatures are brought into being
Without creating any confusion,
He brings them to birth without possessing them,
He regards them without claiming them for his own,
He completes his achievement, but then forgets it.
Only because he forgets it is he never away from it.

The cultivation and nourishment of *the inner self*, and an accurate understanding of the workings of desire depends upon an perception of how objects of thought are brought into this world. This chapter explains the origin of dichotomies. We all think on the lovely and beautiful– but they are not lovely or beautiful at all. They are more to be hated because the categorisation of *lovely* provides the chance for *the ugly*. Likewise identifying the good as *good* is creating conditions for the *not good* and allowing people to argue over what is actually good.

Because of this the Taoist teacher or sage manages his affairs through *wu-wei* and teaches by example, without explaining all he does.



Being and non-being, *having* and *not-having* generate each other. You cannot have one without the other. Qualities and quantities are relative. The *difficult and easy* complement each other, *long and short* fit into one another, *above and below* are inversions

of each other, *tone and voice* blend into one another, *forward and behind* follow one another and all distinctions arise and blend into one seen from the point of view of the Tao.

The myriad creatures in this world are brought into being, born and developed of their own accord. *The sage* never interferes or possesses them. He never claims their virtues as his own, nor seeks any recompense for his action. Once work is done, it is forgotten. He never dwells on any achievement and so can be properly committed to it.

If we dwell in *wu-wei* and think on the natural pattern of Yin and Yang and the dual aspect of things, then blessings and virtue are eternally ours. All practices which cultivate the self are dependent upon this detachment when looking at the world.

NB. The first chapter explained the Tao; the second chapter introduces the theme of Yin and Yang. Everything in the universe involves their two aspects; Yin and Yang are both complementary and antagonistic. Having and not-having, difficult and easy, long and short, above and below, forward and after. All follow the natural law acting in things.

three / *bringing the people peace*

DO NOT HONOUR THE WISE
And the people will not dispute.

Do not value objects that are hard to get

And the people will not thief them.

Do not look on desirable things,

And the heart will not be thrown into disarray.

Therefore the sages governed

By emptying the people's minds

And filling their bellies.

They weakened their ambitions

And strengthened their bones.

Always keep the people unknowing and content,

And the clever ones will not dare to react.

Act through non-action

And the people are always at peace.

Those whom the world calls 'wise' are but glib
orators and brilliant writers, who abandon the Great
Tao to work at their constructs. There is no substance to

them and they work superficially. Do not value or honour them with recognition, a post or position. Then the people will not dispute over merit or rank, but return to their natural ways.



You should not show a fondness for *objects that are hard to get*. Do not persist with fripperies, rowdy songs or loud experiments (twelve / *the limiting of desire*). Then the mind is not turned awry and you avoid bewilderment.

The sages always governed by 'emptying minds and filling bellies'. They taught others to yield and be peaceful. Their bodies remained healthy and their lusts restrained – so there were no false desires or

over-cleverness.

Only the capable are to be employed. Ability is enough for any task. What is the value of anything else, like wisdom?

If you value the wise, you give them a distinction above others and above their ability. They will always be competing, the one against the other. Similarly when

objects are regarded beyond their usefulness, the greedy fight for them. They will squirm through windows and ransack houses in order to steal, at risk to their own lives! If you do not look on desirable things, your heart will not be in disarray

The sages governed the state and themselves in similar fashions. By *emptying minds* they cherished the Great Way and embraced the One and by *filling bellies* they guarded the core of the self.

As they weakened ambitions, they strengthened bones. They kept the people unknowing and content. Those with clever ideas did not dare act. Thoughts anyway should be kept to ourselves; we should not express them lightly. Through acting in *wu-wei*, the people are kept at peace.

NB. In the third chapter of the book the art of the government of the sage is broached and his contempt for the world. The Taoist is much more the recluse who warns against over-cleverness. He despises the show of the hair-splitting scholar. He praises the craftsman and craftswoman. After all, is not ability enough for the world?

four / it has no source

THE TAO IS AN EMPTY VESSEL,
It may be used but never filled.
How deep it is!
The ancestor of all the myriad things.

“Grind down where you are sharp,
Slacken off where you are tight,
Shade off where you are bright.
Blend with the dust of the world”.

Unfathomable, yet there constantly.
I do not know whose child it is.
It resembles the forefather to the Emperors!

The Tao is self-rooting and self-originating. It has no source, no beginning and no end. In the care of the inner self we should act similarly and model ourselves on the Tao, quiet and detached, without ever being filled. Then we never wear out.

Being empty and still, the Tao infuses all things, yet hides its identity. It may be made use of in an ordinary manner



but fill it again and again, and it will never be full. Its measure must be infinite!

Its knowledge is beyond ordinary knowledge. The Tao is the ancestor of all the myriad things. Gently retiring, never full of itself, it always leaves something to be desired. He who grasps the full measure of a state will never rule that state; he who grasps the full measure of a family will never keep that family. Use all your strength to lift something heavy and you cannot use it!

Therefore *grind down the sharp* and blunten your behaviour. The method is not to regard self. *Slacken off the tight* and make use of *wu-wei*. *Shade off the bright* to find a friend in darkness and obscurity. The art is never to dazzle. Echo the Tao *and blend with the dust of the*

world, never to stand out differently. Then seemingly somewhat unfathomable, you are yet constantly in the here and now and aware.

Where does the Tao originate from? I do not know. It is the source of all – existing even before the forefather to the Emperors! That it still survives is due to it being able to stay out of the way, quiet and non-confronting.

five / the usefulness of emptiness

HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE NOT LOVING,
They take the myriad things as straw dogs!
The sage is not loving -
He treats the people as straw dogs!

The space between heaven and earth
Is like a pair of double-action bellows!
They empty out but are never crushed,
The more they are worked, the more they create.

Too much speaking and your life is ended.
Better to hold to the centre!

Certainly it must be something loving which has
created people and things. It must be something
loving which set them up, administers to them and
transforms them. Love works actively for the good. But
once people and things are created, set up, administered
to and transformed, they eventually fail in integrity - and
once they cease to coexist, there is no longer a cause for

them to be supported. This is simply how it is.

Heaven and earth lack any moral stance; they embrace



neither the
good nor
bad, neither
love nor
hate. They
are certainly
not loving.
Everything
is born and
destroyed
equally. The

sage aims for such equanimity of mind. While he acts he expects nothing in return.

Heaven and earth are not *kind*. They leave all nature alone. They regard all the things in the world equally, as so many 'straw dogs' – which are discarded after they have proved their usefulness. Grass or reed straw models were used in the ceremonial sacrifices at the ancestral Temple. They served a practical purpose and were never retained or valued after use.

It is not for its own creatures that the earth grows plants and vegetation, but animals take advantage of them and eat them; and similarly it is not for us that animals are born and reared, but we take advantage of them eat them. Each accords with its lot and acts in kind. Then there is sufficient for all. Likewise the sage is *not loving* although he cherishes and nurtures the people. His love is to take the people on their own terms, as straw dogs!

How is the space within Heaven and earth *like a pair of double-action bellows*? Within a pair of bellows there is also space and emptiness, which neither senses nor acts nor can ever be exhausted. Likewise in the vastnesses of Heaven and earth there is space and emptiness, where all is left alone. There exists just *one gentle energy* moving through all. Like the space within the bellows, it is never exhausted. The more they are worked, the more the bellows create.

Our bodies are born, but our energies are unborn and self-originating. They more they work, the more they create. If we can only *put aside passion*. check any preference for people or things and keep a purity within, the light of the Tao will command us.

N.B. This *one gentle energy* is the '*he qi*' which flows through everything, much as in the electron field of quantum mechanics. It can be cultivation in the practice of *qigong*. This is when we cast off, or put aside passion until we are *without desire*.

THE SPIRIT OF THE VALLEY WILL NEVER DIE.
It may be named the Dark Female.

The gateway to the Dark Female
Is the root to all Heaven and earth.
Continuously one, as if always present,
In use, it will never fail.

The spirit of the valley will never die. A 'valley' implies a place of easy cultivation, as opposed to the rocky slopes of a mountain and hillside which need more work. Cultivation arises through the fertility of the valley. As in the bellows of the last chapter *the more they are worked, the more they create*. The *spirit of the valley* will never fail, because, just as in the next chapter, the sky is broad and the earth endures. This is because 'they never live for themselves'. The emphasis is on detachment, resilience, ordinary life and common and continuous usage.

Nurture this *valley spirit* and you will never confront death. Her spirit will inhabit all the organs of the body. She may be named the Dark Female. She is dark - as the

sky without the sun, moon and stars is dark. To eliminate the sun, moon and stars is the same as to eliminate the light of all our senses. Take command of your senses, the entrance and exit of the breath, and you are one with the body and the *valley spirit*.

The gateway to the Dark Female can be seen as the gateway formed by the mouth and nose. This is the root of Heaven and earth - it forms a channel for the breath, which is continuously present during life, passing back and forth.

The breath throughout our practice should be made *continuously one*, fine and long. When gentle it is *always present*, yet also hardly there at all. It makes for peace and contentment, relaxation and an unforced manner.

NB. This chapter's lapidary style has given rise to much debate. To some it seems out of place in the Book and may be a fragment of an older, possibly Taoist prayer. Some say the dark valley may be the physical entrance to the womb. I give another plausible interpretation. The use of a gentle breath in our practice will never fail. It makes for peace and contentment. It is the genius of Taoist cultivation and our birthright.

The Writings of Lao Tzu in Nine Volumes

1. The Tao which can be Told is Not the Constant Tao

