

Chapter One

THE TAO

The Tao is what gave Taoism its name, both the ancient philosophy and the later religion; the Tao is their most fundamental concept, what occupies the place of the sacred in their very center.

The Tao is ineffable and beyond human comprehension; thus it is spoken about as nameless, formless, and obscure, with the help of contradictory metaphors and paradoxes. To speak about the Tao is, in fact, to “tao” it—something that cannot possibly succeed, yet has to be continuously attempted if there is to be a teaching in its name.

The Tao, if we then try to grasp it, can be described as the organic order underlying and structuring and pervading all existence. It is organic in that it is not willful, but it is also order because it changes in predictable rhythms and orderly patterns. If one is to approach it, reason and the intellect have to be left behind. One can only intuit it when one has become as nameless and as free of conscious choices and evaluations as the Tao itself.

The Tao cannot be described in ordinary language, since language by its very nature is part of the realm of discrimination and knowledge that the Tao transcends. Language is a product of the world; the Tao is beyond it—however pervasive and omnipresent it may be. The Tao is transcendent and yet immanent. It creates, structures, orders the whole universe, yet it is not a mere part of it.

Crucial to the religious experience of Taoism, the Tao is always there yet has always to be attained, realized, perfected. It creates the world and remains in it as the seed of primordial harmony, original purity, selfless tranquility. When outwardly active, it manifests as Virtue, an orderly, measurable power of

vitality that supports and rectifies the world, pervading life with a hue of the Tao's radiance deep within. Virtue can be practiced and followed, but only so far. Perfect Virtue is too close to the Tao itself to be fully practiced or understood. To realize it one must go truly beyond.

All Taoism centers around the Tao and its Virtue, around the ever transforming power of vitality and its deep and dark yet brilliant source. Different schools and traditions, down to individual practitioners, have understood and experienced this Tao and its Virtue differently, organizing their religious activities accordingly and building different theoretical frameworks for its comprehension. There is no one Taoism and no one single Taoist experience. Yet there are patterns, manifestations, to be observed. Like the Tao, the experience is and yet is not, remains hidden and only occasionally emerges from the shadows.

The selections on the Tao are representative of varied approaches to this difficult and most fundamental of all Taoist concepts. The four texts come from three different periods and schools and give an impression of four different approaches to the enigma of the Tao and its formulation in human language.

First, the *Daode jing* (Scripture of the Tao and the Virtue) is the classic of all Taoism, the oldest and most important of its works. Dated to the third century B.C.E., it belongs to philosophical Taoism and represents the ancient philosophical and speculative view of the Tao.

Second, the *Daoti lun* (On the Embodiment of the Tao) is a medieval (eighth century) exegesis of the ancient text, highly theoretical and sophisticated, yet strongly informed by the beliefs of the religion and geared toward the needs of the religious practitioner. It stands for the scholastic approach to the Tao.

Third, the *Qingjing jing* (Scripture of Purity and Tranquility) represents the liturgical formulation of the Tao. The text, originally from the Song dynasty (960–1260), has been and still is used in the ritual devotions of monastic Taoism. It is chanted regularly and represents a devotional attitude to the Tao.

Fourth, then, the selection from the *Zhuangzi*, another text of philosophical Taoism that at the same time is recognized as China's first major literary work, shows the Tao in a story, clarified by literary tales, by metaphors and narrative events. It represents another ancient angle, yet at the same time shows the literary and metaphorical approach to the Tao.

1. The Tao That Can't Be Told

The *Daode jing*, known also as the *Laozi* after its alleged author, a philosopher of the sixth century B.C.E., is a short text of about five thousand characters. It is divided into eighty-one chapters and two major sections, dealing with the Tao and the Virtue respectively.

Although the concepts expressed in the text are recognized as quite ancient, the actual document dates from approximately 250 B.C.E. A manuscript copy from before 168 B.C.E. was found recently. Due to the rather legendary nature of its alleged author Laozi, the text is now assumed to consist of varied sayings of ancient masters, transmitted orally. Interpreted in many ways—politically, symbolically, as cultural criticism, allegory, popular sayings, etc.—the text in its religious reading has maintained a strong influence over Taoism for the past 2,500 years.

English translations of the text abound—more than one hundred to date. Frequently used versions are, for example, Waley 1934, Bynner 1944, Lin 1948, Legge 1962, Chan 1964, LaFargue 1992. Translations of the recently excavated manuscript are found in Lau 1982 and Henricks 1989. On the problems surrounding Laozi, see Fung and Bodde 1952, Seidel 1969, Kaltenmark 1969, Graham 1990. For commentaries of the text, see Ch'en 1981, Robinet 1977, Bergeron 1986, Chan 1991, Wagner 1980, 1986, and 1989.

***Daode jing* (Scripture of the Tao and the Virtue)**

The Tao that can be told
Is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
Is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the origin of heaven and earth;
The named is the mother of the myriad beings.

Always remain free from desires—
And you can see its wonder.
Always cherish desires—
And you can only observe its outcome.

Both these develop together
But have different names;
They are part of the mystery.

Mysterious and more mysterious—
The gate of all that's wondrous. (chap. 1)

The Tao is empty.
Use it,
It will never overflow;
Abysmal it is—
The ancestor of all beings.

Blunting blades,
Opening knots,
Joining light,
Merging with dust.
Profound it is—
Like something eternal.

I do not know.
Whose child is it?
Its appearance precedes the gods. (chap. 4)

Heaven and earth are not benevolent,
They take the myriad beings as mere straw dogs.
The sage is not benevolent,
He takes the hundred families as mere straw dogs.

The space between heaven and earth,
Isn't it like a bellows?
Empty, yet never bent;
Active, yet reaching ever farther.

Speak much, repeat again—
No, much better to guard it in your midst! (chap. 5)

The valley spirit does not die,
It is called the mysterious female.
The gate of the mysterious female
Is called the root of heaven and earth.

Forever and ever, it exists continuously,
Use it, yet you'll never wear it out. (chap. 6)

Highest goodness is like water.
 It benefits the myriad beings
 And never contends.
 By never contending
 It is without fault.

It rests in what the multitude disdain,
 Thus it is close to the Tao.

Rest in goodness like you stand on the earth,
 Make your mind as good as the abyss is deep.
 Join goodness to become fully benevolent,
 Speak pure goodness for mutual trust.

Be straight in goodness when you govern,
 Serve goodness as much as you can,
 Then you will move with goodness at all times. (chap. 8)

Look at it and do not see it:
 We call it invisible.
 Listen to it and do not hear it:
 We call it inaudible.
 Touch it and do not feel it:
 We call it subtle.

These three cannot be better understood,
 They merge and become one.

Infinite and boundless, it cannot be named.
 It belongs to where there are no beings.
 It may be called the shape of no-shape,
 It may be called the form of no-form.

Call it vague and obscure.
 Meet it, yet you cannot see its head,
 Follow it, yet you cannot see its back.
 Grasp the Tao of old and control existence now.
 Know the beginnings of old—
 And have a thread to the Tao. (chap. 14)

Attain utmost emptiness,
Maintain steadfast tranquility.

The myriad beings are alive,
And I see thereby their return.
All these beings flourish,
But each one returns to its root.

Return to the root means tranquility,
It is called recovering life.

To recover life is called the eternal.
To know the eternal is called enlightenment.

If you don't know the eternal,
You will fall into error and end in disaster.

Know the eternal and forgive;
Forgive and be altruistic.
Be altruistic and embrace all;
Embrace all and be like heaven.

Be like heaven and merge with the Tao,
One with the Tao, you will last long.
You may die but will never perish. (chap. 16).

Forgiveness of great virtue
Flows from the Tao alone.
The Tao may appear as a being,
Yet is just vague, only obscure.

Obscure it is! It is vague!
In its midst, some appearance.
Vague it is! It is obscure!
In its midst, some being.

Serene it is! It is profound!
In its midst, some essence.
True this essence, nothing but so true!
In its midst, some trust.

From the old to today
Its name never vanished,
To open the beginnings of all.

How do I know what those beginnings are?
From this alone. (chap. 21)

There is a being, in chaos yet complete;
It preceded even heaven and earth.

Silent it is, and solitary;
Standing alone, it never changes;
It moves around, yet never ends.
Consider it the mother of all-under-heaven.

I do not know its name.
To call it something, I speak of Tao.
Naming its strength, I call it great.

Great—that means it departs.
Depart—that means it is far away.
Far away—that means it will return.

Therefore the Tao is great,
Heaven is great,
Earth is great,
The king, too, is great.

In this enclosure, there are these four greats,
And the king rests as one of them.
The king follows earth,
Earth follows heaven,
Heaven follows the Tao.
The Tao follows only itself. (chap. 25)

The Tao—eternal, nameless, simple.
Although small,
It is subject to neither heaven nor earth.

Kings and lords maintain it,
 And the myriad beings come to them.
 Heaven and earth are in harmony,
 And sweet dew falls.

People do not order it,
 It is everywhere equally.

First you control it, then names appear.
 Yet once there are names,
 Knowledge must arise of when to stop.
 Know when to stop
 And you will never perish.

Compare how the Tao is in all-under-heaven
 To the converging of rivers and valleys
 Toward the great streams and endless oceans. (chap. 32)

Great Tao—overflowing!
 Can be left and right!

The myriad beings rely on it to be born.
 It never turns them away.
 Its merit, so perfect—
 Yet claims no fame for its existence.

It clothes and nurtures the myriad beings—
 Yet claims no position as their chief.
 Always free from desires—
 Call it small!

The myriad beings return to it—
 And yet never make it their chief.
 Call it great!

To its very end
 It does not think itself great.
 Thus
 It can perfect its greatness. (chap. 34)

2. The Tao in the World

The *Daoti lun* (DZ 1035, fasc. 704) is a short scholastic treatise not studied or translated to date. It is commonly associated with Sima Chengzhen (647–735), the twelfth patriarch of Highest Clarity (Shangqing) Taoism at its height under Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang. Invited to court several times, Sima was the leading Taoist figure of his time. Several important works of his remain today, including the *Zuowang lun* (On Sitting in Oblivion) and the *Fuqi jingyi lun* (On the Essential Meaning of the Absorption of Energy). Both texts deal with Taoist practice, meditation and longevity techniques.

For more on Sima Chengzhen, see Kohn 1987, Engelhardt 1987 and 1989. For a study of Taoist soteriology, see Kohn 1992. For other scholastic interpretations of the *Daode jing*, see Robinet 1977.

***Daoti lun* (On the Embodiment of the Tao)**

DISCUSSING LAOZI'S *DAODE JING*

[1a] The Tao is all-pervasive; it transforms all from the beginning. Virtue arises in its following; it completes all beings to their end. They thus appear in birth and the completion of life. In the world, they have two different names, yet fulfilling their activities, they return to the same ancestral ground. They are two and yet always one.

They are two and yet always one. Therefore there is no Tao outside of the omnipresence of Virtue. There is no Virtue different from the completion of life through the Tao. They are one and still appear as two.

The Tao is found in endless transformation and pervasive omnipresence. Virtue shines forth in the completion of life and in following along. They are always one; they are always two.

Two in one, they are all-pervasive. All-pervasive, they can yet be distinguished. Thus their names are the Tao and the Virtue.

Question: You said, “The Tao is all-pervasive; it transforms all from the beginning.” Whose beginning does this refer to?

Answer: The beginning of the inner natures of all beings. How do we know this? Because the text says, “Virtue arises in its following; it completes all beings to their end.” Thus we know. [1b] Inner

nature arises from the Tao. The outer body is brought forth by Virtue.

Question: This being so, why then does the scripture say, “The Tao brings them forth, Virtue nurtures them”?

Answer: They follow the root and rely on the prime, thus the text says, “the Tao brings them forth.” The body is established only gradually, thus the text speaks of “nurture.”

Question: There is a root that lies at the beginning of inner nature. Does it have a name or is it nameless?

Answer: Both.

Question: If it is both, why then does the scripture say that the nameless is at the root of the myriad beings? Why does it not say that it has a name?

Answer: The Tao is an expression for that which pervades all life. When something pervades all life, there are bound to be outer manifestations. Once there are such manifestations, one can name them. Therefore one can attach names to the Tao, but none of these names will ever be truly permanent.

Indeed, the Tao embodies all, wide and encompassing; its meaning is not limited to one name. Today we use language to dispel its engulfing obscurity. But language only makes the rough outer manifestations of the Tao appear more clearly. It is only by going beyond these that one can awaken to the wondrous depths. [2a]

Question: The Tao is wide and encompassing. Is it the same or different from beings?

Answer: The Tao is always there, yet eternally other. Beings need the Tao to embody themselves. At the same time, the Tao needs beings to embody itself. Beyond the inherent oneness of all, there are good and evil, right and wrong, life and death, opposition and conformity.

Compare it to a fish. The fish depends on water to live; it also depends on water to die. Similarly people depend on the earth to walk on; they depend on the earth to fall down on; and they depend on the earth to get up on.

Question: The scripture says, “The Tao brings them forth, Virtue nurtures them.” It also says, “That which brings forth and nurtures beings is called the Mysterious Virtue.” First it says, the Tao brings them forth. Then it says, Virtue does so. How does this go together?

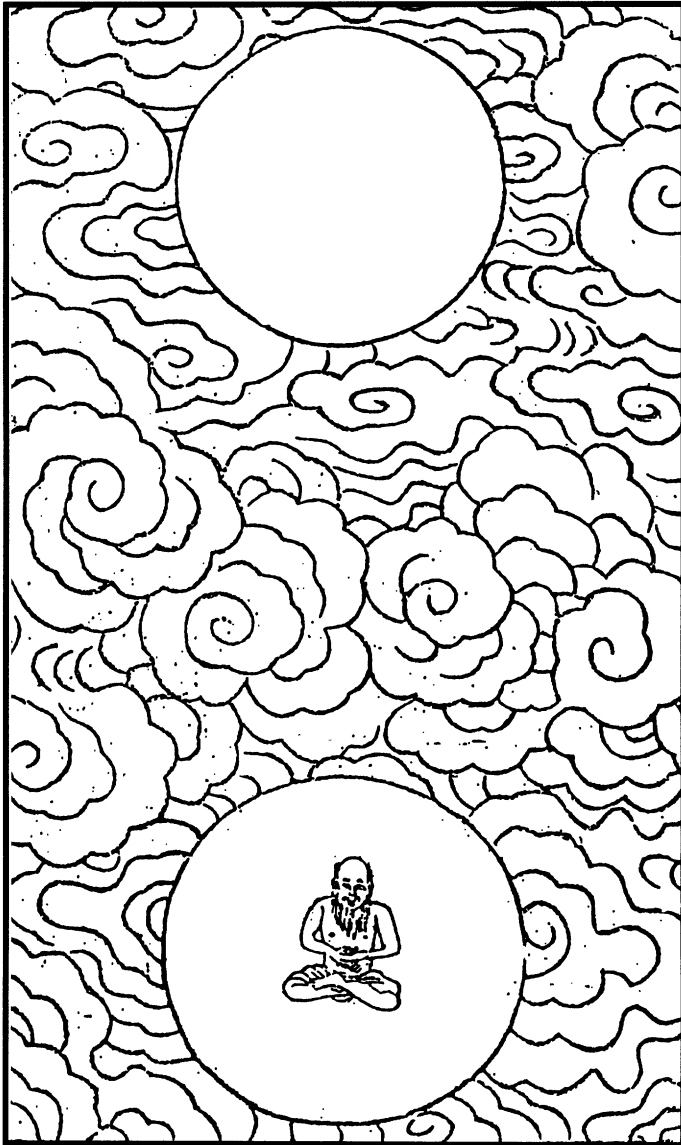


Fig. 1. The Empty Tao and the Tao in the World. Source: *Laojun bashiyi huan tushuo*.

Answer: When the text first says that the Tao brings them forth, it refers to the fact that beings first receive cosmic empowerment from the very root of all existence. When it then says that

Virtue brings them forth, it indicates that afterwards beings receive their concrete life and are duly shaped into separate entities. How do we know this is so?

Yin and yang embody each other in harmony and engender manifold transformations. With the establishment of these transformations yang comes to predominate, just as ruler and minister jointly govern the world. When their task is fulfilled, they return to the primordial beginning.

The embodiment of the myriad beings as concrete living entities comes through Virtue. [2b] But in its ancestral roots, this goes all the way to the deepest ground [of the Tao].

The text says, "The Tao brings them forth." What the Tao does in fact bring forth is the embodiment of chaos complete, the beginning that has no name. It structures and encompasses the myriad beings in their original state. Wondrous it is in the extreme, the tranquil center of all developments.

Obscure it is, indistinct! One cannot say it is really there. Yet all beings are there, right in its midst! One cannot say it is not there either. Above it shines, yet there is no light. Below it hides, yet there is no darkness. Meet it and you cannot see its head; pursue it and you cannot see its back.

None knows where it comes from; it cannot be investigated and searched out. It is shape without shape, image without being. It is a word that is no word, yet this wordless word fills the universe. Through the Tao, bodies and names become apparent, and it separates the ordinary from the sagely.

Indeed, the ordinary cannot awaken of themselves. They must accumulate outer impulses and painstakingly seek the omnipresent pervasion underlying all. The sagely thus do not abandon beings to themselves, but instead make use of favorable opportunities to establish the teaching.

The opportunities of teaching are irregular; therefore a myriad differences arise. But they all have in common that they are manifestations of the unifying harmony of all—the Tao and the Virtue.

The Tao's deepest roots lie in its omnipresent pervasion. Virtue most of all means spontaneous realization. In omnipresent pervasion, there is no principle that is not pervaded. In spontaneous realization, there is no trait of inner nature that is not fully realized.

Omnipresent pervasion has no name. Nameless, it can be affirmatively named. [3a] Spontaneous realization is nonrealization. Therefore its activity manifests and duly becomes known in appellations. Appellations thus contain the manifestations of active Virtue.

In Virtue, diligent practice is foremost, affirmatively naming the originally nameless. In the Tao, diminishing daily is essential, diligently pursuing and practicing it. Without this practice, nothing can be achieved.

Diminish and again diminish, and there will be no fetter that does not dissolve. As Tao and Virtue are both forgotten, one mysteriously joins beings and oneself in pervasive oneness. Thus one can be great and overflowing [like the Tao]. Remain moderate in its use and it will never be exhausted.

So great, it has no beyond; so small, it has no within. Flowing and encompassing all, it changes and transforms, leaving nothing that is not done.

Therefore the myriad beings, numerous and varied, in all their shapes and names, their actions and developments, always depend on the Tao and the Virtue. Thus they can complete themselves.

The scripture says, "The Tao is the obscure background of the myriad beings." Thus Laozi the Perfected lived in accordance with its manifestations and, under the Zhou dynasty [6th century B.C.E.], revealed its mysterious aura in order to save the age. Thus he wrote about the Tao and the Virtue. He used these two names to establish the teaching. Thus we know that the teaching does not appear all by itself. To appear in the world, it must have a foundation.

Its first and foremost foundation lies with Laozi, the Old Child. As he was even before symbols and gods, he is called Old. As he goes along with the changes and transforms in ever new births, he is called Child. [3b] As he embodies the teaching in omnipresent pervasion, he is called the Tao. As he represents the perfect principle that never changes, he is called the Scripture. As he has arisen even before these four, he is called the Highest. Thus his name is Old Child; he is embodied in the Highest Scripture of the Tao.

Question: What does chaos complete embody itself in?

Answer: It embodies itself in empty nonbeing as well as in the myriad forms of being.

Question: Chaos is empty nonbeing as well as the myriad forms of being. Now, is this embodiment of chaos the same or different from the Tao?

Answer: It is both different and the same.

Question: Please explain how this is so.

Answer: It is different because, when chaos assembles to obtain embodiment, it becomes apparent and is named the Tao. In its embodiment, chaos pervades all and can thus be named. This is because, in its pervasion, it accumulates and its different aspects are singled out. Then they can be identified. Thus we say, chaos is different from the Tao.

But it is also the same, because the Tao is never separate from its omnipresent pervasion. When one tries to distinguish this pervasion from chaos, there is no real division. Chaos assembles and pervades all. Thus we say, chaos is the same as the Tao.

Question: So, you're saying that chaos can pervade the myriad beings. Pervasion therefore is chaos. Chaos in turn is all beings. [4a] Chaos is the Tao. Therefore all beings are the Tao. Now, if there is no difference between all beings and the Tao, why then should one cultivate it?

Answer: Pure cultivation makes up for the discrepancy, however minor, between the root and its embodiment. It leads back to the original nonbeing beyond and above chaos. The meaning of cultivation must be carefully taught. It is certainly not at all like an investigation and analysis of embodiment.

Question: Is chaos complete the same or different from the Great Emblem?

Answer: It is both different and the same. How do we know this? The Great Emblem is called chaos complete. This is the name of its embodiment. But the actual meaning of this embodiment is something else again. Thus we know that it is different.

Still, if the name is not distinguished from the appellation of this embodiment, then the name is also this very embodiment itself. When thus the embodiment has no other name than chaos, the name is in fact the embodiment. Thus we say they are the same.

3. Pure and Tranquil

The *Qingjing jing* (DZ 620, fasc. 341), translated here in full, is a short, verse-like text that rose to prominence in the Song dynasty (960–1260). It was especially popular with the monastic school of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen) Taoism, in whose centers it is still recited as part of the regular devotions today.

The text serves to inspire the active practitioner and believer. It provides an easy handle on the realization of the Tao within the religious life. It is an exhortation to purity and meditation, a warning against bad thoughts and deviant desires. Pious Taoists know this short and rhythmic text by heart.

There is as yet no study of this text or of Taoist monastic liturgy. A recent translation with inner-alchemical commentary is found in Wong 1992. On the history and present circumstances of the Complete Perfection sect, see Yao 1980, Tsui 1991.

***Qingjing jing* (Scripture of Purity and Tranquility)**

The Great Tao has no form;
It brings forth and raises heaven and earth.
The Great Tao has no feelings;
It regulates the course of the sun and the moon.

The Great Tao has no name;
It raises and nourishes the myriad beings.
I do not know its name—
So I call it Tao.

The Tao can be pure or turbid, moving or tranquil.
Heaven is pure, earth is turbid;
Heaven is moving, earth is tranquil.
The male is moving, the female is tranquil.

Descending from the origin,
Flowing toward the end,
The myriad beings are being born.

Purity—the source of turbidity,
Movement—the root of tranquility.

Always be pure and tranquil;
Heaven and earth
Return to the primordial.

The human spirit is fond of purity,
But the mind disturbs it.
The human mind is fond of tranquility,
But desires meddle with it.

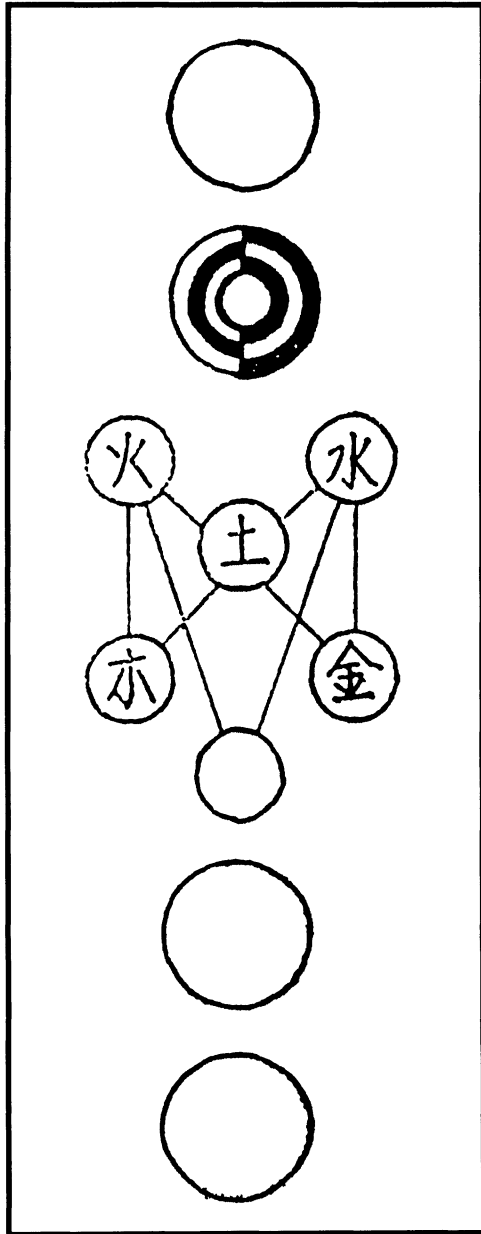


Fig. 2. The Empty Tao Develops into the World: The Diagram of the Great Ultimate.
 Source: *Taiji tushuo*.

Get rid of desires for good,
 And the mind will be calm.
 Cleanse your mind,
 And the spirit will be pure.

Naturally the six desires won't arise,
 The three poisons are destroyed.
 Whoever cannot do this
 Has not yet cleansed his mind,
 His desires are not yet driven out.

Those who have abandoned their desires:
 Observe your mind by introspection—
 And see there is no mind.

Then observe the body,
 Look at yourself from without—
 And see there is no body.

Then observe others by glancing out afar—
 And see there are no beings.

Once you have realized these three,
 You observe emptiness!

Use emptiness to observe emptiness,
 And see there is no emptiness.
 When even emptiness is no more,
 There is no more nonbeing either.

Without even the existence of nonbeing
 There is only serenity,
 Profound and everlasting.

When serenity dissolves in nothingness—
 How could there be desires?
 When no desires arise
 You have found true tranquility.

In true tranquility, go along with beings;
 In true permanence, realize inner nature.
 Forever going along, forever tranquil—
 This is permanent purity, lasting tranquility.

In purity and tranquility,
 Gradually enter the true Tao.
 When the true Tao is entered,
 It is realized.

Though we speak of “realized,”
 Actually there is nothing to attain.
 Rather, we speak of realization
 When someone begins to transform the myriad beings.

Only who has properly understood this
 Is worthy to transmit the sages’ Tao.

The highest gentleman does not fight;
 The lesser gentleman loves to fight.
 Highest Virtue is free from Virtue;
 Lesser Virtue clings to Virtue.

All clinging and attachments
 Have nothing to do with the Tao or the Virtue.

People fail to realize the Tao
 Because they have deviant minds.
 Deviance in the mind
 Means the spirit is alarmed.

Spirit alarmed,
 There is clinging to things.
 Clinging to things,
 There is searching and coveting.

Searching and coveting,
 There are passions and afflictions.
 Passions, afflictions, deviance, and imaginings
 Trouble and pester body and mind.

Then one falls into turbidity and shame,
 Ups and downs, life and death.
 Forever immersed in the sea of misery,
 One is in eternity lost to the true Tao.

The Tao of true permanence
 Will naturally come to those who understand.
 Those who understand the realization of the Tao
 Will rest forever in the pure and tranquil.

4. Ineffable Knowledge

The *Zhuangzi* is the second most worthy ancient classic of Taoism after the *Daode jing*. In its present edition it consists of thirty-three chapters. Only the first seven are accepted as being close to the philosopher Zhuangzi himself, a man who lived in the fourth century B.C.E. in the south of China. The remaining chapters are associated with different schools of ancient philosophical Taoism, including the Primitivists, the Hedonists, the Syncretists, and later followers of Zhuangzi's thought. Chapter 22, from which the stories are taken, belongs to the latter.

The *Zhuangzi* is famous for its high literary quality, its humor, and the depths of its insights. Throughout the history of Taoism, the text has never failed to inspire practitioners and poets alike.

The rendition relies on Watson 1968. For other translations, see Graham 1981 and 1982. Discussions are found in Mair 1983, Allinson 1990. On the history and origin of the text, see Graham 1980, Roth 1991a.

There are also two other texts of philosophical Taoism, the *Huainanzi* and the *Liezi*. Like the *Zhuangzi*, they present philosophical concepts in literary and metaphorical format. On the *Huainanzi*, see LeBlanc 1978, 1985, Roth 1992; for a translation of the *Liezi*, see Graham 1960.

“Zhi beiyou” (Knowledge Wandered North), *Zhuangzi*, chap. 22.

Knowledge wandered north to the far side of the primordial waters and climbed the hills of the absconded rise. There he happened to meet Non-Action-No-Words.

Knowledge said to Non-Action-No-Words: “I would like to put some questions to you. By what thinking, by what reflection can I know the Tao? By what setting, by what activities can I be at peace with the Tao? By what procedures, by what way can I attain the Tao?”

He put these three questions, but Non-Action-No-Words did not answer. It was not that he did not answer. He did not know how to answer.

Knowledge thus did not get any answer. He returned to the south of the white waters and climbed the heights of suspicions-at-rest. There he caught sight of Crazy Crouchy. Knowledge, in the same words, put the three questions to Crazy Crouchy.

"Ah! I know!" said Crazy Crouchy. "I'll tell you."

But just as he wished to say something, he forgot what he wished to say.

Knowledge thus did not get any answer. He returned to the imperial palace, where he had an audience with the Yellow Emperor. He posed his questions.

"Only with no thinking nor reflection," said the Yellow Emperor, "can you begin to know the Tao. Only with no setting nor activities can you begin to be at peace with the Tao. Only with no procedures nor way can you begin to attain the Tao."

Knowledge had a further question. "You and I know," he said, "but those other two did not. Which of us is right?"

"Non-Action-No-Words is truly right," the Yellow Emperor explained. "Crazy Crouchy appears to be so. But you and I, after all, don't even come close. Really! Who knows does not speak—who speaks does not know. Therefore the sage practices the teaching without words. The Tao cannot be brought about; Virtue cannot be approached.

"But benevolence," he went on, "can be actively practiced. Righteousness can be lost or gained, and the rites can be considered true or false. Thus we say: Lose the Tao and then there is Virtue; lose Virtue and then there is benevolence; lose benevolence and then there is righteousness; lose righteousness and then there are the rites. Rites are the marginal ornaments of the Tao. They are the beginning of disorder.

"Thus we say," the Yellow Emperor continued, "practice the Tao and decrease day by day. Decrease and again decrease, until you come to non-action. In non-action there is nothing that is not done. Now we already are active beings. To want to go back and recover our root, is this not indeed difficult? Only the great man might find it easy.

"Life is the follower of death; death is the beginning of life. Who knows their patterns? Human life is an assembly of energy. It assembles and there is life; it disperses and there is death. Death and life follow each other naturally. So why should I feel distressed?

"From that perspective the myriad beings are in fact one. We find some beautiful because they are spiritual and strange; others we think of as hateful because they are smelly and rotten. But the smelly and rotten will again change and be spiritual and strange;

and the spiritual and strange will again turn to be smelly and rotten. So we say: Just penetrate the one energy of all-under-heaven. The sage, accordingly, places highest value on absolute oneness.”

Knowledge pondered this. “I asked Non-Action-No-Words and he did not give me a reply,” he said to the Yellow Emperor. “It was not that he did not give me a reply. He did not know how to reply. I asked Crazy Crouchy and he wished to tell me, but he did not tell me. It was not that he did not tell me. But just as he wished to say something, he forgot what he wished to say. Now I have asked you. You know. Why then do you say you don’t even come close?”

“Non-Action-No-Words is truly right. Because he does not know. Crazy Crouchy appears to be so. Because he forgets. But you and I, after all, don’t even come close. Because we know.”

Crazy Crouchy heard about this. He thought the Yellow Emperor knew what he was talking about.



Master Eastwall asked Zhuangzi, “What we call the Tao—where does it exist?”

“There’s no place it does not exist,” Zhuangzi replied.

“Come on,” said Master Eastwall, “you must be more specific!”

“It is in the ant.”

“How can it be so low?”

“It is in the grass.”

“How can it be even lower?”

“It is in bricks and shards.”

“How can it be lower still?”

“It is even in excrement!”

Master Eastwall did not reply.

“Sir,” Zhuangzi said in explanation, “your questions do not reach the essence. When Inspector Huo inquired in the market how to examine the fatness of a pig by pressing it with the foot, he was told that the lower one pressed, the better.”

“But,” he went on, “you must not apply this rule to the Tao. Nothing ever avoids its presence. Such is the perfect Tao. So too are truly great words. Encompassing, universal, including all. These three are different words but mean the same. They all indicate just one reality.”

He took a breath, then went on.

“Why don’t you wander with me,” he asked companionably, “to the Palace of Nothing-At-All? We’ll be together and in

harmony for our discussions, never ending, never exhausted. Why don't you join me in non-action? Be serene and tranquil, carefree and utterly pure, finely tuned and at leisure? Already my will is open vastness. I go nowhere and do not know where I'm getting to. I go and come and do not know where to stop. I've already come and gone many times, but I do not know when it'll be over. I ramble and relax in endless openness. Great knowledge enters in and I do not know where it will ever end."

He paused to collect his thoughts.

"That which treats beings as beings does not have the limits of beings," he continued with conviction. "Beings have their limits—the so-called limit of beings. The limit of the unlimited ultimately is the limitless end of the limit. We speak of beings filling and emptying, decaying and dying. The Tao makes them full and empty, but is not itself full or empty. It makes them decay and die, but does not itself decay or die. It establishes their roots and branches, but is itself free from roots or branches. It determines when they assemble and disperse, but in itself neither assembles nor disperses."