

# A Taste of the Dao De Jing

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Cambridge Chinese Classics Society  
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## Introduction

The Dao De Jing(道德經) or Laozi (老子), is a fundamental Taoism classic text, written at around 6 century BC, the beginning of the Spring and Autumn period in the Zhou dynasty.

Its author is traditionally ascribed to Laozi(or literally translated as the Old Master), a contemporary of Confucius. He worked as the Keeper of the Archives for the royal court of Zhou, which allowed him broad access to previous works or classic texts. Seeing the decline of Zhou, Laozi headed west to live as a hermit. At the west border of Hangu Guan, Laozi was recognised by the border official, Yinxi, who was a follower of Taoism. He asked the Old Master to produce a record of his wisdom. After having delivered the text, Laozi is said to disappear westward travelling on an ox. This is the legendary origin of the *Dao De Jing*.

The received text has around 5000 Chinese characters in 81 chapters, covering topics like Dao (道), Wu Wei (無為) or noninterference, De (德) and so on. Its written style is very poetic and its implication is very profound. Hopefully from the following selections we can have a taste of the book.

## Text Selections

### 道 Dao (the Way)

*1 The Tao that can be told of 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 all things. Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety; And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome. The two are the same, but after they are produced, they have different names. They both may be called deep and profound. Deeper and more profound, the door to all subtleties! (Chan)*

- What is Dao?

Although the genuine or eternal Tao can not be told of, a literal meaning of the word is path or roadway, or by extension, method or approach. The Dao in Dao De Jing is a universalised term of all these definitions to the general truth that there is a course all things follow and a force that guides them on it. (Moss Roberts)

Another explanation from Robert Henricks: The Way in a sense is like a great womb: it is empty and devoid in itself of differentiation, one in essence; yet somehow it contains all things in seedlike or embryo form, and all things “emerge” from the Tao in creation as babies emerge from their mothers. But the Way does not simply give birth to all things. Having done so, it continues in some way to be present in each individual thing as an energy or power, a power that is not static but constantly on the move. (This implies the

De, which will be mentioned later).

- What are being and non-being?

A simple analogy is the definition of natural numbers with set theory. At the very beginning, we have nothing. This is the status of 'non-being'.

Then we define the set that contains nothing as the empty set, corresponding to the number 0. Right after this, we have 'being', which is the empty set, defined from 'non-being'.

Then all the natural numbers can be defined recursively and an abundant world of numbers is revealed to us.

This is what it means by 'Therefore let there always be non-being, so we may see their subtlety; And let there always be being, so we may see their outcome.'

### 無為 Wu Wei (Noninterference)

*2 When all the people of the world know beauty as beauty, there arises the recognition of ugliness. When they all know the good as good, there arises the recognition of evil. Therefore: Being and non-being produce each other; Difficult and easy complete each other; Long and short contrast each other; High and low distinguish each other; Sound and voice harmonize each other; Front and behind accompany each other. Therefore the sage manages affairs without action, and spreads doctrines without words. All things arise, and he does not turn away from them. He produces them but does not take possession of them. He acts but does not rely on his own ability. He accomplishes his task but does not claim credit for it. It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his accomplishment remains with him. (Chan)*

- The continuation of the dualism, and the produce of each other.
- Back to the mysterious Dao, which creates this myriad world, but does not interfere the movement of anything. Then draw a comparison between human (or sages) and this Dao, and the result is Wu Wei or non-interference.

*11. Thirty spokes are united around the hub to make a wheel, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the carriage depends. Clay is moulded to form a utensil, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the utensil depends. Doors and windows are cut out to make a room, but it is on its non-being that the utility of the room depends. Therefore, we regard having something as beneficial; But having nothing as useful. (Chan & Henricks)*

- Explanation of "being" and "non-being" with detailed examples like a carriage, a utensil and a room.

*40. "Reversal" is the movement of the Dao; "Weakness" is the function of the Dao. All things in the world come from being; And being comes from non-being. (Henricks & Chan)*

- Being and non-being or any dual concepts are not static. They are in constant motion towards each other. Thus, “strong” things embody a trend of decline and “weakness” has the tendency of growing, which implies the utility of Dao.

A classical quote from Faraday: When Faraday was asked what use his early discoveries were, he borrowed a reply from Benjamin Franklin: "What use is a newborn baby?"

*78 There is nothing softer and weaker than water, And yet there is nothing better for attacking hard and strong things. For this reason there is no substitute for it. All the world knows that the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard. But none can practice it. (Chan)*

- A reinforcement of the previous claim “weakness” is the utility of Dao. by an example of water.

Bruce Lee: Be water, my friend.

### 德 De (Virtue)

*38 The man of superior virtue is not (conscious of) his virtue; And in this way he really possesses virtue. The man of inferior virtue never loses (sight of) his virtue; And in this way he loses his virtue. The man of superior virtue takes no action, but has no ulterior motive to do so. The man of inferior virtue takes action, and has an ulterior motive to do so. The man of superior humanity takes action, but has no ulterior motive to do so. The man of superior righteousness takes action, and has an ulterior motive to do so. The man of superior propriety takes action, And when people do not respond to it, he will stretch his arms and force it on them. Therefore when Tao is lost, only then does the doctrine of virtue arise. When virtue is lost, only then does the doctrine of humanity arise. When humanity is lost, only then does the doctrine of righteousness arise. When righteousness is lost, only then does the doctrine of propriety arise. Now, propriety is a superficial expression of loyalty and faithfulness, and the beginning of disorder. (Chan)*

- What is De?

As we said before, the Way does not simply give birth to all things. It continues to be present in each individual as an energy or power, a power that is not static but constantly on the move, inwardly pushing each thing to develop and grow in a certain way, in a way that is in accord with its true nature. The Way in things is generally what Taoist mean by “De”, or virtue (Robert Henricks).

*55 He who possesses virtue in abundance may be compared to an infant. Poisonous insects will not sting him. Fierce beasts will not seize him. Birds of prey will not strike him. His bones are weak, his sinews tender, but his grasp is firm. He does not yet know the union of male and female, but his organ is aroused, this means that his essence is at its height. He may cry all day without becoming hoarse, This means that his (natural) harmony is perfect. (Chan)*

- An example of “De”: infant. Why? His essence is at its height and his natural harmony is

perfect.

I can't give a logical explanation to this chapter. But I believe in it. I think this sentence need to be perceived or felt with heart, instead of being analysed or understood with mind.

### **Reference**

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### **English translations**

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